

How to Communicate with Your Professors

Communicating with college professors requires a level of professionalism and courtesy that you may not be used to. Here are ten tips to ensure that your communication is well received.

- 1. Make sure the information is not readily available somewhere else.** There is a t-shirt that says “IT’S IN THE SYLLABUS” because that is an answer to too many student questions. Checking to see if you already have the information shows that you respect your professor’s time. It also demonstrates that you have initiative—the willingness and ability to figure things out for yourself.
- 2. Use a salutation when emailing your professor.** A “salutation” is a formal greeting. Don’t jump right to your point or begin with the words “hey” or “hi.”
- 3. Use your professor’s title.** If your professor has a PhD, they probably prefer to be addressed as “Dr.” If they do not, go with “Professor.” If you are unsure whether or not they have a PhD, use “Professor.” Do not use their first name or the titles “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” or “Ms.” unless your professor has specifically told you that’s what they like to be called.
- 4. Follow the title with their last name.** Your email should begin like this: “Hello Dr. Smith,” or “Dear Professor Jones.” If your professor has specifically told you that you may call them by their first name, then you can begin your email with something like “Dear Rebecca.”
- 5. Err on the side of formality.** In any situation, it is better to be too formal than to be too informal. If you are overly informal, you risk being perceived as rude or ignorant.
- 6. Let your professor know which class and section you are in.** Example: “I am writing with a question about ENG100-02.” You can also include this information in the subject line of your email.
- 7. Get to your point quickly and clearly.** Example: “You mentioned in class a YouTube video that was relevant to our reading. Could you share the link with me?”
- 8. If you are angry or upset, take a beat.** It is possible that you misunderstood something, that you are incorrect about a situation, or that there was an honest mistake. Approach emotionally charged communication from a place of inquiry, not accusation.
- 9. Remember that emails travel.** Anything you write in any email to any person can—and most likely will—be forwarded to others. Do not write anything that you don’t want to be seen by a wide audience. Since tone is so easily misinterpreted in electronic communication, be extra polite.
- 10. End well.** At the end of your email, thank your professor. You can also include a pleasantry such as “I hope you have a nice afternoon.” Generally, you will need something from your professor—if not at the time of this particular email, at some time in the future. To give some examples, you might need an extension, information, extra help, or a reference. In any situation, it never hurts to build *social capital*. Social capital can be thought of as goodwill placed into a bank account. If you take the little bit of extra time and care it requires to communicate in a friendly and respectful way, you are making a deposit of goodwill that you can draw upon down the road. You are also practicing professional communication that will be an asset to you in your future employment.