

Dear Dr... how our email style reveals much about our personalities

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A new theory from psychologists at the University of Bath argues that how we communicate online, including via email and social media, reveals much about our personality and character types.

In an [open letter](#) for the journal *Molecular Autism*, the researchers at Bath and Cardiff highlight clear differences in electronic [communication](#) styles between autistic and non-autistic people. And they say these findings have wider relevance about how we communicate online and for being respectful of others' communication styles.

By looking at the ways in which [email style](#) differed between two groups, the researchers observed fewer social niceties and less preamble in emails from autistic people (e.g. 'I hope you are well'), yet a stronger and polite observance of formal address, (e.g. 'Dear Dr...').

In autistic people, they noticed considerable attention to detail, often demonstrated by participants correcting the researcher, by highlighting grammatical errors or broken hyperlinks. But autistic people were also more open to correcting themselves, for example if they

found spelling mistakes in their previous emails. Non-autistic people rarely seemed to make these corrections, likely fearing they would appear rude or silly.

They also noted that many autistic people communicated in precise, though socially unconventional ways (for example referring to their arrival time for a meeting as 14:08 or describing a meeting point with map coordinates). Such interactions almost never occurred when emails were exchanged with non-autistic people.

The analysis, say the researchers, is important for all of us—not just those with autism—in thinking about how we might better adapt our own styles and be more respectful of others. The researchers say that the autistic email style is far from a weakness and that we could benefit from adopting a more direct, efficient, and precise autistic-like style in our emails.

Dr. Punit Shah from the Department of Psychology at Bath explained: "There is no right or wrong way to email, but there are definitely different email styles and that can be revealing of a whole host of characteristics. Our work only looked at the differences between non-autistic and [autistic people](#), but this topic has much wider relevance and application. In a world where we are increasingly reliant on email communication, how we communicate online really matters.

"Some people may bash off emails in seconds, with little care for polite preamble, formalities, or spelling. But we must try not to read too much into how something is said and focus more on its function. We should also be more willing to give people 'the benefit of the doubt' if they seem rude as we don't know about their social-communication differences, potentially related to autism, or other contextual factors that might have influenced their electronic communication, for example managing child care while emailing remotely from home.

"On the other hand, for some people with autism and many others in society more generally, writing emails to friends and colleagues, or posting to [social media](#) can be challenging. For some people, this can create a block where, for fear of an 'email faux pas', they become unresponsive online. This can be problematic, potentially leading to feelings of stress and anxiety.

"In our fast-paced online world we will hopefully become as tolerant and respectful of different [electronic communication](#) styles as we are of social differences in face-to-face communications."

More information: Lucy Anne Livingston et al, Electronic communication in autism spectrum conditions, *Molecular Autism* (2020). [DOI: 10.1186/s13229-020-00329-2](#)

Provided by University of Bath

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