

# Orange Crate Art

"check your local listings"

Monday, January 10, 2005

## How to e-mail a professor

[Welcome, lifehack.org, Lifehacker, and 43 Folders readers. Welcome, PhinisheD and ScienceBlogs readers. Welcome, HackCollege readers. Welcome, everybody.]

I've read enough e-mails to know that many college students could benefit from some guidelines for writing an e-mail to a professor. Here they are:

**Write from your college or university e-mail account.** That immediately lets your professor see that your e-mail is legitimate and not spam. The cryptic or cutesy or salacious personal e-mail address that might be okay when you send an e-mail to a friend is not appropriate when you're writing to a professor.

**Include the course number in your subject line.** "Question about 3009 assignment" is clear and sounds genuine, while "a question" looks like spam. "Question about English assignment" or "question about assignment," without identifying the class you're in, may leave your professor with the chore of figuring that out. For someone teaching large lecture classes, that might mean reading through hundreds of names on rosters. But even for a professor with smaller classes, it's a drag to get an e-mail that merely says "I'm in your English class and need the assignment." All your English professor's classes are English classes; she or he still needs to know which one is yours.

Consider, in light of this advice, the following examples:

An e-mail from "qtpie2005" with the subject line "question."

An e-mail from a university account with the subject line "question about English 2011 essay."



Michael Leddy

"Orange Crate Art" is a song by Van Dyke Parks and the title of a 1995 album by Van Dyke Parks and Brian Wilson. It is, to my mind, one of the great American songs: "Orange crate art was a place to start." Comments are welcome, appended to posts or by [e-mail](#).

Blogger's built-in search (top left) is often broken. Use the search box below.

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Which one looks legitimate? Which one looks like spam?

**Think about what you're saying.** Most students are not accustomed to writing to their professors. Here are some ways to do it well:

**Choose an appropriate greeting.** "Hi/Hello Professor [Blank]" is always appropriate. Substitute "Dear" and you've ended up writing a letter; leave out "Hi" and your tone is too brusque.

**Avoid rote apologies for missing class.** Most professors are tired of hearing those standard apologies and acts of contrition. If you missed class because of some especially serious or sad circumstances, it might be better to mention that in person than in an e-mail.

**Ask politely.** "Could you e-mail me the page numbers for the next reading? Thanks!" is a lot better than "I need the assignment."

**Proofread what you've written.** You want your e-mail to show you in the best possible light.

**Sign with your full name, course number, and meeting time.**

Maggie Simpson  
English 3703, MWF 10:00

Signing is an obvious courtesy, and it eliminates the need for stilted self-identification ("I am a student in your such-and-such class").

One don't, and one last do:

**Don't send unexpected attachments.** It's bad form. Attaching an essay with a request that your professor look it over is very bad form. Arrange to meet your professor during office hours or by appointment instead. It's especially bad form to send an e-mail that says "I won't be in class today," with a paper or some other coursework attached. Think about it: Your professor is supposed to print out your essay because you're not coming to class?

**When you get a reply, say thanks.** Just hit Reply and say "Thanks," or a little bit more if that's appropriate. The old subject line (which will now have a "Re:" in front) will make the context clear. I don't think that you need to include a greeting with a short reply, at least not if you refer to your professor in your reply. And you don't need to identify yourself by course number and meeting time again.

Many e-mail messages end up never reaching their intended recipients, for reasons of human and technological error, so it's always appropriate to acknowledge that someone's message got through. It's also plain courtesy to say thanks. (Your professor will remember it too.) When you reply, you should delete almost everything of your professor's reply (quoting everything is rarely appropriate in e-mail). Leave just enough to make the original context clear.

So what would a good e-mail to a professor look like?

Hi Professor Leddy,

I'm working on my essay on William Carlos Williams and I'm not sure what to make of the last stanza of "Spring and All." I'm stuck trying to figure out what "It" is. Do you have a suggestion? Thanks!

Maggie Simpson  
Eng 3703, MWF 10:00

And a subsequent note of thanks:

> "It" is most likely spring, or life itself. But have you  
> looked up "quicken"? That'll probably make  
> "It" much clearer.

It sure did. Thanks for your help, Professor.

Maggie Simpson

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[How to talk to a professor](#)

[How to unstuff a sentence](#)

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And for professors:

[How to e-mail a student](#)

And if you want to read the most recent posts on Orange Crate Art, here's the [front page](#).

[Some further thoughts: I'm astonished by the amount of interest in this post--over 1,600 visits in the past two days. Then again, there really isn't anything very similar on-line--or if there is, I haven't found it--so if what I've written is useful, well, I'm happy.]

My one purpose in writing these guidelines was to help college students write to their professors with greater ease and maturity and a better sense of audience (instead of "i am a student in your class"). They're guidelines for writing to *a professor*, any professor, in the absence of other

guidelines. And they're meant to keep the e-mailer in the high esteem of any professor to whom he or she is writing.

Most of the reasoning behind the guidelines is omitted for concision. But I'll elaborate a little here. Why, for instance, write from a university account? A professor filtering spam will almost certainly also have a filter to okay mail from addresses from her or his "edu." So if you want your mail to get through, an "edu" account is a smart choice. Many schools require students to use those accounts for official school business already. Writing from an appropriate address is smart practice for the future too. (I always say something when I see a tacky or juvenile e-mail address on an otherwise polished student résumé.)

Why say "Hi/Hello Professor [Blank]?" Well, what should a student call a professor? Some people like "Doctor"; some don't. Some people don't have a doctorate. Some people don't explain any of that to students. There was a great piece in the *Chronicle* about this subject not long ago--["What Should We Call the Professor?"](#) *Professor*, in the absence of any other guidelines, seems like a good choice.

Having received many telegraphic one-sentence e-mails, often with no greeting, no thank-you, and no signature, I find them weirdly depersonalized: "I need the assignment." I do think a question is better, better even than a polite "Please send the assignment," because the question is more conversational, more human. (But if a student e-mails me and says "I need the assignment," I send it.)

Why sign with your name, class, and meeting time? It's a courtesy, yes, but it also avoids the awkward "My name is . . . , and I am a student in your such-and-such class," all of which is taken care of in the signature. It occurs to me that "My name is . . . , and I am a student in . . ." is telling evidence of the unfamiliarity of e-mail as a way for students to communicate with professors.

I appreciate the point several commenters have made about a follow-up thank-you being unneeded. Still, a lot of e-mail doesn't get through, and the follow-up, to my mind, closes the loop. Many people do a follow-up by using the subject line to say thanks, often followed by the abbreviation "eom" (end of message). That seemed to me too arcane to recommend. But I do like the idea of closing the loop by saying yes, I got it, thanks.

I hope that this post leads to much more talking on the part of professors and students about communicating by e-mail. [All reports from the business world](#) point to enormous problems of clarity, correctness, and decorum with e-mail writing. Maybe things can start to get better in college.

Added September 30, 2005; revised October 29, 2005.]

By Michael Leddy at [11:45 AM](#)

<http://mleddy.blogspot.com/2005/01/how-to-e-mail-professor.html>