

Emailing your college professor: do's and don'ts

By Jackson Nimesheim (July 26, 2022, at 11:57 a.m.)

Clarity and formality are key to effective messaging with college instructors, experts say.

Most college students do the bulk of their electronic communication via text messaging. But they may need to send emails when contacting professors.

Texting is casual: A student may not think twice about abbreviating long words or swapping punctuation marks for emojis when composing a message. But standards for emailing are different, especially in academic settings. Students' emails can influence the way their professors view them, experts say.

"Think about what type of student and person you want your professor to perceive you as," Michael Burns, a senior lecturer and director of career readiness in the communication studies department at Texas State University, wrote in an email. "The way you structure and communicate in an email creates an impression and you want to make sure you are being perceived in a positive way."

Here are some mistakes to avoid and principles to keep in mind when emailing a professor.

Don'ts

- Email from a personal account.
- Use a nondescript subject line.
- Forget a proper salutation.
- Rush the professor.

Don't Email from a Personal Account

Some professors will not open emails that come from unfamiliar addresses. And even those that do may never receive one sent from a student's personal account, according to Burns.

"It is not that I won't open an email from an address I don't recognize, it's more about the fact that many university firewalls send messages from unknown or non-university emails to junk and we don't see them," he says. "Students should always use their university email addresses when corresponding with a professor."

Don't Use a Nondescript Subject Line

"The subject line of your email matters just as much as the contents that are within the email," says Staci Perryman-Clark, director of the Institute for Intercultural and Anthropological Studies and an English professor at Western Michigan University.

Marilyn Sanders Mobley, professor emerita of English and African American Studies at Case Western Reserve University in Ohio, says students need good subject lines to ensure their emails do not get overlooked.

Clear subject lines allow professors to understand the urgency of a student's inquiry. Students can demonstrate professionalism by using subject lines that properly summarize the contents of their message.

"If you have a question, be specific about what the question is in your subject line," Perryman-Clark says. "For instance, you could say 'Question About Chapter 2's Review Sheet' instead of just simply stating 'Question.'"

Don't Forget a Proper Salutation

While students may be accustomed to starting electronic conversations with the terms "Hey" or "Hi," experts encourage them to use more formal salutations when addressing professors. Mobley and Latrise Johnson, associate professor of English language arts and literacy at the University of Alabama, offer "Hello," "Dear," "Good morning" or "Good afternoon" as appropriate alternatives.

Students reaching out for the first time may not know what their professor wants to be called. Some professors with doctoral degrees may prefer a “Dr.” title. Others prefer their first name. When in doubt, “Professor” is a safe bet, according to Perryman-Clark.

“If you don’t know the professor’s title, it never hurts to begin your email with ‘Dear Professor X,’” she says.

Don’t Rush Your Professor

Students waiting on a reply may be tempted to send a follow-up email after a few hours. But experts advise giving professors ample time to respond.

“If you’ve asked a question that you need answered, send a very polite nudge email after two days, not counting weekends,” says Sarah Johnson, director of the writing center and an English instructor at Madison Area Technical College in Wisconsin.

Latrise Johnson advises students to wait even longer – a week – before sending an additional email. Professors often have many emails in their inboxes, and many other job responsibilities to take care of, she explains.

Do’s

- Consider whether an email is necessary.
- Visit a writing center.
- Be concise.
- Proofread.

Do Consider Whether an Email Is Necessary

Students may already have access to the information that they are hoping to get from a professor. Sarah Johnson encourages them to check the syllabus or reach out to a classmate for questions regarding class policies or assignments due.

Emails previously sent from the professor may also contain the guidance that the student needs. Burns says students need to read all of their professors’ emails.

“We don’t send emails for fun, they contain really important course information,” he says. “A prepared student reads emails.”

Do Visit a Writing Center

College writing centers are not exclusively for students who need help with class papers. Sarah Johnson encourages students to visit their writing center for help with particularly important emails.

“With high-stakes writing, it can be very worth it,” she says.

Do Be Concise

Clarity is important, but students should aim to take as little time from their professors as possible in an email exchange.

“Students need to be reminded that professors have preparation, grading, office hours, department meetings, professional meetings, conferences, research and publication deadlines that limit the amount of time they have for reading and responding to emails,” Mobley wrote in an email.

Experts say that students hoping to share complicated information with their professors should think about using other channels of communication before sending an email.

“If you find yourself writing an email that’s going into its fourth paragraph, consider whether a phone call or a meeting might be a better way to convey what you need to tell your professor,” Sarah Johnson says.

Do Proofread

Students should ensure that their emails are formal and grammatically correct before hitting the “send” button, experts say.

“I often receive emails that have no punctuation, no upper case letters, and they also include abbreviations like LOL or LMK,” Burns says. “There is an expectation that more time is spent on an email, which means it should be written more professionally and proofread.”