Emailing your Professor

“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? Students must answer these questions before composing an email to a professor. 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 required in the workplace.

Brief 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:
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 your eventual 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 this 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.

In the subject line, include your course number, section number, and a very brief summary of the content of your email. Remember that instructors may teach several courses so such details allow your instructor to identify you and may aid in a more timely response.

Please remember, however, that instructors are busy people with lives outside of school. Students should not expect an immediate reply; rather, students should be patient. If three or four days have gone by, students may email the instructor again, using gracious, formal prose, reminding the instructor of the earlier email and asking when a reply might be expected.

The language within the body of the email should include clear, concise, full sentences and complete paragraphs. Students should avoid emoticons, text language, abbreviations, or ALL CAPS. Students may find it helpful to use the same language and tone they would use when writing a paper for 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 students and favorably impress instructors.
Additionally, students should avoid personal attacks or comments about other people. If you have a concern about a classmate or a grade, schedule an appointment to talk with your instructor. 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.

The following examples illustrate the guidelines of an email to your instructor:

**DO:**

```latex
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:**

```latex
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 work and my boss, who hates me, won’t let me off. Can we get together soon? I’m available Friday afternoons. BTW, it’s to talk about that paper that’s due soon.

Peace out, Cub Scout!

Snoopy Smith
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