

Appendix on Email

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Email

Writing email messages is probably the most common writing task for any graduate student. Email has replaced phone calls, face-to-face interactions, and many forms of written message; it has become part of the fabric of academic communication. Given the important role of email, in this appendix we offer some general suggestions for email communications with people you do not know well or to people in authority positions, such as advisors, department chairs, or instructors.

1. Respond to All Personal Messages Promptly

It is important to let the sender know that you know that you have received an important email message. If you have nothing to reply or you are not sure how to reply, at least acknowledge the message. Here are two examples.

I just read your question about the manuscript. I'll get back to you ASAP.

I've read your message about applying for a fellowship.
Thanks very much for the suggestion. I am thinking about it
and will get back to by Friday .

(Do you know what the acronym ASAP means? FYI? BTW? If not, see the short list of common acronyms on page 8 of this document.)

2. Be Careful about Forwarding Personal Messages

Remember that personal email messages have been sent to you—with you as all or part of the intended audience. Before forwarding a message to somebody else, ask yourself whether the sender would approve. If in doubt, do not.

3. Check That It Is Appropriate to Send an Attachment

Attachments are, of course, a very efficient means to exchange files that contain your homework or a manuscript. However, you should send such attachments only if it is the preferred way for both you and the recipient to share files. Many courses have websites through which students submit homework, and many instructors do not want to receive homework in any other way. Collaborators on projects may also have a website where information is shared, so it is important to upload information to the site so all necessary files are in one place and available to all group members. When you do send an email attachment, always include a message with a clear subject heading. As you may know, attachments sent with no message or clear subject may end up in a spam box or trashed. Also, for multiple files, consider sending them in zipped or compressed form.

4. Check Outgoing Messages before Posting Them

Once an email message is sent, you may not be able to get it back. Although there are ways to recall messages, in our experience we might have been able to see and read the recalled message. We think it wise to read through all the messages you write before sending them—especially if you are upset. You need to check to see if the tone is wrong (too critical, too direct, too apologetic, too weak, etc.). Keep in mind that, unlike in face-to-face communication, you have no means to influence how the reader will receive your message other than the words on the screen. You do not want a written record of a message that reflects poorly on you.

Suppose your advisor sends you this message:

Please have a look at the Mills et al. paper in the latest issue of JACL. I suspect it may be relevant to your project. What do you think?

Why might you decide to abandon the following replies? (Remember that *positioning* also applies to email—you want to present yourself as a credible graduate student/junior member of the club.)

- a. I am sorry to bother you. I have read the Mills paper, but I cannot understand it. Could you please help me by letting me know what you had in mind?

- b. I spent three hours in the library reading and rereading the Mills paper that you told me to read. I don't really see a connection since it deals with wheat intolerance and my project focuses on corn.
- c. Thanks for the excellent suggestion to read the paper by Mills et al. I just finished reading it and it was great. You always have such helpful ideas. So, do you want one to rethink the direction of my project before I do anything else? I know that you are really busy these days. But I would like to see you tomorrow to talk about how you think I can incorporate some insights from the paper into my work.

If you are unsure why you might want to abandon these replies, please see page 8 of this document.

5. Use the Subject Line to Clearly Indicate the Topic

Especially in sequences of email messages, subject lines help receivers to recognize the topic (rather than making them search their memories). They also help to make the messages concise and precise. In the following message, notice how the student uses the subject line to avoid repeating herself.

Subject: Guest Speaker for ED 817 "Int. & Comp. Ed"
To: Sungjoon Cho
From: Bob Wakefield

How would you like to be one? Professor Walsh is looking for someone to spend an hour with our tiny seminar (about 8 people), and I suggested you. The class meets on Tuesdays from 4-7. Let me know if you're interested!

Bob

We offer one note of caution, however. If your reader does not look at the subject line (which is not uncommon), he or she will definitely be confused.

Be sure to write subject lines that are informative. One-word subjects like: *Help*, *Sorry*, or *Meeting* may not be very informative. Also, be sure to change the subject line as your email discussion moves into new areas. This can help when searching for old messages.

6. Do Not Overuse Conversational Openings and Closings

As we can see from the examples already given, email language is a hybrid of speech and writing. Because of its speech elements, many international students tend to use conversational openings and closings from (phone) conversations. We often see messages that open and close like this:

Hi Chris! How are you? This is Fatima from your 321 class. Can I change our appointment to Friday at 9:30? I have a test on Wednesday. Have a good day.

Got to run. Bye, bye, Fatima

Some recipients (like Chris) encourage students to adopt a more conversational style. However, it is very easy to misinterpret this informality or friendliness as “unbusinesslike” and perhaps somewhat naïve. Notice, too, that in many cases email allows you to avoid the problem of determining how to address someone. You may choose among such greetings as the following:

Dear Dr. Smith,
Dr. Roger Smith,
Dear Roger Smith,
Dear Roger,
Dear Advisor,



I'm afraid I will be ten minutes late for our appointment.

If you have been “invited” to use the first name of your instructor or advisor, do so in your email with him or her.

Express “Business” Requests Politely

Email language is typically informal. In many ways, this feature is very helpful for non-native speakers. It helps to build relationships. It also allows people to use the system quickly and without worrying too much about typos, imperfect sentences, and so on. There is, however, one situation where this informality can be very problematic. When a student sends a request to a faculty or administrator, informal language may be too direct and thus insufficiently polite.

Two examples follow. The first might be considered only a little offensive, but the second rather more so. Of course, giving offense was not the intention of either writer.

Subject: Pages

To: Joan Robinson

From: Keiko Ichiko

Dear Professor Robinson,

Finally, I have something for you to read. I will leave the draft of my paper in your mailbox soon, so please pick it up when you stop by.

Keiko

This first message is problematic for two reasons. First, there is the vagueness of *soon*. (How many times will Professor Robinson have to check her mailbox before she finds Keiko's pages?) Second, the end of the message is completely unnecessary. Here is a simple "repair."

Dear Professor Robinson,

Finally, I have something for you to read. I will put the draft of my paper in your mailbox by noon tomorrow.

Here is the second example.

Subject: Paper

To: Henry Rabkin

From: Kumar Bhatia

I am currently working on a paper (approx 8/9 pages). I should be done on Mon. evening. Could you please go through it & give your comments by Wednesday?

Kumar

Studies of politeness suggest three elements for polite requests.

1. Do not impose.
2. Give options.
3. Make the receiver feel good.

Notice how Kumar breaks all three rules. Here is what he might have written instead.

I am currently working on a paper (appr ox 8/9 pages). I should be done on Mon. evening. If you ar e not too busy, I would appreciate any comments you might have to make before I submit it. Unfortunately, it is due on Wed., so there isn't too much time. If you can help, I'll bring you my draft as soon as it's done. If you can't, that's OK too.

This draft looks better in terms of the three elements, but what do you think of this message? Ask your instructor how he or she might react.

In contrast, here is a superb student request that John received.

Subject: Article review

To: John Swales

From: JP Park

I was wondering if you have an article that you want me to review yet. If you have something appr opriate, next week would be good for me to get started on it. I don't want to sound anxious to get going on this, but I'll be around, so let me know. Thanks.

It is clear that JP really wants to get going on this assignment and perhaps believes that John has been a little slow off the mark. However, he presents himself as being very relaxed about it; notice in particular his use of the past continuous (*I was wondering*) to give distance to the request. This message is a very good example of how to be informal and polite at the same time. (It was also immediately successful.)

8. Keep Your Messages as Brief as Possible

We would suggest that you avoid burdening your readers with messages that are very long (more than one screen's worth of text) or include information that is really unnecessary. If, for example, you need to cancel an appointment or miss a class because you are ill, there is no need to describe the illness. A simple statement that you are ill and unable to get to class or an appointment is fine. In other situations, such as if you need to ask for an extension on a homework assignment, some explanation may be necessary.

9. Become Familiar with Common Abbreviations

Email often includes acronyms or abbreviations. For example, among abbreviations we have used in this appendix are *ASAP* and *Mon*. Notice others as you read your messages.

10. Do Not Worry Too Much about Capitalization

Some people relax or even completely abandon the normal rules for capitalization. Here is an example.

here's what I know about the next tesol conference. It's in atlanta from march 16 to 20—the hq hotel is the hilton.

You might not want to go this far. At the other extreme, don't write your messages in all capital letters. MOST PEOPLE FIND MESSAGES IN ALL CAPS rather threatening and imposing. It seems very much like shouting. Fortunately, email programs allow you to format your text in other ways and so there is little need to use capital letters for emphasis.

11. Use Deletions Carefully

Some writers will be very casual about the style of their messages, leaving out certain articles and pronouns and various other bits and pieces of English grammar. Compare these two messages.

Standard English

I got your message about the manuscript. I will return it along with my comments to your mailbox on Friday .

Message with Deletions

Got your message about the manuscript. Will return it with comments to your mailbox Friday.

Unless your English grammar is very strong, we recommend that you do not use these deletions. You may teach yourself bad habits.

12. Avoid Conventions for Communicating Emotions (emoticons)

Email is a written medium but has many of the characteristics of speech. In speech, we can use voice inflection and gestures to communicate what we are feeling. Some email users adopt special symbols to communicate their state of mind: :-) = happy, ^0^ = worried, :-(= unhappy. These devices are fine to use in email for friends. They also seem more widely used by undergraduates than by graduates. We advise against using them in messages with your instructors and for email sent to individuals you do not know.

A Final Word

In this appendix, we have provided some suggestions for using email. We hope in the way to increase your confidence. We do not want in any way to make you anxious about this means of communication. Many non-native speakers find email to be an ideal way to improve their English and therefore participate in various email groups, blogs, and online communication spaces. If you have the time to use email to improve your English fluency, we strongly recommend it.

Some Common Acronyms

AKA = also known as

IMHO = in my humble opinion

ASAP = as soon as possible

IMO = in my opinion

BTW = by the way

LOL = laughing out loud

FYI = for your information

WRT = with respect to

Do an Internet search on email, instant messaging, and Internet acronyms and emoticons if you would like to learn more.

Some Thought on the Three Messages in Item 4

Possible reasons you should discard the replies (and start over) include the following:

- a. You do indeed seem rather hopeless here. Even if you did not understand the paper, do you need to say so? And in this way? Think about the importance of impression management.
- b. You seem rather irritated—and perhaps you missed the point. What if your advisor thinks that it is the methodology part that is relevant? Perhaps it would be wiser to respond with a question like *Could you be more specific about which parts of the paper are most relevant?*
- c. You sound like you cannot think for yourself and are too eager to please your advisor.

For even more information and practice on email, see Unit Three of *Academic Interactions: Communicating on Campus* (University of Michigan Press, 2009).