

Conflict on e-mail

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Susan Nienber at Alban has some good thoughts about [how not to communicate about conflict](#). But I'm puzzled as to why she frames her argument as the problems of e-mail in particular. Here's her list of observations about e-mail ([click through](#) to read how she spells out each one further):

1. E-mail makes it impossible to read the non-verbal body language of the persons with whom you are communicating.
2. E-mail appears to be fast, almost immediate, communication, when in fact the length of time it takes to deliver a message depends largely on the recipient's personal habits.
3. Because e-mail language is often less formal than traditional written language, it feels much more like talking on the telephone, except that it is a one-sided conversation.
4. E-mail is not confidential.
5. E-mail is not a constructive venue for *important* conversations.

True. But little of this recommends the telephone as an alternative. On the phone, nonverbals are impossible unless they're audible. As often as not, you get someone's voicemail—and who knows when they'll hear it. You could say that e-mail is one-sided and phone calls are not; you could also say that the phone's lack of visual cues makes for many awkward interruptions, a problem e-mail eliminates. A phone call can't be forwarded like an e-mail, but a voice mail can—and a phone call can be recorded.

On #5 I agree completely. I'd add that important conversations are always best in person. When that's not practical, we rely on communications technology—and I don't think there's a clear answer as to which technology is most appropriate.