

Corresponding with Your Instructor

What would we do without email? These days we rely heavily on email as our mode of communication, and while email is generally informal than the formal letter, emailing a professor or a university staff member is best regarded in a more formal light. Reason? We're usually contacting this person with a request, a question, or concern. Approaching the email with your audience and purpose in the forefront can help avoid some of the pitfalls.

At the university, we often rely on email as our venue for communication. And yet, there remains a protocol on how to write appropriate emails.

Emailing is a highly successful way of communicating with your instructor about any questions you might have. Research indicates that communication with your faculty is essential to your success, and email is an easy way of corresponding. Additionally, most faculty frequently check emails, and you should get an answer within 24 hours.

Although you may have a friendly relationship with your instructor, you are not emailing a friend or a family member. Additionally, email is not texting so watch out for those abbreviations and avoid emojis. For your university email, consider a more formal tone and style.

Here's how to approach emailing:

First, recognize that your instructor receives multiple emails daily, so do all you can to ensure your email gets read and your reason for writing is understood. Here are a few guidelines:

1. Clearly identify your reason for writing in the subject line. If you're currently in a class, include that as well. For example, "Question about Psy401 Assignment" or "Office Hour Request."
2. Since you are probably going to ask a question or make a request, be cordial and respectful. "Salutations" such as "hello" are helpful here. If you don't have experience using the faculty member's first name, rely on the person's title and last name. For example, "Hello, Professor Garcia" or "Hello, Dr. Garcia" for those faculty member's with doctoral degrees. Use "Ms. or Mr." work for those with Master degrees. When in doubt, check your syllabus or use "Professor."

Tip!

Be consistent! For example, if you're writing to Dr. Sylvia Garcia and referring to another faculty member, use either both their first names or refer to both as Dr. or Professor. For example, if you write "Hi, Sylvia" and refer to "Jim O'Reilly" in your missive. Also, you'll avoid the inadvertent sexism here. You wouldn't want to use the informal first name for the female professor but then reference the male professor by title.

3. Email correspondence should be direct and relatively brief. Clearly state why you're writing. Try "I am writing because" as your opening line. If you're confused about an

assignment, simply state that and ask for clarification. Try to be as clear as possible. For example, “I am writing because I am confused about the assignment’s length requirements. Your syllabus indicates that this reflection be 2 pages. Does this include the References page?”

4. Provide a timeframe regarding the issue for the faculty member to get back to you.
5. Never forget the value of a simple “thank you.” For example, “I appreciate your help here. Thank you.”
6. Check for typos and misspellings. Use Spellcheck if it’s available. However, spellcheck is not always reliable, so always proofread your text prior to sending. Watch out for those [pesky homophones](#).

Sound easy? Good! If not, here’s a sample of using these tips:

Hello, Dr. Garcia.

I am in your “Child Development” class that meets on Tuesday nights. I am writing because I have a few questions regarding next week’s assignment. I’ve read the syllabus and other course materials, but I’m not sure if I am required to conduct outside research or if the class readings will be enough. Dr. O’Reilly is requiring only class readings in his section. I plan on working on this assignment in the next few days and would appreciate your help. Thank you.

Best,

Michelle

What not to do!

Sylvia-

You need to explain next week’s assignment. I’ve talked with others in the class and they’re also baffled. UGH! Not sure if we’re supposed to do outside research. I feel that we’re assigned a lot of class readings and they should suffice. Dr. O’Reilly is requiring only the class readings. However, since you’re the one who will grade the assignment, we need you to tell us what you want. Please respond ASAP!!!