High-Stakes Emails

“Just email your professor with your questions.” This statement can strike fear into the heart of many a college student. How do I address my professor? Is text language appropriate? What is the proper way to close my email? Because email communications often have real world consequences, many people have anxiety about composing high-stakes messages to professors, supervisors, scholarship committees, and other potentially intimidating audiences. This handout provides students with simple guidelines for email etiquette, salutations and closings, and writing the body of the email. Using this handout will aid students in crafting emails that are appropriate, communicative, and professional. Developing well-written emails is a skill that not only aids students while they are in college, but will be also expected in the workplace.

Handout Summary:
1. Use a formal tone for salutations, closings, and the body.
2. Provide personally identifying details in the subject line.
3. Wait patiently for a reply.
4. Use well-written paragraphs within the body of the email.
5. Avoid personal attacks.

General Guidelines for Writing a Formal Email:
In the subject line, include identifying information (course number for a message to a professor, department or project for a business email) and a very brief summary of the content of your email. Remember that your audience may be corresponding with many people so such details allow your audience to identify you and may aid in a more timely response.

While email is often conversational in purpose, maintaining an appropriate level of formality is important. If you are unsure, always err on the side of being more formal rather than less. An email to your professor, as with an email to a workplace supervisor, should not read the same as an email to your roommate. Use a formal salutation such as “Dear Professor . . .” unless your professor has asked that you use a different form of address such as “Dr. Smith,” “Ms. Jones,” or “Helene.” Overly informal forms of address, such as “Dude,” or “Hey,” are never appropriate in a high-stakes context; save those salutations for friends. Similarly, closings require simplicity and formality. “Sincerely” or “Thank you” followed by your name is often a suitable closing phrase.

The language within the body of the email should include clear, concise, full sentences and complete paragraphs. Avoid emoticons, text language, abbreviations, or ALL CAPS. Writers may find it helpful to use the same language and tone they would use when writing a paper for a class. As when writing a paper, use tools like spell check and grammar check before clicking send. Remember, this is a more formal email than an email to friends about plans for Saturday night. A formal tone and well-written email reflect well on the writer and favorably impress the audience.

Additionally, avoid personal attacks or comments about other people. If you have a concern about a classmate or a colleague, schedule an appointment to talk with the professor or supervisor. Email is not the correct forum to air such concerns. Additionally, sarcasm and humor can be difficult to understand in an email and should be avoided. What seems funny in the writer’s head may not be understood by the recipient and may lead to misunderstandings or hurt feelings.
Please remember, however, that your readers are busy people with lives outside of their workplace. Students should not expect an immediate reply from a professor or scholarship committee, just as employees should not expect an instant reply from their supervisor. If two or three days have passed, you may send a follow-up message, using gracious, formal prose, reminding the reader of the earlier email and asking when a reply might be expected.

The following examples illustrate the guidelines of a high-stakes email:

**DO:**

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To: Professor Woodstock
From: Snoopy Smith
Subject: (W100, Tues 9 am, Section 12345) Scheduling a meeting outside of office hours

Professor Woodstock,

I would like to meet to discuss our upcoming assignment in W100. I am unable to attend your office hours due to my work schedule, and I am wondering if there was another time when we could meet that would be convenient for you.

Thank you,
Snoopy Smith
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**DON'T:**

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To: Prof
From: Me
Subject: I need to see you ASAP!!

Hey, dude!

I can’t get to your office hours because I have to wrok and my boss, who hates me, won’t let me off. Can we get together soon? I’m available friday afternoons. BTW, its to talk about that paper that’s due soon.

Peace out, Cub Scout!
Snoopy Smith
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