

# GUIDE TO EMAILING PROFESSORS

## OPEN STRONG.

1. Address the professor as “Professor [Last Name].” Professors may sign emails with their initials or first name, but stick with “Professor.”
2. Do NOT start your email with “Hey” or “Hi.” Start your email with “Dear Professor X, ...” or “Professor X, ...” And, close your email with your first name (e.g., “Best, Jeffrey”).
3. Include a relevant subject line. Be sure your subject line is simple and descriptive.
4. If you do not know the professor or are enrolled in a large class with them, explain who you are. It should be as simple as, “I’m a first-year in your PSYC 101 course.”

## SOME BASICS.

1. Edit your email. An email is not an essay, but check your spelling, grammar and syntax. Do not use texting slang or abbreviations. And, consider the flow of your email. (Perhaps start with “thank you” rather than ending with “oh, and thank you” as an afterthought.)
2. Avoid phrasing requests as demands. Emails that begin with the words “I need” are irksome. “Please” and “thank you” go a long way.
3. Email within “working business hours.” Do not send an email after 10 pm or before 7 am.
4. Use your [@williams.edu](mailto:williams.edu) email address.

## COMMUNICATION.

1. In an email thread, follow your professor’s lead on how formal you should be. For some professors, even on subsequent emails, you should avoid one-liners such as “Yup 4 pm works,” and include a greeting and sign-off. But, for other professors, a one-line informal text-like response is acceptable.
2. It’s better to communicate earlier rather than later. Before you ask for an extension, speak with your professor well before the due date, so they can help you prepare before things get stressful, such as during midterm season.
3. Reply to your professors. It is common courtesy to respond to an email, especially when you are the only recipient and, in particular, when there is a question or query.

## GMAIL TRICKS.

1. “Undo Send.” With this feature, you have a few seconds to take back that email you did not mean to send. (Find it under “Settings” then “General”)
2. “Boomerang for Gmail.” Write an email now and then automatically send it later. (Find the plug-in at boomeranggmail.com)
3. Use “Themes” to make emailing fun!

## GENERAL SUGGESTIONS.

1. Your professors are people too. Professors were students and understand where you are coming from. They are here for you and want to help. To quote one professor: “Do not be afraid to talk to us. We teach at Williams because we love students and want to see them succeed.” If you make a mistake in an email, don’t worry. We all do it sometimes. Including professors.
2. Keep it short and simple. Professors, like you, do not have all day to read long emails (like this too-long guide). Writing a concise email shows respect for the reader and improves your communication (your future boss will thank you).
3. Be patient. Professors receive many emails; do not be surprised if turnaround time is 24 hours. After that, use your judgment on how to follow up.
4. Respond promptly. Check your email at least twice a day and respond to an email as soon as possible, even if only to say “I will get back to you once I know more.” Letting messages linger invariably leads to forgetting it entirely.
5. A note on mental health and personal difficulties. Regarding personal difficulties, while you should never lie, you do not need to over-share. For more information, read the wonderful guide written by Sally Waters ’16.5 on how to contact your professors about mental health: [bit.ly/mhccemail](http://bit.ly/mhccemail)

## EXPLORING COURSES.

1. Read the course description before emailing the professor. When expressing interest in a course, provide concrete reasons as to why this course is of interest to you (beyond “it satisfies a distribution requirement,” etc.)
2. Be honest. If you are exploring courses, say so. Professors know students do this. Do not lie and say a course is your first choice and then drop it after the first meeting. As one professor said: “Talk is cheap.”
3. Use a tone that is confident, calm, and humble. You do not want to sound like you are trying too hard to get into the class; keep the email comfortable.
4. Do NOT email a professor saying you are interested in their class because you want to go into a particular profession. More often than not, these reasons have nothing to do with the class and reflect a lack of knowledge about the subject.
5. Ask for a syllabus if you want. If you want to learn more about a class and cannot find a syllabus online ([library.williams.edu/syllabus](http://library.williams.edu/syllabus)), ask a professor if they might provide the syllabus for a course you’re interested in.
6. If you’re emailing to add a course, express your intent to attend the first class meeting. Most professors will not let students enroll in a class if they do not attend the first meeting. Show you are committed to enrolling by assuring them you will be there if the professor indicates there may be space available.
7. If you are dropped from a class, do not ask why you were dropped. It sounds like you are second-guessing the professor’s judgment. If you are dropped, ask the professor if you can attend the first class and be put on the wait list.

## SCHEDULING MEETINGS.

1. There is no easy answer for how to best set up a meeting with a professor. Some professors prefer when you send them specific times you are available, but others prefer you ask for a meeting and let them suggest the time.
2. A middle ground would be to suggest broad times you are free, such as “Wednesday after 3 pm” or “Thursday morning before my 11 am class.”
3. Be flexible when trying to schedule a meeting time. Provide multiple times that would work. Yes, this may involve waking up early for a morning meeting.
4. When setting up a meeting, mention what you want to talk about. This could be a general request such as “help organizing my essay” or a specific request such as “how to determine isotope ratios in Problem 3A on this week’s homework.” Providing this information shows the professor you are prepared, and perhaps the professor can effectively answer your question over email.

Guide compiled by Jeffrey Rubel '17, the student chair of the Committee on Educational Affairs (you can contact him with any questions or comments at [jnr2@williams.edu](mailto:jnr2@williams.edu)). Thank you to the following for their submissions to this guide: Professor Ralph Bradburd (ECON), Professor Phoebe Cohen (GEOS), Professor Susan Dunn (HIST), Professor Stephen Fix (ENGL), Professor Paul Karabinos (GEOS), Professor Anthony Nicastro (RLIT), Professor Lee Park (CHEM), Professor Greg Phelan (ECON), Professor Leyla Rouhi (RLSP), Professor Tom Smith (CHEM), Professor Janneke van de Stadt (RUSS), Jackie Lane '16, Luis Urrea '16, Em Nuckols '16, Stephanie Caridad '18, Gary Chen '18, Jack Greenberg '18, Alexandra Griffin '18, and Allegra Simon '18. Also, thank you to Stephanie Caridad '18 (CEA) and to Celeste Pepitone-Nahas '17 and Chris Lyons '17, co-chairs of the Mental Health Committee, for editing earlier drafts.

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## APPENDIX: SAMPLE EMAILS.

Here are examples of acceptance and unacceptable emails to express interest in a course.

### An acceptable email:

*Dear Professor Cohen,*

*I am a first year, and I wanted to write to express interest in taking GEOS 101 this fall. My schedule has been shuffling around a bit since pre-registration, and I have an opening in my schedule and would love to fill it with GEOS 101.*

*In high school, I did not have the opportunity to study geosciences or environmental science. However, I would love to learn about geosciences this fall in GEOS 101 because I think Earth history is interesting and provides important context for understanding the modern environment.*

*Please let me know if there is a possibility of enrolling in GEOS 101. I would love to sit in on the first class meeting in the hopes of a spot opening up.*

*Best,  
Jeffrey*

### An unacceptable email:

*Hi Phoebe,*

*Williams has been dope so far. Can't wait for my learning to start!*

*I was dropped from my computer sci course, and I need a Division 3 course this fall. I saw your course, GEOS 101, and I would love to take it. The course fits in my schedule, and it does not sound like too much work (I'm looking for an easy science class!). I excelled in high school (weighted GPA of 4.2), so I have no doubt I'll be a strng addition to your class. I don't no what geoscience is, but I like geography, so it sounds cool.*

*Let me know when this week you are free to meet in person to talk about 101. Can't wait to meet you!*

*Yay dinosaurs!*