



How to Email an Instructor

Based on "How to Email a Professor" by Professor Morton Ann Gernsbacher

Email has become a democratizing system of communication that flattens hierarchies and allows people of different status to communicate with each other.

Most instructors value receiving email from their students. But some instructors are shocked by the sheer effrontery of some students' email messages. And hardly any instructors want to read email messages from their students that resemble texting or IM.

These guidelines, and the above introduction, are culled from recommendations provided by several universities, a list of which appears at the end.

(1) Use your university email account. Most instructors receive hordes of spam mail, as a result of their university email addresses being widely available. Ergo, most instructors use vigorous spam detectors. Don't run the risk of your important email message ending up in your instructor's spam folder because it was sent from your bigeyes@yahoo account.

(2) Start with a new message. Avoid simply replying to an old message that your instructor previously sent, unless your correspondence is on the same topic as the previous message (i.e., don't reply to a message about the Course Syllabus unless you are emailing about the course syllabus). While it might be convenient for you to quickly grab a message from your inbox and reply to it, replying to a previous message tells the recipient you are corresponding about the previous topic.

(3) Write an informative subject heading. If your instructor has instructed you to use a particular subject heading whenever you email regarding a particular class or a particular assignment, use that subject heading. If your instructor hasn't instructed you to use a particular subject heading, write the course number of the course you are writing about in the subject heading. Do not use a generic subject heading, such as "Question," or a slang subject heading, such as "Hey."

(4) Use paragraph breaks to help organize your message. No one likes to read a long block of words on a screen. A good rule of thumb is **no more than three or four sentences per paragraph.**

(5) Do not address an instructor by their first name unless they have explicitly instructed you to do so. Some instructors may tell you to call them their first names. If so, writing an email to them in which you address them by their first name (e.g., Dear Roberto) is fine. But do not address an instructor by their first name unless they have explicitly told you that is ok (even if you hear your TA address the instructor by their first name. A TA has a different relationship with an instructor than you, a student, has with an instructor). The recommendation to not address an instructor by their first name, unless they have explicitly instructed you to, also holds for in-person communication.

(6) Write grammatically, spell correctly, and use appropriate capitalization. Show your instructor that you care about how you present yourself by writing well formed email messages to them. Capitalize properly, use a spell checker, and proofread for grammatical errors.

(7) Don't use e-mail to rant or whine. Ranting and whining messages are no fun for anyone to read. Therefore, and not surprisingly, most ranting or whining emails elicit the exact opposite effect than the effect you want the email to elicit. We're all tempted to rant sometimes, so what one professor recommends is to rant all you want in an email. But don't send that email. Hit the delete button, and then write a more measured message.

(8) Write the body of the email message first; fill in the address in the TO: line last. To guard against sending a typo-ridden, ranting, or simply incomplete email message, write the body of your email message first. Read it over at least once if not twice. If it looks ok, then fill in the address in the TO: line and send.

REFERENCES

[Dr Who or Professor Who? On Academic Email Etiquette.](#) Tom Hartley, ThermalToy.

[Email Etiquette: How to Write Email to Your Professors.](#) University of La Verne Learning Enhancement Center.

[How to Use Proper Email Etiquette When Writing to a Professor.](#) University of Delaware.

[Netiquette Guidelines.](#) Wellesley College Project on Social Computing.