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## Advice for students so they don't sound silly in emails (essay)

Submitted by Paul T. Corrigan and Cameron Hunt McNabb on April 16, 2015 - 3:00am

Dear College Student,

If your professor has sent you a link to this page, two things are likely true. First, you probably sent an email that does not represent you in a way you would like to be represented. Second, while others might have scolded <sup>[1]</sup> you, mocked <sup>[2]</sup> you or despaired <sup>[3]</sup> over the future of the planet because of your email, you sent it to someone who wants to help you represent yourself better.

In part, because only a click or swipe or two separate emails from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and texting, the lines between professional emails and more informal modes of writing have become blurred, and many students find the conventions of professional emails murky. We think we can help sort things out.

In the age of social media, many students approach emailing similar to texting and other forms of digital communication, where the crucial conventions are brevity and informality. But most college teachers consider emails closer to letters than to text messages. This style of writing calls for more formality, more thoroughness and more faithful adherence (sometimes bordering on religious adherence) to the conventions of Edited Standard Written English <sup>[4]</sup> -- that is, spelling, punctuation, capitalization and syntax.

These different ways of writing are just that -- different ways of writing. The letter approach to emails is not always and forever better (or worse) than the texting approach. Knowing how and when to use one or the other -- based on why you are writing and whom you are writing to -- makes all the difference. So, if you use emojis, acronyms, abbreviations, etc., when texting your friends, you are actually demonstrating legitimate, useful writing skills. But you *aren't* if you do the same thing when emailing professors who view emails as letters.

Effective writing requires shaping your words according to your audience, purpose and genre (or type of writing, e.g., an academic email). Together these are sometimes called the rhetorical <sup>[5]</sup> situation <sup>[6]</sup>. Some of the key conventions for the rhetorical situation of emailing a professor are as follows:

- 1. Use a clear subject line.** The subject "Rhetorical Analysis Essay" would work a bit better than "heeeeelp!" (and much better than the unforgivable blank subject line).
- 2. Use a salutation and signature.** Instead of jumping right into your message or saying "hey," begin with a greeting like "Hello" or "Good afternoon," and then address your professor by appropriate title and last name, such as "Prof. Xavier" or "Dr. Octavius." (Though this can be tricky <sup>[7]</sup>, depending on your teacher's gender, rank and level of education, "Professor" is usually a safe bet for addressing a college teacher.) Similarly, instead of concluding with "Sent from my iPhone" or nothing at all, include a signature, such as "Best" or "Sincerely," followed by your name.
- 3. Use standard punctuation, capitalization, spelling and grammar.** Instead of writing "idk what 2 rite about in my paper can you help??" try something more like, "I am writing to ask about the topics you suggested in class yesterday."
- 4. Do your part in solving what you need to solve.** If you email to ask something you could look up yourself, you risk presenting yourself as less resourceful than you ought to be. But if you mention that you've already checked the syllabus, asked classmates and looked through old emails from the professor, then you present yourself as responsible and taking initiative. So, instead of asking, "What's our homework for tonight?" you might write, "I looked through the syllabus and course website for this weekend's assigned homework, but unfortunately I am unable to locate it."
- 5. Be aware of concerns about entitlement.** Rightly or wrongly, many professors feel that students "these days" have too strong a sense of entitlement <sup>[8]</sup>. If you appear to demand help, shrug off absences or assume late work will be accepted without penalty because you have a good reason, your professors may see you as irresponsible or

presumptuous. Even if it is true that “the printer wasn’t printing” and you “really need an A in this class,” your email will be more effective if you take responsibility: “I didn’t plan ahead well enough, and I accept whatever policies you have for late work.”

**6. Add a touch of humanity.** Some of the most effective emails are not strictly business -- not strictly about the syllabus, the grade, the absence or the assignment. While avoiding obvious flattery, you might comment on something said in class, share information regarding an event the professor might want to know about or pass on an article from your news feed that is relevant to the course. These sorts of flourishes, woven in gracefully, put a relational touch to the email, recognizing that professors are not just point keepers but people.

We hope that these rules (or [these](#) [9] and [these](#) [10]) help you understand what most professors want or expect from academic emails. Which brings us back to the larger point: writing effectively does not simply mean following all the rules. Writing effectively means writing as an act of human communication -- shaping your words in light of whom you are writing to and why.

Of course, you won’t actually secure the future of the planet by writing emails with a subject line and some punctuation. But you will help your professors worry about it just a little less.

With wishes for all the best emails in the future,

PTC and CHM

*Paul T. Corrigan and Cameron Hunt McNabb are assistant professors of English at Southeastern University.*

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### Links:

[1] <http://chronicle.com/article/Students-Should-Check-Their/126890/>

[2] <http://collegemisery.blogspot.com/2012/08/it-begins.html>

[3] <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-05-08/what-do-u-s-college-graduates-lack-professionalism>

[4] [https://books.google.com/books?id=EJxy06yX\\_NoC&pg=PA57&ots=UkWWkpaFC&dq=policy%20for%20the%20use%20of%20edited%20standard%20written%20english&pg=PA57#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=EJxy06yX_NoC&pg=PA57&ots=UkWWkpaFC&dq=policy%20for%20the%20use%20of%20edited%20standard%20written%20english&pg=PA57#v=onepage&q&f=false)

[5] <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/625/01/>

[6] <http://writingcommons.org/open-text/writing-processes/think-rhetorically>

[7] [http://www.slate.com/articles/life/education/2014/03/what\\_should\\_students\\_call\\_their\\_college\\_professors.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/education/2014/03/what_should_students_call_their_college_professors.html)

[8] <https://chroniclevitae.com/news/908-dear-student-no-i-won-t-change-the-grade-you-deserve>

[9] <http://web.wellesley.edu/SocialComputing/Netiquette/netiquetteprofessor.html>

[10] <http://www.virginia.edu/cue/urn/how-to-successfully-e-mail-professors.html>

[11] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/teaching-and-learning>

[12] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/views-7>

[13] <https://www.insidehighered.com/tags/faculty>

[14] <https://www.insidehighered.com/taxonomy/term/119>

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