



Emailing your Professor

“The email of the species is deadlier than the mail.”
Stephen Fry

- Remember that you have a formal relationship with your professor and your email should be as professional as possible. It is better to wait until you have time to sit at your computer and compose a well-written email than to quickly send a message from your mobile phone while walking down the street.
- Remember that an email is a permanent record of your contact with your professor. Before you send it, make sure it says what you mean, the way you mean to say it (an email sent in poor judgement can haunt you later, as once sent it cannot be retrieved).
- If you want to forward to someone else a message that you received from your professor, be sure that you do not violate the professor's expectation that the original email would be read only by you, that is, that she or he did not intend it to be sent to a third party. If you are not sure, ask. (This principle holds for all email that you receive electronically.)
- Although professors work long hours, student email is normally handled during business hours. Do not expect responses overnight or over a weekend.
- Do not assume that your professor is on campus and available to respond to your message. Many faculty members travel for research purposes or to conferences on the days when they are not teaching.
- If you are asking for exceptions you need to ask well in advance, e.g. an extension on an assignment. It is better to notify your professor that you are ill and may need extra time – and then meet the deadline - than to lose your credibility by contacting the professor after the fact.
- Do not write asking for information that is already printed on the course syllabus or on the instruction sheets for assignments – as you want to avoid asking a professor for information that (s)he has already given you.
- Don't use email for anything that requires a reply of more than 3 or 4 lines. If an email requires a lengthy reply, it is something that should be brought to office hours (usually questions to clarify course material).
- Avoid sending frivolous emails for things that you would never ask in person. If you would not be willing to ask the question face-to-face, it might not be appropriate to send.
- If you need to contact your professor for a legitimate concern, do not let embarrassment prevent you from tackling a difficult question – or asking for help or necessary accommodations.
- Use your Queen's email account as this ensures that the email is sent on a secure server. Emails sent from non-Queen's accounts (e.g. hotmail, gmail, yahoo) may be filtered and deleted from the Queen's email server and/or the email account of the professor you are emailing.
- Learn to write an email that will not get lost in the recipient's in-basket. If your email is clearly written and easily understood – expect a faster response time!
- Keep in mind that learning how to email in a professional manner is a skill that you will use for the rest of your life.

“I’m sorry I made such a long speech. I didn’t have time to write a shorter one.”
Winston Churchill

Subject: Keep concise and informative.

- The Subject should inform the recipient about the content of the message.
- If a professor has 20 messages all with the title “Help” then your message may be lost.
- Give the recipient a unique subject that will help them identify your email quickly. This will help your professor sort your email into a folder for that class and identify you by name and the concern that you were emailing about. (Don’t forget that most tenured professors teach more than one course.)
- If you are emailing an adviser in a Departmental or Faculty Office about an issue, also include your program as the answer to your inquiry may vary dependent on your program requirements.

Avoid:
Subject: Appeal
Instead:
Subject: INTR 100/3.0 – Ackers, George A. – Assignment 1

In the greeting of your email, address your professor formally unless instructed otherwise.

- Most professors have a Ph.D. so should be addressed as Dr.
- Sometimes experts in a subject who do not have a Ph.D. or who are students in their final year of graduate studies, are hired to teach a course. In that case, as they are the professor of your course, you may address them as Professor
- Show respect by using the formal salutation of “Dear” and avoid casual greetings such as “Hey”.
- When in doubt, you cannot go wrong using the title of Professor.

Avoid:
Hey John!
Instead:
Dear Prof. Smith,

Break the body of your email into paragraphs.

General Principles

- Keep in mind that your professor receives hundreds of emails.
- Try to write it so that it can be read quickly (avoid run-on sentences).
- Keep the paragraphs short and concise.
- Structure the message so that your questions are easily identified.
- As a courtesy use the conditional tenses of verbs, e.g. I “would like” rather than I “want”.

Introduce yourself in the first paragraph by including:

- Full name
- Student number
- Context of message.
- Any further identifying information.
- Note: If you are writing to an academic adviser, then include your program as each program has different course requirements.

Avoid:

From: 1234abc@queensu.ca

With no introductory paragraph!

Instead:

My name is George Ackers (01234567), a student in your INTR 100/3.0 class (I usually sit in the front row and participate in class discussions). I am writing concerning the first assignment due on October 3.

In the second paragraph state the issue that you have encountered.

- State the issue as simply as possible in plain English.
- Disclose all relevant information – otherwise when the professor gets to your email, (s)he will not have enough information to make a decision. The resulting delay in response time could have serious consequences in an appeal situation, especially for a deferred test or assignment.

Avoid:

I need a one-week extension on Assignment 1, would that be possible?

Instead:

On Sept. 17, I became ill with a flu-like virus and was very sick for 6 days. As a consequence, I am appealing for an extension on the Oct. 3 assignment. Ideally, I would like a six-day extension until October 9 but would appreciate any additional time you would be willing to grant me.

Use additional paragraphs to expand on the issue.

- Try to anticipate additional questions from your professor and respond to them in advance.

Avoid:

No further information included.

Instead:

I am concerned that Student Health will not issue a health certificate. Is there any other form of documentation that you would require? My Residence Don, Adam Sayer at abc123@queensu.ca has offered to confirm that I was sick. You can verify that he is an employee of Residences by calling their main office at extension: 54321.

Professional Correspondence

- Using all capital letters is considered “shouting” and is inappropriate for emailing a professor.
- Use complete sentences with punctuation.
- Texting language is not appropriate in a formal email, e.g. LOL.
- Use correct punctuation, e.g. periods and commas help readability.
- Avoid using contractions, e.g. use “I am” rather than “I’m”.

Avoid:
i NEED to extra time to finish my assignment could you let me know if that’s ok.
Instead:
Due to illness, I would like to request an extension on Assignment 1.

Use a closing with a formal signature block

- Separating the closing remark such as “Sincerely” marks the formal end of your message and should be followed by your name on a separate line.
- It ensures that both your name and any thanks that you express stand out.
- A formal signature block should include (1) full name (2) student number (3) program, and (4) year at Queen’s.

Avoid:
I have a timetable conflict and was hoping that my INTR 100/3.0 (W) Lab 004 could be switched to Lab 005 (2:30-4:30PM). I am very concerned about missing labs due to this conflict and would appreciate your assistance. Thank you in advance for your assistance! George
Instead:
I have a timetable conflict and was hoping that my INTR 100/3.0 (W) Lab 004 could be switched to Lab 005 (2:30-4:30PM). I am very concerned about missing labs due to this conflict and would appreciate your assistance. Thank you in advance for your assistance, George Ackers, George (01234567) BSCH Kinesiology, YR3 in 11-12

Additional resources:

[Health Literacy and Plain Writing Go Hand in Hand: Make the Connection between Literacy Level and Plain English](#) Ontario Health Promotion

[Plain English Bootcamp: Part II – Tips for improving understanding of written materials](#) Ontario Health Promotion

In Stauffer Library

Title: [On writing well: an informal guide to writing nonfiction](#)

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