

How to Email Your Professor¹

Bad:

hi,	-or- hey,
i need to meet with you!	I need a letter of rec for study abroad. Its due next week
oscar	Tthanx,
	oscar

So much better:

Dear Professor Woolf,*

I have really been enjoying your class. I have some questions about the upcoming paper and I am wondering if I could talk to you about my draft. I am unfortunately not able to come to your office hours this week, but would be able to meet with you on Wednesday afternoon or any time Thursday. I know that it is a busy time in the semester but I would appreciate your feedback; please let me know when you might be available to meet with me.

Many thanks,

Oscar (Political Science 101, Section 3)

Dear Professor Woolf,

I hope that the semester is treating you well. I have been busy finishing up my sophomore year and in fact have declared a political science major, in large part because I enjoyed your class so much last year! I am in the process of applying to a study abroad program in Brussels because I am particularly interested in the European Union. I would very much appreciate a letter of recommendation from you if you are able to write me one. Please let me know your availability in the near future, and I will bring you the forms and tell you more about the program and why I am interested in it. The final deadline for the application is May, 15 but I would like to have it sent off by May, 1 if possible.

Gratefully,

Oscar (Political Science 101, Fall 2011)

*“Dear Dr. Woolf” works well too (and is the norm at some colleges). If you are emailing an instructor or lecturer or graduate student (who is not a PhD or Doctor of some kind) use Mr. or Ms. (never Miss or Mrs.). If your instructor continues to sign their² emails with their first name, the first time you use their first name in an email you should say “Dear Virginia (if I may).”

General Tips:

- Use proper grammar and mechanics, and proofread before you hit send.
- Address your instructor respectfully, and be polite and understanding of the fact that they are very busy.
- Be specific about what exactly you need from them; and a little flattery about their class or the readings or something never hurts.
- If you are requesting to meet with your instructor outside of office hours, provide at least two days/times that you are available to meet. Also, request appointments several days in advance. They will need to fit you into their already busy schedules. Don’t be surprised if they cannot accommodate you on short notice.
- Thank them in advance for their help.
- If they have a lot of students, be sure to remind them which class of theirs you are in.
- Ask for letters of recommendation as early as possible (at least two weeks in advance of the due date), and give clear deadlines (be sure to follow up if you aren’t hearing back).
- Send a quick follow-up email after meeting with them to thank them for their time.

¹ This handout is adapted from a handout created by Professor Katherine Brokaw.

² My use of singular generic *they* and its inflectional forms is intentional.