

# HOW TO (AND HOW NOT TO) EMAIL A PROFESSOR



## SUBJECT

Make sure you have an accurate and specific subject in your subject line: something like “question about homework” or “time for a meeting?” Don’t write something vague or alarming like “PLEASE READ!” It looks like spam and doesn’t tell us much.

## GREETING

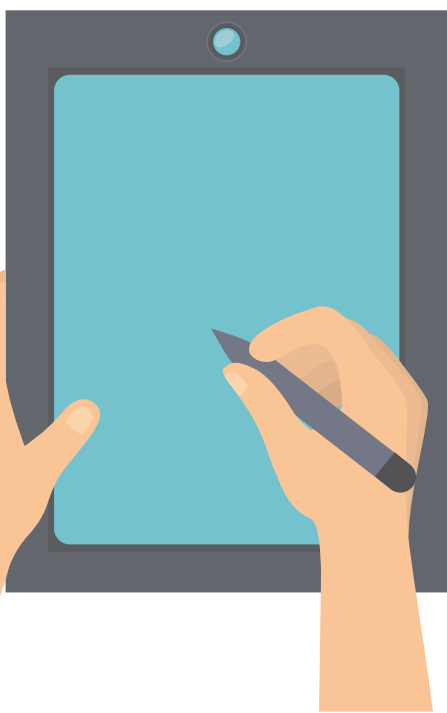
Unless the professor has told you you can call them by their first name (as I have,) **it’s usually safest to address them formally.** The best way to do this is to begin your email “Dear Professor (the professor’s last name)” Just calling them “professor” without a last name looks pretty strange and impersonal. Don’t call a person “Mr.” or “Miss” if their name is “Dr.” (your name becomes “Dr.” when you get a Ph.D. Not all of your professors have one.) It’s best to find out what their name is! It will be on the syllabus.



## BODY OF THE EMAIL

You should make the body of your email as short, clear and straightforward as possible, while still remaining polite. If you don’t understand the homework assignment, begin with “I have a question about the homework assignment” and then describe your question.

Make sure that you have tried to answer the question yourself first, that you’ve looked at the homework assignment on the syllabus or website, that you’ve asked a friend in class. For example: “I have a question about the homework. The website says it should be 200 words long, but in class, you said it should be 300.” Don’t ask “What is the homework for tomorrow?” without checking the website, syllabus, or consulting with a friend.

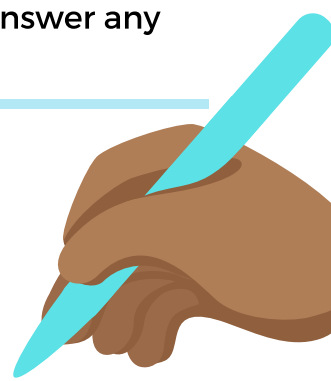


DO NOT EVER (NEVER EVER EVER) SEND AN EMAIL TO A PROFESSOR THAT SAYS “DID WE DO ANYTHING IMPORTANT IN CLASS YESTERDAY?” I, obviously, think what we did in class was important. I invented it!

If you miss class, be sure to talk to a friend who was there. Also **make sure to read the website or syllabus first.** After doing these two things, you can write to the professor with an informed question, such as “I talked to Frank about Friday’s class, and he said you guys spent some time writing what you had to add to the discussion of Ferguson. I’m a little confused about what that means—I’ve never experienced anything like the Ferguson situation, so I don’t think I have anything to add to that discussion.” Like most professors, I am very happy to answer any informed questions! I like getting student emails.

## SIGNING OFF

Just write “Thank you” or “Thank you for your time.” “Sincerely” or “Yours Truly” sound too formal for an email. Don’t write “Please get back to me as soon as possible” or anything like that. It just sounds demanding.



## FOLLOWING UP

Some professors are great about returning emails. Others aren’t. Please have mercy on us—keep in mind some profs might get more than 50 student emails a day. Emails can get lost in the shuffle. Give your professor a little time to respond (you can’t expect us to email you back on evenings or weekends) but also, if you haven’t heard from the prof in a timely manner (usually 3 days) **it’s okay to send them a friendly reminder message that includes everything you said in your first email.** For example: “Dr. Hall, I sent you an email last Wednesday asking a question about Tuesday’s class and I was wondering if you’d had a chance to look at it. Basically, I was wondering ... (and then repeat what you said in the previous email.)

