

EMAILING YOUR PROFESSORS

Academic Email = Professional Email

It's just an email, right? Yes, but it's an *academic* email. And that means it's professional email, not personal email.

A key element of writing effectively (and that's a big part of what we teach) is learning to change your writing style to be appropriate to the needs and conventions of diverse situations and genres. Academic email is one such genre. The tips and tricks and conventions listed here should serve you in good stead as a foundation for other kinds of formal communication both during and after university. Most importantly, academic email done right is great preparation for business and other professional emails.

So what are those conventions? And why do they matter?

Let's start with why they matter.

First, many "digital native" students approach email, texting, tweeting, online comments, etc., as more or less a single genre, i.e. online/digital communication. Though we're not luddite fuddy-duddies (yet), most university faculty and staff treat email as something combining digital communication with some of the conventions of a business and/or personal letter. In the one case, informality, brevity, directness, etc., are the appropriate genre conventions. In the other, those very same writing strategies risks off-putting or offending your reader. Good writing shouldn't do that. So don't.

Second, Japan generally expects a higher level of formality than many international students are accustomed to. Part of living in Japan is adjusting to these expectations. So raising your base level of formality a bit is similar to the way that good writers fine tune their writing to their audience and genre.

Rules and Conventions of Academic Email

Here are a few easy rules, followed by a template:

1. **Use a clear, descriptive subject line.** Including your **name** and the **class** you're writing about, if appropriate, is always a good idea.
2. **Use a salutation and signoff/signature.**
 - For a **salutation**, try "Dear Professor X" (see what I did there?) to start. As you become more acquainted with an individual professor's preferences and personality, you'll find that some of us respond just fine to "Dear Professor," and even "Professor X." For administrative staff, "Dear Mr./Ms. Surname" works. Oh, and get the names right. More on this below.
 - Nobody cares if your email is sent from your iPhone (seriously, this applies to more than just academic email). "Best," "Sincerely," etc., plus your name make better **signoffs**. "Thank you" can work nicely, too. Just be careful when using this with a request; it can sound presumptuous.
 - Really, this is all about treating each other with **respect** as human beings and as your professors, helpful administrative staff, etc. That's why it's also helpful to start off with a "Hope you're enjoying your weekend," or "Hope you're enjoying the cooler temperatures." We're not, because we have no weekends and never go outside. But it's nice to know you're thinking of us, even if it's just a formality. **Form** is important.
3. **Address your professor by her/his surname/family name** unless you've explicitly asked permission to do otherwise (and be mindful that even in this case, your professor may see conversation and email as different, so be careful). Get that name right, too. Please don't misspell my name. Please don't abbreviate it.

4. **Check your grammar and spelling.** Think of emailing a professor as a formal writing task. Homework, if that helps. **Editing** is key. Go back over the email once before hitting Send.
5. **Do the work.** Is the answer to your question in the syllabus? Does a classmate know?
6. **Do the work.** Don't email the night before for an extension. Don't demand help, a better grade, or an ice cream. Don't rant, whine, or go on endlessly.
7. **Questions and appointment requests** are best accompanied with a prioritized list of time suggestions. For example, you might **list times** that you (a) prefer, (b) are available, and (c) can possibly make it if (a) and (b) don't work for your professor. This is another way of saying, "Do the work."
8. **Following up** is appropriate if you haven't received a reply after several days (for an urgent matter) or a week. We all need gentle reminders sometimes. But remember that this is not Line, Snapchat, Facebook, etc., where response times are expected to be instantaneous at the very latest.
9. **Other considerations.**
 - These rules apply even if your professor breaks them. An email "conversation" (a flurry of emails back and forth on a single subject) doesn't necessarily require you to have a proper salutation and signature, but the other rules still apply.
 - Also, check your email at least daily. And if it's from a professor or university staff member, read it. It's usually important and often time sensitive. And don't just read it, respond. Please.

Template / Example

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Subject:

From [Your Name] re/ [few words describing the content of your email]

Body:

Dear Professor [Surname],

Hope you're [well / enjoying the cooler weather / surviving the heat / not overwhelmed by work / not stuck in a committee meeting].

This is [Your Name] from [Your Class], which meets on [Mon-Fri].

I am writing to [state your purpose clearly and succinctly].

I [what you have done about the issue].

Could you please [what is it that you want us to do?]

Sincerely,

Best Student Ever, III

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Of course, you will have to adapt this to suit your needs. For example, you won't need to introduce yourself to us (maybe to your other professors), but you should still mention which class you're emailing about if you're taking more than one. In any case, this template is intended as a starting point for communicating clearly and appropriately with your professors both in JACS

and beyond. In turn, that's a good start on formal written communication for the workplace.

Sources:

- <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2015/04/16/advice-students-so-they-dont-sound-silly-emails-essay>
- <https://medium.com/@lportwoodstacer/how-to-email-your-professor-without-being-annoying-af-cf64ae0e4087>