UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS | GRADUATE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

Mass Communications & Email Standards Guide

Review Workflows, Expedited Urgent Protocols, and Accessible Email Best Practices

GSM Marketing & Communications Support: The GSM Marketing & Communications team is always available to serve as a resource and strategic partner, and we are happy to review and suggest edits to email drafts. For questions or assistance, contact gsm-marcomm@ucdavis.edu.

PART 1 • STANDARD GOVERNANCE

Mass Communications Review & Approval Checklist

A mass communication is a school-related message distributed to a broad audience or a defined group using substantially the same content. Common examples include:

- Messages to students, staff, faculty, and alumni within a defined group.
- Policy updates, operational notices, event announcements, and deadline reminders.
- Surveys, fundraising appeals, and automated campaigns.

When Review Applies: Routine updates, individual correspondence, and small-group coordination generally do not require the full review process. However, messages involving sensitive topics, policy changes, confidential information, or significant school commitments should receive appropriate review regardless of audience size. When in doubt, consult the unit approver or Marcom before distribution.

SUGGESTED STANDARD REVIEW WORKFLOW

Message Owner ➔ Content Expert (if needed) ➔ Unit Approver ➔ Quick Marcom Review (optional "gut check") ➔ Final Send Authorization

1. Purpose and Audience

- ☐ Confirm the purpose, audience, and recipient list.
- ☐ Make required actions, deadlines, and contacts clear.
- ☐ Honor opt-out preferences.

2. Content Accuracy

- ☐ Verify names, titles, dates, times, locations, and contacts.
- ☐ Have the responsible unit confirm policies, programs, requirements, and commitments.
- ☐ Check links, attachments, forms, and registration details. Remove draft text, placeholders, and outdated information.

3. Sensitivity and Privacy

- ☐ Use respectful, inclusive language suited to the audience.

- ☐ Confirm authorization for use and distribution of personal or confidential information. Route sensitive topics for review before approval.

4. Presentation and Accessibility

- ☐ Check the subject line, branding, sender name, signature, and reply-to address. Proofread for clarity and brevity.
- ☐ Check headings, links, formatting, and image alt-text descriptions for accessibility. Preview on desktop and mobile.
- ☐ Make the email easy to scan. Put the main action first, group related details into short paragraphs, and use descriptive headings and bullets where helpful.

5. Review and Approval

- ☐ Get expert verification as needed, unit approval of content and audience, messaging, content, and presentation.
- ☐ Resolve comments and obtain final approval.

6. Distribution

- ☐ Send test. Check personalization, links, attachments, and platform-added text.
- ☐ Confirm recipients, filters, exclusions, estimated count, sender details, reply routing, send time, and time zone.
- ☐ Review automated reminders and follow-ups as applicable.

PART 2 • TIME-SENSITIVE PROTOCOL

Expedited Review Process for Urgent Communications

Use this process when a communication must be sent before the standard review can be completed (e.g., time-sensitive operational update, deadline change, or correction). **Urgency shortens the review timeline; it does not remove approval requirements.**

1. **Flag the request as urgent:** The message owner sends the draft to the designated unit approver and Marcom at the same time, noting:
   - Why the message is urgent and the latest acceptable send time.
   - The intended audience and distribution platform.
   - Any sensitive content or facts still awaiting confirmation.
2. **Complete a focused review:** The unit approver verifies accuracy, audience, and timing. Marcom checks clarity, tone, sensitivity, and presentation. Involve the appropriate specialist if the content requires additional review.
3. **Resolve changes and authorize release:** The message owner incorporates feedback. The unit approver explicitly approves the final version in writing. Silence does not count as approval.
4. **Use a designated backup if needed:** If a reviewer cannot respond within the required window, contact the preassigned backup. If Marcom and its backup are unavailable, the designated school leader decides whether to authorize distribution and documents the reason.
5. **Check before sending:** Confirm recipients, sender details, dates, links, and attachments. Review a test message in the distribution platform, including third-party systems, whenever feasible.
6. **Document and follow up:** Retain the final message and approval record. Share any message sent without Marcom review with Marcom as soon as possible, ideally by the next business day, and address any needed corrections promptly.

> **Emergency Alerts:** Follow the school's established emergency communications protocol and authorized chain of command.

PART 3 • STRATEGY, DESIGN & ACCESSIBILITY

Email Best Practices Guide

This guide is intended to assist in planning an email strategy and crafting more effective and accessible emails, regardless of platform. These best practices and tips will increase the likelihood that your email message is opened, read, and engaged with by your target audience.

General Best Practices

- **Aim for impact, not volume:** Not every piece of information warrants a standalone email. Use emails for important, need-to-know information. Share nonurgent updates in a newsletter to ensure critical messages stand out and get read.
- **Ensure accessibility:** UC Davis's Digital Accessibility Policy requires electronic communications to be accessible to all community members, including those with disabilities. Tips are highlighted throughout this guide and summarized in the Accessibility section at the end.

★ ***Accessibility Tip:*** *Accessibility guidelines make emails easier for everyone to read!*

- **Avoid long, text-heavy emails:** People are busy, and attention spans are short. Be direct and succinct, and assume most readers will only skim the email. Less is always more.
- **Avoid frequent, repeated messages:** Limit reminder emails and leverage other channels, such as newsletters, for follow-ups and additional reminders.
- **Be consistent:** Regular emails such as newsletters should be sent on a consistent day and time so your audience knows when to expect updates from you.
- **Proof and test:** Send a test email to yourself and a few others to proof for accuracy and check that all links work properly. If possible, view the email on desktop and mobile in different email applications and web browsers, as well as in dark mode.

Email Types: CAN-SPAM Compliance

The FTC CAN-SPAM Act regulates the sending of mass email. It categorizes emails into two types based on their primary purpose: commercial or transactional/relationship.

Requirement	Commercial Messages	Transactional / Relationship
Primary Purpose	Promotes a product or service, including web content. Conveys "nice-to-know" information.	Delivers information related to an agreed-upon transaction or relationship. Conveys "need-to-know" information impacting day-to-day operations or experience.
Common Examples	Invitations, solicitations, press releases, and most newsletters.	Emergency messages, policy changes, benefits information, etc.
Mandatory Elements & Opt-Out Rules	• Sender name & email accurately identifying sender • Subject line accurately reflecting content • Sender's physical address • MUST include an unsubscribe link (opt-out)	• Sender name & email accurately identifying sender • Subject line accurately reflecting content • Should NOT include an unsubscribe link (explain why received in footer)

Follow UC Davis Policy and Procedure Manual section 310-18 when administering campus email lists or sending mass messages it covers. UC Davis guidance on email lists and mass electronic messaging

Audience & Inbox Presentation

Audience

- Your message should be relevant to all or most of its recipients. The more irrelevant emails people receive from a sender, the less likely they are to read future emails from that sender.
- Use a targeted list of recipients for whom your message is relevant. This boosts open and engagement rates, reduces unsubscribes, and builds trust so recipients know your emails are worth their time.
- Leverage newsletters or other channels to share information with a broader audience.

Sender & Replies

- The sender name must accurately identify the source of the message and should be a recognizable UC Davis person, office, or organization.
- The sender and reply-to email addresses should always be ucdavis.edu addresses. Many platforms allow these two addresses to be different if replies should go to a separate mailbox.

Subject Line

- Aim for 30–50 characters including spaces; additional text will be cut off on mobile devices.

- Convey the primary purpose or call to action at the beginning of the subject line.
- Avoid cryptic/misleading language and vague phrases such as "An important message from..."
- Consider personalization where possible and appropriate.
- Use sentence case or title case (all caps may trigger spam filters), and limit excessive punctuation (!!!) and emojis.

Preheader

- A preheader is the line of text appearing below the subject line in a recipient's inbox (if enabled). If omitted, the email client automatically pulls the first line of the email.
- Aim for 60 characters or less to avoid truncation on mobile, and use sentence case.
- Provide additional information about the purpose or call to action that complements the subject line rather than repeating or rephrasing it.

Length & Format

Studies show that people only spend about 8 seconds scanning an email, asking themselves two questions: "What is this about?" and "Why is it relevant to me?" Ensure your email is easy to scan and answers both questions up front.

- **Optimal Length:** Aim for 250–500 words (1–2 minutes of read time) for non-newsletter emails. Long walls of narrative text are rarely read in full and lose the reader quickly.
  - ★ ***Accessibility Tip:*** *Long, text-heavy emails can be overwhelming to neurodiverse readers.*
- **Chunk & Structure:** Break text into short sections and use descriptive headers, bold text, and bullets to make information scannable and add white space.
  - ★ ***Accessibility Tip:*** *Use heading styles in order (<h1>, <h2>, etc.) and don't skip levels to assist screen readers in navigating content and conveying hierarchy.*
- **Lead with Priority Info:** Put the most important information at the top, including the primary call to action. If conveying extensive information, hit the key points and link to a web page for details.

Content Elements

View in Browser Link

- Include a "View this email in a web browser" link at the top of the email in case it does not load properly (most email platforms can generate this automatically).

Salutation / Headline

- Not all emails need to be a formal letter; announcements, news, and invitations can begin with a headline instead of a salutation.
- When using a salutation, describe the audience (e.g., Dear GSM Faculty and Staff) or personalize where appropriate (e.g., Dear [First Name]).

Language, Voice, and Style

- Use short sentences and plain language that is clear, to the point, and easy to understand the first time. Avoid jargon, flowery words, and complex sentences.
  - ★ ***Accessibility Tip:*** *Plain language is especially important for those with cognitive challenges or language barriers.*
- Use active voice, speak in the second person addressing the reader as "you," and follow UC Davis Writing Guidelines and AP Style.

Links

- Use descriptive text explaining where the link takes the reader, not "Click here" or "Learn more" (e.g., visit the Student Affairs website). Avoid full URLs unless very short.
  - ★ ***Accessibility Tip:*** *Descriptive links are critical for those using screen readers.*
- Use a button to ask the reader to do something (e.g., Register for the workshop) and a text link to ask the reader to go somewhere (e.g., Visit the HR website).
- Underline text links to visually signal interactivity, and never underline non-link text.
  - ★ ***Accessibility Tip:*** *Don't use color as the only way to identify a link; readers with color blindness may not distinguish colored text from regular text.*
- Limit links: More links lower the click rate for each. The optimal number for non-newsletter emails is two—one near the top and one near the bottom.

Images & Video

- Minimize image use: Aim for a 70:30 or 80:20 text-to-image ratio. Never send an all-image email, and never use images of text in place of actual text (exception: header graphics with alt-text).
  - ★ ***Accessibility Tip:*** *Screen readers cannot read text embedded in images.*
- Add alt-text to all images: Describe what is in the image, including any text. Avoid "Image of" or "Photo of" and be specific yet simple. Label decorative images as decorative, and include both alt-text and captions for charts and graphs.
  - ★ ***Accessibility Tip:*** *Alt-text is critical for those using screen readers.*
- Use web-resolution JPG, PNG, or GIF files resized to no more than 2x the desired display size.
- Link to videos rather than embedding: Use a thumbnail image with a "play" arrow and link to the video online.

Closing & Footer

- **Closing:** Include contact information for questions or feedback (name and email address of a UC Davis person or office, matching the reply-to address if possible). Include name and title in the signature if using letter format.
- **Footer:** Include basic sender information: organization name, physical address, website address, and optional social media links.
  - **Commercial Opt-Out:** Place the unsubscribe link in the footer.
  - **Transactional Notice:** Indicate why the user received the email (e.g., "You are receiving this email because of your status as a UC Davis student, faculty and/or staff member.").

Design Guidelines

- **Brand Standards:** Follow The UC Davis Brand Visual Identity Guidelines for all university emails.
- **Mobile-Friendly Layout:** Use a single-column layout or a responsive design that stacks multiple columns into a single column on mobile.
- **Header Dimensions:** Use a UC Davis-branded header sized 600–800 pixels wide by 100–200 pixels high.
- **Typography:** Use a web-safe font supported by all email clients (Arial or Open Sans).
- **Font Size:** Use a minimum body text size of 14 points for readability and to ensure text hyperlinks are large enough to tap on mobile.
- **Alignment:** Left-align text and avoid center or right alignment.
  - ★ ***Accessibility Tip:*** *Left-aligned text is easier for those with reading disabilities to process.*

Accessibility Quick-Reference Summary

Email accessibility is the practice of designing emails so that all people, including those with disabilities or assistive devices, can receive and interact with your content:

Element	Accessibility Requirement
Color	Ensure a color contrast ratio of at least 4.5:1 between text and background colors. Do not use color alone to convey information (such as in a chart or hyperlink).
Text	Dense, complex text is difficult for those with neurodiversity or language barriers. Use plain language, be concise, left-align text, and chunk content into short sections.
Headings	Screen readers use heading levels to navigate content and convey hierarchy. Use heading styles in order (<h1>, <h2>, etc.) and do not skip levels.
Lists	Use built-in bulleted or numbered list tools so screen readers interpret them properly. Use bullets when order is not significant, and numbered lists for sequential steps.
Links	Use descriptive, relevant text and underline link text (e.g., "Visit the Student Affairs website" rather than "Click here"). Avoid full URLs unless very short (e.g., events.cmu.edu). Use identical link text when linking to the same destination multiple times, and unique text for different destinations.
Images	Ensure all images have descriptive alt-text for screen readers. Charts and graphs require both alt-text and captions. Never use images of text in place of actual text (except header graphics with alt-text).
Attachments	Check that attachments are accessible.

> **Digital Accessibility Resources:** For more information or guidance on accessibility best practices, visit the UC Davis Digital Accessibility website.