Email etiquette

Emails are something we all have to deal with, and for many, it can be intimidating to email people more senior than you, or your instructors (professors, TAs), or people you don't know. It's also important to note that the lines between informal communication and professional communication are increasingly blurred, complicating the email forum for many.

In general, keep in mind the following: communications that are direct, concise, and unambiguous save time. For a first email to someone, try to meet these criteria! You can always get into more detail in a follow-up conversation. Here are a few tips to prepare a professional email to a professor in a college setting and get a response.

Wait, do you need to send the email?

If you have a question, make sure you check to see if you can find the answer. Many faculty get emails asking for information to things they've already communicated. That's one of many reasons why many faculty provide resources to help answer common questions – class website, lecture notes, syllabus, office hours, etc – so as to minimize email questions. Check those first and if you have checked it and still can't get your question answered then email!

The same is true about research opportunities. Check the lab's website first before emailing to ask about available positions or types of research done in the lab.

What account should you use to send the email?

I would recommend using your university email. If you don't have a university email, or you are transitioning between positions, keep a "professional" personal account (e.g. elizabethnance@provider.com). This decreases the likelihood that your email will end up in spam.

Use a short but informative subject line

It's important to have a subject line that is short, yet informative and gives an idea of what is in the email or what ask you are going to make. For example, if you are emailing to ask about undergraduate research positions, a title like "Undergraduate Research Opportunity in the Nance Lab" or "Interest in undergraduate research in the Nance lab" can be useful. Too much detail can actually make an email look like spam. Subjects that don't make a lot of sense will also look like they were generated by random word generators, which sends emails into the spam folder. Blank subject lines are ineffective and generally an email with a blank subject line is deleted or ignored.

Start an email with a salutation

Launching directly into a request is not going to be effective! Refer to the person you are emailing by their title. Professor is usually a safe bet for addressing college instructors. If emailing a faculty, starting with "Dear Professor Nance," or "Hello Prof. Nance," or similar is always a good default. If you prefer, you might refer to faculty with PhDs or MD degrees as "Dr.", which is ok too! While there are individual preferences, in general, saying "Hello," without a title or name is more off-putting than getting "Hi Professor,".

Be succinct in your email

Introduce yourself in the first sentence, especially if this is your first time emailing the professor. Giving your name and some contextual relationship (e.g. a student in the class, an undergraduate

interested in xx degree program and interested in research) in the first sentence is helpful. Then get to your point up front! If you are making an ask, make it in the first few sentences. If you are providing information, state what info you are providing in the first few sentences. Be succinct, but avoid demands, presumptions, and accusations.

Either way, professors get a lot emails, so think about someone only spending a few seconds glancing at the content of the email to determine if its something they need to respond to or just something they need to know about. If you can't explain your reason for the email in a sentence or two, consider asking for an appointment instead!

Avoid abbreviations or shorthand as much as you can. While it's ok for informal communications, shorthand or abbreviations can often result in misunderstanding or feelings of exclusion that lower the likelihood of getting any response or a useful response.

End your email with a closing

It is helpful to have a closing because this is the closing impression you'll leave when someone finishes your email. There are a lot of debates on how to close emails, but some useful tips on ending emails are available here: https://www.themuse.com/advice/how-to-end-email-list-of-sign-offs

When should you send a follow-up email?

For non-class related emails, sometimes you might not get a response. So when do you send a follow-up email? In general, I would wait at least 1 week to follow-up. If it's not time sensitive, then 2 weeks is also ok. If you need a response on a specific timeline, make sure that specific timeline is included in the initial email and your intended follow-up time.

For class related emails, check first to see if there is a class policy on the website or syllabus (e.g. allow up to 48 hours for a response except on weekends/holidays). If there is not written policy or expectation for the class, allow at least 24 hours but preferably 48 hours to get a response.

Some additional nuance for emailing professors

Writing in capital letters can be interpreted as shouting, so avoid all caps!

Use black text on a white background.

In many classes, faculty will let you know what they prefer to be called, so use that!

If you are a responding to an email sent to you, take a look at how that person signed their name, and use that name as the salutation in your response.

Proofread your message for grammatical errors and spelling! Will your emails always be perfect? No, we all make mistakes. But a proofread can help minimize those mistakes and make sure you are increasing the chance that you'll get a response.

If an email is emotionally charged, for you or the recipient, consider drafting it then waiting 24 hours then reading it again. You might find more effective ways to communicate your message to get a useful response with fresh eyes on your email.

We prefer face to face conversations! If we have office hours, try to come to those – or set up an appointment - rather than putting everything in email!

Some additional quick read resources:

Because there are a lot of opinions on this topic, I'm providing some alternative views:

https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2015/04/16/advice-students-so-they-dont-sound-silly-emails-essay

https://academicpositions.com/career-advice/how-to-email-a-professor

https://marktomforde.com/academic/undergraduates/Email-Etiquette.html

https://medium.com/@lportwoodstacer/how-to-email-your-professor-without-being-annoying-af-cf64ae0e4087

An often used comic about writing emails to instructors – dramatic, but not far off from many instructor experiences (and frustrations!)