

# How to Email Your Professor (without being annoying AF)



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Every semester, I see the tweets and Facebook posts. My professor friends, they are annoyed. Their students do not know how to write emails, they say. What they really mean is that their students don't know how to follow the conventions of email etiquette in the academy. I used to be exasperated by student emails too. Until I realized that there was a simple explanation for why they didn't know how to write them — they've never actually been taught how.\*

But now, clueless students have no excuse, because they can read this post. Profs, share it with your students. Students, share it with your friends. Or don't, and be the one person in the class your prof enjoys receiving email from.

## 10 Elements of an Effective, Non-Annoying Email

Here's a template you can follow in constructing your email to a professor. Each element is explained further below.

*Dear [1] Professor [2] Last-Name [3],*

*This is a line that recognizes our common humanity [4].*

*I'm in your Class Name, Section Number that meets on This Day [5]. This is the question I have or the help I need [6]. I've looked in the syllabus and at my notes from class and online and I asked someone else from the class [7], and I think This Is The Answer [8], but I'm still not sure. This is the action I would like you to take [9].*

*Signing off with a Thank You is always a good idea [10],  
Favorite Student*

## Element #1: Salutation

Right off the bat, here's where you can establish that you view your relationship with your professor as a professional one. Use "Dear," or if that feels horribly formal to you, you can use "Hello" or "Hi." ("Hi" is pushing it. See note about exceptions below.)

## Element #2: Honorific

This is where a lot of students unwittingly poke right at their professor's sensitive ego and sense of justice in the world. You didn't think this little word was a super big deal, but it actually is to them. An honorific is a title used to communicate respect for a person's position. Whether or not you, as a student, *actually* respect your professor's authority or position, it's a good idea to act like you do. The simplest way to do this is to address them as "Professor." If they have a PhD, you can technically call them "Dr." but you're safer with "Professor." Not all instructors have PhDs (and many won't even have the word professor in their official job title), but if they are teaching a college class they are inhabiting the role of Professor and can be addressed as such. The bonus of "Professor" and "Dr." is that they don't require you to know anything about your professor's gender identity or marital status. If you call your prof "Mrs." or "Miss," lord help you.

Top highlight

## Element #3: Name

You might be surprised at how frequently students get their professor's name wrong. This is not difficult information to look up, people. It's on your syllabus, it's on the department website, it's probably Google-able too. Use their last name. Spell out the whole thing. Spell it correctly. If there's a hyphen in it, use both names *and* the hyphen (this really falls under spelling out the whole thing and spelling it correctly, but I get it, it's a special case and it causes a lot of confusion for some reason even though it is 2016).

## Exceptions to #1–3 (do not attempt until you have leveled up to pro emailer status)

You may use a less formal salutation, and address your professor by something other than Professor Last-Name in your email, **if, and only if, you have received an email from them where they use an informal salutation and sign it with something other than Professor Last-Name.** For example, when I was a college professor, I would often sign off on my emails "Prof. P-S" because I knew my last name was long and confusing for people. I then rather liked it when people sent me emails addressed to

“Prof. P-S.” But don’t deviate from what they call themselves. NEVER try to use a first name unless you have been given explicit permission to do so. If the prof cryptically signs their emails with only initials, best to stick to Professor Last-Name. Do not under any circumstances begin an email with “Hey” because some people get real huffy about that.

#### **Element #4: Meaningless Nicety**

It never hurts to say something like “I hope you’re enjoying the beautiful weather today,” or “I hope you had a relaxing weekend,” to start off. It shows that you see your professor as a person who has some kind of life. Professors like it when you see them as people who have lives outside of their classroom (however remotely this may resemble the truth). It doesn’t really matter what you say here, it’s more the ritual of polite interest that counts. If you can make it come off like you genuinely mean it, bonus points for you.

#### **Element #5: Reminder of how they know you**

This one is key, especially if it’s the first time you are contacting your professor. You can’t count on them to remember your name from their rosters or to be able to put your face with your name. If there’s something distinctive about you that would jog their memory and make them look upon you fondly, include that. For instance, “I stayed after class to ask you about the reading that one time,” or “I sit in the front row and have blue hair,” whatever. If you haven’t met them yet, explain your desired relationship to them, such as “I am interested in enrolling in your class next semester.” If you’re fairly certain they will know you by name, you can leave this out. But some profs are very bad at remembering names, so you might as well throw them a bone here. (If you are lucky, those profs will be self-aware and empathetic enough not to make you memorize any names for exams in their classes.)

#### **Element #6: The real reason for your email**

This is the whole reason you’re sending the email, so make it good. The important thing here is to get in and get out, while remaining courteous. Concisely state what it is you need from the professor without offering a bunch of excuses or going into excessive detail or sounding like you are making demands. If you can’t explain why you’re emailing in a sentence or two, consider making an appointment to meet with the professor in person, in which case your line here will be “I was hoping we could meet to talk about X. What would be a good time for that?” If they can’t meet and just

want to discuss it over email, they'll let you know.

### **Elements #7 and 8: This is where you prove you're a wonderful person**

There is a t-shirt for sale on the internet that says, "It's in the syllabus." Think for a second about why there is a market for this product. A vast number of emails sent to professors by students are seeking information that has already been communicated by the professor. Before even sending the email, you should actually check the syllabus and your notes (and the class website if there is one) to see if your question has indeed been answered there. It doesn't hurt to ask someone else from the class too — this is why you should try to get a least one classmate's phone number or email address during the first week. If you've actually done all these things and you still have a question, then your contacting the professor will actually provide helpful information to them that they might not have been clear about something.

If you can try to answer your own question, and you turn out to be right, that saves them a little bit of time in their response. For instance, if you are writing to set up a meeting, you could say, "It says on the syllabus that your office hours are Tuesdays at 3pm. Could I come this Tuesday at 3:15?" This also shows that you thought about the whole thing for more than two seconds before deciding to take up their email-reading time.

### **Element #9: Super polite restatement of your request**

If you're asking a question you need an answer to, you can say something like "If you could let me know at your earliest convenience, I'd really appreciate it." If you need them to fill out a form, or contact someone on your behalf, or do something that requires more action than just answering your email, state that very clearly here. This helps them put it on their to-do list and get it done.

### **Element #10: Sign-off**

If you're not sure how to sign off an email, "Thank you" is nearly always appropriate. You can do "Best," or "All the best," or "Sincerely," or whatever, but some form of thanks here does double duty as both sign-off and expression of gratitude.

### **The hidden Element #11: The follow-up**

If your professor hasn't responded to your email, *and social cues tell you they*

*probably meant to by now*, you can send a gentle follow-up. You can format the follow-up using all the elements here, but you can add in “Just following up on my previous email,” right before you get to Element #6. You don’t have to rub it in that they forgot to email you back, they will get the point (and if they genuinely forgot, they might feel bad). If they were not emailing you back on purpose, you probably already annoyed them the first time around, and you might as well be as polite as possible with the follow-up. When is it safe to send a follow-up reminder? You have to gauge this based on how quickly they usually respond to things and how dire your need for a response truly is. If it can wait a week, let it wait a week (or until you see them in person).

## Why any of this matters

Learning how to craft professional emails is a skill you can take with you into the so-called real world. A courteous and thoughtfully constructed request is much more likely to receive the kind of response you want. And, let’s face it, professors are humans with feelings who just want to be treated as such.

You might think professors who are annoyed by student emails are oversensitive and lazy (it’s their job to handle this shit, right?). And you might be right. But consider that while you only have a few professors at any one time, they might have hundreds of students. They are possibly getting the same question from ten different people. They might be an adjunct professor who is actually only paid for the hours they spend in the classroom (and they’re not paid very much for that even). They might have experienced a pattern of receiving less respect from people based on their gender or race. Make your email the one they don’t gripe to their friends about. Now you know how.

*\*This was corroborated for me when I interviewed a bunch of my former students about how they figured out how to navigate electronic communication in their college careers. The ones who felt confident and effective were ones who’d had a lot of experience interacting electronically with adults outside their family before they ever got to college. We don’t have to go into the sociological dimensions of who’s most likely to have had such opportunities, but you can probably fill in the blanks.*

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