

Those Typos in Your Emails Matter More Than You May Think

Email and other text-based communications are generally seen as relatively deliberate media, given that senders can review their messages and edit out anything they don't intend to convey. New research finds a more complicated picture—one in which simple typing errors serve as powerful cues of emotion.

Across six studies, participants who read emails containing a few mistyped words interpreted those messages as being more emotional than were error-free but otherwise identical emails. In one study, for example, 598 participants read a message from a manager

dressing down an employee who had failed to submit a report on time. The version read by one group of participants contained three typos, while the version read by a second group had none. Those who read the email with errors rated the manager as significantly angrier than did those who read the error-free message. A subsequent experiment showed that the pattern held when the email concerned a happy event: In that instance, typos increased perceptions of the message writer's joy. When people observe something unexpected, such as a typo, they seek to find a reason for it, the researchers explain, and we are culturally conditioned to think that intense feelings often lead to cognitive processing mistakes. Hence, "communication errors act as an amplifier of the perceived intensity of an otherwise expressed emotion," they say. A silver lining: When encountering typos in an emotionally laden message, readers judge the writer less harshly than when the message is emotionally neutral, attributing the errors to an excess of feeling rather than a lack of intelligence.

People who are aware of the emotional signals that errors can send may be better able to communicate effectively, the researchers conclude. "For example, if a manager wanted to communicate what she considered an appropriate amount of anger over poor results, she may be more apt to triple check her email" for mistakes.



ABOUT THE RESEARCH *"Beyond the Emoticon: Are There Unintentional Cues of Emotion in Email?"* by Hayley Blunden and Andrew Brodsky (Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 2021)