

E-Mail Etiquette: How Not to Communicate with Your Professor

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From: student@college.edu

Sent: Tuesday, January 27, 2009, 11:42 A.M.

To: professor@college.edu

Subject: hey

hey, sorry i missed class today . . . i had a little too much fun last nite had a rough time waking up;) can you E-mail me your teaching notes ASAP? Tnx.

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E-mails, when used effectively, are a valuable educational tool. They allow college students to ask questions outside of class and let professors provide instant feedback, making instructors more accessible than ever before. And while that's a great thing, many professors are complaining that some student e-mails are getting out of control—they're written informally, address inappropriate subject matter, or are outrageously demanding. The sample e-mail reprinted here manages to be all three at once: it hits the trifecta of communication incompetence.

Informal

An e-mail to your professor isn't like posting something on your friend's Face-book wall; different communication contexts carry different expectations. Your message should be formal. It should open with a salutation ("Dear Professor Smith") and close with a proper signature ("Best, Kate" or "Thanks in advance, Jacob"). The rules of grammar, spelling, and capitalization all apply. There should be a clear subject line that should be appropriate to the content of the e-mail (otherwise, your professor may reject your e-mail as spam).

Inappropriate

The e-mail shown here is wholly inappropriate for student-professor correspondence. There's a halfhearted attempt at an apology and a thinly veiled reference to being hung-over on the day of class. Here, as with any communication, it's important to analyze your audience. There are some things you can say to your friends that you shouldn't say to your professor. Review your draft before you send it; if you think you've written something that you think might offend your audience, take it out!

Demanding

Many professors complain that student e-mails are becoming increasingly pushy in tone. Recipients of poor grades send nasty notes, absent students demand teaching notes, and many students send more than ten e-mails a day, expecting their professors to be available around the clock. This is partly due to the fact that the impersonality of e-mail makes it easier to act rudely; students are demanding things via e-mail that they wouldn't have the gall to demand in face-to-face interactions. But that, of course, is no excuse.

Some guidelines:

- don't clutter inboxes with a barrage of requests, and give recipients plenty of time to respond.
- Use the tools that your professor has provided, such as course syllabus, assignment sheets, or notes posted on a Web site; you may find that you already have what you need.
- And if you skipped class, don't ask your professor what you missed; that's what classmates are for.