

Communication with Professors and Potential Employers

This handout will help you more effectively communicate via email with professors and future employers. When written without much thought and planning, emails have the potential to harm your relationship with your recipient, often without you ever knowing.

One of the best ways to avoid inadvertently offending superiors is to carefully consider the two most important features of the situation: **audience** and **imposition**.

Who is your audience (the person receiving your email)?

How well do you know this person?

What do you know about this person?

What does s/he *value*?

To what extent are you imposing on your audience's time and energy?

What are you asking your audience to do?

What will it "cost" your audience to do what you're asking?

Five Email Communication Principles

After carefully considering your audience and the imposition of your request, the following five principles will help you craft more effective email.

1. Do not appear to place demands on the audience

- ✓ Acknowledge imposition
- ✓ Use phrasing that softens your requests
- ✓ Acknowledge that your audience can say "no"

☹ "Will you write me a letter of recommendation?"

☺ "I was hoping you could write me a letter of recommendation. "

2. Make it easy for your audience to respond

- ✓ Provide a plan of action when appropriate
- ✓ Show that you've exhausted your other resources
- ✓ Ask specific questions that are easy to respond to

☹ "I want to apply to the job you have listed. What should I do?"

☺ "I'm interested in applying to the assistantship you have listed on your website. Since the listing does not specify, do I need to submit a cover letter as well as a resume?"

3. Show gratitude or apologize when appropriate

- ✓ Use explicit and multiple thank yous
- ✓ Acknowledge any imposition
- ✓ Apologize when appropriate

☹ "I'd like to meet with you to discuss my paper?"

☺ "I know you are extremely busy, but I would be grateful if you could meet with me for 15 minutes to discuss the introduction of my paper?"

4. Put important information early—where your audience is sure to see it

- ✓ Write short but informative subject lines
- ✓ Put the "ask" where your reader will see it
- ✓ Use white space effectively

☹ "Subject: Hello Professor"

☺ "Subject: Requesting a meeting to discuss paper 3"

5. Err on the side of formality

- ✓ Use appropriate titles, greetings, and closings
- ✓ Proofread very closely
- ✓ Pay attention to overall tone

☹ "Hi Miss Smith"

☺ "Dear Jamie Smith"

Example Email Using the Five Email Communication Principles

Subject: Meeting to discuss Friday's class material

Dear Professor Jones,

This is Jamie Smith from your Statistics class. I know you are very busy, but I was hoping you could meet with me for 15 minutes to go over X concept. Unfortunately, I missed class last Friday when we reviewed X because I had to leave town for a family emergency.

I looked at the Canvas materials and got notes from a classmate; however, I'm still having trouble understanding X, and, unfortunately, I have another class during your scheduled office hours.

I'm available M/W from 9a – 12p and Tuesday all afternoon. If you're unable to meet during those times, perhaps you could suggest a time that works for you. Again, I apologize I had to miss class.

Thank you,
Jamie

Phrases for softening imposition

Making a Request

- “Would it be possible for you to...”
- “Would you be willing to...”
- *Mix & match:*
“I was wondering if ... } + { you would...”
“I was hoping that... } you might be able to ...”
“I would appreciate it if ... } you had the chance to...”
“I would be grateful if ... } you could ...”

Acknowledging Time and Effort

- “Sorry to bother you, but ...”
- “Thank you for taking the time to...”
- “I appreciate your help with ...”
- “I apologize for the short notice.”
- “If not ...” (*give an alternative option if they deny*)
- “Whenever it’s convenient for you”
- “When you are available”
- “At the best time for you”

Some Other Good Resources

Politeness (softening requests): <http://blog.harvardcommunications.com/2014/07/30/how-to-be-polite/>

Email Greeting: http://www.businesswritingblog.com/business_writing/2006/01/greetings_and_s.html

Email Sign-offs: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2013/09/27/57-ways-to-sign-off-on-an-email/>