

# Email Etiquette

Emails from students:

<<There is no way that I have missed twice in 3 weeks.

<<Hey, I will not be in class this morning because I have to go out of town with my parents. I hope I am not missing anything important! Sorry for the short notice,

Think about professionalism. Do the two emails above make an impressive case to the instructor? The first has no opening or closing, not to mention anything but a statement. Does the student wish the instructor to respond? The second student is making the incorrect assumption that it is the responsibility of the instructor to catch the student up with any missed work. Also, is not every class day important?

Here are some tips:

- Always think about the message you are sending the instructor. Is it what you intend to say? Could you find the information by going to the course website or asking a classmate first? Proof read your email.
- Write from your university e-mail account. That immediately lets the instructor see that your e-mail is legitimate and not spam. The cryptic or 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 an instructor.
- 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 Math assignment" or "question about assignment," without identifying the class you're in, may leave your instructor with the chore of figuring that out. For someone teaching large lecture classes or many sections, that might mean reading through hundreds of names on rosters. But even for an instructor with smaller classes, it's a drag to get an e-mail that merely says "I'm in your Math class and need the assignment." All your Math instructor's classes are Math classes; he or she still needs to know which one is yours.
- If you are asking about a particular homework problem. Always state the problem in the email. The instructor may not always have a copy of the textbook at hand, especially if he or she is reading email from home. Also be sure to explain what you do understand about the problem and/or what strategies you have tried. The instructor will be more likely to respond with useful information if you narrow down your question.

Consider, in light of this advice, the following examples:

- An e-mail from "qtpie2005" with the subject line "question."
- An e-mail from an university account with the subject line "question about Math 2011 assignment."

Which one looks legitimate? Which one looks like spam?

Think about what you're saying. Most students are not accustomed to writing to their instructors. Here are some ways to do it well:

- Choose an appropriate greeting. "Hi Ms. Butler" 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 instructors 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.

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

Maggie Simpson

Math 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 assignment with a request that your instructor look it over is very bad form. Arrange to meet your instructor 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 instructor 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. Many e-mail messages end up never reaching their intended recipients, for reasons of human and technological error, so it’s always appropriate to acknowledge that someone’s message got through. It’s also plain courtesy to say thanks. (Your instructor will remember it too.)

So what would a good e-mail to an instructor look like?

Hi Ms. Butler,

I’m working on my homework on exponential growth/decay and I’m not sure what to make of the negative in  $y=e^{(-2x)}$ . The problem asks for me to “interpret the negative in practical terms.” How can I understand how the negative affects the equation? Do you have a suggestion? Thanks!

Maggie Simpson

Math 3703, MWF 10:00

And a subsequent note of thanks:

- > Try graphing the equation by plotting points. Then try
- > graphing the similar equation  $y=e^{(2x)}$  by plotting points.
- > That’ll probably make it clearer.

It sure did. Thanks for your help, Ms. Butler.

Maggie Simpson