Email etiquette: how to make a professional impression (and avoid awkward social situations)

Email has been around for decades, but there's still confusion around **proper email etiquette**. Sending an email at the wrong time or using the wrong titles can make you seem unprofessional. That's without even mentioning the embarrassment you risk by hitting "Reply all" at the wrong time.

We've created a comprehensive rule book with the most common rules, together with email etiquette **examples and tips**. Use it to determine proper email **etiquette in business, in your workplace, and beyond**.

We've focused this rule book on formal email etiquette, as opposed to informal etiquette. We assume these are the times where you have most at stake.

Read on to become a master of email etiquette, and write properly to anyone without fear.

Email etiquette: how to make a professional impression (and avoid awkward social situations)

What is email etiquette?

Email etiquette broad rules of thumb

Different aspects of email etiquette

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- 2. What language you use
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- 4. What time to send your email
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What is email etiquette?

Email etiquette is the socially appropriate code for greetings, salutations, titles, pronouns, tone of voice when writing an email. This code is meant to convert courtesy and goodwill. Professional email etiquette rules are rooted in the social context in which the email is composed. So, they may change significantly across industries, social circles, and cultures.

At its core, email etiquette is simply email-courtesy. Professional email etiquette is about making your recipients feel comfortable by making them feel valued and respected. This means going the extra mile to make your message clear and concise, which respects the other person's time and attention span. In a highly hierarchical setting etiquette would also mean acknowledging the recipient's status and achievements.

Email etiquette broad rules of thumb

Professional email etiquette and business email etiquette are a lot about communicating status. So, it's very much governed by the need to acknowledge hierarchy. By understanding the degree to which hierarchy is present in the correspondence you can gauge your level of formality.

When writing an email use the following etiquette rules of thumb:

- The more hierarchical the culture the more formal you should be (think cultures with strict social classes)
- The more hierarchical the organization the more formal you should be (think big corporations)
- The more important the person the more formal you should be (think CEO, or politician)
- The older the person the more formal you should be (think 45+)
- The more you are dependent on your recipient the more formal you should be (think a big client, an important supplier, your boss, etc.)

It's also true that in general email tends to incorporate stricter etiquette the more formal the setting. Most people will address their boss very formally unless instructed otherwise. The higher up the boss the more formal the email becomes.

That said, in most western countries email does not tend to be very formal. When writing an internal email to a colleague we know or when writing an outreach email we do not usually open with "Dear Mrs. Windsor..." for most of us being called Mr. or Ms. feels, well... old. So we open with "Hi Elizabeth". Or if we know how they address themselves, then why not "Lizzie"?

This email etiquette rule book was made to help you maneuver the sea of social context to avoid misstepping and offending the wrong person. Take note that this rule book was made with Western culture in mind. In Asian countries, in the Middle East, and in Eastern Europe, email etiquette is still more formal, so take this into consideration.

Different aspects of email etiquette

Email etiquette is used to give your recipients a sense of being appreciated (in order to gain good favor). This complex goal makes email etiquette impossible to achieve by simply doing one thing. Instead, to gain good favor, you will have to abide by a range of aspects that tie together.

1. How you address your recipient

The way you address people immediately spells out their social status and their hierarchical relationship to you (are they your colleague, your boss, your subordinate, your client, your service provider, etc.). In formal circumstances, people are very sensitive to how they are addressed because of the status implied by it.

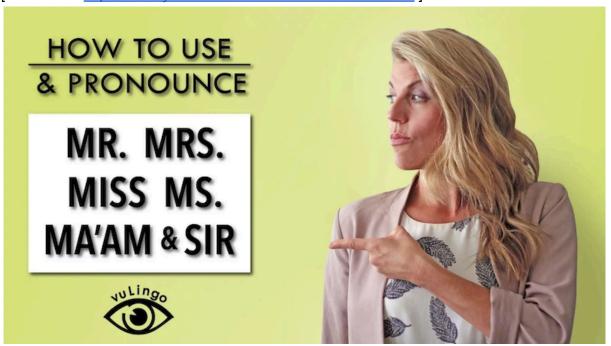
This is why it's important to use a title when formally addressing someone.

What to do:

- Use conventional titles such as Mr., Mrs., Ms., and Miss,
- Use professional titles such as Dr., Prof., Congressman, Sgn. (see full list of military abbreviations), Judge, etc.

Use the person's last name after their title (for example, Mrs. Windsor, or Dr. Freud)

[Add video - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4KcBQMsUAok]



[video thumbnail - alt: email signature etiquette proper titles and pronouns]

2. What language you use

The language you use is made out of different things. It's simple things like the **pronouns** you use, the **slang** words, or the **industry words** you use. But language is also made up of more complex things like your **tone of voice** (warm or formal, direct or indirect, assertive or placating, and so on) and **how honest and clear you are**.

All of these moving parts, simple and complex, translate into how a person feels when reading your email.

If you use slang words they may feel like you are unprofessional, and if you use industry jargon that they don't understand they may get frustrated and feel like idiots. If you use the wrong pronouns then they may feel offended. And if your tone of voice is out of tune with their expectations or you come off as insincere then they will form a negative opinion of you.

What to do:

- To assess the right tone of voice, look for the person's age, job title, and culture.
- Gage the right amount of industry jargon according to the person's job title, and education (look to Linkedin for this information).
- Look for the person's preferred pronouns in their email signature or in Linkedin. Otherwise use the standard gender pronouns.
- Avoid abbreviations or shorthands
- Avoid humor, sarcasm, or cynicism

3. How you close your email

The way you choose to close your emails, your closing words, and your sign-off, also have etiquette considerations. It is one of the most important places to observe proper email etiquette because the last thing people read tends to be the most memorable. And this means it will decide how you are remembered for good or for bad.

What to do:

- Compose your closing paragraph so it simply reiterates respectfully the main point of your email.
- Choose your sign-off based on the specific social context, the content of your
 email. Be mindful that email sign-offs can take many forms depending on anything
 from social context, the time of day, and even the time of year. <u>Take a look at our
 email sign-off lexicon for every possible occasion</u>.

4. What time to send your email

The time your emails are received is a known factor that influences your email open rate, but most people don't take into account the way it influences how you are perceived. If your email is received at the wrong time it can annoy or anger your recipient. So it definitely calculates into email etiquette.

It's important to understand that some people have their work email connected to their mobile phone or private computer. In this case, any email you send to their work email will likely show up on their personal devices as a notification.

As a result, if you send an email on the weekend, late at night, it can be interpreted as an intrusion into a person's leisure time, which will paint you as a nuisance. Unless it really is urgent, avoid sending work emails after work hours, or over the weekend.

What to do:

- Coincide your emails with conventional working hours (09:00-17:00, and not on weekends)
- Send your emails according to the recipient's time zone (it may be office hours for you but not for them)
- Make sure it's not the weekend according to the country of your recipient (for example weekend days in Israel are Friday-Saturday, in Muslim countries the weekend days are Thursday-Friday, and <u>some counties are pursuing a 4 day work</u> week)
- Schedule emails to send at the appropriate time (you can schedule emails on Gmail and on Outlook)

5. Who you include and who you address

Email is a form of social interaction, but most of us don't give it any thought. There are emotional implications to decisions like who to include in an email and how to include them

(CC or BCC), and also who we reply to when there is more than one person involved in an email.



[video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jF8jV6nR5mU | Alt: video: what's the difference between CC and BCC]

In general, you want to include everybody that has a stake in the topic at hand, from colleagues to managers. You do not want it to look like you are leaving someone out intentionally. It may be interpreted as an attempt to take sole credit or manipulate team decisions.

When it comes to addressing people, you do not want to address one team member using "Reply all" when talking about something that's relevant for the entire team. And similarly, you do not want to use "Reply all" when stating anything that is specifically relevant to one person.

What to do:

- Include in BC anybody who is either a stakeholder or a decision-maker with regard to the email topic
- Include in BCC only people that need to be in the loop, but should not be seen as taking part (these people should never "Reply all" since that reveals their participation)
- Use "Reply all" when addressing everyone
- Use "Reply all" when making moderate positive statements about one or more people
- Use "Reply" for personal messages, or critical statements

 If your email addresses specific group members on a few different issues, precede each issue by tagging the relevant person/s using "@member name" (this technique should bring up the person's email contact name).

See detailed section about email Reply etiquette
See detailed section about CC and BCC email etiquette

Where in the email is etiquette important?

Email etiquette always matters, but some parts of the email have more impact than others.

1. Subject line

Your subject line is crucial because the recipient sees it before they open an email. If the subject line is vague, confusing, or badly spelled, the other person might decide not to open it.

A good subject line is short, to the point, and summarizes the topic of the email.

Example subject lines:

- Agenda for tomorrow's meeting
- Marketing analytics Q3 2021
- Your hair appointment next week

2. Email opening

If it's an informal email to friends or relatives, you can begin with "Hi," or even skip the opening and jump straight into your point.

But business email etiquette needs more formality. Begin with a salutation, like "Hello X" or "Dear Mr. X," If you're unsure, it's always best to err on the side of formality.

3. Email body

Most people are flooded with emails and don't have time to wade through 500 words. Make your email body short and on point. You should also keep paragraphs short to make them easier and faster to scan.

Example email:

Dear [name]

Here are my ideas for the new product packaging. I'll start working on a mockup next week.

To help speed things up, are there any things I should know about that are must-haves, or that I should avoid?

Best wishes, [name]

Emojis should be used with care. Most people over the age of around 35 might think they look unprofessional, plus what seems to you like a happy smiley face that lightens the mood could seem sarcastic or mocking to the recipient.

Main rules for email writing etiquette:

- Use the right spelling and punctuation
- Never write in all caps
- Don't use exclamation points
- Try to keep your email to no more than 3 short paragraphs
- Avoid abbreviations or shorthand, unless you know the other person well
- Avoid humor or sarcasm
- Never put confidential or sensitive information in an email

4. Email signature

The way you sign off your email matters too. In most professional emails, "best wishes" or "kind regards" hits the right tone, but if you're sending a formal business email, you should use "yours sincerely" or "yours faithfully."

Example email:

Dear [name],

Thank you for your email with the project details. I'll read them over the next day or two, and get back to you with questions and feedback by Thursday at the latest.

Looking forward to working with you.

Best wishes, John Smith

If this is the first time you're getting in touch with someone, it can be helpful to include your preferred pronouns so that they know how to respectfully address you.

Your signature should also include your position, the company where you work/the name of your business, and your email address and phone number. This is called a signature block, and it should look something like this:

Best wishes.

John Smith (he/him/his)
Senior accountant
A&B shipping services
johnsmith@aandbshipping.com

1-223-445-6789

If you truly want to look professional, you can create an email signature with the Wisestamp <a href="mailto:emailt



Email reply etiquette

When it comes to "Reply" email etiquette there are 3 important questions to ask before you reply.

- 1. Should I reply?
- 2. When should I reply?
- 3. Who should I reply to? ("Reply all" vs "Reply")

1) Should I reply?

Before you reply, remember that not every email needs a response. You should avoid replying unnecessarily so as not to clog up other people's inboxes. Additionally, if the email thread gets beyond about 3 or 4 responses, it's time to call the other person.

For most people email reply gets tricky when there is more than one person included in the email. The question now becomes whether to reply personally to a single person or to "Reply all" so that everyone can see it.

2) When should I reply?

For work emails, professional email etiquette dictates that you should reply within 24 hours. If you're in a customer-facing role, like sales, marketing, or support, you should respond much faster, like within 1 hour.

If it's a long or complicated email that'll take you a while to deal with, acknowledging email is good etiquette. Reply quickly to say you saw the email, and let them know when to expect a full reply.

3) "Reply all" email etiquette

So who should you reply to? This question is not one to disregard. Hitting "Reply all" at the wrong time has sometimes made international headlines, so it's crucial to think twice before using it. Even if you don't end up sending information to the wrong people, your colleagues, etc. Won't appreciate a string of irrelevant emails.

When to use "Reply all" and when to use personal "Reply":

- Use "Reply all" when addressing everyone
- Use "Reply all" when making moderate positive statements about one or more people
- Use "Reply" for personal messages, providing advice, or being critical
- If your email addresses multiple members separately on a few different issues, precede each issue by tagging the relevant person/s using "@member name" (this technique should bring up the person's email contact name).

Forwarding email etiquette

You should always ask permission before you forward someone's email. Otherwise, you could get into trouble with data privacy laws, as well as annoy a colleague or customer.

You never know what hidden triggers an email might have when read by the wrong person. The person writing you the message may have addressed a message to you that would be upsetting for the person you intend to forward it to.

Forwarding an email is often the easiest way to send an attachment, but if you do this you need to tidy the email up first. Delete all the extraneous emails in the thread and just send the most relevant parts. Clean up the subject line too, by deleting all the unnecessary "Fw:" or "Re:" that appear.

What to do:

- Ask for permission to forward someone else's email
- Provide clarity by removing parts of the email that are irrelevant to whom you are forwarding to
- Provide context by adding an opening paragraph to the forwarded email with a summary of the email content (for emails longer than 3 paragraphs)

 Remove any private information of the person who wrote the email that should not be exposed to the person you forward the email to (such as email address, phone number, job title, etc.) This type of information is included in the "forwarding" snippet and in the email signature (see example below).



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CC and BCC email etiquette

When you send an email you have 3 "Send to" options:

- 1. "To" this is used for the primary recipient of the email. Use it for the person who needs to take action when they get the email or who most needs to know this information. The person in the "To" field is expected to reply.
- 2. CC this stands for "carbon copy." (those strange 2 layer papers we used to have in banks and offices, that when you write on top of the first page it imprints the one under it, thereby creating a copy). Everyone can see who receives a CC copy of the email, and if someone hits "reply all" then everyone in the CC field will get an email. People in the CC field know that they don't need to reply.
- 3. BCC this stands for "blind carbon copy." If someone gets a BCC, no one else will know that they received it, and they won't be included in future replies. But the person in BCC can "Reply all" and thereby expose the fact of their inclusion to the rest. If all group members are in BCC then none of them can see or contact each other.

In general, work emails should use CC and not BCC, so that everyone knows who's in the loop. According to email ethics, you should never use BCC to include a superior without telling the other recipients (but we all know that sometimes can't be helped).

BCC is for when you don't want everyone to know who's receiving this email. It's the best choice when you're emailing multiple clients, to protect their privacy.

When should I use either "CC" or "BCC"?

- Use CC when emailing a group where people should be allowed to contribute to the thread
- Use CC when you want everyone to know who the email concerns
- **Use CC** when you want to be transparent about who is able to read the email, and it's replies
- Use BCC when you need to keep someone in the loop without exposing their involvement
- **Use BCC** when you do not want list members to be able to "Reply all" (e.g. a newsletter)
- Use BCC when you do not want to expose the email group members' addresses to each other

How to decide CC hierarchy?

Email etiquette concerning CC hierarchy simply asks the question of who to place first in the CC field of an email. Some professionals prefer to list recipients in descending order of importance in the company, placing the highest position first. This is more common in highly hierarchical organizations like the army, or big business conglomerates.

If you know that your boss is the type of person that cares about status and respect, make sure to place him or her at the top of the list. But in most cases, nobody will notice the CC order.

Email attachment etiquette

It's common to send attachments, but there's also email etiquette around sending a PDF. Don't assume your recipients will see your attachment. Don't make them ask you for it, and don't make them look for it. Remember, email etiquette is about email courtesy.

What to do:

- Tell the recipient there's a file attached (e.g. "see attached below, [name of file]")
- Tell them if it's large.
- Let them know the format they should expect.
- Compress large files and resize attached graphics so they won't slow download time.
- Make sure the recipient has the right software to open your files.

Example email:

Dear [name]

[email body]

I've attached the social media audits for October below. Please note that they're large files, so you may want to download them.

Best wishes, [name]

Removing or adding recipients email etiquette rules

Sometimes you'll need to add or remove a recipient from an email thread. That's fine as long as everyone knows what's going on. Include a note saying "I'm adding John from accounts to this email to help us understand the finances," or "I'm removing Jane from sales because I realize this isn't a sales matter."

That way no one gets a shock when they find out who's seeing their replies, and equally, no one gets offended by being removed.

Email etiquette rules in the workplace

As mentioned above, the way you write an email depends a lot on who you're addressing. Proper email etiquette is different for your boss than for your teammates, for example. Here are some email etiquette examples for different contexts.

How to email your boss

Emailing your boss can be nerve-racking, especially about a tricky subject like asking for a raise, requesting an extended leave of absence, or reporting a mistake or misbehavior (even if it wasn't your mistake). Here are some business email etiquette examples to help you through it.

- Be formal by default. Write "Dear Mr. Smith" instead of "Dear Mike" unless he asked everyone to address him as Mike.
- Once again, make sure your subject line is clear and to the point.
- In the body of the email, include only the relevant information.
- Don't be melodramatic or exaggerate.

Example email:

Subject line: Request for time off from [date] to [date]

Dear Mr. [name],

I am emailing today to request time off from [date] to [date] for [X reason]. I have completed [task you've completed to prepare for time off].

Please reach out with any questions regarding my time off.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely, [Name and job title]

If you need to share a lot of information, just use the email to outline the subject and ask for a meeting.

Example email:

Subject line: Marketing campaign for fall clothing line

Dear Mr. [name],

I'm writing to let you know that our marketing campaign was not as successful as we predicted it would be. We saw RoI fall 40% and conversion rates fall 27%. This leads us to question our decisions about social media marketing spend.

I would like to schedule a time to discuss the results with you further. Please let me know when would be convenient for you.

Kind regards, [Name and role]

How to write an email to a colleague

Writing to your colleagues means treading the line between formal and friendly. You don't want to sound cold, but you do need to stay professional. Here are some email etiquette tips for hitting the right balance when writing to a colleague.

Email etiquette tips when emailing a colleague:

- Address colleagues by their first names, but avoid nicknames
- Use your colleague's preferred pronouns
- Even if you're close friends, keep your emails impersonal
- Make your expectations clear
- Stay respectful and positive

Example email:

Hi [name],

I was thinking about [name of project] on my [ride/drive/walk] into work today. I had some thoughts about how we could approach it in a different way that might be more efficient.

I'm excited to share them with you. Are you available [day] at [time] for a short chat? If not, when would be convenient for you?

Best wishes, [Name]

If you're asking a colleague for help or reminding them about a task, make it clear what the action item is and include a deadline.

Example email:

Hi [name]

Just a reminder that I need your design board by [date, time] for the [project name]. Please send it in PDF format and at least 800 x 1200 megapixels.

Thanks, [Name]

Email etiquette when writing to a group or a team

Writing to a group is similar to writing to your colleagues, so you should follow the same rules. But there are some special issues to keep in mind specifically for group emails.

Group email etiquette guidelines:

- Make sure that all sentences are gender-neutral.
- Be clear about who is receiving this email (see also the <u>section on CC and BCC</u> etiquette below).
- Don't include anything that should be kept private

Unless it's a very small group (under 5 people), don't use each person's name in the greeting. "Dear team" "Dear co-workers", "Dear colleagues" is enough, or "Hi, everyone" will suffice.

If parts of the email are only relevant to some of the recipients, make that clear too. Here's an example.

Dear marketing team,

At yesterday's meeting, we agreed to share brainstorming ideas for next quarter's Google ad texts. Please send your suggestions by email no later than [date].

Anna and Rick, you volunteered to research our competitor's campaigns. Please report on the results of your research by [date].

Sincerely, [Name]

Business email etiquette

Most business email etiquette rules were already covered in the prior sections of this article, so if you jumped over them, you should go back and read them first.

That said, there are many types of business emails, and scenarios that require the use of specific business email etiquette. Let's go over a few business situations to see the basic email etiquette for each in action.

Specific types of business email etiquette:

- Sales email etiquette
- Customer support email etiquette
- Etiquette for email asking for a quote
- Etiquette in email reminding about payment
- Etiquette for email requesting donations
- University email etiquette (student to professor)

Sales email etiquette

For sales emails, you want to be respectful and informative in your subject line, so as to encourage them to open the email. You want to avoid being too pushy, too salesy, and focus more on building a trusted relationship before you pitch your wares or services.

Example subject lines:

- Have you thought about [problem your product solves]?
- Ideas for dealing with [problem your product solves]?
- Question about your [problem your product solves]

Unlike emails to your colleagues or boss, start a sales email with more than just "Dear [name]". Don't jump straight into your sales offer. Instead, remark something about their well-being to show them that you care about them as a person rather than just a lead.

Example openings:

- I hope you and your family are all safe, now with the new Covid wave,
- I hope you are rested and well now the holidays are over,

Example email:

Subject line: New ways to increase sales

Hi [first name], I hope you are keeping safe during these crazy times,

I'm a big fan of your company. You seem to be doing well at [add a few compliments about the positives].

But I noticed one problem [write about the problem].

I'd like to suggest a solution. [Company name] helps businesses to increase sales within 3 months by [detail your product and solutions].

Here's a recent case study [link case study] of how we helped one of our clients [write about the result].

If you'd like to hear more, just let me know and we'll arrange a [demo/phone call].

Thank you for your time, [Name, position]

Customer support email etiquette

How to write an email for A good customer support email can turn an unhappy customer into a loyal fan.

CS etiquette rules:

- Address the customer by name.
- Restate their complaint and validate it (when relevant).
- Express sympathy and apologize (when relevant).
- Answer all their questions as fully as possible.
- Proofread it once more to check that every detail is correct.

Email example:

Hi [name],

I'm very sorry you [describe their experience].

It's always important for us to [address a company value here, e.g. respond quickly to our customers/deliver excellence/make sure our products last for years]. Having to [summarize their complaint] is unacceptable.

I've passed this on to my team – we'll make sure we get better as we grow and learn. We have [offer sweetener e.g. sent you a code for a \$5 discount, added free shipping to your next order, etc.] to try to make up for the bad experience you had.

Thank you for your patience and let me know if I can help in any way. I apologize again for the inconvenience.

[Name, position]

After you've emailed the customer and resolved their issue or answered their questions, follow up a few days later just to check that there's nothing outstanding. The email could look like this:

Hi [name],

Hope you're doing great.

I wanted to check in with you regarding the issue you had /question you asked the other day. Was it resolved? Do you need any additional help?

I'd be happy to assist you with anything further. Have a great day,

[Name, position]

Etiquette for email asking for a quote

Asking for a quote is routine, but it can set the tone for your whole relationship. When you email to ask for a quote.

What to do:

- Introduce yourself.
- Describe exactly what you need.
- Explain when (and where, if relevant) you need the product or service.
- Give a deadline for the quote.

Email example:

Subject: Quotation Request

Dear [name],

I'm the [position] for [company name]. We're interested in [list the products/services you want].

Please send a quotation on the prices of these products, along with an estimated shipping cost to [location]. We hope to hear from you by [date].

For further clarification or inquiry, please call or email me at the number or email address below.

Sincerely, [name, position]

Etiquette in email reminding about payment

Nobody likes to chase payments, but sometimes you have no choice. Here are some email etiquette rules for getting payment without upsetting the client.

What to do:

- Write a clear subject line
- Reattach your invoice
- State the payment date and amount
- Remind the recipient about payment options and include a link to payment
- Ask for confirmation of receipt of invoice
- If necessary, remind them about penalties for late payment

Example email:

Subject: Payment reminder: Invoice #123

Dear [name]

I'm writing to remind you that your payment for invoice #123 is [x days] overdue. Please find the invoice attached. Please confirm receipt of this email, so I can check I have the right address.

Just to remind you, the payment is for [amount] including [VAT, tax, expedited shipping, etc.] and was due on [date]. You can pay by [payment options/link].

According to our contract, a late fee of [amount] will be applied for [terms of late payment e.g. every week the overdue payment is not paid].

Best wishes, [Name]

Etiquette for email requesting donations

If you're running a non-profit organization or helping out a local cause, you might have to ask for funds. This can be uncomfortable, but the right email etiquette can make it go more smoothly.

What to do:

- Start with a clear subject line
- Make your ask early in the email
- Explain what the donation will be used for
- Describe what your organization does
- Include a link to make it easy to donate
- Give a deadline if relevant
- Follow up to say thank you

Example email:

Subject line: Donate to [organization name's campaign name] to [state goal]

Dear [name],

[Organization name] needs your help to [state cause]. [Organization name] has been [state what they do in more detail] for [years]. We couldn't do it without you.

Your donation will [describe what you will do with the money].

We need to raise [amount] by [date]. To donate, please click here [link].

Thank you for all your support.

Best wishes, [name]

University email etiquette (student to professor)

Regardless of whether you're sending a short note to your professor to ask about an assignment, or have questions about the material, you want to make a good impression.

Here are some points to bear in mind to make your student email easy to read and help your professor send a quick reply.

What to do:

- Include your name and your grade, year, and/or class
- If you have a lot of complaints or questions, ask for a meeting to discuss them in person instead of sending a long email list
- Stay respectful

Example email:

Subject: Jane Jones, Intro to History, Assignment #3

Dear Professor Smith,

I'm Jane Jones and I'm in your Intro to History class for freshmen on Wednesday mornings.

I can't find the information about assignment #3, which was set yesterday. Please could you resend the details?

Thank you in advance, Jane Jones.

Conclusion: email etiquette can affect your professional future

When you get it right with email courtesy, you'll help strengthen warm relationships and build a reputation for being helpful and reliable. Smooth mail etiquette can advance your career and open doors professionally and personally.