The normal place to enter the email address of the recipient of your emails is the "To:" field (a "field" in computer terms is an area in which data is stored). You can send the same message to several people by entering all their email addresses here (separated by commas or semi-colons). Every person receives the message and every person sees the email address of all the other recipients.
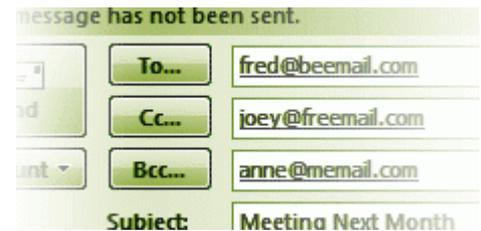
So what is the CC field?

This stands for "carbon copy" and goes back to the days of typewriters and carbon paper. Someone who is "cc'd in" receives a copy for their information. All addresses entered in the CC field are also visible to all recipients of the email.

And what is the BCC field?

This stands for "blind carbon copy". Other recipients are not aware that someone else has received a "blind copy".

But I can't see a BCC field!

Different email programs are set up differently and a lot of them do not display the "BCC" field by default. If you can't find how to display it in your own email program tell me what email program you are using and I will see if I can help.

But why use the CC and BCC fields?

Well, the difference between the "To" and "CC" fields is that the "CC" recipient is just being informed (or, as they say tirelessly these days, "kept in the loop"). They are not expected to respond in the same way as the main recipient. This is actually causing big problems in a lot of organisations where people send "CC's" to all and sundry so that they can say they kept the other person informed. Consequently, people are being bombarded with emails that they have to read in case there's anything they actually need to know.

The first use of the BCC field is fairly obvious – you can send someone a copy without anyone else knowing.

However, there is a much more important use for the BCC field. Suppose you want to send the same email to, say, 30 people who do not know each other. If you put all their email addresses in the "To" field or the "CC" field then they will all see each others' email addresses. This is fine if everyone on the list already knows everyone else, but it's a very bad idea otherwise. To begin with, it's bad "netiquette". By displaying someone's email address to other people you are opening up the possibility of that email address being abused (by spammers, for example). Would you give out someone's phone number to other people without permission to do so? I have also heard that it is possibly a contravention of data protection legislation to be cavalier with email addresses in this way. I've no idea whether that's true or just an urban myth, but I'm sure you get the point.

So, if you wish to send an email to lots of people without revealing their addresses to each other you put them into the BCC field. If you do this you must still put an address in the "To" field and the easiest thing to do is to put your own address here. You could also create a contact in your email contacts/address book that consists of your own email address with the "display as" information set to "undisclosed recipients". You then use this as the recipient in the "To" field.

While we're on the subject of netiquette, there are a couple of options in most email programs that are useful if used sparingly, but which drive me (and others) nuts when overused:

- prioritising emails – by all means put a "high priority" tag on emails that require a high priority response, but don't put one on every email. I'm sure I'm not the only person childish enough to treat these "me, me, me" emails with a slower than average response.
- requesting a "read receipt" for every email. As a matter of bloody-minded principle, I refuse to send "read receipts" to people who request them on every email they send me. Anyway, I think I'm intelligent and mature enough to be able to work out for myself when it is appropriate to acknowledge receipt of an email.

Grumpy? Moi?

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