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### How to Write an Email

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# How to Write an Email

By Professor Joan Robinson, The City College of New York

I strongly suggest that you email in a professional manner. Below you will find examples of email styles: best practices (most formal), acceptable, and unacceptable (unprofessional).

Part of my job is to socialize you into the email etiquette that will help you succeed in a professional environment. I cannot count the hundreds of emails I have received from both Columbia University and CUNY students that are completely unacceptable in terms of formality and grammar. I worry that students send similar emails to employers and prospective employers that prevent them from getting the promotion or job that they want. Let your brilliance shine through. Don't let them deny you that position because you don't know how to write an email!

## a. Best practices / most formal:

- Subject: "SOC 322: Question about \_\_\_\_\_"
- Opening: "Dear Professor Robinson," "Dear Prof. Robinson," "Dear Dr. Robinson,"
- Body: "I am writing to ask for clarification about the OpEd assignment." "I am writing to let you know that I will be late due to train trouble." "I am writing to ask for an extension due to a family emergency (see attached document from the ER)." "I read this amazing article in the *Times* about reproduction. Did you see it? Here's the link."
- Closing: "Best, Gloria Gomez" "All my best, Steve Wade" "Sincerely, Elaine Cho"

## b. Acceptable:

- Subject: "Gender and Reproduction: Question about \_\_\_\_\_"
- Opening: "Hi Professor," "Hi Dr. Robinson,"
- Body: "Could you explain the OpEd assignment again?" "I'll be late." "I found this article that I think you'd like :)"
- Closing: "Steve Wade" (just your full name with no "Best," "Sincerely," etc.)

## c. Unacceptable / unprofessional:

- No opening and/or no closing, lack of or overuse of punctuation, lack of or overuse of capitalization, use of emojis, and/or informality. Ours is a professional relationship, and email is not text messaging!
- Subject: "URGENT: Question about \_\_\_\_\_," or doesn't give a clue what the body of the email is about (that is the point of the subject line). If there is something urgent, call 911 or your lawyer. Nothing related to my class is urgent.
- Opening: "Hi," "Hey," (without using my name), "hey prof," "hi Robinson, professor,"
- Body: "i like ur class its gr8 but hey u give 2 much reading how bout you give less ;) jk its cool" "CAN YOU GIVE ME AN EXTENSION?????" Use all caps sparingly and judiciously (if ever) because it is interpreted by the reader as yelling.
- Closing: Just your first name is not enough. I probably know other people with your same name. Even worse are the countless emails I receive with no signature. No signature at all!

Example of best practices / most formal:

[subject] IAS3158: Question about Assignment 1

Dear Professor Robinson,

I'm writing to get some clarification on Assignment 1. I'm planning to take my kids to see the new Dora movie this weekend. The assignment says we should visit a children's store or a tv show. Would the movie be an acceptable alternative? Thank you for your guidance.

Best,  
Sonia Rodriguez

Examples of unacceptable / unprofessional: (If you think these are exaggerations you are sorely mistaken.)

[subject] dear professor

hey Robinson professor ,

i was just wondering about the assignment you see i was going to the dora movie with my kids and i dont know about the assignment let me know wha tyou think thanks Robinson  
this is jaime

[subject] *Left completely empty!*

how about the dora movie for assignment 1 . . ?

*No signature!*

Robinson's Email Etiquette by Professor Joan Robinson, The City College of New York, 2020; Contact: [jrobinson1@ccny.cuny.edu](mailto:jrobinson1@ccny.cuny.edu)



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