

The New York Times

ON CAMPUS

U Can't Talk to Ur Professor Like This



By **Molly Worthen**

May 13, 2017

Chapel Hill, N.C. — At the start of my teaching career, when I was fresh out of graduate school, I briefly considered trying to pass myself off as a cool professor. Luckily, I soon came to my senses and embraced my true identity as a young fogey.

After one too many students called me by my first name and sent me email that resembled a drunken late-night Facebook post, I took a very fogeyish step. I began attaching a page on etiquette to every syllabus: basic rules for how to address teachers and write polite, grammatically correct emails.

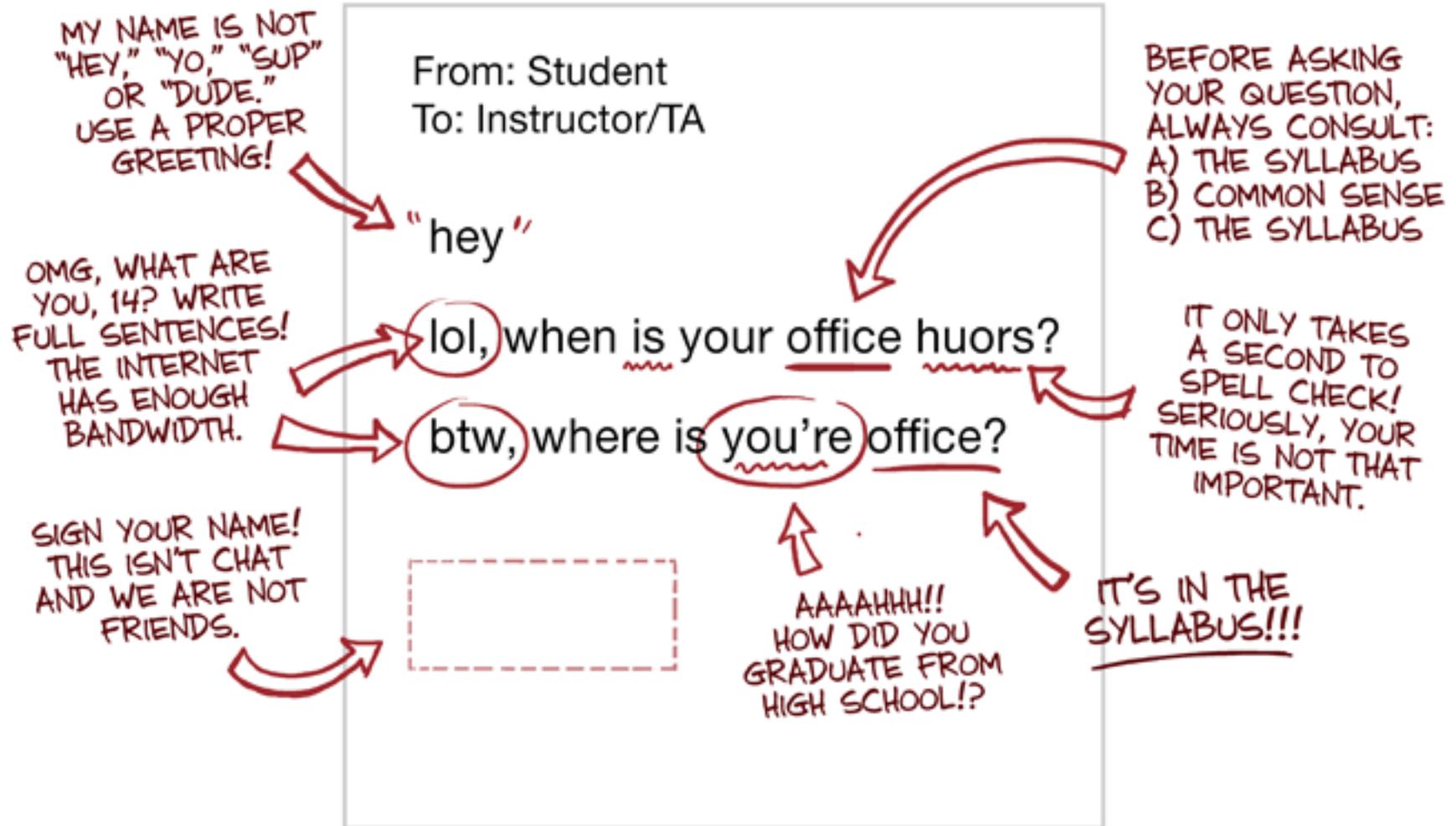
Over the past decade or two, college students have become far more casual in their interactions with faculty members. My colleagues around the country grumble about students' sloppy emails and blithe informality.

Mark Tomforde, a math professor at the University of Houston who has been teaching for almost two decades, added etiquette guidelines to his website. "When students started calling me by my first name, I felt that was too far, and I've got to say something," he told me. "There were also the emails written like text messages. Worse than the text abbreviations was the level of informality, with no address or signoff."

His webpage covers matters ranging from appropriate email addresses (if you're still using "cutie_pie_98@hotmail.com," then "it's time to retire that address") to how to be gracious when making a request ("do not make demands").

Sociologists who surveyed undergraduate syllabuses from 2004 and 2010 found that in 2004, 14 percent addressed issues related to classroom etiquette; six years later, that number had more than doubled, to 33 percent. This phenomenon crosses socio-economic lines. My colleagues at Stanford gripe as much as the ones who teach at state schools, and students from more privileged backgrounds are often the worst offenders.

HOW TO WRITE AN E-MAIL TO YOUR INSTRUCTOR OR T.A.



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Why are so many teachers bent out of shape because a student fails to call them “Professor” or neglects to proofread an email? Are academics really that insecure? Is this just another case of scapegoating millennials for changes in the broader culture?

Don't dismiss these calls for old-fashioned courtesy as a case of fragile ivory tower egos or misplaced nostalgia. There is a strong liberal case for using formal manners and titles to ensure respect for all university professionals, regardless of age, race or gender. More important, doing so helps defend the university's dearest values at a time when they are under continual assault.

It's true that the conventions that have, until recently, ruled higher education did not rule from time immemorial. Two centuries ago, students often rejected expectations of deference. In 1834, Harvard students rebelled when some of their classmates were punished for refusing to memorize their Latin textbook. They broke the windows of a teacher's apartment and destroyed his furniture. When the president of the college cracked down and suspended the entire sophomore class, the juniors retaliated by hanging and burning him in effigy and setting off a rudimentary explosive in the campus chapel.

Later in the 19th century, etiquette manuals proliferated in bookstores, and Americans began to emphasize elaborate social protocols. As colleges expanded and academic disciplines professionalized, they mimicked the hierarchical cultures of the German research universities, where students bowed before “Herr Professor Doktor.”

The historian John Kasson has noted that back then, formal etiquette was not aimed at ensuring respect for all. It was, in part, a system to enforce boundaries of race, class and gender at a time when the growth of cities and mass transit forced Americans into close quarters with strangers. Codes of behavior served “as checks against a fully democratic order and in support of special interests, institutions of privilege and structures of domination,” he writes in his book “Rudeness and Civility.”



Erik Carter

The normal curve of email response time

What, do you just sit by your inbox all day?

Don't you EVER check your email?



But today, on the other side of the civil rights revolution, formal titles and etiquette can be tools to protect disempowered minorities and ensure that the modern university belongs to all of us. Students seem more inclined to use casual forms of address with professors who are young, nonwhite and female — some of whom have responded by becoming vocal defenders of old-fashioned propriety.

Angela Jackson-Brown, a professor of English at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., told me that “most of my students will acknowledge that I’m the first and only black teacher they’ve ever had.” Insisting on her formal title is important, she said: “I feel the extra burden of having to go in from Day 1 and establish that I belong here.”

When Professor Jackson-Brown began teaching in the 1990s, most students respected her authority. But in recent years, that deference has waned (she blames the informality of social media). “I go out of my way now to not give them access to my first name,” she said. “On every syllabus, it states clearly: ‘Please address me as Professor Jackson-Brown.’ ”

She linked this policy to the atmosphere of mutual respect that she cultivates in her classes. These days, simply being considerate can feel like a political act. “After this recent election, I’ve had several female students come to me and say, ‘I’m noticing differences in how men are treating me.’ It’s heartbreaking,” she said. “We’re trying to set standards for them that they may not see outside the classroom, places where you’d think there would be decorum.”

This logic resonates with some students. “Having these titles forces everyone to give that respect,” Lyndah Lovell, a graduating senior at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va., said. “They know they have to use these manners with everyone. Even if the underlying thoughts of prejudice will still be there to some extent, you give these thoughts less power.”

Insisting on traditional etiquette is also simply good pedagogy. It’s a teacher’s job to correct sloppy prose, whether in an essay or an email. And I suspect that most of the time, students who call faculty members by their first names and send slangy messages are not seeking a more casual rapport. They just don’t know they should do otherwise — no one has bothered to explain it to them. Explaining the rules of professional interaction is not an act of condescension; it’s the first step in treating students like adults.

That said, the teacher-student relationship depends on a special kind of inequality. “Once I refer to them as I would my best friend, I eliminate that boundary of clarity,” Ms. Lovell told me. She recalled how awkward she felt when the head of the research lab where she worked asked undergraduates to call him Willy. “All my friends were saying: ‘Oh, man, do we do this? He has a Ph.D. He’s a professor. Is it O.K. to do this?’ Sometimes I do, but he’s a great mentor, and it’s confusing. A lot of us like to preserve that distance.”

Alexis Delgado, a sophomore at the University of Rochester, is skeptical of professors who make a point of insisting on their title. “I always think it’s a power move,” she told me. “Just because someone gave you a piece of paper that says you’re smart doesn’t mean you can communicate

those ideas to me. I reserve the right to judge if you're a good professor."

But she ruefully recalled one young professor who made the mistake of telling the class that he didn't care if they used his first name. "He didn't realize how far it would go, and we all thought, this is awkward," she said. "I had no desire to be friends. I only wanted to ask questions."

During office hours, we have frank conversations about career choices, mental health crises and family tribulations. But the last thing most students want from a mentor is the pretense of chumminess.

Ms. Lovell said the very act of communicating more formally helps her get some distance on a personal problem. "When I explain my difficulties and struggles, I try to explain in a mature way," she said. "I want to know: How would someone older than me think through this?"

The facile egalitarianism of the first-name basis can impede good teaching and mentoring, but it also presents a more insidious threat. It undermines the message that academic titles are meant to convey: esteem for learning. The central endeavor of higher education is not the pursuit of money or fame but knowledge. "There needs to be some understanding that degrees mean something," Professor Jackson-Brown said. "Otherwise, why are we encouraging them to get an education?"

The values of higher education are not the values of the commercial, capitalist paradigm. At a time when corporate executives populate university boards and politicians demand proof of a diploma's immediate cash value, this distinction needs vigilant defense.

The erosion of etiquette encourages students to view faculty members as a bunch of overeducated customer service agents. "More and more, students view the process of going to college as a business transaction," Dr. Tomforde, the math professor, told me. "They see themselves as a customer, and they view knowledge as a physical thing where they pay money and I hand them the knowledge — so if they don't do well on a test, they think I haven't kept up my side of the business agreement." He added, "They view professors in a way similar to the person behind the counter getting their coffee."

But if American culture in general — including many workplaces — has become less formal, are professors doing students a disservice by insisting on old-fashioned manners?

When Anna Lewis left a Ph.D. program in English to work at a technology firm, she had to learn to operate in a different culture. Yet she has noticed that the informality of the tech industry can mislead new millennial employees.

"They see they can call everyone from the C.E.O. down by their first name, and that can be confusing — because what they often don't realize is that there's still a high standard of professionalism," she told me. "At the intern level, these things are basic, but they require

reminders: show up to meetings on time; be aware that you, yourself, are fully responsible for your work schedule. No one is going to tell you to attend a meeting.” In other words, young graduates mistake informality for license to act unprofessionally.

“There is some value in being schooled in more formal etiquette, developing personal and professional accountability, a work ethic and a level of empathy, which is very much valued in the tech industry,” Ms. Lewis said.

Here’s an analogy: We should teach students traditional etiquette for the same reason most great abstract painters first mastered figurative painting. In order to abandon or riff on a form, you have to get the hang of its underlying principles.

That means that professors should take the time to explain these principles, making it clear that learning how to write a professional email and relate to authority figures is not just preparation for a job after graduation. The real point is to stand up for the values that have made our universities the guardians of civilization.

And if you’re going to write an angry email telling me how wrong I am, I beg you: Please proofread it before you hit “send.”

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I invite you to join me on Twitter (@MollyWorthen). Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

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Rules of Academic Etiquette

General rules of thumb:

- When in doubt about how you should speak, write, or act, always err on the side of formality. You will never offend or annoy someone by being overly formal and polite.
- While you are in college, your coursework is your job. You should behave as you would in a professional work environment.

When addressing your professors in person:

- Always address them as “Professor Smith” or “Dr. Smith.”
- Do not call them by their first names or anything else unless they explicitly ask you to do so.

When writing an email to your professor:

- Begin the email with “Dear Professor Smith,” “Dear Prof. Smith,” or “Dear Dr. Smith.” Do not begin the email “Hi” without addressing your professor by their title and surname.
- Be alert to the tone of your message. Any email to a professor or teaching assistant should sound like a formal letter, not a text message or a demand to a customer service representative. For example, you should write:

Dear Professor Smith,

I cannot come to your office hours this week. Are you available at any time on Monday instead?

*Sincerely,
Jane*

Do NOT write

Hi,

I need to talk to you about the test. Can I come by Mon? Thx Jane

Do NOT write

Hello,

I'm a senior and I need your class to graduate. ConnectCarolina says I need permission. I need you to enroll me immediately.

Jane

- Write in complete sentences with correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- Proofread your email before sending it.

Email Etiquette: Guidelines for Writing to Your Professors

The way in which you **communicate** and **present yourself** when writing to your professors is **extremely important**.

When you write to a professor, you should view it as a professional exchange. How you choose to interact conveys your level of seriousness and professionalism. It not only affects how your professor views you, but it also determines how much time they are going to take to deal with your issues. If you come off as rude, clueless, or irresponsible, then it will affect how your professor responds. This will have consequences for how the professor interacts with you and possibly also how they evaluate you. As with any professional interaction, it is in your best interest to be respectful, polite, and courteous when communicating with professors. Your emails, and the words you use, are a reflection of you and your attitudes.



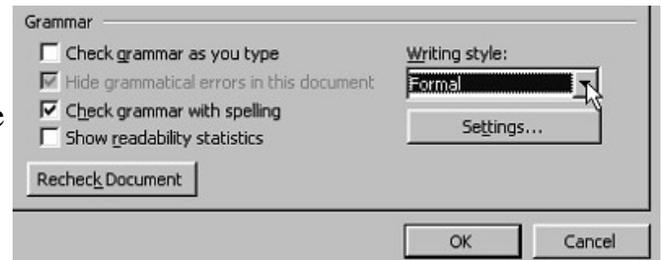
Here are a few basic tips that you should follow when emailing your professors or instructors.

1. **View an Email to a Professor as a Professional Interaction.** In many ways, writing to a professor is no different from writing a business letter. Keep in mind that you are not texting with a friend or writing a casual message to an acquaintance -- this is a professional interaction with someone who is an expert in their field and in an official position to evaluate you and grade your work. Your emails should contain the proper parts of letter, convey respect and courtesy, and reflect the fact you are a serious student. Here are a few specific tips:
 - **Begin your email by addressing your professor by title and name, and end your email with a closing and your signature.** A message that begins without a greeting or ends without a signature could be viewed as rudeness or indifference on the part of the writer. [Refer to your professor by the title "Professor" or "Dr."](#) If your professor has a Ph.D, you should address them as "Professor LastName" or "Dr. LastName". If they do not have a Ph.D., or if you are not sure, address them simply as "Professor LastName". Unless explicitly instructed to do so, never address your professor by their first name. Begin your email with a greeting addressing the professor politely, such as "Dear

Professor Smith" or "Hi Dr. Jones". After your message, end with a closing and signature, such as "Sincerely, YourName" or "Thanks, YourName". If the professor does not know you well, use your full name. If the professor knows you or you've spoke in person a few times, your first name will suffice.

- **Be clear and concise.** Make sure your message is easy to understand, and that you do not go into unnecessary details. Writing in a professional manner does not mean your message must be long. If your question is short or direct, a one-sentence email (provided it includes a greeting and signature) is fine.

- **Use correct spelling and proper grammar.** If your email is filled with spelling and grammar errors it indicates one of two things: (1) You are woefully uneducated; or (2) You care so little about the person you are writing that you are unwilling to take the time to write properly. Neither is something you want to convey to your professor. Use complete sentences. Use proper spelling, capitalization, and grammar. Be particularly careful using homophones, such as there/their/they're or to/two/too. Do not use grammatically incorrect colloquialisms, such as "gonna" or "could of". Do not use emoticons. Do not use text abbreviations, such as "R U gonna have ur class 2morrow cuz i won't b there".

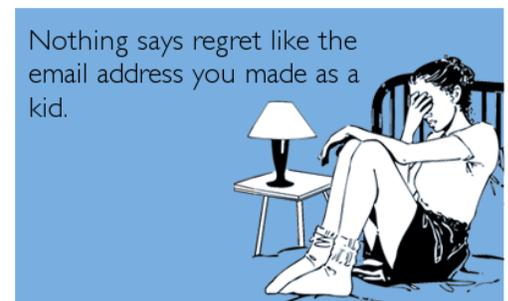


"Good English, well spoken and well written, will open more doors than a college degree. Bad English will slam doors you didn't even know existed."
 --- William Raspberry

2. Use Proper Email Etiquette.

In addition to the content of your message, there are other technical aspects to being professional and courteous in email.

- **Use an account with an appropriate email address.** Ideally, you should use your university email account. Cutesy, offensive, or childish email addresses are inappropriate in professional interactions, and it is a big mistake if you use one. If you have an email address of the form
 sweet_darlin_nikki@yahoo.com or
 cutie_pie_98@hotmail.com or mikey_g@aol.com then it's time to retire that address in favor of something more grown up and more professional. If you don't want to



use your university email address, create a Gmail account of the form `firstname.lastname@gmail.com`. If you like, you can forward email from your other accounts to your new one. Your email address, including both the username and the domain name, is a reflection of your professionalism. ([See this comic by The Oatmeal.](#)) In addition, silly email addresses have a much higher chance of getting flagged as spam and never making it to your professor's inbox.

- **Make sure the emails you send display your full name in the "From" field.** In your email preferences, you can set the "From Name" that recipients see when they get your emails. This should be set to include both your first name and last name. It should not be your email address; it should not be only your first name; and it should not be a nickname or a handle. When your professor looks at their inbox, it helps them if they can see immediately who the message is from, and recognize you as a student in their class. If you're not sure how the "From Name" appears in emails from your account, send an email to yourself and take a look. Again, emails that don't display your full name have a higher chance of getting flagged as spam and never making it to your professor's inbox.

- **Always use an informative subject line.** Do not leave the subject line blank. Subject lines help the recipient to determine what the email is regarding before opening the message. The subject line also aids in organizing and locating email in the future. It is helpful if your subject contains the course name and a brief explanation of the nature of the email. For example: "Math 3333-Question about Homework" or "Math 2331-Request for Meeting".

The truth is, your email subject line is HANDS DOWN the hardest working piece of your email.

3. **Do Not Waste Your Professor's Time.** Professors are incredibly busy, and [teaching is not the only part of their job](#). If you send emails with trivial requests, or if you ask a professor to do things you could easily do yourself, it indicates that you do not respect your professor or value their time. In addition, be very careful you do not send emails that convey the message "I need to know this, and you need to tell me right now." Here are some common student mistakes that you should avoid:

- **Do not email to ask basic questions you can answer for yourself.** If you don't know what a word means, try looking it up in the index of the textbook. If you don't know how to do an exercise, check your notes to see if a similar one was done in lecture. Class policies, such as office hours, assignment details, writing guidelines, grading criteria, policies on missed classes and exams, etc. are almost always addressed in the syllabus. If something is still not clear, then by all means ask your question --- but first attempt to answer the question yourself and only write if you need further clarification.

- **Do not make demands.** If you are asking for anything requiring time or energy, you should be courteous and phrase it as a request. Do not presume your request will be granted or that you automatically deserve special accommodations. If you miss an exam, for whatever reason, do not write and say "I missed an exam. When can I make it up?". Instead, explain why you have extenuating circumstances, and ask the professor if they will allow you to make up the exam. Likewise, if you have special needs or a disability that requires accommodation, do not write the professor an email telling them what they have to do. Explain your circumstances and your needs, and ask politely for accommodation.



The Shirt Every Professor Would Like To Wear

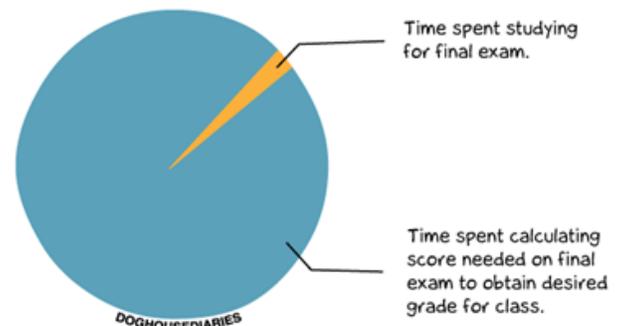
- **Do not email to explain why you missed class.** Most professors are tired of these kinds of excuses, and most do not care. If something serious has occurred, or you need special accommodations, you should go to office hours and discuss it in person.



- **Do not write your professor asking for copies of their notes because you missed class.** Professors are busy, and it's not their responsibility to do more work because you didn't come to class. Instead, ask a classmate.

- **Do not write asking for extra credit.** If you don't understand why, [see this page](#).

- **Do not email to ask what your current grade is, or how many points you need on the final to get a certain grade in the class.** If there is a grader for your class, your professor may not even have your homework scores. Often the grader gives them to the professor at the end of the semester. You should be keeping track of your scores on homework and exams. The syllabus describes how the portions of the course are weighted and how your final percentage in the class is calculated. You should be able to calculate your current grade and what score you need to get a certain final percentage in the class. If you are not keeping track of your scores on homework and exams, it shows

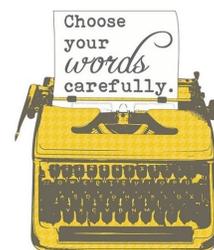


you do not care very much about the class or your academic performance. If you are concerned about your grade, go to office hours and talk about it in person rather than writing an email.

4. **Before Sending an Email, Check That What You Have Written is Appropriate.**

Remember that you are engaging in a professional exchange, not writing to a friend. Here are some tips:

- **Do not use your email to vent, rant, or whine.** If you have a complaint, or are not happy about something, explain yourself calmly and ask if anything can be done. You may very well be frustrated about a situation, but sending an angry email will not help things. In situations like this, it is also often more helpful to talk to the professor in person rather than send an email -- particularly since tone and intent can often be misinterpreted in emails.
- **Do not share inappropriate personal details.** Detailed information on your love life, health issues, home life, or family situation are often not appropriate or even relevant. Discuss only what relates to the class. If something serious is occurring in your life, talk to the professor in person.
- **Be respectful, and consider whether anything you have written might sound rude or offensive to your professor.** For example, don't flippantly say that you slept through the professor's class, or say that you hate the subject or course, or that you think the professor is too strict. These things are all offensive and inappropriate. Likewise, do not write your professor asking if they covered anything important on a day you missed --- by doing so you imply that most of what the professor covers in class is not important.



5. **Allow Time For a Response.** Professors are busy and have [many other job responsibilities](#) in addition to your class. Also, you should not expect professors to be responding to email at night or first thing in the morning. Allow up to 24 hours for a professor to reply -- possibly more if it is a weekend or holiday.

6. **Do Not Use Email as a Substitute for Face-To-Face Conversation.** Most professors complain that students fail to take advantage of office hours and speak with them in person. Many issues are often better handled in person than by email. Discussions about assignments or grades, questions about homework problems, requests for a letter of recommendation, and