



# College of Communication Writing Center

## Writing Emails to Professors and TAs

You can use this handout to review the following:

- What to do before you write an email
- What to put in the subject line
- How to structure your email with a greeting, a message, and a sign-off
- How to phrase a polite request
- How to write a follow-up email
- Examples of full emails
- A checklist to use while you write

Please note: This handout is **not comprehensive**, but it provides an overview of the email-writing process for anyone looking for tips and tricks.

### **BEFORE YOU WRITE YOUR EMAIL:**

Remember that your professors want to help.

It's important to communicate with your instructors about any issues you're having in class.

- DO NOT BE AFRAID to reach out if you have a question or concern.
- However, you should always ask yourself first: "Is there another (reliable) way I can find out the answer to my question before I contact my professor?"

Check the syllabus.

**Before emailing a professor to ask a question, it's a good idea to check the syllabus and Blackboard page for the class.** Most important information (e.g., due dates, class policies, readings, etc.) is likely there.

- If you email the professor to ask about something that is clearly stated in the syllabus, it shows that you did not read the syllabus. It might seem like you don't take the class seriously or you aren't paying attention.
- While you should generally avoid emailing a professor about something unnecessary (e.g., a due date in the syllabus), it is appropriate—even necessary—to contact your professor in various other situations.

### **Check with a classmate.**

**Before emailing your TA or professor, try checking with a classmate to see if they have the information you need.** They might be able to answer your question.

**It's also a good idea to email a classmate after an absence from class.** Ask them what you missed and if they can share their notes with you. It's more respectful of your professor's time.

**What if you're shy?** Take a chance. Strike up a conversation before or after class. It may be easier to do this at the beginning of the semester, but it's never too late.

### **Should you send the email to your TA or your professor?**

**There might be guidelines in the syllabus about when to email TAs** (e.g., about small concerns, assignments, and grades) **instead of contacting the professor.**

**It's often best to start by emailing the TA— especially in a very large class.** Use your judgment based on the situation you're dealing with, as well as information in the syllabus and class announcements. If your TA is unable to help you, they will advise you to email your professor directly.

**If you're unsure whether to contact your professor directly or email the TA first, you can email the professor and "cc" your TA in the class.** The appropriate person will respond.

Email your professor or TA as soon as a question arises (if you can't find the answer in the syllabus).

**The sooner the better!** It is unreasonable to expect that professors and TAs will respond to your emails immediately. Instructors have busy lives and receive lots of emails, so they might not see your message—or have time to respond—on the day you send it.

- Some instructors have policies about when they respond to students' emails. For example, they might not check emails after 5pm or on the weekend.
- Most professors attempt to reply to students' emails within 72 hours, but this timeframe may not always be possible.

If you have a question about an assignment, it's important to email professors and TAs well before due dates.

- If you email them with a question about your paper on the due date, you might not get a response before the deadline. Always email as far in advance as possible.

## **CONSTRUCTING YOUR EMAIL:**

What should the subject line of the email be?

In the subject line of the email, write the course number and/or name of the class you're taking with the instructor.

Professors and TAs teach many students, so they may not recognize your name immediately or remember which section of the class you are in. Always include this information in the subject line (and/or one of the first lines) of the email. That way, they don't have to waste time looking for it.

Some examples for the subject line:

- CO 101 Project question
- CO 201 question about the assignment

## What should the first line of the email be?

Here are some options:

If you're writing to your professor: Dear Professor [last name],

- OR... IF your professor has a PhD (or MD): Dear Dr. [last name],

If you're writing to your TA: Dear Mr./Ms. [last name],

- PLEASE NOTE: Avoid "Mrs." or use it with caution; it is used only for married women.

If (and ONLY IF) your professor/TA has told you to use their first name to refer to them, you can start your email: Dear [first name]/ Hi [first name] / Hello [first name]

- PLEASE NOTE: "Dear" is a traditional way to address people in letters/emails. "Dear" works with anyone you write to— it's always appropriate because it can be used in both formal and informal situations. By contrast, "Hi" is a more informal greeting. It's a common way to start an email, but some professors might interpret it as rude. For this reason, it is best to use "Hi" only with professors you know well. If a professor has given permission to use their first name, it is safe to assume that you can start an email to them with "Hi [first name]."

Can you start an email with "Good morning," "Good afternoon," or "Good evening"?

- Yes, but "Dear \_\_\_\_\_," is perhaps more polite. Polite= good. Also, your recipient may not read your email for hours/days, so the time of day is irrelevant.

Some common greetings in other cultures are NOT customary in the US. Avoid them.

- INCORRECT ways to address professors and TAs: "Dear Comrade"/ "Dear Officer"/ "Dear Sir" / "Dear Ma'am"/ "Dear Madam"/ "Honorable [name]"/ "Respected [name]"

If you're writing to a general email address for a center, program, or office on campus, and you're not sure who will read your email, you can start the email with "To whom it may concern,"

- This is an easy, polite way to begin an email when you don't know who will read it.
- Another way? Greetings like "Good morning!" and "Hello!" work well.

**It is customary to start with a brief, friendly line after the “Dear \_\_\_\_\_,” greeting.**

Here are some examples:

- I hope you’re doing well!
- I hope you’re enjoying this [lovely/ sunny/ snowy/ beautiful] weather!
- [on a Monday]: I hope you had a nice weekend!

PLEASE NOTE:

- Be sincere. If this friendly line feels forced, you don’t have to include it. In some situations, it’s best to go straight to your reason for writing, rather than spend time on such pleasantries. For example, you do NOT need to engage in small talk if you are in the middle of a medical emergency or it would otherwise seem unnatural.
- Be polite. It might NOT be appropriate to say something like “I hope you are not miserable because of all the grading you have to do now.” Instead, you could write something like: “I know this is a really busy time, and I hope you’re doing well!”

**After the brief/friendly line, you can remind them who you are.**

This is especially important in a large class and/or at the start of the semester. This is also crucial if you use a nickname in class that is different from the name on your BU email.

Here are some examples:

- I’m Henry, one of the students in your CO 101 section.
- I’m Aparna and I’m in section D of CO 201 with you.
- My name is Yanni and I’m taking History of International Horror Films with you.

**Make sure to clearly state the reason for your email.**

Here are some examples:

**I'm writing because...**

- EXAMPLE: I'm writing because I wanted to ask you for some advice on internships.

**I'm writing to ask...**

- EXAMPLE: I'm writing to ask if you would consider writing a recommendation for me. I would really appreciate it.

**I'm writing about...**

- EXAMPLE: I'm writing about the homework assignment. I'm not sure if we should read the entire book for Friday, or just the first 3 chapters. Could you please clarify?

**I wanted to let you know...**

- EXAMPLE: I wanted to let you know that I got the WBUR internship.
- EXAMPLE: I wanted to let you know in advance that I won't be able to attend class tomorrow. I'm in the hospital with appendicitis.

**I wanted to update you on...**

- EXAMPLE: I wanted to update you on my ideas for the final project.

**I have some questions about \_\_\_\_\_. Specifically, ...**

- EXAMPLE: I have a question about the exam. Specifically, is it an open-book test?

**How should you phrase a request?**

**DO NOT DEMAND** that professors or TAs do certain things for you. It is very important to ask for help politely.

Example of a <u>polite</u> request:	<u>Do not</u> send a request that sounds like a command. Examples of what <u>not</u> to do:
○ <u>Could you please</u> send me information about the assistantship?	○ Send me information about the assistantship. ○ Send me information about the assistantship please.*

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Please send me information about the assistantship.*</li> </ul> <p><b>*Please note:</b> Using “please” is a nice touch, but it is still far more polite to pose your request as a question.</p>
--	--

Here are some examples of polite requests:

**Could you please... [?]**

- EXAMPLE: Could you please let me know if there are any additional times that you’re available to meet with students next week?
- EXAMPLE: Could you please send me a copy of the handout from today’s class?
- EXAMPLE: Could you please clarify whether we should read pages 12-45 or just 12-30?

**Should I... [?]**

- EXAMPLE: Should I send you my paper before we meet, or is it better to bring it with me to our writing conference?

**Would it be possible to... [?]**

- EXAMPLE: Would it be possible to send you the recommendation form in a couple of days?

**Is there any way that I could... [?]**

- EXAMPLE: Is there any way that I could meet with you before class tomorrow?

**Would it be alright/ okay if... [?]**

- EXAMPLE: Would it be alright if we discuss that at your office hours?
- EXAMPLE: Would it be okay if I ask you some more questions after class tomorrow?

PLEASE NOTE: It is not advisable to ask for your professor’s (or TA’s) permission to do something that you are clearly NOT supposed to do.

- EXAMPLE OF A QUESTION YOU SHOULD NOT ASK: Would it be possible to skip the exam?

**I was wondering if... [.]**

- EXAMPLE: I was wondering if you might have time to meet with me before class tomorrow.
- EXAMPLE: I was wondering if you might be willing to write me a recommendation for grad school/ for an internship/ for a job on campus.

## Thank them.

**After you ask a question or request help from a professor, be sure to say thank you.** This can come at the end of your email, but don't forget to add it.

Here are some suggestions:

- Thanks!
- Please let me know if you have any concerns. Thanks so much!
- Thank you for your help!
- Thanks—I really appreciate your help!

## Sign off politely.

**At the end of the email, there are many ways to sign off.** There is no "right" way— and perhaps you already have a phrase that you always end your emails with.

Here are some suggestions:

- Thanks again!
- Have a great weekend!
- Enjoy the weekend!
- See you soon!
- See you in class!
- Take care,
- Cheers,
- Sincerely,
- Stay safe and be well,
- Best,
- All the best,
- My best,

**PLEASE NOTE: There are "wrong" ways to sign off when you email a professor or TA.**



- DO NOT end your email with “Love,” “With love,” etc. Always avoid inappropriately affectionate language.

## ADDITIONAL TIPS:

**Keep your message short and sweet.**

**Professors and TAs are busy.** They want to help, but they get a lot of emails, so they appreciate it when emails are direct and to the point.

- Provide enough details that they understand what your question/request is. If you're too vague about who you are or what you want, they won't be able to help.

**Be polite.**

**Don't use CAPS in an email to professors and TAs.** This can seem very rude.

- EXAMPLE OF WHAT NOT TO SAY: I NEED YOUR HELP!
- EXAMPLE OF WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD: I need your help./ I'd really appreciate your help.

**Use exclamation marks (!!!) rarely in emails to professors and TAs.**

- Don't use them after asking for help. This might seem rude or unprofessional.
- It's best to use them only at the end of kind/upbeat sentences at the beginning or end of your email. If you use a period (.) with such sentences, it might seem cold.
  - EXAMPLE at the beginning of an email: I hope you're doing well!
  - EXAMPLES at the end of an email: See you in class!/ Have a great weekend!

**Maintain a formal tone.** Check your email for spelling errors and typos. Avoid the informal language you might use when texting your friends (e.g., “cuz” instead of “because,” etc.).

**Sleep on it.** If you're unsure about what you wrote in your email, and it's not an urgent message, you can write a draft and send it the next day. Some time and distance from your email might help you to edit it before you send it. Just DON'T FORGET to send it.

## What about follow-up emails?

After your professor or TA responds, you'll need to reply to their email. Respond promptly.

It's important to thank your professor or TA for their response.

- Thanks for your reply!
- Thanks for your response!
- Thanks for your email!
- Thanks for getting back to me!

Follow the email guidelines above. Maintain a polite, professional tone.

Answer any questions they posed in their email. Clarify information politely (if necessary).

If you have additional questions, ask them. Another option? Set up a time to meet your professor during office hours if you have too much to discuss in an email.

## How should you tell a professor or TA about your (future/past) absence from class?

If possible, let the professor or TA know about expected absences/tardiness in advance.

- Do NOT go into great detail (especially if you are/were sick). Stick to the facts.
- Always refer to the class policies in your syllabus regarding absences and tardiness. Some professors have very strict rules.

Here are some examples:

- EXAMPLE: I'm sorry I was late to class today. I got stuck in traffic. I apologize for the interruption when I came into the classroom.
- EXAMPLE: I'm sorry I missed class on Tuesday. I actually broke my leg Monday night. I've already emailed a classmate to find out what I missed. I'm attaching the homework.

- EXAMPLE: I'm really not feeling well, so I'm not going to be able to attend class this evening. I'm attaching my homework to this email, and I'll contact a friend from class to find out what I missed. Thank you for understanding.
- EXAMPLE OF WHAT NOT TO SAY: I was vomiting all night. I think it's food poisoning. Have you ever had food poisoning? I have a doctor's appointment today, so I won't be able to come to class for the next week. I'm sure you understand.

## **A FULL EXAMPLE EMAIL:**

### A basic example

*Dear Professor Price,*

*I hope you're having a good week!*

*I'm writing to check in with you about the team project. We originally signed up to give our presentation on Monday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, but you changed the order of the readings on the syllabus, so the other students in class may not have read the related chapters by the time we present the material. Is that okay? I just wanted to check with you.*

*Thanks!*

*Take care,*

*[student name]*

(Please turn to the next page.)

## A version with comments

**Subject Line: CM 713 A Presentation Concern**

When you're emailing a professor or TA, it is customary to start with a brief, friendly line after the greeting. Be sincere. If this type of line feels forced, you don't have to include it. In some situations, it's best to go straight to your reason for writing, rather than spend time on such pleasantries.

**Dear Professor Price,**

**I hope you're having a good week!**

**I'm writing to check in with you about the team project. We originally signed up to give our presentation on Monday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, but you changed the order of the readings on the syllabus, so the other students in class may not have read the related chapters by the time we present the material. Could you please clarify if we will still follow the reading schedule in the syllabus?**

**Thanks!  
Take care,  
[student name]**

At the end of the email, there are many ways to sign off. There is no "right" way—and perhaps you already have a phrase that you always end your emails with.

In the subject line of the email, or one of the first sentences, write the course number and name of the class you are in with the professor or TA. Often, professors and TAs teach many students and may not recognize your name immediately or remember which section of the class you are in.

If you're writing to your professor: **Dear Professor**  
If your professor has a PhD: **Dear Dr.** If you're writing to your TA: **Dear Mr./Ms.** If (and ONLY IF) your professor/TA has told you to use their first name to refer to them, you can start your email: **Dear [their first name],**

After the brief, friendly line, clarify the reason why you are emailing your professor or TA.

After you ask a question or request help from a professor, be sure to say thank you. This can come at the end of your email, but don't forget to add it.

Politely phrase questions using "Could you please..." "Should I..." "I was wondering if..." etc.

(Please turn to the next page.)

## A quick checklist to use when you write your email

1. Check the syllabus and/or ask a classmate for information
2. If you can't find the information you need, email your professor or TA
3. The subject line
  - the course name and # (and/or the topic of your email)
4. The first line...
  - to a professor: Dear Professor [last name]
  - to a TA: Dear Mr./Ms. [last name]
5. A brief and friendly greeting
  - I hope this email finds you well!
  - I hope you're doing well!
6. Introduce yourself (in a huge class) or remind them who you are
  - I'm [your name] from your Horror in International Film class.
7. Clearly state the reason for your email
  - I'm writing to ask if...      ○ I'm writing because...      ○ I wanted to let you
  - I have questions about...      ○ I'm writing about...      know that...
8. Phrase requests politely
  - Could you please...?      ○ I was wondering if...      ○ Would it be okay if...?
9. Thank your professor or TA
  - Thanks for your help!      ○ Thanks so much!      ○ Thanks!      ○ Thanks for...!
10. Sign off politely
  - Take care,      ○ Thanks again!      ○ See you soon!      ○ Best,

### ADDITIONAL TIPS TO REMEMBER

- Your professors and TAs want to help you, so don't be afraid to email them
- Send emails as far in advance as possible & don't expect an immediate response
- Spellcheck your work
- Keep your email short, polite, and formal