

E-Mail Etiquette

Write from your college or university e-mail account. That immediately lets your professor see that your e-mail is legitimate. The cutesy or salacious personal e-mail address that might be okay when you send an e-mail to a friend is not appropriate when you're writing to a professor.

Include the course number in your subject line. "Question about 3009 assignment" is clear and sounds genuine, while "a question" looks like spam. "Question about English assignment" or "question about assignment," without identifying the class you're in, may leave your professor with the chore of figuring that out. For someone teaching large lecture classes, that might mean reading through hundreds of names on rosters. But even for a professor with smaller classes, it's a drag to get an e-mail that merely says "I'm in your English class and need the assignment." All my classes are English classes; I still need to know which one is yours.

Think about what you're saying. Most students are not accustomed to writing to their professors.

Choose an appropriate greeting. "Hi/Hello Professor [Blank]" is always appropriate. Substitute "Dear" and you've ended up writing a letter; leave out "Hi" and your tone is too brusque.

Avoid rote apologies for missing class. Most professors are tired of hearing those standard apologies and acts of contrition. If you missed class because of some especially serious or sad circumstances, it might be better to mention that in person than in an e-mail.

Ask politely. "Could you e-mail me the page numbers for the next reading? Thanks!" is a lot better than "I need the assignment."

Proofread what you've written. You want your e-mail to show you in the best possible light.

Sign with your full name, course number, and meeting time.

Example: Maggie Simpson

English 3703, MWF 10:00

Signing is an obvious courtesy, and it eliminates the need for stilted self-Identification ("I am a student in your such-and-such class").

Don't send unexpected attachments. It's bad form. Attaching an essay with a request that your professor look it over is very bad form. Arrange to meet your professor during office hours or by appointment instead. It's especially bad form to send an e-mail that says "I won't be in class today," with a paper or some other coursework attached. Think about it: Your professor is supposed to print out your essay because you're not coming to class?

When you get a reply, say thanks. Just hit Reply and say "Thanks," or a little bit more if that's appropriate. The old subject line (which will now have a "Re:" in front) will make the context clear. I don't think that you need to include a greeting with a short reply, at least not if you refer to your professor in your reply. And you don't need to identify yourself by course number and meeting time again.