

Email etiquette

This is a brief recommendation on how to write emails in an academic and school environment. It expresses my personal opinion, based on several years of experience in writing and reading emails. You may browse the internet to see other recommendations to get more diverse opinions.

I am always happy if I get an email from you, and I don't mind the format, missstypes or mystakes. Take the following advice as a practice for the future - eventually, once you will need to write an English email to some of your advisors, colleagues, or researcher with whom you are going to have some cooperation. Let's use our email communication as a practice of good habits in writing formal English emails.

The email has a structure - it is not a Facebook message

An important note at the beginning: email is not a Line or Messenger message. It has a conventional structure, with **the salutation, email body, signing off and signature**. You don't need to be that formal if you just reply to another email and the reply is short, but it's always better to be a little more formal at the beginning of the conversation to make a positive impression.

1) Salutation

Note: before you write to a person, make sure what is her/his given name (first name) and what is the surname (family name, last name). This may not always be obvious. My given name is David and my surname is Zeleny, written as David Zeleny (the given/first name comes first, and surname/family/last name comes second). In Taiwan, especially if written in Chinese, names starts usually by surname - like Li, Lin, Chen, Wang etc., followed up by given name (like Hsin-Han, Chang-Fu etc.), often written in "Surname, Given-Name" format, separated by comma (e.g. Hsieh, Chang-Fu). To make the distinction between the given (first) name and the surname is important!

Examples of bad salutations:

- Dear Dr. David, (If you address somebody with their academic title, you should ALWAYS use it with surname, not given name.)
- Hi prof. David, (The same as above, and the use of Hi/Hello looks not too good together with a formal salutation Prof./Dr. XXX.)
- Dear Zeleny, (Instead of using only the surname, it's always better to use some title - use e.g. Dear Mr. XXX or Dear Ms. XXX if you don't want to use an academic title or you are sure that the person doesn't have it.)
- Dear Sir, (This sounds more like in an army.)
- Hi there, (This is good for your friends and persons you are quite familiar with, but you will make a bad impression if you use it in the formal email.)
- Hey, teacher! (This sounds a bit like from the [Pink Floyd's song "The Wall": Hey! Teachers! Leave us kids alone! :\)\)](#)

Examples of good salutations:

- Dear Dr. Zeleny, (Dr. stands for doctor and is universal - you won't do anything bad if you call anybody a doctor. It is actually better to use Dr. even if you are not sure whether the person actually holds a doctorate; if not, nothing worse will happen than that the person will be delighted that you thought she or he is actually a

- doctor. Of course, if you are sure the person does not hold a doctorate, don't use it, it would sound strange.)
- **Dear Prof. Zeleny**, (Prof. is used mostly for teachers. There are different habits in different countries how to use the title Professor; e.g. in Taiwan, there is a habit to call Professor not only full professors but also associates and assistant professors; in Czech, for example, I would call Professor only the person who holds the full professorship.)
- **Dear David Zeleny**, (This sounds impersonal, but you can't make anything wrong with the full name.)
- **Dear David**, (If we are already familiar, either because we met personally or because we exchanged emails before, it is not a problem to use directly the given name, at least in English speaking countries. But never add the title (Dr./Prof./Mr.) in front of the given name!)
- **Hi David**, (This is ok if we know each other rather well and on a frequent basis. Not good to use colloquial *Hi* or *Hallo* for somebody you don't know well or do not meet frequently.)

If you are not sure whether you should start with a super-formal salutation or use some more friendly or familiar way, there is one unwritten rule: in the first email to the person that you don't know well, it is always better to be formal. If the conversation continues and you will write that person another email, check the way how the person signed off. If they used their first name to sign the email off (e.g. *Cheers, David*), in the next email you may start with a more familiar salutation (e.g. *Dear David*). But if the first response email ended up formally (e.g. *Best regards, David Zeleny*), then it is better to keep using the formal salutation even in the follow-up emails. Do not expect that everybody will directly offer you a friendly way of communication - some people, especially if they are teachers and communicate with their students, prefer to keep a formal distance.

2) Body of the email

Here comes the main “meat” of your message. Always try to keep the email short, unless it's necessary to write many details. It may be a good idea to write one or two sentences at the beginning to make sure that the person you are writing to will get an idea of who you are, but try to get to the point as soon as possible. Not everybody has time to read long emails anytime - it may happen that the person will open the email, see that it needs more time to read/digest/respond than she/he can spend on it right now, decide to postpone the reading, and in then just forgot about it at all.

Btw, note that although the salutation usually ends by a comma (,), the first letter in the first sentence of an English email is usually uppercase.

3) Conclusion of the email (sign-offs)

It's always good to put the greetings at the end of the email on an extra line (usually followed by a comma, since your name will be added below, see next section). The following sign-offs are sorted from the most to the least formal:

- Kind regards,
- Best regards,
- Yours sincerely,
- With regards,
- Sincerely,
- All the best,
- Greetings,
- Best,
- Regards,
- Cheers,

- Hugs, (only for your French and Italian friends :)

4) Signature

After the greetings at the end, don't forget to **ALWAYS write your name** (Chinese, English, nickname - depending on what you prefer; in the first email to a person which you do not know, always use your whole name (without any title). In the follow-up emails, when you became more familiar, to use just the first name is fine. If you have a Chinese name, in English email it's better to use English transcription of Chinese characters (the one you get in your passport) instead of using directly Chinese characters - the person you are writing (e.g. me) may not be able to read Chinese, and then will have no idea how to pronounce your name (and probably won't even know who you are, even though you may meet frequently). If you have an English nickname (like *Jeff* or *Alvin*, feel free to use it in the follow-up emails, but in the first email always write your formal name (eventually with the nickname enclosed in parentheses after).

Examples

Example of email good for the first contact in the academic environment:

Dear Dr. Zeleny,

I would like to request a pdf of your recent publication in Science¹⁾.

Best regards,

Chen Ching-Feng (Alvin)

Example of email to somebody you are somewhat familiar with:

Dear David,

Not sure how can I solve the exercise you gave us as a homework assignment. I am not sure which function I should use for it. Could you give me a hint?

Cheers,

Po-Yu

And the example of **formally bad email**:

Hello Prof. David!

*Good day! I can't solve the homework, any help?
Bye bye*

What's wrong? The use of title (*Prof.*) with the given (first) name instead of a surname is a mistake. Starting the body of the email with another salutation (*Good day!*) is not necessary for an English email (although it is common in some Asian languages). Signing off using a very informal *Bye bye* style, which is good if spoken, but not good if written, is also not a good idea. And - the signature at the end is missing. It may not always be obvious who actually is the author of the email, especially if you use an email address like `r01b25645034@ntu.edu.tw` or `lucky.boy.012@gmail.com`.

Email conversation

One simple rule - it is a good habit to always answer emails if they are addressed directly to you, even if the email's author does not specifically request the answer. Also the other way around - if you ask a question or suggestion, and you get an email with the response, it is always a good idea to ping back a short reply - something like "Thanks, this is useful", or "Ok, I will think about that", or "I already solved that, but still appreciate your help" etc (this is basically an analogy of "like" or "thumbs up" on Facebook). This is to show that you actually got the email, you read it and it was of some use to you. Of course, there are some healthy limitations - if the conversation lasts for a while and a couple of emails are being exchanged, you don't need to specifically respond to each of them in this way.

Remember - it never looks bad if you respond to email, but it may sometimes look bad if you do not.

Others sources for inspiration

You will find similar advice on the Internet. I found particularly useful the [advice of Grammarly](#) (a company that offers an English proofreading tool). And if you need a cartoon summary of the suggestions above, you should definitely check [PhD comics](#). Good luck with writing your emails!

1)

hahaha...