



Email Etiquette at the University

Graduate Writing Center UCLA

As a graduate student, you will write thousands of emails while pursuing your degree—emails that ask for extensions on papers, set up meetings with professors, and connect you with potential mentors or advisors. This workshop, which is designed for graduate students who speak English as a second or foreign language, will break down the language necessary to make polite requests over email. It will also cover basic email etiquette and include opportunities to edit emails written by real graduate students.

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Introducing Yourself (When the Recipient Doesn't Know You)

When you are emailing someone who doesn't know you or who may have forgotten who you are, you must do two things in the first sentence of the email: (1) introduce yourself, and (2) explain how you got that person's name.

1. INTRODUCE YOURSELF

In the introduction, include details that the recipient will find relevant. Notice that the first sentence is typically two sentences combined with a comma and "and." You can give your name in the first sentence, or you can leave it out.

You can give your name

First sentence of email	Audience
My name is Mary Jones, and I am a doctoral candidate at the Georgetown School of Music.	musician not affiliated with Georgetown

Or you can leave your name out

First sentence of email	Audience
I'm a Georgetown graduate from the French department, and Jane Doe recommended that I email you.	French professor at Georgetown who knows Jane Doe

Language focus: Articles and prepositions

Article and preposition use is often tricky when you are describing yourself and your institutional affiliation. If you're not sure of how to refer to your program, search your department's webpage for how it brands itself (e.g., "the UCLA Anderson School of Management"; "UCLA Anderson"). Below are some possibilities.

I am...	a History PhD student a doctoral candidate an MA student a master's student a second-year student	at UCLA at the UCLA School of Music in the Department of Urban Planning in electrical engineering in the M.S.N. advanced practice program
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How would you revise the following introduction?

This is George Alexandropolis, Graduate student in CS, Dr. Brown's lab.

2. IDENTIFY HOW YOU GOT THE PERSON’S NAME

In order to keep your recipient from wondering why a random person is emailing her, you should explain the connection between the two of you. In general, there are three ways to describe your connection.

- **If someone referred you to her**, mention that person’s name and, if relevant, explain why the person thought you should get in touch with her.
- **If no one referred you to her**, mention what you have in common, such as a shared field or institution. Indicate how you got her name only if it’s worth noting. (An alumni database is worth mentioning; “I discovered you online” is not.)
- **If you met the person a long time ago and aren’t sure if she remembers you**, it’s okay to admit this.

If someone referred you

First sentence of email	Audience
My name is Hailey Oakenshield, and I am currently a Writing MFA candidate at Georgetown University's School of the Arts. I have been teaching for the past two years as an instructor in Georgetown’s Undergraduate Writing Program; however, my teaching appointment ends this semester, and I’ve been looking for teaching and/or tutoring jobs for next year. The assistant director of the program, Derrick Johnson, <u>gave me your name and thought it might be a good idea to contact you</u> about possible job openings at UCLA.	Writing program administrator at another university
Jane Doe is my comment editor at the Law Review, and she <u>suggested I contact you</u> . I will soon be writing a comment relating to the commerce clause, and although I don't believe we've met, I was hoping you might be willing to serve as my faculty sponsor for the upper-level writing requirement. Jane <u>gave me your name because</u> it seems like there could be a good match between your expertise in environmental law and my topic.	law professor at the same university

If no one referred you

First sentence of email	Audience
I don't believe we've met yet. I'm Jane, and I've been working in IE since July. I just wanted to express my interest in the upcoming Usability Group.	coworker in another division at the same company
I am currently a first-year student in the GTRS program, and I am looking for a lab in which to rotate starting in January. If there is an opening in your lab for a rotation student this winter term (January-April), I would very much like to be considered for it.	science professor at the same university

If you met that person a long time ago and aren’t sure if she remembers you

First sentence of email	Audience
<u>You might not remember me</u> , but a few years ago I took your Augustan Literature course at Georgetown University.	professor at alma mater
<u>Many months have passed since the Hanson Symposium, so I am not sure if you remember me.</u>	professor at the same university

Language Focus: Verbs

The examples on the previous page suggest just a few ways to describe how you came to know your recipient. Reread the text in the first table (“If someone referred you”), noting the verbs or verb phrases the writers use to make this connection (see underlined words).

What other verbs and verb phrases could you use in this situation?

What tense are the verbs in?

Making Your Request

After you introduce yourself, you will need to make your request and justify it. Here are some overall tips to consider, each of which will be discussed below.

1. Justify your request

Put yourself in the shoes of your very busy recipient. Upon seeing the subject line and your email address, Dr. Very Important Person will most likely think, “Why is this UCLA student bothering me? Can’t this person do independent work?”

With this in mind, make sure you justify your request. Make it clear why this person’s advice, feedback, or work is relevant or crucial to your progress on some task. Make it clear that you’ve done a certain amount of work so far on your question and that contacting Dr. VIP is the next step in your research.

2. Present your request with “negative politeness”

Using “negative politeness” means that you seek to minimize the burden that your request may put on your recipient. To present your request with negative politeness, you can communicate your desire not to impose on their time and use conventionally indirect verb phrases and other words.

a. Communicate your desire not to impose

Noting that you will understand if Dr. VIP won’t be able to meet your request or help you—or at least acknowledging the possibility—is a way to make your request more indirect and thus polite. You can do this in ways such as the following:

- Reference Dr. VIP’s busy schedule
- Use “if”

b. Use conventionally indirect verb phrases and other words

Past-tense verbs and modals are one conventional way to lessen the imposition of the request and thus make it more indirect. You can do this in ways such as the following:

- Avoid “I want” and “I would like”
- Use “I was wondering if”
- Use “I would be very interested in/to”
- Use “I would love” when a little more emotion and informality seems OK
- Use “would it be possible” and remove human subject pronouns
- Use “I (just) wanted” very cautiously
- Use “please” sparingly

1. JUSTIFY YOUR REQUEST

Prefacing your request with a justification of why you are writing shows your recipient that you “did your homework.” It demonstrates that you are writing for a good reason and are trying not to waste the recipient’s time.

How would you revise the following justification?

Read Jane Doe’s email to Dr. Brown (see below). Dr. Brown might wonder, “Why hasn’t Jane done her own research, at least to see what’s out there, before contacting me?” Dr. Brown might also wonder “Why is she contacting me instead of any other professor?”

How would you revise Jane’s email?

From: Jane Doe
To: Donald Brown
Subject: book recommendation

Dear Dr, Brown,

I am a Ph.D student at UCLA studying adolescent literacy. For my Field Methods of Research course I need to do a book length study on Ethnography about high school students’ literacy practices focusing on ESL students. Can you please name a book for me. Thanks in advance.

Jane Doe
333-9998787

Blessings



Compare Jane Doe’s email with the underlined text in the following email, written by Matt Yule. Mr. Duchamp is an employee at CVA and friends with Matt Yule’s supervisor, Derrick Johnson.

Dear Mr. Duchamp:

I am an editorial assistant at Thompson Consulting, and Derrick Johnson suggested I contact you to learn more about graphic design. I am considering going back to school for a certificate program in graphic design either at CreativeWorks or WAT, and Mr. Johnson didn't know if CVA had any continuing education classes I could take in the meantime. I know CVA just offers bachelor programs, but I don't know if they have added any courses aimed at working adults; the website doesn't specify.

If you have any time coming up I would love to meet with you to talk more about CVA and the field of graphic design in general. You can reach me via cell (333-666-7777) or email (yule@aol.com). Thanks!

Best,
Matt Yule

2. PRESENT YOUR REQUEST WITH “NEGATIVE POLITENESS”

If you practice “negative politeness,” you try to avoid making your request seem burdensome—and, thus, alienating your recipient. You can practice negative politeness by communicating your desire not to impose on your recipient’s free time and by using conventionally indirect verb phrases and other words.

2A. COMMUNICATE YOUR DESIRE NOT TO IMPOSE

It’s common to give recipients a “way out” of your request—or at least imply that you can conceive of their saying “no.” You can do this by referencing the person’s busy schedule and/or using words like “if.”

Reference their busy schedules

Noting that you “understand,” “appreciate,” “recognize” the person’s busy schedule is a way of telling them you will understand if they say no.

I'd like to get the notes in by next Tuesday (the 4th) so that the concert office has a week to put in the program, <u>but I understand if you may not have the time, especially at the end of the semester.</u>

Use “if”

Writers often encode their requests in an if-clause, indicating that fulfilling the request is hypothetical, not a fact.

<u>and if you are willing</u> I would be very grateful for any feedback you might be able to offer.
I am leaving town tomorrow afternoon but am free before 2 pm <u>if you happen to have a moment to spare.</u>
I am writing to find out <u>if you would be willing to serve as a committee member for my 2nd year project.</u>

2B. USE CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT VERB PHRASES AND OTHER WORDS

You can create a sense of indirectness by using certain past-tense verbs and modals (e.g., “would” instead of “will”). The past tense, it seems, distances you and your recipient from the burden of your request. Sometimes, to make a request more conventionally indirect, you can just reword in the past tense: “I am wondering if I can meet with you” becomes “I was wondering if I could meet with you.” In your request sentences, consider using verb phrases such as “I was wondering if,” “would it be possible,” “I would love,” and “I (just) wanted.” But use “please” sparingly.

Avoid “I want” and “I would like”

Never use “I want”

“I want” is too bold for a request to a person in a position of authority. How would you revise the following request?

If you have time, I want to visit you and introduce myself.

Avoid “I would like”

“I would like” may be more polite than “I want” when, say, you are ordering dinner at a restaurant. But in an email, consider them of equal directness unless you add intensifiers like “I would very much like to meet with you to discuss my project.”

Although it’s not advisable to use “I would like” in the request itself, you can use it to preface your request. The following is a nice example of “would like” as a preface to the real request:

I can't make it to your office hours but would like to meet sometime to ask you a couple of questions. Do you have any time this week or next to meet?

“I would love” is a good substitute for “I would like” and “I want” when making the request: “I would love” implies a hypothetical situation whereas “I would like” implies that the recipient must act.

Use “I would love” and its substitutes (“I would be very interested”)

“I would love” creates a slightly more intimate tone:

While I would love to study voice with you regularly, I completely understand if your schedule won't permit it.

Even if you do not have class time for me, I would love to meet you briefly and hear more about your interests and how the seminar has gone this semester.

If you have any time coming up I would love to meet with you to learn more.

To avoid this tone, try “I would very much be interested in meeting with you to discuss my project,” “I would be especially interested in meeting...,” “I would very much appreciate the opportunity to meet with you and discuss my project.”

Use “I was wondering if”

A common way to word requests is to use “I was wondering if”:

...and was wondering if I could use you as a reference.

I was wondering if you knew of any openings in any colleges or universities, preferably local.

...I was wondering if you would be interested in working with me.

Use “would it be possible” and remove human subject pronouns

“Would it be possible” is a handy phrase that implies “would it be possible *for you* to do something *for me*” without using “you” and “me.” Its effect is to make the request more indirect, and thus polite, because it creates distance between you, your recipient, and the big, oppressive, time-consuming request you’re about to make.

Would it be possible to arrange another time for an audition, some time during the week?

Would <u>it</u> be possible to move our meetings to one of those times starting next quarter?
While I would love to study with you regularly, I completely understand if <u>your schedule</u> won't permit it.

In the last example above, using a noun like “your schedule” instead of “you” can be more indirect and thus polite because it shifts the focus from the person to the person’s schedule.

Use “I (just) wanted”

Although the simple present “I want” is too direct, it is completely appropriate to make a request using the past tense version, “I wanted.” The past tense is an element of conventional politeness, perhaps because it creates distance between you and the imposition of your request. “I wanted” can be used to preface the request, or it can be used as the request itself.

Prefaces the request

I am considering going back to school for interactive design/graphic design at either CreativeWorks or WAT, and <u>wanted</u> to learn more about the working conditions of the field from someone firsthand. If you have any time coming up, I would love to meet with you for an informational interview. Would you have any time in the next few weeks? My schedule is flexible, but I am usually free on...

Functions as the request

I <u>just wanted</u> to check in to see if a decision regarding my employment/part-time status has been made by HR. I haven't heard anything back from Donna. School starts next week, so I'm hoping it will be sorted out as soon as possible.

“Just” is often used with “wanted” to further lessen the imposition of the request. It suggests that the request is not very important. Also note that “I just wanted” is a great way to start a follow-up email, as in the above example in which the writer is “checking in.” (Note: a bit informal.)

Use “please” sparingly

Most of us are taught that “please” makes something more polite. Yet because “please” forces us to make a command in the imperative—as in “Please review them” instead of “Would it be possible for you to review them?”—“please” assumes that the reader will fulfill the request. It thus has a colder, more businesslike tone, and it imposes a sense of urgency on the recipient to complete the task. It is perhaps most appropriate to use when you are in a position of authority.

How would you avoid the word “please” in the following requests?

I would like to get training on GHT at your earliest convenience. Would you <u>please</u> let me know when you are available?	
For my Field Methods of Research course I need to do a book length study on high school ESL students’ literacy practices. Can you <u>please</u> name a book for me.	

But there are exceptions to this rule. In the example below, Robert prepared some routine monthly reports for his boss, whom he addresses as “Jane,” and he is asking her to review them. Every month, he sends an email with a body similar to the one below. What do you think of his use of “please”?

Attached are the monthly reports for January. Please review them and return any edits to me by Thursday, February 14. If you need more time or have any questions just let me know.

Also, “please” is quite appropriate as an ancillary request at the very end of an email, right before the closing. For example: “Please don’t hesitate to contact me” or “Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.” “Please let me know” is perhaps the most common:

Please let me know if you think this is something you would be willing to do...
Please let me know if you would like more information about my project.
Let me know if any of these times are good for you.

Closing

- | | | |
|---|---|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | → | I look forward to{(hearing from)/(speaking with)} you. Thank you. |
| 2 | → | Sincerely,
Henry Cho |

1. Thank-You Line

Check (✓) the thank-you lines that you would use in formal emails.

Thank you, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Thanks

Thanks very much, and I hope to hear from you soon!

2. Complimentary Closing

Identify when you would use the following complimentary closings. Add any you use in your own emails.

Complimentary Closing	Use
Best,	
All the best, (or All best,)	
Best wishes,	
Sincerely,	
Take care,	
No complimentary closing (just your name)	

Editing Practice 1

Email to Professor Whose Lab You Want to Join

Instructions: In the email below, label the greeting, introduction, request, and closing. For each part, think about what you would write differently and why. Then make revisions as appropriate.

Chung-ho Park can join a lab only after he finishes his computer science preliminary exams in May. He is writing this email in October because he wants to introduce himself to Professor Chang, make a good impression on her, and find out if there will be any openings in her lab starting in June. His underlying motivation: that she will invite him to work in her lab starting in June.

Dear Professor Cindy Chang

Hello, Professor. How are you doing today?

My name is Chung-ho Park, a first year Ph.D student in Computer Science. In this quarter, I am using most of my times for preparing preliminary examination and classes. I email you because, after the examination, it might be so late that I would lose my valuable opportunity to join your group in which I have been highly interested since applying for UCLA.

Data mining is my main research theme when I studied for my master degree in Korea. I studied pattern compression and usage, and I reported my results in SCI journal papers and presented at international meetings. Due to this research background, I have strong motivation for studying data mining and finding other applications under your guidance. If you are okay, I want to visit you and introduce myself in detail.

Attached files are my CV and one related paper. I appreciate your reading this email. Thank you. Have a wonderful day!!

Sincerely yours,
Park, Chung-ho

Send Message

Save Draft

Cancel Message

Editing Practice 2

Email to Unresponsive Thesis Committee Member

Instructions: In the email below, label the greeting, introduction, request, and closing. For each part, think about what you would write differently and why. Then make revisions as appropriate.

Sandra has finished her thesis proposal and has emailed her committee members for feedback. John, a committee member with whom she has not been in frequent contact, did not respond to an email she sent two weeks ago. She really needs and wants John's feedback—she has to submit her proposal in a few weeks—so she is emailing him again. In this email, Sandra sends him her proposal (again!) and tries to set up a time to meet.

Hi John,

I am not sure if you got my last email or not, and am writing you to ask a meeting to discuss my thesis proposal. Again, I am sorry about my infrequent emails.

I finished working on it a few weeks ago and I have attached it as a Word document.

I am pretty free in these days, and will appreciate if you can take time for our meeting, so that I can get some critic from you and discuss about my thesis.

Thank you,
Sandra

Send Message

Save Draft

Cancel Message

Editing Practice 3

Email to Professor about Extension on Grading Papers

Instructions: In the email below, label the greeting, introduction, request, and closing. For each part, think about what you would write differently and why. Then make revisions as appropriate.

Rose is a graduate student in History working as a “reader” for Professor Brown. (A “reader” is someone who helps a professor grade papers.) The professor has given the department’s office assistant, Julie, a stack of papers for Rose to pick up. Rose emails him to thank him for doing this, set a meeting time to discuss the grading criteria, and ask him for an extension, as she herself has two papers to write.

Dear Professor Brown,

Thank you for your email. I will pick the student papers up tomorrow afternoon from Julie. Thank you for caring this.

I am wondering if you want to meet me to talk about the final papers this Friday. Otherwise, I am wondering if I can visit your office next week (monday or tuesday). I am sorry to say, but I have two other papers due on this friday and next monday...so...my schedule could be very busy this weekend.

It would be very appreciate if you could give me a few more days to grade the History 120 final papers.

Rose

Send Message

Save Draft

Cancel Message

DOs and DON'Ts

Below is some advice for writing formal emails. Some tips may be obvious, but others may be less so. What are some other DOs and DON'Ts you can think of?

DO...	DON'T...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respond promptly to emails • Use formal greetings (“Dear Professor Einstein,”) • Summarize your purpose for writing in the subject line. • Put a space between the greeting and the first paragraph, as well as the last paragraph and the complimentary closing (such as “Best, John”) • Create a separate paragraph for each new point. (One-sentence paragraphs are okay, but an email composed entirely of one-sentence paragraphs would be excessive.) • Use contractions (e.g., “can’t” instead of “cannot”) for a friendly tone • Keep the email as short as possible—about the size of an email window 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use conversational greetings (“Hi Albert!”) and complimentary closings (“Have a good weekend!”) • Use emoticons :-D ^_^ T_T • Write words in all-capital letters (e.g., “I would REALLY appreciate your feedback”) • Delete words (“Got your message”; “Just wanted to follow up”) or use ellipses (“I was wondering...would you have time to meet on Friday?”) • Use non-standard fonts and colors • Forget to check your spelling • Send an attachment without including a message in the body of the email • Omit capitalization and punctuation (such as commas, periods, apostrophes [e.g., “don’t” instead of “dont”])

Sources and Further Reading

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