Effective E-mail Communication with Professors

Know your audience
- Do not be too casual. “Hey” is not an appropriate salutation for a professor.
- Write out all words. Do not use slang or shorthand like ‘thx,’ ‘ttyl,’ etc.
- Use proper capitalization and punctuation. This is not a text message.
- College is a great place to start corresponding like a professional.

Tips:
1. Think about your message before you write it.
2. Reflect on the tone of your message.
3. Strive for clarity and brevity.
4. Consider the time investment it will take for the professor to respond. Many questions are faster and easier to handle in person than via email. The email exchange should be equal; that is, you should put in as much time into the exchange as the faculty member does, which is why many faculty do not read and comment on drafts that students send via email.
5. Format so the email is easy to read.
6. Use your Puget Sound e-mail address (especially if your external e-mail address is something inappropriate or unprofessional).
7. Give your professor time to respond; don’t repeatedly e-mail your professor when you haven’t heard back, especially late at night or on the weekends. Your professor has many responsibilities that may prevent an immediate response.
8. Proofread.

Some Common Occasions for Emailing Faculty and Some Effective (and ineffective) Strategies:

Going over what you missed
You write: “I was out last Thursday. Can you tell me what I missed?”

Your Professor thinks: “Do you expect me to hold a private class and cover 50 minutes worth of material—again?”

Figuring out if you missed something “important”
You write: “I was out last Thursday. Did I miss anything important?”

Your Professor thinks: “I work very hard to prep for class. I don’t present material that’s unimportant.”

TRY THIS INSTEAD: “Professor Smith, I missed your class on Thursday and noticed you covered Chapter 6 that day. I read Chapter 6 and reviewed Jane’s notes. I think I’m in good shape with catching up, but have a few questions on a couple points on which I am confused, and want to make sure I haven’t missed anything else.”
E-mailing after receiving a disappointing grade, or for another issue about which you are angry

Your Professor thinks: “I have a permanent record of these words. Have you considered the consequences of that?”

TRY THIS INSTEAD: “Professor Jones, I received my grade and I’m surprised it was lower than I was expecting. I looked at the samples you provided, checked the rubric, and thought I was doing everything correctly. I feel frustrated because I don’t know where I could have improved. Can you please explain to me more fully where I went wrong so I can improve on the next assignment? I’m not able to make your office hours because I’m in class then, but I’m available on Tuesday afternoon after 2:00 and on Wednesday from 9:00-3:00. Are you available any time during those windows to meet with me? Thank you."

Components of an Effective E-mail Message

Clear, specific subject line gives purpose for message ----→ Subject: Two questions about my research paper

Message opens with short, friendly greeting. ------------→ Hello, Professor Smith,

Using appropriate tone and language, the message introduces the purpose for writing. ------------------------→ Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about my research paper. I am looking forward to starting my paper this week. As we discussed, I have made an appointment with a librarian to learn more about finding appropriate secondary sources on the abolition movement. In the meantime, I have two questions:

- I found a book with some broadsides in it that I’d love to write about in my paper. Is it all right to include images in the paper?
- I found two versions of the Sojourner Truth speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” that you recommended, but I think I remember you mentioning that one edition is considered more authoritative than another. I’m attaching both versions I found here. Could you please remind me which would be better to use as a source in my paper?

I know you are busy this time of year, and I appreciate your time. If possible, could you answer these questions before the end of next week?

Message formatted for quick reading. Bullets draw the eye to important details. --------------------------→ Thanks for your help with my paper.

Message includes attachments, making it easy for the professor to see exactly what you’re asking. Make sure to attach the attachments, though! --------------------------→ Sincerely,

A. Student

Message concisely states desired outcome of email. ------→

Message ends with short, friendly closing. ------------→

Closing tips...

Don’t forget to respond to your professor’s e-mails, too, just as you expect responses to your e-mails. A brief thank you or follow-up is courteous. And when you think you are ready to hit “send,” proofread one more time!

Resources:
http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/effective-e-mail-communication/