

Students often tell us that they worry about how to address an e-mail message to a professor – especially one whom they don't know. Below are suggestions that answer concerns we've heard not just from students, but from professors. And note: use these tips not just for e-mailing professors, but people who work in college offices, your employers and job supervisors, and your class deans and RDs.

### ***On addressing your professor***

**E-mail to a professor should be treated like a business letter** – at least until you know that professor's personal preferences very well. Although e-mail is widely regarded as an informal medium, it is in fact used for business purposes in many settings (including Wellesley College). You won't err if you are too formal, but there is the possibility of committing many gaffes if you are too informal.

**The subject header should be informative.** It is not a salutation line, so don't write something like "hey professor" in that line. Instead, write a few words indicating the purpose of your message: "Request for a space in your class," for example.

**Use professors' names when addressing them.** Many professors we queried said that they do not like to be called simply "professor." They prefer "Professor Lee" or "Ms./Mr. Lee"; most tell us that the title itself doesn't matter nearly so much as the fact that you also use their names ("Dr. Lee" does seem to be uncommon at Wellesley, though, just so you know). Some professors will eventually suggest that you call them by their first names, but if you are more comfortable continuing to use a title, that is always fine. Just be sure to use a name. (Note: these comments are true for personal interaction as well as for e-mail).

**Dear, Hi, Hey, or nothing?** To some eyes and ears, "Dear Professor Jones" may be too formal for an e-mail message – but in fact it will do just fine when your purpose is a business-like one. Simply writing "Professor Jones" (followed by a comma) is fine, too. Some faculty are sensitive to the word "Hi" as a salutation, whether alone or with a name (e.g., "Hi, Professor Jones"), but others don't mind it and in fact use it themselves. But avoid "hey" – no one we queried likes that one.

**Don't expect an instant response.** Although we have all become accustomed to the instantaneous quality of electronic communication, your professors want you to know that they simply cannot always answer a message quickly. Allow them a day or two, or even more, to respond. You can re-send the message if you haven't heard back in five days or so.

### ***On e-mail style***

**Don't use smiley faces or other emoticons when e-mailing professors, and don't use all those internet acronyms, abbreviations, and shortened spellings** (e.g., LOL, or "U" for "you"). Similarly, don't confuse email style with txt style. All of that electronic shorthand signals a level of intimacy (and perhaps of age) that is inappropriate for exchanges with your professors.

**Write grammatically, spell correctly, and avoid silly mistakes.** Proofread. Use the spelling checker. Especially double-check for embarrassing errors in your subject header. Show that you care about how you present yourself in writing to your professor.

**Use paragraph breaks** to help organize your message. It's hard to read a long unbroken stream of words on a screen.

**On content**

**Don't use e-mail to rant or whine.** Sometimes the very appearance of a message can signal "rant": very long paragraphs, no capital letters, no sentence breaks. These are not fun to read, and may well elicit the exact opposite response that you intend. Of course, we are all tempted to rant sometimes in e-mail, so what one professor recommends is this: Sure, rant all you want in an e-mail. But don't send it. Hit the delete button, and then write a more measured message. (Many faculty will tell you that they have files full of unsent messages; they have wisely learned that an e-mail written in the first flush of frustration must be re-crafted and sent with care.) On the other hand, an email in which you direct a constructively worded complaint to the person most able to address such complaints is just fine.

**Keep most messages to under a screen in length;** lots of readers will simply defer reading long messages, and then may never come back to them. On the other hand, a very short, terse message may simply be meaningless. Be sure to include enough information so that your reader can understand what you are requesting. Provide a bit of background or context if necessary. State your request clearly.

**Take extra steps to minimize the e-mail exchange;** for example, if you are requesting an appointment, state your purpose and name the times that you could come in in your initial message. Your respondent may then be able to answer you with only one additional message.

**Quote selectively and briefly** from any prior messages to provide context and background. Although sometimes it's good to quote an entire exchange so as to keep a record of what's been said and decided, often that's unnecessary and simply ends up making a message too long and cluttering the screen.

Many professors advise that you **think about why you are sending an e-mail message.** Are you asking something that could easily be checked if you took a few extra steps yourself? For example, e-mailing a professor simply to ask when her office hours are can be annoying when the office hours have been clearly announced on the syllabus already. On the other hand, e-mailing for an appointment is just fine. Are you asking a question privately that might be better asked on the course conference, where all the students might usefully see the response? Are you e-mailing to lodge a complaint or to ask for a letter of recommendation or to seek help with a problem set? In these cases, personal contact and an office visit might be much better.

**Be respectful, and think about what kinds of things might sound odd or offensive to your professor.** For example, don't say flippantly that you slept through that professor's class, or talk about your love life, or bash chemistry or math or writing.

Wellesley faculty think very highly of their students, and you will soon find that they will work closely with you and that you'll feel quite comfortable entering an intellectual relationship with your professors. E-mail has often been seen as a democratizing system of communication that flattens hierarchies and that allows people of all sorts to communicate comfortably and freely with each other. We value the ease of communication that e-mail offers us - but we who work at Wellesley have also learned, over time, that we don't quite want our e-mail with students to feel like an instant-message exchange. Most professors are overwhelmed by the vast number of e-mail messages they receive; some have been shocked by the sheer effrontery of some of those messages; many become frustrated if e-mail consumes so much of their time and emotional energy that they can't then spend valuable personal time with you. We hope these tips will help you - and your professors - conserve some of that emotional energy.

**And as for that emotional energy, here's one last tip:**

**Be kind to yourself if you make an electronic faux pas.** All of us - even those who have studied electronic communication for years - have made some pretty monstrous errors. We learn from our mistakes, and we learn to forgive ourselves (and others).