

# Professional Emails 101

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A Primer on Avoiding Embarrassment

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## **I. ABOUT**

I often receive emails from both students and non-students that completely lack any semblance of professionalism. Yet, these same emails frequently come from people who are nothing short of polite or respectful in person. Heck, years ago, I once received an email from a student asking what she missed in class. I will call her Amy. Amy was a quiet, shy student who always prefaced my name with “professor” and insisted on doing a polite bow when leaving. Yet, Amy made the mistake of signing off her email with “XOXO.” Imagine my surprise.

This guide aims to provide tried-and-true advice for writing an acceptable professional email by examining both good and bad practices for salutations, general content, and signatures.

## **II. THE SALUTATION**

### **A. Use the Recipient’s Name**

The recipient’s name should always be included. Compare these two salutations:

Hi,  
Hi Amy,

The former example comes across as much more informal—or even rude, given the circumstances—by simply not including the recipient’s name. This may be fine if you are on close terms with the recipient, but otherwise, write the recipient’s name.

Also, if you are not sure exactly how to address someone, apply the rules below in descending order. The recipient will often let you know how to address him or her in due time.

- If a title is available and it is one that is commonly spoken (e.g., “director” v. “senior assistant”), then write the title and the surname (e.g., “Director Chang”).
- If no title is available and the recipient has a doctorate, then use “Dr.” and the surname (e.g., “Dr. Wilson”).
- If no other information is available and you know how the recipient identifies, then “Mr.” or “Ms.” and the surname (e.g., “Mr. Adams”). If you know the recipient is married and female, use “Mrs.”
- Use the recipient’s first name as an absolute last resort. In this case, it is best to quickly ask the recipient how they prefer to be addressed in the same email.

## B. Simple is Good

I recall a student email that started off with the following:

Hey, how's it going Prof.,

Friendly as can be and good intent, for sure. Unfortunately, you will be hard-pressed to find people who appreciate that kind of greeting in a professional environment. Avoid trying to create your own elaborate greeting. Surely you heard the phrase about reinventing the wheel—no need to start now. Tried-and-true salutation formats in order of arguably least-to-utmost formality include the following:

Hey Amy,  
Hi Amy,  
Hello Amy,  
Good morning Amy,  
Good evening Amy,  
Dear Amy:

## C. The Two-Comma Technicality

No, it is *not* wrong to use a two-comma salutation when starting your email. In fact, from a pure grammar perspective, a two-comma approach might technically be correct depending on your salutation. The following two-comma examples are all grammatically correct because the words preceding the name are classified as interjections, and thus demand the extra punctuation:

### **Two-Comma Approach**

Hi, Amy,  
Hello, Amy,  
Welcome, Amy,

### **One-Comma Approach**

Hi Amy,  
Hello Amy,  
Welcome Amy,

However, today's more common salutations take a one-comma approach. This approach likely vastly outnumbers the number of two-comma salutations a person receives on any given day—even in the business world—and that is perfectly fine. Perhaps that is even how it should be. Read the two approaches aloud, and you might notice that the two-comma approach creates an unnatural- and awkward-sounding pause between the interjection and the recipient's name. That pause generally does not occur when spoken because it is an unnecessary interruption to the speech's natural flow of sound.

Ultimately, this issue involves little more than stylistic preference and is in no way something to lose sleep over. If you prefer to be truly grammatically correct and show off your

knowledge, feel free to generally adopt the two-comma salutation. If you prefer to adapt to the times and follow the crowd on using the natural-sounding approach, then roll with the lone comma as your default salutation.

#### **D. For a Dose of Extra Formality**

If you are writing a truly formal email (e.g., to an executive you are unfamiliar with or an office), then best practice dictates using the following “dear” format using a colon:

Dear Dean Matz:

Dear Scholarship Committee:

Dear Office of Human Resources:

And, if you are using this format, never add a comma between “dear” and the recipient’s name. Unlike the interjections “hi” and “hello,” recall that “dear” is an adjective. People often forget this important point when writing salutations, believing “dear” to be the same as “hi.” However, the reality is that “dear” still refers to something akin to “respected” or “beloved,” and is generally regarded as the most formal way to greet someone in a message.

Please note that, depending on the level of formality you hope to convey, the colon may be substituted for a comma. However, this substitution creates only a slightly less-formal salutation than the “dear” and colon format, yet remains more formal than other salutations. Consequently, this substitution lacks any material benefit. Thus, this substitution is rarely used, and one will instead generally see either “dear” and colon used or a completely different salutation altogether.

### **III. THE BODY**

#### **A. Based on Basics**

The general rule for writing a professional email is simple: write like you are writing a graded term paper. In elaborated terms, follow basic format, grammar, and punctuation rules. Break your paragraphs up appropriately, avoid incomplete sentences, capitalize where important, and so on.

This is not to say that you cannot be creative! Please do use your own writing style, picking and choosing what you think is best. Just be careful not to go overboard and generally defy everything you were expected to learn in college, because a lot of that knowledge is what helps shape your writing into something readable by the general population.

Please note that double-spacing is generally not something you should do in emails. However, it is best practice to throw one line of spacing between each paragraph. This makes it easier for you to split up ideas in an organized manner and manage the flow of the message. Additionally, the spacing allows the recipient to easily track where they are in your email and later quickly refer to it if needed.

## **B. consistency**

I hope you noticed and agree that “consistency” really stands out in a *bad* way.

When you do something in a writing, simply be sure that you are *consistently* doing that thing in the same writing. Few things are more glaring than inconsistencies. Perhaps you even lost points on school papers due to inconsistencies (e.g., repeatedly alternating between “artificial intelligence” and “AI” for no apparent reason). Email recipients also often catch such inconsistencies, and some even secretly judge you for them. If you are not exactly sure how to write something, at least be consistent in what you decide to do—it will look vastly better than any inconsistency.

## **C. Shorter is Better**

A golden rule for writing an email is that shorter is generally better. Writing a five-sentence email on a regular basis is normal. Writing a lengthy one-page email on occasion might be warranted. Writing a five-page email with any regularity is a completely different story and people might start to think you are losing your mind or have way too much free time. “Time is money.” Writing an email is a balancing act that focuses on what is worthwhile to include v. not. Try to quickly and politely get to your point, generally only including information you believe relevant and important.

## **D. Open in a Polite Manner**

It is a good idea to start your email’s body off with a simple opener like the following:

I hope everything is going well.

This is a nice way to add a dash of humanity before diving into business, reminding the recipient that a person with feelings is on the other end of the message. Please note there is a sliding scale of factors determining how involved your opener might be (e.g., how long since you spoke with the recipient, how close you are to the recipient). Use your best judgment, but keep in mind that “respect begets respect.”

## **E. Introductions and Reminders**

If you are writing your first email to the recipient, it is best practice to *briefly* introduce yourself. Please note that this may potentially be unnecessary if someone else connects the two of you and sufficiently introduces you. For example, this is a sufficient short introduction:

My name is Amy Zyla, and I am a current student at George Mason University. It is great to e-meet you.

Please also note that a brief reminder of who you are is also considered best practice. Many people may have a lot going on, so a quick reminder might be incredibly helpful to the recipient (e.g., your professor might have over 100 students in a semester). You might even combine this shorter reminder with a polite opener for an extra personal touch:

This is Amy from your ENGH 101 class. I hope you are having a great day.

Please be sure to use your judgment on this one. You may not want to send a reminder about who you are to someone you email on a regular basis. But, if you rarely email the recipient (e.g., once every two weeks or longer), the brief reminder is increasingly warranted.

## **F. Make Questions Pop**

When you are writing to ask questions, ensure that your questions clearly stand out. Solutions include putting your questions in a list format at the end of your email body or bolding each question. A large reason for this is that people are busy, and so they frequently skim messages. Thus, there is a bigger possibility of the recipient missing your question if you happen to bury it in the middle of a large block of text without extra emphasis.

It is also best practice to limit the number of questions you ask in a single email—the fewer, the better. Save some questions for your reply if needed. Yes, it may take more time to get everything out of the way, but this may also possibly lead to quicker responses.

## **G. Slang**

No slang. Just no. Not if you are trying to maintain any level of formality in the exchange. Save your street lingo for instant messaging. However, an exception does exist for demonstration (e.g., explaining the slang to someone for some pertinent purpose).

H. :) 😊 XD :PPPPP

Avoid emojis or other imagery (e.g., 😊 or XD). While they may seem cute and well-received in social media or more personal communications, using this stuff in professional exchanges is a risky idea. Many people view some or all emoji and such imagery negatively (e.g., as sarcasm) or are more prone to misinterpreting their usage. The key here is to ask yourself whether it is worth risking sending the wrong message to the recipient.

#### IV. THE SIGNATURE

The signature often interchangeably or collectively refers to the sign-off, the name written immediately following the sign-off, and the subsequent block of extra personal information. For the purposes of this section, they will be separately identified.

##### A. The Sign-Off

The sign-off is sandwiched between the body and the signature. It is hard to go wrong with a sign-off so long as it is polite. Though, the deeper you read about sign-offs, the more nuances you might learn to apply in certain situations. Here are a few sign-offs that generally work universally:

Best,  
Best wishes,  
Regards,  
Sincerely,  
Thank you,  
Warm regards,

Here are some additional sign-off notes to be aware of:

- Always maintain your composure. Even if you are failing to do that, maintain the *illusion* of composure. Never write an aggressive or threatening sign-off under any circumstances. For example, this is an extremely bad idea:

Or else,

Instead, try to live by the “kill it with kindness” mentality. Let us be real, though—this advice also applies to the entire email.

- Avoid simply using your name or any abbreviation of your name without also including a true sign-off unless you are on extremely casual or informal terms with the

recipient. However, this rule becomes arguably less important if, say, you are knee-deep in a lengthy back-and-forth exchange spanning numerous replies.

- Simply avoid using religious overtones. Yes, everyone should respect that you are religious. However, an email sign-off is not the place to project your religious beliefs on others.

## B. The “Real” Signature

The signature typically follows the sign-off and is a prime place to express your creativity in an email. Just avoid getting too crazy. For example, if you add a headshot to your signature, be sure the size is appropriate. Also, shorter and leaner is generally best practice, with many considering six lines to be the maximum for the personal information block immediately following your signatory name.

Oh, and if you decide to use different styling between your signatory name and the personal information block, best practice is to ensure that your signatory name’s styling matches the rest of your email and to customize only your personal information block.

A basic signature might resemble this:

Amy

*Amy Zyla*

*Management Major*

*George Mason University*

*E: [notreal@gmu.edu](mailto:notreal@gmu.edu)*

*P: [+82-10-0668-7325](tel:+82-10-0668-7325)*

*LinkedIn: <https://www.notarealprofile.com>*

Many online style guides exist like [this one](#). I recommend spending a few minutes researching different styles and figuring out a signature format that best matches your preferences.

## V. GENERAL EXAMPLES

I encourage you to break down what the following examples do well and do poorly. Running through the examples below while recalling the advice throughout this document’s prior sections should solidify your grasp on writing professional emails.

### **A. Acceptable Example I**

Good afternoon Prof. Robertson,

This is Amy from your 1:30pm ENGH class. I hope you are doing well. I would like to ask when the homework is due. I could not find any information in the syllabus, and I unfortunately had to leave the class early today for personal reasons. Would you please let me know?

Thank you,

Amy Zyla

### **B. Poor Example I**

Hi

This is Amy from ur class!!! What's tonight's homework?? Thank u. 😊

Amy

### **C. Acceptable Example II**

Dear Hiring Committee:

I hope this email finds you well.

My name is Amy Zyla, and I am writing to apply to your marketing position. I attached my application materials to this message. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Amy

*Amy Zyla  
Management Major  
George Mason University*

#### **D. Poor Example II**

Hey Hiring Committee, I hope this email finds you well. How's it going? I am Amy. I am writing to apply to one of your positions. I attached my application materials to this message. Thank you for your consideration. :) Bless you, *Amy*

Amy Zyla  
GMU

#### **E. Acceptable Example III**

Hi Mike,

I am sorry to hear that you still disagree with our decision. Please allow me to further consider how to best respond. I hope to get back to you soonest.

Thank you,

Amy

#### **F. Poor Example III**

Mike,

It's my office's call. Stop complaining to me.

Or else,

Amy