

How to Email a Professor

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Professors may or may not be adept at using email, in terms of technological savvy. But those of us who do use email have certain expectations for the messages we receive from students.

Steps

- 1. Make sure your professor accepts email.** The fact that he or she has an email account does not mean he or she knows how to use it or has agreed to use it to correspond with students. If your professor provided his or her email address to you with the syllabus, then it is safe to assume that email is acceptable.
- 2. Write from your academic account, if possible.** Some professors who filter their email will not open messages from unknown senders.
- 3. Always use a greeting.** Spell your professor's name correctly. Generally speaking you should use "**Dear Professor Last-name.**"
(When writing in Hungarian, use: **Tisztelt Tanár Úr!**, **Tisztelt Tanárnő!**).

Don't use the professor's first name unless you have been explicitly invited to do so.

Don't write: *"Dear Miss!", *"Hello Professor!", "Jó napot!", or "Tisztelt Cím!"

- 4. Briefly and politely state the reason why you are emailing.** Offer only as much information as is relevant to the situation and likely to interest the professor.
- 5. If you are emailing with a problem, suggest a solution.** (See Tip below.) Be considerate of how your solution might create additional work for the professor.
- 6. Use standard spelling, grammar, and punctuation. "You" is a 3-letter word, and "I" is capitalized.** Most professors won't be offended if you write "who" when you mean "whom," nor will they expect emails to be as well-proofread as papers should be, but most will be annoyed by (or incapable of deciphering) the abbreviations and shortcuts you may use with friends.
- 7. Sign it with your name.** Use first and last name, and if you think there is any chance that your professor may not be able to place you, include your course information below your name.

8. **Read it over.** If you do not have spell-check on your email, you might copy the message and paste it into a word processing program and run spell-check there. Consider not only the mechanics, but what you have said. Strive for a polite tone, concise language, and clear purpose.
9. **If the issue is touchy, or the email long, ask someone else to read it too.** Ask if your reader would be offended by such an email if it were directed at him or her.
10. **Make any changes necessary.**
11. **Send.**
12. **Allow adequate time for a reply.** See tips below about how to address a professor's failure to reply. If you are only sending a piece of information ("I have the flu and will not be in class on Tuesday, but Sue will turn in my paper for me.") the professor may not consider a reply necessary. In this case, you are done.
13. **Once a reply has been received, acknowledge it.** A simple, "Thank you," may be enough. If necessary, write a more extensive email using these same guidelines to achieve a professional effect. If the case is not being adequately resolved by email, ask for an appointment to meet in person.

Tips

- Try to contact a peer first, if the purpose of your email is to find out what you missed when absent.
- Recognize that requests that may take only a few seconds to write and send may take much longer to fulfill..
- Leave enough time for a response. Some professors do not work on campus every day, and may not have Internet access at home, so you may need to wait a few days.
- Being polite doesn't mean being a pushover. If you have a need, make it known. While you cannot make a demand, you should make a suggestion. For example, if you have surgery scheduled on the day of the final, you should do more than state your conflict. You should offer to take the exam early, request an incomplete, offer to submit a final project in place of the exam, or whatever other idea you think would solve the problem to everyone's satisfaction. Be sure to remain open to other suggestions, as the professor may have ideas of his or her own.
- Follow up. If more than a few days have passed and you have not gotten a response, it is appropriate to politely ask if the professor received your email and had time to consider what you wrote. It may be more effective to follow up by phone or by office visit. The squeaky wheel gets the grease, so don't be afraid to speak up or send a reminder.

Warnings

- If you have a complaint or have strong negative feelings that you are trying to resolve, email is probably not your best avenue. You need to converse with the professor, and email is only one-way (at a time). You may email to tell your professor that you feel a need to talk about the issue, and ask to set up an office visit or phone conversation, but it is best not to write anything that you might regret later.