

Emailing Like a Professional

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Email is the official communication method of Washburn University and Washburn University School of Law. It will most likely be an important part of any professional career you have. Everyone thinks they know how to professionally email, but we all know, from our own experience with email, that some of those people are wrong.

Some people do recognize when they email unprofessionally but think it doesn't matter. They are wrong on that count as well. *Scholarships, references, jobs, promotions, cases, clients, and even bar licenses are lost every year because of poor email skills.* In some of these cases, the person doesn't even learn of what was lost, or why. Most people (with the exception of the Attorney Disciplinary Officer) won't take it upon themselves to explain, so your Professionalism Mentor is your best friend in pointing out pitfalls to you early!

Initiating the Email

Whenever you initiate an email to a professor, staff member, prospective employer, or employer, you should remember that this is not a casual email to a friend. You want to show that you are a professional. Err on the side of excess formality. Nobody will be offended if you are too formal, but you can easily offend by being too informal. Remember that people are comfortable with telling others that they don't have to be so formal with them ("You don't need to call me Mr. Smith--call me Eddie"), but few are comfortable with telling people that they need to be more formal with them ("Quit calling me Eddie—call me Mr. Smith").

1. You should begin by using a proper email address. For Washburn school emails, you should try to use your Washburn email. You shouldn't use a private email account with an unprofessional name like cutiepie4evs@gmail.com At the same time, it is very important that you don't use school or business email accounts to send personal emails, such as an email to your plumber disputing their bill. That is your dispute, and you need to be careful to keep your school or your employer out of it.
2. Treat the **subject line** carefully: it should be the workhorse of your email. It should be descriptive of the subject matter of the email and highly

searchable. If you are asking a professor a question about a course, it is helpful to put the course name in the subject line, since they are likely teaching more than one course.

Good: Will miss November 1 class in torts due to surgery

Bad: will miss class

Horrible:

If the subject changes in a long email string, change the subject line to indicate the new subject.

3. The **salutation** is important: it indicates the level of sophistication, professionalism, and respect for others that you have. You should address the person by their title and last name. Be sure that you are spelling the name correctly. If someone isn't a "Professor," "Dr.," "Judge," etc., use "Ms.," "Mr.," or "Mx." unless you know of some other preference. Take the time to do a quick internet search or call the person's office if you aren't sure of the proper title. Law school professors are addressed as "Professor" rather than "Dr." even if they have an advanced degree in law beyond the J.D. In almost all jurisdictions, judges on the highest court in the jurisdiction are addressed as "Justice" rather than "Judge." Messages may be posted to "The Honorable Jane Smith" regardless of whether judge or justice, but then the salutation will begin, "Dear Justice Smith" or "Dear Judge Smith." If the judge is the chief of the court, it should be "Dear Chief Justice Smith" or "Dear Chief Judge Smith."

Some people have trouble starting the salutation with "Dear," and you don't have to, but many of the older generation still prefer it as they find the salutation to brusque without it. Don't worry, they won't think it's a love letter.

4. Try to keep the **body** of your email brief and to the point, but complete. Use the "who, what, when, where, why, and how" technique so that people won't have to email you back for further details. Don't use terms like "tomorrow," which forces people to look at when you sent the email: use the exact date.

Good: The Kansas Bar Association is having a reception for newly admitted lawyers on Friday, September 29, 2023 from 10:30-11:30 a.m. at the Judicial Center, 301 SW 10th Avenue, Topeka, KS. You may park in the southwest lot. All are invited.

Bad: The KBA is having a reception for the new lawyers on Friday—you should come!

5. Pay attention to grammar and spelling. Don't use abbreviations, acronyms without explanation, or slang. It helps to use a spell-check app, but realize that it won't catch the dreaded homophone problem that is so easy to fall into when your tired or rushed. You're.
6. Try not to ask questions that you can look up yourself. It's especially egregious to ask a professor or staff member a question that is answered on the course syllabus.
7. Request, don't demand.

Good: Professor, students are having difficulty catching everything you say. Would it be possible to speak a little louder or to have a microphone?

Bad: You need to quit mumbling—we can't hear a thing you're saying.

Horrible: [Not letting professor know of the problem at all.]

8. Do not make this request: "Could you fill me in on what I missed today?" (Ask a classmate for notes, or request a recording in advance.)
Do not ask this question: "I missed class today--did you cover anything important?"
9. If you have a complaint, especially at your workplace, follow chain of command and give the person whose job it is a chance to address the complaint. Don't do a blast email complaining to the senior partner on down. Your colleagues will mistrust you and so will your superiors.
10. If you are adding **attachments** to the email, refer to the attachment in the email; don't assume that it will be noticed otherwise. Rename attachments so that they mean something to the recipient later on. For example, your resume shouldn't be sent with the file name, "resume." It should be named something like "Smith, John—resume 8-18-22."

If you are turning in an exam, your name (or exam number, if anonymous) should appear in the name of the attachment AND on the first page of the exam.

Carefully read the instructions regarding the submittal of assignments and attach exactly what is required, and in the format requested. Double-check that the document is actually attached before sending. If there is a deadline, failure to attach could lead to a late penalty and subsequent grade reduction, or to the professor not accepting the assignment at all.

11. Give a formal **closing** and your full name.

Good: Best regards,
Jane Smith
Bad: js
Horrible:

Replying to Emails

1. Promptness is essential. If the email is from a professor or staff member, try very hard to reply within 24 hours, 48 hours at the most. If the email is from a client, employer, or professor in Clinic, you generally will be expected to reply within 24 hours—at the most.

If you cannot answer the questions in the email within those time frames, send a quick reply giving as much information as you can, and stating when you will have the rest of the information to them.

You will quickly get a very bad reputation in school or in your workplace if people can't rely on you to get back with them. Communication is like a game of tennis—each person has to respond to the ball when it's in her court. Not doing so puts you out of the game.

2. Given these timelines, it's clearly not enough to do a good job writing emails. You must also learn to professionally READ emails, because you are going to get a lot of them. Quickly scan the name and subject lines. Use some method (“unread” highlight, archive, file, etc.) to quickly winnow out those emails you need not read from those that you will need to reply to later. Immediately answer those that can be answered quickly. My friends and I use “NOM” for “No Other Message” in the subject line to indicate that the email need not be opened. (“Will meet at 6- NOM”). This works efficiently among friends, but should not be used with strangers, obviously.

3. If you are receiving information that you requested, it is obviously essential that you respond with a thank-you.
4. It is not normally expected that you will respond to the thank you for sending information with “You’re welcome.” (Think of it like receiving a thank-you letter in the mail, rather than a “thank you” in face-to-face conversation.) There are exceptions, however, if the thank you is more than the usual civility; then you should respond to let the sender know that you appreciated that effort.
5. If you are responding to a request for information, be sure that you are answering *all* the questions, or that you explain why all cannot be answered. It is very frustrating for people to have to drag everything out of a person email by email. Similarly, if you have a question after reading an email, read it again to make sure it wasn’t answered in the email, in the string below it, or in an attachment before shooting off an email asking for the information.
6. With a reply, you can usually let the initiating email be your guide as to how informal you can be on the string. Generally, if the initiator uses exclamation points or a smiley face, you can, too (if you want). If the initiator does not use a formal opening and closing, you need not, either. Exceptions may be in order when the initiator is a judge, boss, prospective employer, or client. When in doubt, keep your formality.
7. Note on emoticons and exclamation marks: the less formal the communication, the more acceptable these are. A complete lack of exclamation marks in texts can make you seem unfriendly, while exclamation marks in a brief or formal letter can make you seem unprofessional. Email is a middle ground. A lot of professors or employers don’t mind a smiley face or an enthusiastic exclamation mark once in a while, if the matter isn’t too formal. They can convey warmth or make sure that something is understood as a joke in an efficient and easily-understood way.
8. “Reply all” is tricky, and important to get right. You should “reply all” when everyone on the email string is working on a project, or otherwise interested in it. In this case, it can be extremely rude, confusing, and inefficient to take someone off the email and continue the conversation. If it nevertheless makes sense in the context to do so (perhaps the conversation has moved past what that person is interested in, and you do so as a favor to them), you

should always announce that you are doing so on an email seen by that person.

On the other hand, it can be inconsiderate to “reply all” when you aren’t adding content. A typical example is when a superior at work sends a mass email announcing an employee’s retirement and thanking her for her service. It’s generally not your place to chime in with a “reply all” to everyone stating that you share your boss’s sentiment. It’s probably better to note your agreement via an individual email to the person retiring.

9. “Blind cc” should be used very sparingly, mainly just to your own address if you need a reminder of a task. It can be very unfair to a person not to know that someone else is peeping in on an email exchange.
10. “Forwarding” can be used as an FYI in some cases where it’s fair to give someone information about a conversation that they need, but unless the matter is completely mundane, it’s best to get permission from those on the email for the forward. Be careful to check that there isn’t information on the email string that should not be forwarded.

Forwarding should always be used rather than “reply” when referring to documents that were attached by a previous sender, so that the recipients can view the documents.

11. Be careful to check the address line to see who all is on an email string; don’t assume that the person signing the email is the only one on it. I’ve read some hilarious emails in which people forgot this rule:

In one case, a student responded to my T.A.’s request for a make-up assignment with “Is Professor Lowry on crack?” In another, officers from the undergraduate Washburn Student Government Association debated whether to respond to my request for information: “Who is this guy? Should we blow him off?”

The rules above are formulated from my own experience and from experience shared by many others. I asked fellow faculty members to share their experiences and preferences with me, and most of those have been incorporated above. Most of their responses were repetitive with others, because the rules are so important (for

example, almost everybody emphasized how important it was to respond promptly). Two replies gave extra information or such excellent examples, however, that I give them below, rather than incorporate them above.

Washburn Law Professor #1

- 1) Start the email with a **salutation** and **identify who you are**.
- 2) Please include a **subject line** that is informative and allows the professor to tell at a glance for what reason you are sending the email.
- 3) Questions posed by email should evidence that you've thought about the issue and have done your very best to craft an answer about which you are **seeking confirmation**. Thus, questions should probably seek a "yes/no" or the assurance that the student is on the right track (or caution that she is not), rather than huge open-ended queries. For emails, I find it much easier to answer a question phrased like this:

Subject: RAP question - group gifts

Dear Professor Smith,

I am confused about the rule against perpetuities and how it applies to a group gift. From the reading and doing some additional research, it appears to me that in order for a grant to be valid, the group must close (so that no further members are possible) within a life in being at the creation of the interest (plus 21 years). I *think* that this means that if even one person could join the group after that time the entire grant is invalidated under RAP? Is that right?

Thanks,
Jane Doe

This is a great email question because I can just write back "yes" or "no."

It is not nearly as effective or efficient to ask a big open-ended question in an email. Jane Doe should not write, "Dear Professor Smith, I don't understand how the rule against perpetuities works in the context of group gifts. Can you explain?" That is not an appropriate email exchange. If Jane really cannot

frame her question better than that (and if she truly has no idea how this rule works and can't fathom an application), then she should come in to talk with me about it. Professors should never be expected to re-create long doctrinal explanations in an email.

- 4) If assignments are being turned in via email, the file **attachment** should be named to include the **student name (or exam # if applicable)** AND the student's name (or exam number, if applicable) should appear on the first page of the document. I've pulled up 30 different documents before, all entitled "purchase and sale agreement," and none of the documents themselves have any indication who wrote them! (Note the well-placed exclamation mark.)
- 5) The best **method to contact** a professor is going to be set forth in the course **syllabus**. For most professors, this is via email or coming by our office. Students should not come up with their own methods of contacting professors. (For example, finding a personal number that hasn't been given out and using that.)
- 6) The question often arises on how quickly responses should be expected on both sides. Students are often expected to respond to professors within 24 hours. Students should not, however, expect that a professor can necessarily respond within 24 hours. This mirrors precisely the relationship between attorney (who is expected to respond within a day at the latest) and client (who is not necessarily expected to do so).

Washburn Law Professor #2

- (1) The instructions for how students should interact with *professors* should extend to how students interact with *administrators and staff*. Students should understand that how they treat everyone in the building reflects on their character and professionalism. Indeed, I am much more likely to be perturbed by unprofessionalism toward staff than unprofessionalism toward me.
- (2) I think students should err on the side of formality in email correspondence--- that is, formal, professional tone, should be the default. Those among us who are fine with casual email communications from students will not mind if students are "too formal." But those who prefer more formal correspondence will mind if students are "too informal." I should note that I prefer formal email

correspondence from students, if for no other reason than it challenges them to know that there *is* a difference between professional communications and casual ones.

Final Notes from Dean Dempsey-Swopes

Email is likely to be a big part of your time at law school, and even more likely to be so in your future career (for at least some time to come). It is efficient and searchable: two things highly valued in the legal profession. You shouldn't become so wedded to it, however, that you forget other methods of communication:

- 1) Email is still too informal for some purposes. Sometimes, only a formal letter on letterhead, sent through the post, will be considered appropriate.
- 2) Remember that your email can be subpoenaed in a law suit. Make sure that what you send can be read in open court without making your mother cry.
- 3) Remember that your email can be forwarded to anyone, and that not everyone uses good judgment about forwarding.
- 4) Some clients, bosses, or professors don't like email: try to use the form of communication they do like.
- 5) Email is not a good communication method for dealing with sensitive topics. Set up a face-to-face meeting instead, when possible.
- 6) If you see that an email communication is unexpectedly going south, stop immediately and call or visit face to face if possible.
- 7) In circumstances where documentation is necessary after a phone or face-to-face conversation, try to do so immediately after, and if appropriate, make sure that the other person agrees with your representation of the meeting. For example, you should follow up a phone conversation with your client with a letter or email laying out what you believe the agreement has been between you on the next steps you will take in the client's case.