

## EFFECTIVE EMAIL COMMUNICATION IN AN INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC CONTEXT

Email is a brilliant medium for communication. It's instant, it's free and it's accessible from anywhere in the world. But it's precisely this ease of accessibility that also makes email problematic as an effective method of communication...

- ✓ There are several professorial chairs and university staff that are literally inundated with **hundreds of emails a day**.
- ✓ Modern students are also not immune to the horrors of **information overload** in their inbox.
- ✓ Unlike formal letters that follow clear conventions of style, there are **no fixed definitions of appropriate language** and terms of address in email.
- ✓ In international academia, the potential for miscommunication is further complicated by **differing cultural expectations** and **disparities in levels of language competency**.

Bearing these common difficulties in mind, it is worth pausing for a moment before you "**just shoot off a quick email**".

As well as some commonsense Dos and Don'ts to email communication, you'll also find a short style guide at the end of this leaflet that contains some standard phrases in English as suggestions for keeping email communication **on target**.



### The 5 Golden Rules of email communication:

Identify yourself!

Address your recipient!

Get to the point!

State your priorities!

But above all, **think like your recipient!**

## Golden Rule 1: Identify yourself!

University mail is often clunky in comparison to commercial email providers, staff and students alike are known to default to using their personal email account, even for university-related correspondence.

But before you send a mail from your personal account, consider how this could come across to your recipient and how this may impede their ability to understand who you are and what you want from them.

### Ask yourself: Do I look professional?

- An email address that doesn't sound serious or professional is likely to land in the spam folder.
- Remember that emails may be monitored by secretarial staff who don't know students personally at all.

### Ask yourself: Can the recipient identify me?

- This is especially important to consider when emailing support departments who do not know individual students – your 2-line email reserving a projector can end up turning into an arduous thread just trying to establish who you are.
- Even teaching staff who may know you in class may not remember all their students by name, or rather, which course/module/year/program each student attends.



If you use your **official university email address**, the recipient can always look you up in the relevant directory, even if they don't know who you are personally.

Make use of the **subject line** to help identify you (and your issue) amongst the other people likely to be sending emails.

Not everyone is good at remembering names – make sure you **identify yourself** by the relevant course/module/year/project right at the start of your mail.



## Golden Rule 2: Address your recipient!

### Before starting any mail with the words "Dear all," Stop!

Tempting as it may be, writing one long email to a disparate group of recipients is very rarely efficient.

For recipients of a long email, where the majority of the content is irrelevant to them, this is simply not a **productive communication method**. The danger is that the few new or relevant items of information are likely to be overlooked in the general email noise.

Avoid starting a **discussion thread in email** – the danger of **missing something important** and the chances for **misunderstandings** are high.

Try to have some understanding for your recipients who may **receive several hundreds of mails a day** from other sources.



**Try thinking of it this way:** If you can't address every recipient by name, you've created a mailing list rather than an email thread.

Mailing lists do have important uses but are just not suitable for 2-way communication or any sort of discussion thread.



## Ask yourself:

What is it I want from each recipient on this list?

If a recipient is not expected to act on this mail, why are they receiving this mail in the first place?

Is what I want from each recipient clear to each and every one of them?

Is what I want from them actually compatible with what I want from the others on this list?

## FREQUENT INBOX OFFENDERS:

1. **For Approval:** The group thread that includes people in a supervisory role in the hope that they will a) monitor the discussion and b) jump in when required to **provide instant approval/rejection**.

**Instead, take control of the communication!**

- Restrict any **discussions to active participants**.
- Choose one person from the group to forward the relevant mails to your supervisor **for action**.

2. **For Your Information:** The group thread that **tries to keep everyone in the loop** – even on aspects that don't relate to them at all. Again, this tends to generate so many mails that recipients just can't keep up and frequently don't understand enough of the content in the thread to be able to follow, even if they wanted to.

There are, however, some **important exceptions** where group emails can really support remote communication:

- **Meeting Agendas and Minutes:**  
A summary of issues in advance or following a meeting as a written record and overview.
  - **To-Do List and Action Items:**  
As a written summary of issues previously discussed and now requiring implementation.
  - **For Your Records:**  
When the recipient needs to retain a copy of the email exchange for their archives. This is the exception where using CC for someone who is not an active participant in the thread actually makes sense.
- Always consult the recipient before adding them to the CC field of an ongoing thread.

**danger!**  
**Exceptions!**

## Choosing the appropriate salutation in academia is something that many find difficult.

In an international setting there is also the additional complication of differing cultural and linguistic norms to consider – every country has their own conventions for formal written styles. Conventions for terms of address differ, not only from country to country and generation to generation, but also between institutions and departments. Therefore expectations of standard norms for greeting academics, students and fellow professionals/colleagues will be colored by past personal experiences.

For example:

- In some countries (Poland included), "professor" may be used as a term of address for any university lecturer regardless of their actual academic title.
- Many languages have politeness rules about how to talk about a third person (this is especially true of Polish). It is therefore not unusual to see: "Prof. dr. hab. Xxx's office hours are ..." – however you would never greet this professor in such a long-winded way.



## When choosing terms of address in email

Remember that based on our own culture, we will all have different expectations of what is "standard".

Focus your attention instead on being and appearing **professional** and you'll find an appropriate tone will come naturally.



## Greeting

- "Dear Xxx," is the standard greeting in English and has the advantage that it is equally appropriate for people who you address by either their first name or surname.
- "Hello Xxx," and even "Hi Xxx," are acceptable in email as short, informal greetings – assuming the name and title is correct they are still perfectly polite, albeit colloquial, forms of address. As a rule of thumb: if the recipient is someone you would not speak to using colloquial language in person, then don't do so in email.

## Name

- Always address the recipient by name, even if in a 1-line reply.
- Take care to spell names correctly, this is something many people are sensitive about.
- Check previous correspondence for a signature, this will indicate how the person wishes to be addressed.

## Title

- You can and should always check the recipient's academic qualifications online.
- "Dr" and "Prof" are terms of address, so it is incorrect to omit these in a salutation to anyone that you address by surname who has these academic qualifications.
- English does not differentiate between female and male doctors or professors (i.e. "Dear Prof. Mrs X," or "Dear Mrs Prof. X," is not grammatically correct).
- In English there is no need to chain academic qualifications in your greeting (i.e. "Dear Prof. Dr. X," is unnecessary) – just use the highest qualification (i.e. "Dear Prof. X,").
- Although British English still differentiates between "Mrs" (for married) and "Miss" (for unmarried) women, this is dying out in professional correspondence as you are unlikely to be able to check whether a female colleague is using their married name or not. Using "Ms" has therefore become a standard salutation in English when addressing a female by surname (without an academic title).

## Golden Rule 3: Get to the point!

**Use smart subject lines:** Imagine you are competing against 50 other unread mails. Take the time to edit subject lines to something meaningful. Even if you are just replying to a preexisting thread, you'll thank yourself later!

- Subject lines should be meaningful to the recipient rather than the sender.
- Avoid generic expressions such as "My examination" or "Assignment deadline".

**Keep it simple:** We are all communicating in the international language of academic English with various levels of language competency. Email is a communication medium of convenience rather than eloquence – so, focus your energy on taking as little time as possible from your recipient.

- Get a second opinion from a lay person!

Ask a friend or family member to act as a sounding board. Even if the details are too specific for her, if your grandma understands what the AIM of your mail is, then your professor certainly will!



**Keep it concise:** Many people check their mail on a smartphone, the recipient should be able to classify and prioritize your mail without scrolling through the message details.

- If you can't clearly define the aim of your mail in 2 sentences, you are unlikely to get the clarification you need in response.
- Consider asking for an appointment to discuss/explain the issue instead.

However, what this mail relates to and how urgent it is, should be clear to the recipient in within the space of a phone screen.



Of course, that doesn't mean that the body of the message can't be longer than 2 sentences!



## Golden Rule 4: State your priorities!

Understandably, many students feel uncomfortable setting a deadline to a professor whom they are essentially asking for a favor. However, being direct is necessary to avoid misunderstandings when communicating remotely. It may help you to think that being direct is a way of taking less of your reader's time.

- ✓ If you need a response from the recipient make sure this is unambiguously stated in your mail:  
e.g. "If you could let me know your thoughts...", "If you could confirm back to me..."
- ✓ If you do have a deadline by when you need something, tell the recipient so directly, to avoid misunderstandings:  
e.g. "If you could let me know by xx, I would be very grateful..."



It may help overcome inhibitions in communicating with superiors if you set yourself the following goals:

1. To communicate your expectations with the aim of **avoiding future misunderstandings**.
2. To try to **take as little time from the recipient** as possible.
3. To assist the recipient in prioritizing their reply by **giving a realistic sense of the urgency** of your request.

Remember, there are ways of communicating deadline information that are both professional and respectful, here are some phrases you may find useful:

### **FYI (For Your Information):**

- If you are not expecting an reply, make sure that is clear from your message.
- You can even add "FYI only" to the subject line.

### **Please could I ask you to confirm...**

- A polite and clear request.

### **If you could get back to me...**

### **If you could confirm back to me...**

### **If you could let me know by xx, I would be very grateful...**

### **If you could let me know your thoughts on this matter...**

- As examples of polite and respectful ways of making the urgency of your request clear to the recipient.

For more English-language advice, check out the British Council's web resource on email writing: <http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/english-emails>

## Golden Rule 5: Think like your recipient!

Email is a communication medium of convenience.

Rather than attempting eloquence of style or worrying about etiquette rules that might not be applicable, focus your attention on the perspective of the reader.

In this way you will take up as little time and effort from them as possible, and ensure you receive a quicker response.

- **Be concise:** Imagine this message is being read on a phone screen.
- **Be direct:** Imagine this message as vying for attention with 50 other unread messages in your recipient's inbox.
- **Be clear:** Ask yourself what your aim is in writing this message.  
Ask a friend or family member to check if they understood this aim (even if they don't understand the details of the content).
- **Be professional:** Many students get very concerned about style and politeness in email, if you focus on addressing the recipient as a professional, you'll find that you can still be polite regardless of the informal nature inherent in email.

### Email phrasing that is best avoided:

#### ▪ **At your earliest convenience...**

This phrase is no longer in common use in English, precisely due to the likelihood for misunderstanding. It originally was used as a polite way of saying "as soon as possible", however many people understand it to mean "whenever is convenient to you", the potential for misunderstanding is great, depending on how you understand or were taught this phrase, so it really is best avoided.

#### ▪ **Redundant repetitions**

Many people tend to reinforce important points in written language by using synonyms and repetitions (this seems to be especially true of Polish speakers).

For example: "...must provide up-to-date and accurate information..."  
or "... to ensure impartiality and neutrality..."

However, in email, where the aim is to express your message as concisely and precisely as possible, redundant repetitions should be avoided.

### Useful standard professional phrases:

#### **Opening lines:**

- I am writing to inform you of/that...
- I am writing to request/confirm...
- Please find attached...

#### **Expressing something negative:**

- I regret to inform you that...
- Unfortunately I am unable to...

#### **Making a request/setting a deadline:**

- Please could I ask you to confirm...
- If you could get back to me by xxx, I would be very grateful.

#### **Standard closing lines:**

- Many thanks in advance.
- Many thanks for your understanding.
- Thanks in advance for your support.