

# So You Want To Email Your Professor?

## A Quick and Easy Guide to Successful Emails

So you want to email your professor? That's great, and you should absolutely feel free to do so whenever necessary. Before you do though, there are a couple of things that you should consider and know which will not only help you get the most out of your email, but also help us help you! This handy guide will walk you through the process of how *not to* email your professor and how *to* email your professor.

The first thing you should realize is that you are in college now. For most of you, this is a transition stage between high school and adulthood. Make no mistake, though: you are all adults now. One thing that adults do is regularly check and read their email. With the proliferation of smartphones, this is a simple task and can be done virtually anywhere at any time. Today, there is no reason to not have checked your email at least twice per day. Before you email your professor to ask them a question, see if they have already answered it somewhere else. If you regularly read your email, you'll already know whether they answered it or not, but it never hurts to take a few seconds to quickly double check. If they have, great – you've already got your answer! If they haven't, feel free to send them a proper email (more on that later).

Second, recognize that your professor is there to help you learn, not to be your personal assistant. Administrative or clerical questions are almost always answered in the syllabus or can be found somewhere on your university's website. For example, the final exam schedule is posted somewhere online and can be found within ten seconds of searching. In fact, that's almost certainly how your professors know when the final exam is – by doing a Google search for “(University name) final exam schedule Fall/Spring 20xx.” Further, the answer to questions such as, “what will I miss in class on the following dates?” can easily be answered by consulting the syllabus. When you email your professor asking these questions (no matter how politely you do it), what you are implicitly saying is “As a college student, I am simply too busy to find this answer on my own. You, professor, are not nearly as busy as I am, so please find the answer to my question for me and send it to me personally in a timely fashion.”

Third, realize that we often have over one hundred unique students each and every semester, dozens of colleagues, serve on several committees, and have to correspond with numerous people outside the university as well. Some of your professors will get over seventy-five emails *per day*, not including any automatically

generated emails. This means that it may take us a day or so to get to your email. If it's been more than 48 hours, please feel free to send us a gentle reminder, but do recognize that we may not be able to get back to you within an hour, despite our deep desire to do so.

## How Not To Email Your Professor

Let's start off with an example of how *not* to email your professor:

From: Student  
Date: Wednesday, December 9, 2015 at 9:12 PM  
To: Professor  
Subject: (no subject)

i have a question about the Final Exam what is the date for the Final Exam???

Sadly, this is an actual email that I have actually received. Let's break down all the problems with this email:

### 1. No subject

- There is absolutely no subject here, which means I have no idea what the email will be about nor can I easily search for it in my inbox.

### 2. No salutation

- Email isn't a text message, it's more formal than that. In fact, you should consider it just as formal as a hand-written letter. All emails to your professors should start with "Dear Dr." or "Dear Professor" followed by their last name.
- Relatedly, professors are vain people – we've often spent several years, toiling away in graduate school working towards our degrees. If we have a doctorate, you should always choose "Dear Dr." If your professor does not or if you are not sure, "Dear Professor" is perfectly acceptable.
- Mr., Mrs., or Ms. are not appropriate when it comes to emailing your professor. Always use Dr. or Professor
- In both cases, always include your professor's last name.

### 3. Missing information

- When you email your professor, provide us with all the necessary information (but no superfluous information) that we need to help you.
- In this case, the professor needs to know what class you're in and what section in order to answer your question. We often teach multiple classes per semester and multiple sections of these classes. Each class is likely to be different and each section will meet at different times for the final exam. Without this information, your professor really can't help you as much as you (or they!) would like to.

#### 4. Grammar Issues

- You should always capitalize the first word of each sentence and use periods
- Also, never use multiple punctuation marks to try to add emphasis. Multiple question marks or exclamation points are too colloquial for this type of communication.
- No smiley faces. This person didn't do it, but there are never cases where you are communicating with a professor that would require an emoji of any sort.

#### 5. No closing

- When you end an email, always end with a closing. The most common one would be "Sincerely," but "Best," and "All the best," are also fine. Avoid using things like "Cheers."
- After your closing, include your name.

### How To Email Your Professor

After seeing how *not* to email your professor, let's go over a more proper way to phrase the above email:

From: Student  
Date: Wednesday, December 9, 2015 at 9:12 PM  
To: Professor  
Subject: Final Exam Schedule

Dear Dr. Hebert,

I hope that this note finds you well. My name is Student and I am in your 3 pm Econ 221 class. I'm writing to you today to ask about the date and time of the final exam for our class. I found the schedule online, but I don't know that I understand how to read the chart that the school provides. When you have the chance, could you please let me know when it is? Thanks so much!

All the best,  
Student

Notice that this email is short and to the point while also providing me with all the information that I would need to answer your question. It also lets me know that you have tried to find the answer on your own but that it was presented in a way that wasn't clear to you. From just this simple email, I now know a lot about you – you pay attention to detail (the grammar is correct), try to answer questions on your own, and are respectful. These are all great things to demonstrate to your professor!

Even though this email is asking an administrative question, I'm much more likely to answer it as it was phrased so eloquently and your question was asked in such a pleasant way. You've shown me that you are polite, considerate, and that you respect the fact that I have a lot to do.

## Other Considerations

Now obviously, there are other considerations to take into account. First, every professor is different, so doing the above may or may not be necessary. That being said, it's always a good idea to at least start formal and become more informal over time. Moving the other way is significantly more difficult.

Second, you are more than welcome to follow your professor's lead in the degree of formality. If your professor responds to the above email with something like the following:

From: Professor  
Date: Wednesday, December 9, 2015 at 11:35 PM  
To: Student  
Subject: Re: Final Exam Schedule

11 am, May 7th.  
-DH

Then it's perfectly appropriate to respond with:

From: Student  
Date: Wednesday, December 9, 2015 at 11:45 PM  
To: Professor  
Subject: Re: Final Exam Schedule

Great, thanks so much!

All the best,  
Student

Further, each specific email type that you want to send will entail slightly different rules. Emailing your professor for a letter of recommendation, for example, is different from emailing them a question about the material in the class. But the same rules still apply:

- Be polite and considerate
- Use proper grammar and punctuation.
- Give us all the necessary information that we need in order to properly fulfill your request
- Give us enough time to respond
- Follow your professor's lead with respect to the level of formality, but always err on the side of being too formal as opposed to too colloquial.

If you do all of these things, you will never run the risk of offending or frustrating your professor with your email. Further, developing these habits in college will only help you as you continue on in life. Emails are an art, which you get better at over time, so feel free to adapt anything above to your own needs and style. But at the same time, there are some simple rules that everyone should always follow.