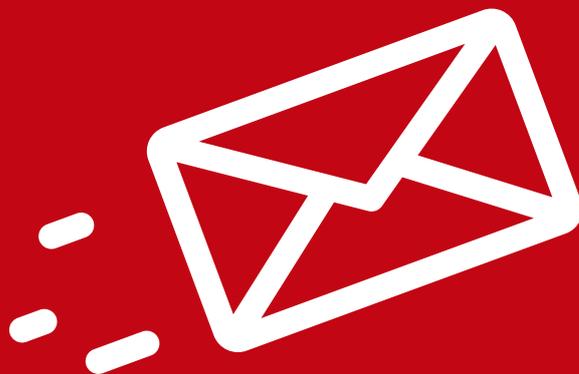


FIVE STEPS TO BETTER EMAILS



ROBERT GENTLE

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DEADLIER THAN THE MAIL

Email – it's the bane of our working lives. They're long. They're impossible to understand!

And there are so many of them cluttering up our inboxes that we don't know where to start.

This short guide will show you the essentials of how to write emails that actually get read.



IS THIS EMAIL REALLY NECESSARY?

FIRST ASK YOURSELF IF A CONVERSATION WOULDN'T WORK BETTER.

We are all aware of people who sit a few desks away from you and send you an email, when they can just walk over and talk to you in person. Of course, there are times when you might not want to be disturbed; but the point is that not all emails are necessary, or even desirable.

Even a short email might take 3-5 minutes of keyboard time, followed by hours or days waiting for a reply. A phone call or a short face-to-face conversation will always be more effective. This is especially true for urgent matters, or those that are delicate, and require tact and diplomacy.

A compromise between email and phone is Instant Messaging (I.M.) or chat software. When linked to people's calendars to show their availability, it allows colleagues to address urgent issues quickly and effectively. This works best for teams and departments, rather than the whole company.

SAY IT IN THE SUBJECT LINE

THE SUBJECT LINE MUST CONTAIN THE POINT OF YOUR MESSAGE.

It seems like an obvious thing to say, but the more useful information you provide in the subject line, the more likely your reader is to open your email. The subject line should not be a tease; it should contain a clear, concise summary of your message.

Ah, you might say – that’s impossible! There is a lot I have to cover in my message, and it can’t be captured in five to eight words.

Nonsense! Newspaper articles are far more complex and detailed than your emails, yet newspapers always manage to summarise them in a short, tight headline. If they can do it, so can you.

EXAMPLE

MEANINGLESS	▶	Meeting
BETTER	▶	Tomorrow’s 10 a.m. meeting
BEST	▶	Tomorrow’s 10 a.m. meeting is cancelled

KEEP IT SHORT AND SIMPLE

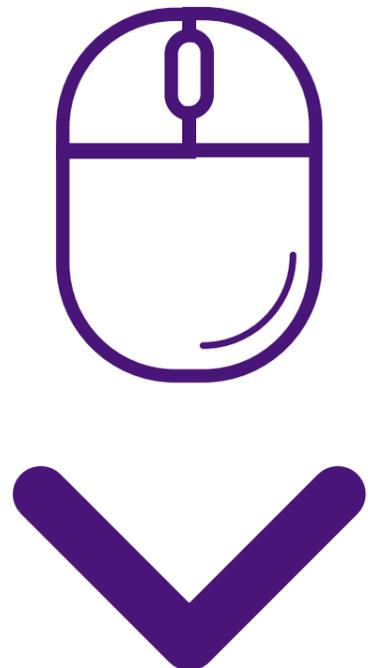
USE EVERYDAY LANGUAGE AND SHORT PARAGRAPHS TO GET YOUR POINT ACROSS

Emails are, for the most part, fairly straightforward. They range from the mundane (scheduling meetings or requesting information) to the slightly more elaborate (pitching an idea, or commenting on a proposal).

With very few exceptions, these can be tackled in a few tight paragraphs using short and simple everyday language.

So, avoid unnecessary detail. You don’t have to say it all; you just have to say enough so that your reader can take action.

You know an email has gone on too long when you’re forced to scroll to the bottom.



EXPLAIN ATTACHMENTS

DON'T JUST THROW STUFF AT PEOPLE – PROVIDE CONTEXT

When you send an email with an attachment, include a summary explaining what it is about. This provides background and context, and makes it more likely that the attachment will be opened.

The same applies to emails that you forward. Always explain what it is you're forwarding and why. Otherwise, your reader will have to wade through an email exchange that they weren't part of.

If necessary, change the subject line of the forwarded email so that it's even clearer.

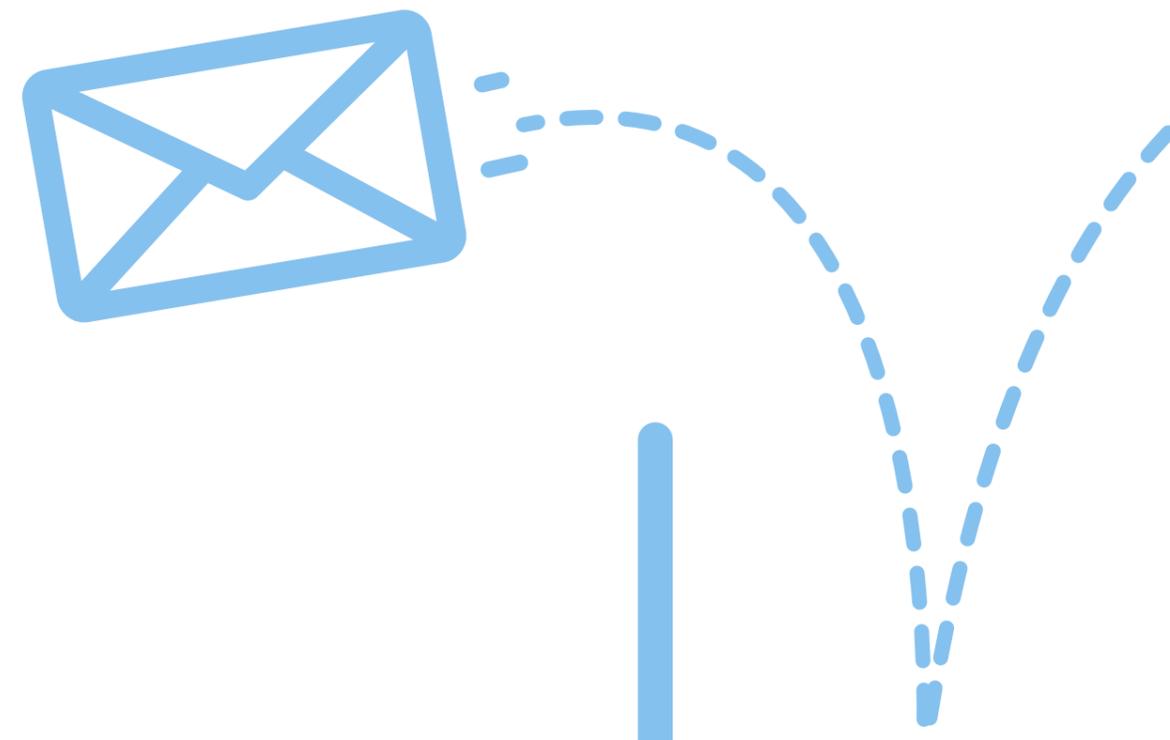


DON'T PLAY EMAIL PING-PONG

IF THERE ARE TOO MANY BACK-AND-FORTH REPLIES, PICK UP THE PHONE INSTEAD

If an email turns out to be more complex than originally thought, with multiple back-and-forth replies, stop the discussion. Pick up the phone instead, or type a one-line reply saying that it'll be more effective to discuss it offline.

Long, interminable “ping-pong” replies can quickly turn into an incomprehensible email trail. The effect is amplified when others are copied via the dreaded “Reply to All” feature, which you should use very sparingly.



BEFORE/AFTER EXAMPLES



1.



2.



3.

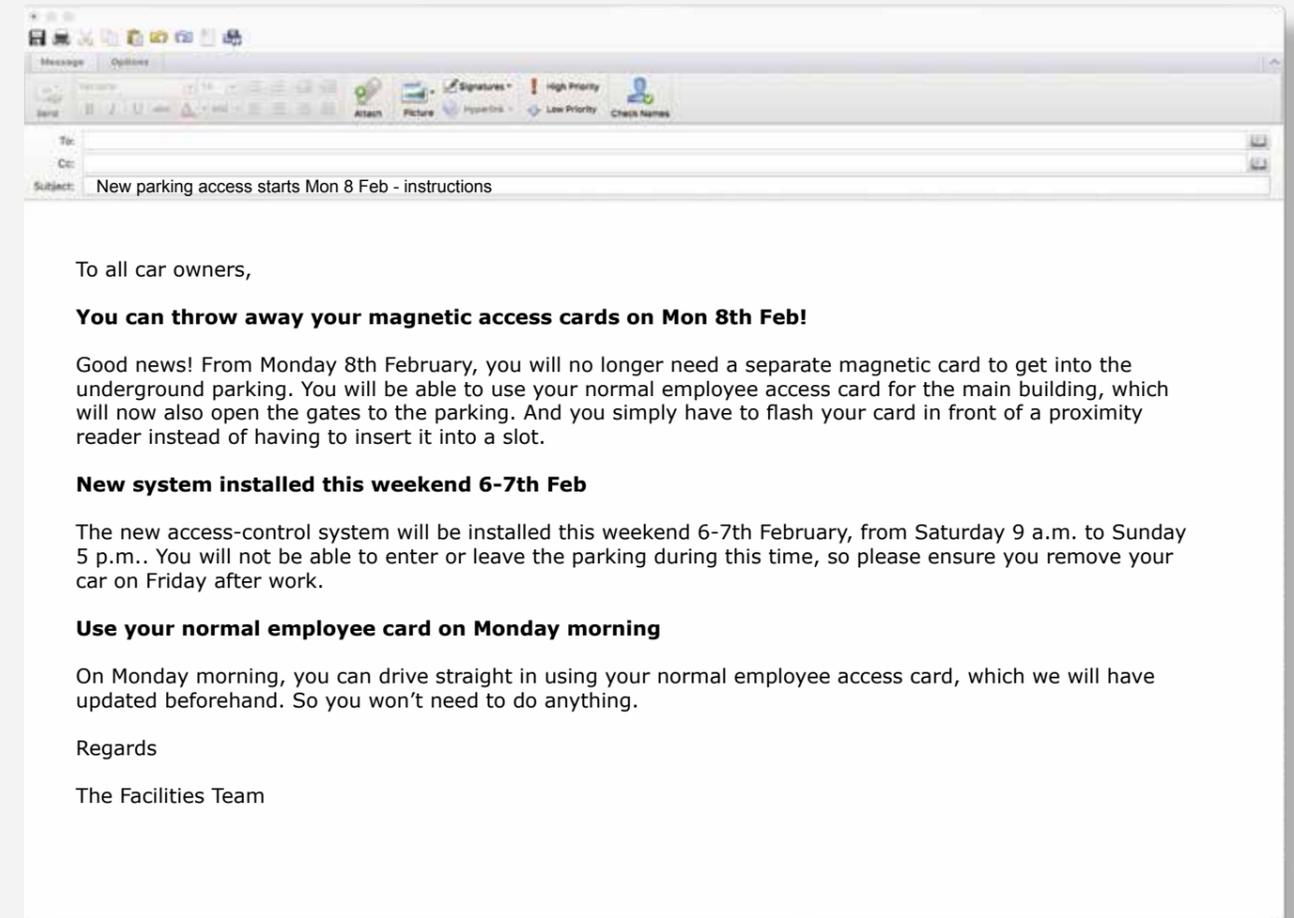
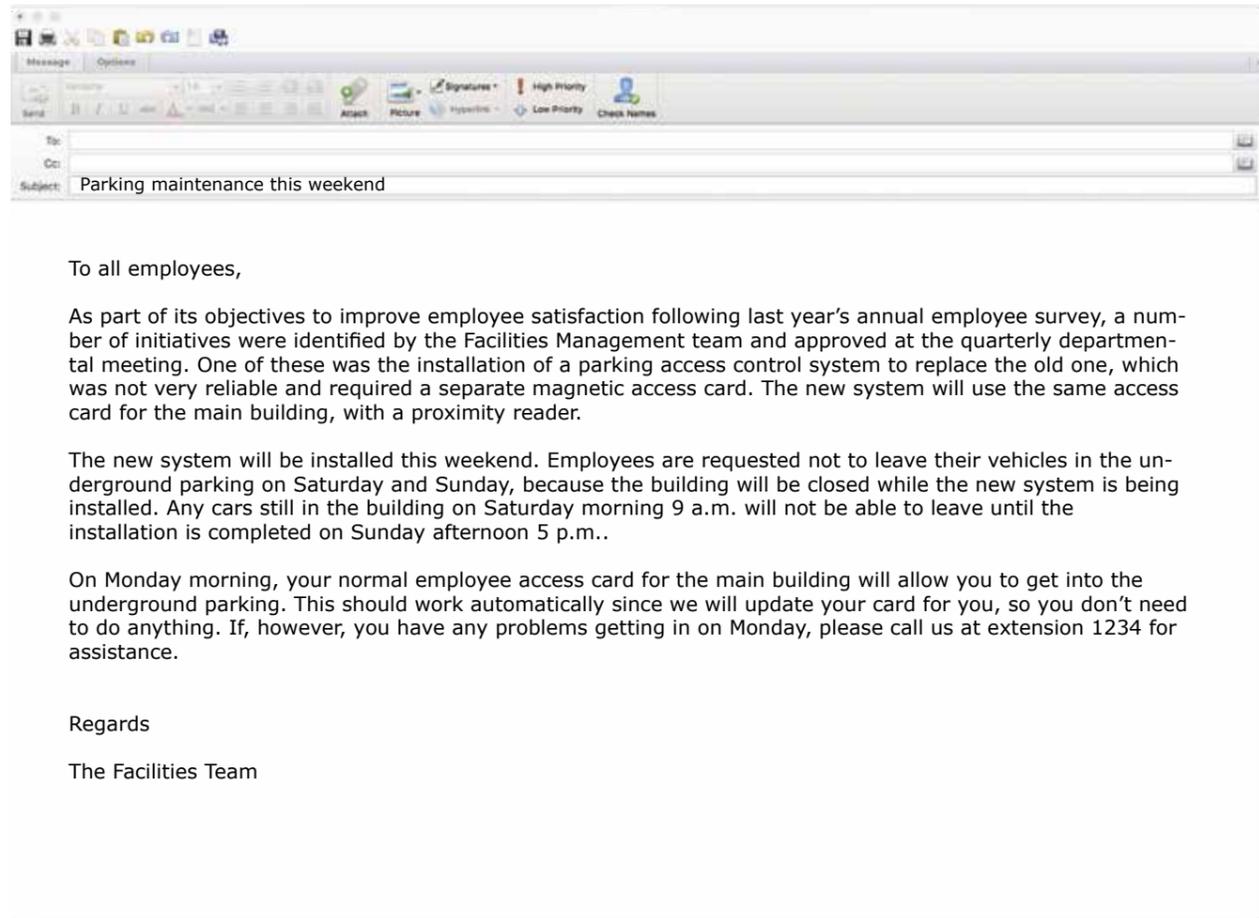
LET'S APPLY THE BASICS TO THREE SIMPLE EXAMPLES OF EVERYDAY EMAIL:

1. A message from Facilities Management to employees about parking maintenance
2. An announcement from IT about a software upgrade
3. An email with attachments





EXAMPLE 1: EMAIL FROM FACILITIES MANAGEMENT TO ALL EMPLOYEES

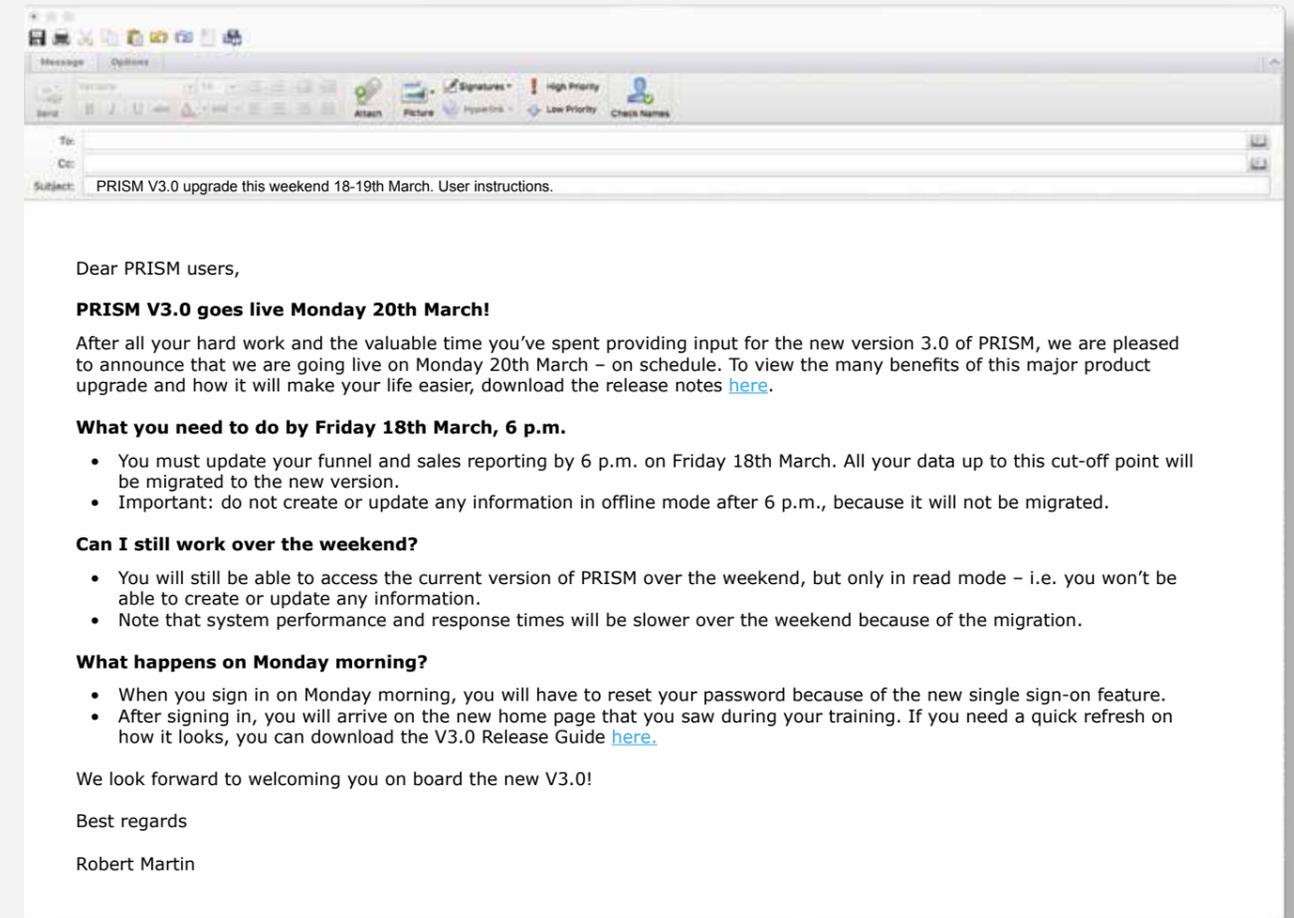
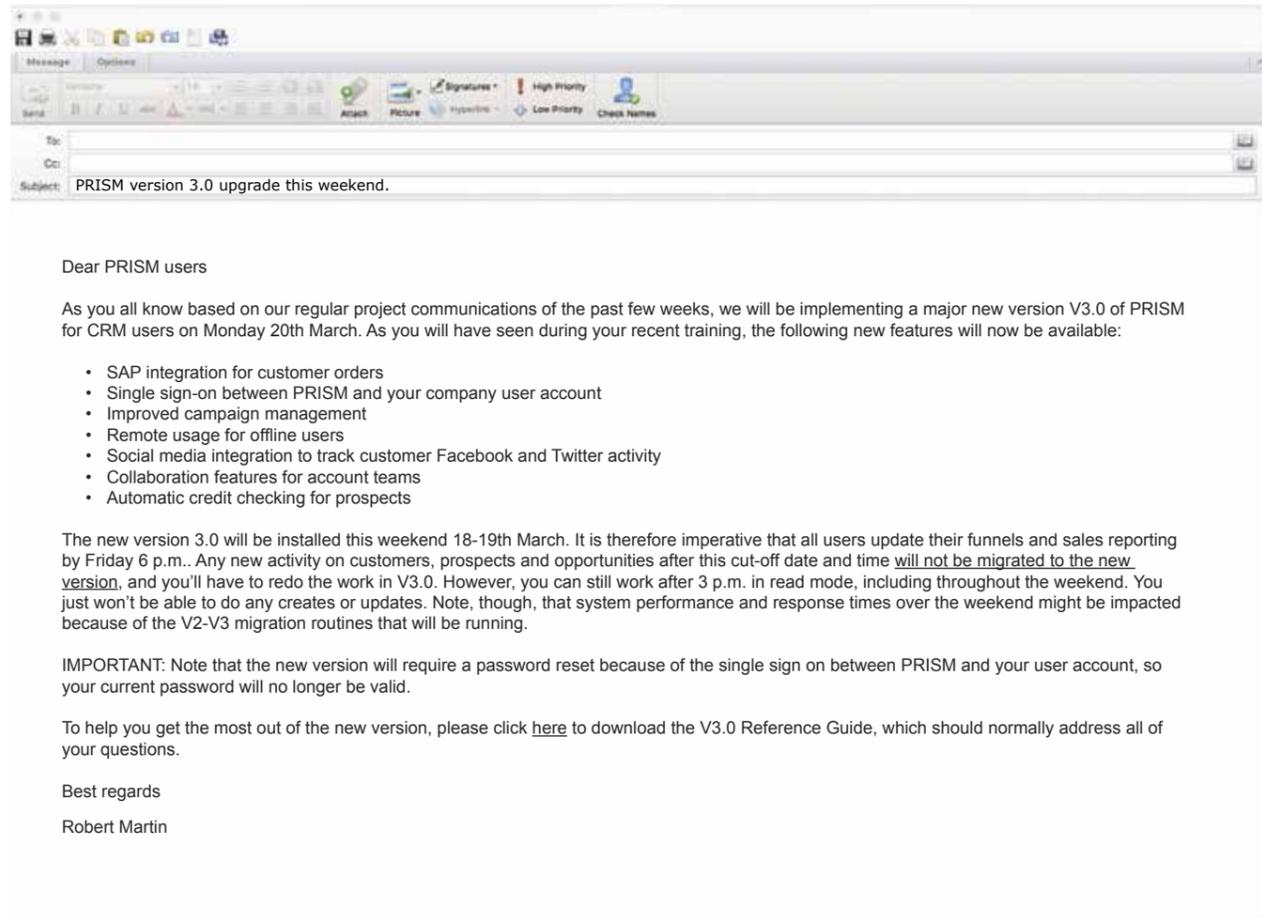


WHAT'S WRONG?

1. Dense, uninviting and unstructured. Nothing stands out. You have to read the whole email.
2. Irrelevant background information in the first paragraph.
3. The main messages (parking closure times and what happens on Monday morning) are buried in the second and third paragraphs. And the main benefit of the new system, namely having one less card to use, is simply mentioned in passing.

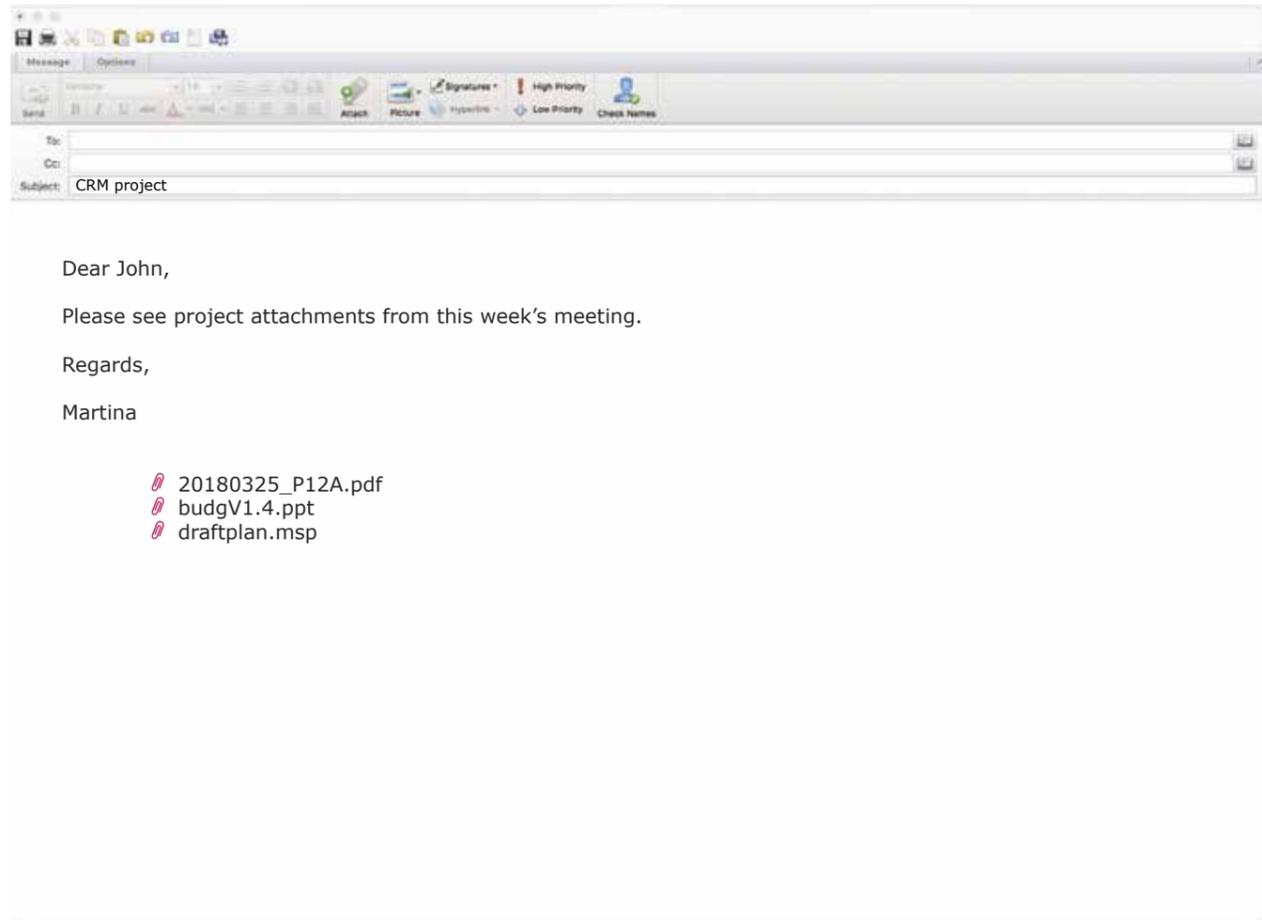


EXAMPLE 2: EMAIL FROM I.T. ABOUT A SOFTWARE UPGRADE

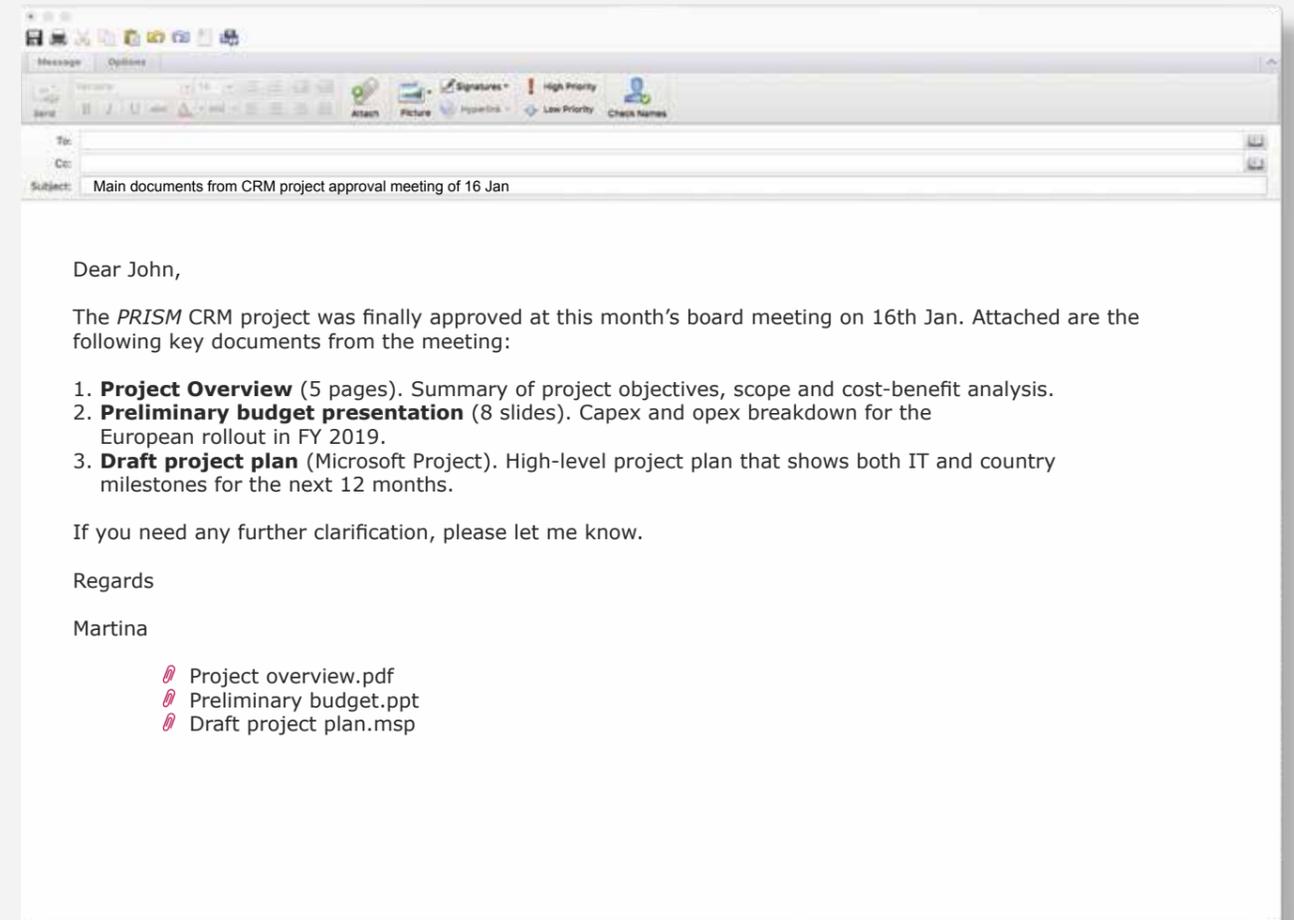


WHAT'S WRONG?

1. Poorly structured, with the key messages scattered throughout the text.
2. Impersonal, bureaucratic tone, written almost entirely in the passive voice. Plus, there is no emotion for what is supposed to be a major new version with significant benefits.
3. Bullet-point overload about the new features.

**EXAMPLE 3: EMAIL WITH ATTACHMENTS****WHAT'S WRONG?**

1. Meaningless subject line.
2. The reference to "this week's meeting" is unclear and provides no useful context.
3. The cryptic file names have no obvious meaning that can be inferred at a glance.



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