

How to write an email

Tips to help you with university and the rest of your life.

by Jonathan Newton

Why is this important?

- Most situations in life require a certain level of decorum.
- Failure to adhere to appropriate convention can make you look lazy, careless and disrespectful.
- Getting some simple things right can improve your chances at getting jobs, improve your reputation as a polite and careful person and make people think that they should listen to what you have to say.

Starting an email – *Dear X*

Imagine that you are emailing somebody with whom you do not have a history of interaction.

Say this person is “Mr John Smith”.

- Always begin your email with “Dear Mr Smith”.
- Do NOT begin your email with “Hi Mr Smith”, “Hello Mr Smith”, or just “Hi” or “Hello”.

Starting an email – *Mr, Mrs...*

- Try to find the correct title with which to address the person to whom you are writing.
- In everyday life, I would recommend “**Mr**” when writing to a man and “**Ms**” when writing to a woman.
- It is also possible to address married women as “**Mrs**” and unmarried women as “**Miss**”, but if you do not know your correspondent well, do not guess.

Starting an email – *Dr, Prof...*

- In a university environment, there are a lot of doctors and professors around.
- If somebody has a PhD degree or is a medical doctor, you may address them as “**Dr**”. For example, “**Dr Smith**”. Some people with PhD degrees prefer this to “Mr” or “Ms”.
- If someone is employed by a university in a professorial position, you may address them as “**Prof.**”, e.g. “**Prof. Smith**”.

Starting an email – *Dr, Prof...*

- To be safe, my recommendation would be to address a university lecturer as “**Prof.**”, unless you know that he or she is a graduate student, in which case “**Mr**” or “**Ms**” is appropriate.
- **Example.** The lecturer for your course is John Smith. You should start your email with “**Dear Prof. Smith**”.
- **Example.** The teaching assistant for your course, John Smith, said that he is a graduate student. You should start your email with “**Dear Mr Smith**”.

Tip for experts

- It is typical in British English to omit any full stop from “Mr”, “Ms”, “Dr” and so on. This is because the last letter of the abbreviated word is included. Therefore, “Mr Smith”.
- In American English it is common to include a full stop. For example, “Mr. Smith”.
- Use whichever you prefer.
- For “Prof.”, the last letters of the word “Professor” are omitted, so a full stop is always included. For example, “Prof. Smith”.

Continuing an email

- After the greeting, it is good practice to include a friendly line before getting down to the main business of your email.

- For example,

Dear Mr Smith,

It was with great pleasure that I read your email informing me about the new contract.

- Or....

Dear Mr Smith,

Thank you kindly for your email dated 5th March.

Continuing an email

- Or...

Dear Prof. Smith,

I am a student in your “Introduction to Economics” class, which I find enjoyable and interesting.

- Or....

Dear Ms Smith,

Thank you kindly for your email related to parking ticket number 5X456 issued on the 5th March 2019.

Getting to the point

- Then get to the main topic of your email.

Dear Prof. Smith,

I am a student in your “Introduction to Economics” class, which I find enjoyable and interesting.

Unfortunately, my course registration has not yet been processed. Consequently, I am unable to access the problem sets on the PandA website. Is there any other way in which I can obtain access to the material?

Just before finishing...

- A final word of thanks is typically advisable.

Dear Prof. Smith,

I am a student in your “Introduction to Economics” class, which I find enjoyable and interesting.

Unfortunately, my course registration has not yet been processed. Consequently, I am unable to access the problem sets on the PandA website. Is there any other way in which I can obtain access to the material?

Thank you in advance for any help you can offer in this matter.

Finishing.

- If you know the name of your addressee, use “Yours sincerely”.

Dear Prof. Smith,

I am a student in your “Introduction to Economics” class, which I find enjoyable and interesting.

Unfortunately, my course registration has not yet been processed. Consequently, I am unable to access the problem sets on the PandA website. Is there any other way in which I can obtain access to the material?

Thank you in advance for any help you can offer in this matter.

Sincerely yours,

Alice Carroll.

Finishing.

- If you do not know the name of your addressee, use “Yours faithfully”.

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you kindly for your email related to parking ticket number 5X456 issued on the 5th March 2019.

However, on the date in question, I was in France, driving the vehicle in question and therefore there must be an error regarding the issuance of this ticket.

Thank you in advance for any help you can offer in this matter.

Yours faithfully,

Alice Carroll.

Becoming more casual – *Dear John*

- After some interaction, it is often acceptable to become more casual in starting the email.
- A good clue is when someone finishes an email to you with just their given name. For example, you receive an email from John Smith which he signs

*All the best,
John*

- It may be okay to start your next email with “Dear John”.

Becoming more casual – *Dear John*

- However, use your instincts here. Sometimes writing “Dear John” will just feel wrong. After all, maybe John Smith is a Nobel Prize winner in Physics and you feel his position demands a measure of respect. In this case feel free to continue to address him as “**Dear Prof. Smith**”.
- **If in doubt, always choose formal address rather than informal.**
- Even if you usually use “Dear John”, if you write an email in which there are other recipients (i.e. CC), it may be appropriate to switch to “Dear Prof. Smith” in this case.

Even more casual – *Hi*

- If you frequently go to lunch with John Smith or interact with him frequently on given name terms, then it may be acceptable to start your emails to him with “Hi John”.
- However, when you interact with John regarding a formal matter, I again recommend that you switch to “Dear John” or “Dear Prof. Smith”.

Becoming more casual – *All the best*

- After some interaction with a correspondent, it is perfectly acceptable to end an email with the slightly less formal

All the best,
Alice

Or

Kind regards,
Alice

Similarly, “Best regards” or just “Yours”.

Even more casual – *Ta!*

- Again, if you frequently interact with John Smith on a **very** friendly basis, it can be acceptable to end an email very informally. For example,

Cheers,
Alice

- Similarly, “Cheerio”, “Ta” or “Take care”.
- Never use these when speaking to someone who has significantly higher status than yourself, unless on extremely friendly terms.

False friendliness

- Some people may think that the premise of this guide is old fashioned.
- Be aware that sometimes people like to pretend to be on friendlier terms than they really are. If you interact with such a person who is your boss in some respect, you may be pushed towards addressing them as if you are closer than you actually are.
- However, in general, it is a good idea to address strangers, colleagues and clients in a different way to how you address friends and lovers.
- The language you use will grow and change with each relationship.