

Professional Email Etiquette in 11 Easy Steps

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In our everyday worlds, we rely almost exclusively upon email as a mode of communication and correspondence. Yet, many graduate students, as well as others who reside in the university community with us, do not understand or appreciate the fundamental uses, and abuses, of email. Further, in many instances, the transmission of email has taken on a kind of rapid-fire shorthand, in which the sender and receiver appear to be shrouded in an unfortunate anonymity, instead of regarded as real people. Knowing the *rules of etiquette* and applying them, *before* you hit the “Send” button, can save you from inadvertent difficulties, embarrassment, and regret.

- 1. Address Email Recipients by Name:** *The highest compliment you can pay to someone is to use his/her name.* Make certain to address the individual to whom you plan to send your email by using his or her name and appropriate title. If the individual is a professor, avoid using the professor’s first name, unless you have a clearly established relationship which permits for this type of informality. In other words, you both have agreed to employ “first” names in your interactions. It is appropriate to use the following: *Dear Dr. Smith; Hello Dr. Smith; Greetings Dr. Smith; Dear Professor Smith*, for example. This information represents the *salutation* of your email – your greeting, and placing it in this manner helps the receiver to understand that he or she is the intended recipient of the email. Do not *imply* the salutation by thinking that the use of an individual’s email address alone suffices or compensates for the lack of a salutation. It doesn’t. An email sent without an appropriate salutation may exert a negative impression and can be likened to a kind of “Hey you,” instead of a more polite address that considers the value of a person’s name – and by extension, that *person*. In communications with faculty, administrators, and staff, it is best to maintain a more formal stance, unless of course, you have an established informal relationship with these individuals: in other words, you both know each other and have encouraged a more informal manner of address.

2. **Identify Yourself and State Briefly Your Intentions:** Your first act of business in the email is to identify yourself and state briefly your intended reason for sending the email. Professors and administrators receive scores of email every day, and from multiple constituencies. Therefore, it is important for you to state briefly the reason for your email:

Dear Dr. Smith,

The purpose of my email is to remind you of our previous meeting on June 2, 2013, when you provided an overview of my Graduate Student Research Grant application. During that meeting, you asked me to re-write the proposal and submit it to you for your final approval. That document is attached.

Dear Dr. Smith,

My name is John Smith, and I am a graduate student in your on-line course, ENG 7888: The 19th Century Novel. I have encountered some difficulty with the course and would like to speak with you about ways that I can be successful. I would appreciate your advice and am interested in scheduling an appointment. Please let me know your availability.

Note the brevity of the information contained in the body of the email. The information is direct, succinct, and it captures in a few sentences 1. the identity of the writer and 2. the purpose of the communication. In both instances, the professor has received all of the information necessary to address the students' requests: A. Review the next draft of a grant proposal; B. Schedule an appointment.

3. **Write a Definitive Subject Heading:** Due to the fact that we all receive numerous email every day, it is important *also* to distinguish the purpose of the email in the subject heading. Recipients may frequently delete email that does not clearly capture the reason for the communication, as provided in the subject heading. In addition, many of us are trained to be on the alert for spam and viruses, and so may delete email without opening it and reading further to decipher the purpose. Therefore, the information in the subject heading is critical in capturing the recipient's attention. Possible subject headings appropriate to the examples in item #2 could read as follows:

Final Draft: Research Grant Proposal – John Smith

Request Appointment: Problems with ENG 7888 – John Smith

4. **Attach Documents:** We all have received email in which the sender refers to an attached document, and then, we discover that the document is not attached or perhaps a document is attached, but it is not the correct document. After you attach a document, take a moment and open up the document, as if *you* were the recipient. Make certain that you have attached the *correct* document and that it opens without difficulty. Read through the document one last time to ensure its integrity and appearance.
5. **Say “Thank You”:** After your email has been completed, make certain to write a brief sentence of gratitude, thanking the recipient for his or her time and assistance. Let’s refer to the examples in Item #2:

Thank you for your time in reviewing my research grant. I look forward to hearing from you.

I look forward to a productive meeting in which we can discuss ways to improve my grades, and I thank you for your time and assistance.

Remember that almost every email that you send represents a request on your part: you are asking for someone’s assistance, clarification, expertise, time, opinion, perspective, etc. A simple acknowledgment clearly signals to the recipient that you are very much aware of this fact.

6. **Include a Valediction or Complimentary Close:** A valediction or complimentary close is a farewell or a way to end a letter or email. When we are engaged in an actual physical conversation with other individuals and notice that it is time to leave, we simply do not walk away. That would be rude. There is a parting ritual, either formally or informally, that we should observe. If we know each other well, we could simply say, “I’ve got to run. See you later!” In a formal context, we might say, “Please excuse me. I have an appointment and need to leave now,” followed by a handshake if we are with individuals that we do not know particularly well. To simply walk away in either setting, formal or informal, would be inappropriate – and impolite. The same holds for an email. Notice that in Item #5, the preludes to the parting rituals are already in place in the two examples provided. This is the beginning of politely withdrawing from the conversation and leaving or concluding your email message. Part of this conclusion or withdrawal concerns the use of words that represent the actual valediction or complimentary close: *sincerely*, *sincerely yours*, *yours truly*, *yours*, *cordially*, *best*, among others. Avoid the use of valedictions that are overblown, elitist, and just plain silly, such as “academically yours,” or “yours in science.”

7. ***Use a Formal Signature and a Professional Email Address:*** Regardless as to whether you are writing email within a formal context or an informal one, it is best to set your computers so that your official signature appears automatically. Nothing is more frustrating than to receive an email from a person who asks you to call her or him, and then does not include a phone number – or one who asks you to send paperwork, an item/object via regular mail and then does not include an address. Make life easy for the recipients of your email by providing all the information they might need in order to better assist you.

See the following example of a Formal Signature:

*Sincerely,
John Smith*

*Graduate Assistant: Department of Mechanical Engineering
Vibration Laboratory
WMU College of Engineering, Parkview Campus/Mail Stop: XXXX
Office: 6. 0000
Cell: 269.000.0000*

Professional Email Address:

Ensure that your email address reflects professionalism: generally, the use of first and last name is appropriate, as is use of lower case: audra.smith@wmich.edu or john.doe@gmail.com. Avoid using email addresses that reflect a “fun and games” type of attitude. Use of playful email addresses is perfectly acceptable within a private context, with family and friends; however, email addresses that reflect frivolity and a carefree sensibility may not resonate positively with potential employers, tenure-track faculty search committees, graduate program admissions committees, and others with whom you are engaged in a strictly professional capacity: 2goodtoBtrue@aol.com; jeannielovesvenice@gmail.com. (These are variants of actual email addresses that I urged students to avoid using in professional contexts.)

8. ***Check Grammar, Mechanics, Tone:*** Make certain that the language used in your email is appropriate to the purpose of sending the email in the first place, and respectful of the person to whom you are sending it. For formal purposes, does the language reflect the right tone? Are there spelling mistakes, mistakes in punctuation or in grammatical usage? Is the language clear, succinct, direct – or muddled, convoluted, and abstruse? Failure to attend to these seemingly minor issues may reflect poorly upon the sender.

9. **Review Your Email Before Sending:** Make certain that your email *reads* the way you want it to read. If you aren't certain, place it in the "draft" category on your computer and let it *cool down* so that you establish some distance between you and your written words, especially if the subject of the email is stressful or upsetting. Then, when you're ready, return to it and review one last time. Are the language and tone polite and professional or are they snarky, disrespectful, angry or hostile? It's clear from the following two examples, which email communication will be the most effective and produce a positive outcome. Consider *yourself* and *your reaction* if you were the **recipient** in each of the following two scenarios:

Example #1: (Unprofessional Communication)

Jane, I've sent email and also called you 2 times now and you still haven't answered. Is something wrong with your phone? Maybe you're on vacation. Anyway, I'm sick and tired of waiting for you to do your job. I need that examination information NOW so that I can take care of my business. You promised it days ago. Send it ASAP! You're not a student and you don't know what we go through.

Example #2: (Professional Communication)

Hello Jane,

I hope that all is well there. I've tried to contact you several times regarding the information that you were going to send so that I could prepare for my examinations next month, but I haven't heard from you. I know how busy it is at this time of year. If you could prepare that information for me, I will make a special trip over to your office and pick up the materials myself so that you don't have to mail them to me. I'm a bit nervous about the upcoming exams, and access to those study guides would really help me a lot.

Please send me an email or call me and let me know a good time to stop by, and if you need me to assist you in compiling the guides, I can do that easily. Professor Smith gave me a complete list of all the titles, and so it should take only a few minutes.

Thank you.

*Sincerely,
John Smith
269.000.0000*

10. Acknowledge Receipt Within 48 Hours: The unwritten rule in business is to try to respond to email within a period of 48 hours (two business days) from the time of receipt, even if you may not necessarily have the exact answer to the sender's question. In that case, the message can be as simple as the following: "*I don't know the answer to your question, but I'll find out and then get back to you as soon as possible.*" And then, deliver what you have promised. Given the scenario in *Item #9*, there is another side to consider. Clearly, the first example indicates the students' mounting frustration with *Jane*, who has failed to send along the information the student has requested on several occasions. It is important to bear in mind the fact that failed communication is a two-way street. As soon as Jane heard from the student, she could *easily* have sent an email or called him to 1. Acknowledge receipt of his request and 2. Make arrangements to provide the requested materials by a specific date. While Jane should not be subjected to rudeness under any circumstances, her failure to communicate with the student – her lapse into silence – sends the unfortunate impression that she doesn't care, when in fact, that may not be the case at all. As soon as Jane received the student's email, she should have responded in the following manner:

Dear John,

I understand that you need the testing materials for your upcoming examinations. They are here in my office and it would be great if you can stop by and pick them up. Our offices are being relocated this week, and in addition to that, one of the office staff was taken seriously ill, and I have had to take over her job. Let me know, and I'll do my best to assist you.

It is very likely that Jane's immediate acknowledgment of the student's needs could have prevented the unpleasant exchange expressed in the scenario in *Item 9*.

11. When Necessary, Use an Alternate Mode of Communication: There may be times when sending an email is simply not the most appropriate mode of communication for your particular needs. Emails that are overly-long and that involve highly-detailed or complex matters may not serve you, or the recipients, in a productive manner. Know when it is best to switch to an actual face-to-face meeting or a phone call, instead, so that business proceeds efficiently.

Closing Thoughts and Quick Tips: Bear in mind that we are living in a day and age when people too often forward our email without our permission, even though we intend our email for a specific recipient only. Remember that you never know just *where* your email will end up or who will have access to it, and under what circumstances. *Before forwarding a person's email to another individual, request permission first. Never write anything that would make you feel ashamed or embarrassed if it were to be seen by other individuals. Never send an email when you are angry or upset. Maintain a professional demeanor in all of your email communications.*