


English  
Language  
&  
American  
Culture ONLINE!


## Email Writing

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THE UNIVERSITY  
of NORTH CAROLINA  
at CHAPEL HILL

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Hallo from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This is an English Language and American Culture Online presentation.

My name is Nigel Caplan, and I am an English as a Second Language Specialist at the UNC Writing Center. This presentation is about writing email, and is suitable for everyone. At the end of the presentation, please take a minute to complete an online evaluation. This will help us design services in the future.

You will be able to read the powerpoint slides more easily if you click the ZOOM button in the top right corner of your screen. You can pause the presentation using the control bar under the video.

# What not to do

Dr. Principal Smith,

How r u? Just shooting you an em to ask u 4 the new txtbks. The class is going SFSG. BTW, the students have been asking abt the field trip. Could you pls em me back b4 2 long to work out the details? Thnx. TTYL.

Mrs. Jones

Email is both common and useful in schools and universities, so it is important to write your emails well. Here's an example of what not to do.

[Read aloud]

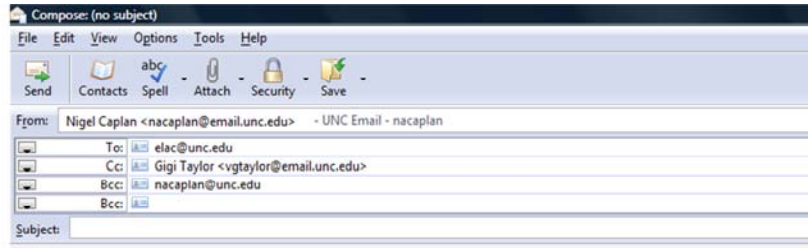
This email fails on three accounts: it does not have a clear purpose or message – there are three topics mixed together. The language is inappropriate for a formal context: too many abbreviations and it's too conversational in tone. And it's not organized well to look like an email.

## The Top Ten Guidelines

1. Use the correct headers
2. Greet the reader
3. Introduce yourself
4. Don't make small talk
5. Set the right tone
6. Use abbreviations carefully
7. Use short paragraphs
8. Close your email
9. Sign your email
10. Check your signature

In this video presentation, I'm going to explain 10 guidelines for writing good clear emails:  
[read them]

# 1: Use the headers correctly



To: *main recipient*  
Cc: *carbon copy*  
Bcc: *background carbon copy*  
Subject: *the topic of your message*

The headers appear above the body of the email. The TO line is the main recipient. You can send your email to many people, of course. However, if you're sending it to some people just for their information – you don't expect a reply from them, for example, it's polite to use the CC – carbon copy – line. You should also say who you're copying and why, for politeness.

A BCC – background carbon copy – sends an invisible copy of the email to someone. That means the people in the TO and CC lines don't see the name and address of the BCC. This can be useful if you want to keep email addresses private. But it can also be dangerous if your recipients don't know that someone else has seen the message, so use it carefully. In the SUBJECT line, always type a clear, short description of your message. Don't include your name here, and be specific. A bad subject line would be "A question." A good subject line would be "Question about today's class"

## 2: Greet the reader

- Hallo Nigel,
- Dr. Smith,
- Dear Dr. Jones,
- Hi / Hallo,
- Hallo everyone,
- Hey! *[very informal!]*
- [nothing]

Just like a letter, an email should usually start with a greeting. This means you need to know how to address your reader, which is not always easy. In American culture, it is very common to use first names, even with professors and instructors when you know them well. However, if you're not sure, use a title -- "Dr. Smith" is usually safe at a university. You can start with just the name, with "hallo" or with "dear." Hallo or hi are quite friendly; dear is more formal but still OK in an email. It is very common to just use someone's name. If you don't know the name of the person, it's fine to start "Hallo" or -- less formally -- "hi." If you're writing to a group, you can use "hallo everyone" or nothing at all. "Hey!" is very informal -- don't use it to your teachers! Sometimes, you can use no greeting at all -- e.g. if you're sending an announcement email, a message to many people, or a reply to someone you know quite well.

### 3: Introduce yourself

- My name is Jim Smith, and I am in your graduate biochemistry seminar.
- I am a postdoctoral scholar at UNC-Chapel Hill.
- I am an international student, and I saw your announcement for...

Unless you're sure the reader knows who you are, you should quickly introduce yourself, as in these examples. Remember that your professors might be teaching hundreds of students, so it is polite to help them remember you! [read]

#### 4. Don't make small talk in a formal email

- **How are you? The weather today is really hot. I don't like it.**  
I am writing because I will be absent from class today ...
- **Did you have a good weekend? I went to the beach.** I would like to ask you to be on my PhD committee ...

Guideline 4: Don't make small talk in a formal email. As you can see in these examples, it's usually inappropriate. [Read]

If you need to explain that you will miss a class or a meeting due to illness, just say that you're sick or not feeling well. Don't give details of your illness to anyone except close friends and doctors!

## 5: Set the right tone

Subject: Pages

Dear Professor Robinson,

Finally, I have something for you to read. I will leave the draft of my paper in your mailbox soon, so please pick it up when you stop by.

Keiko

Source: Swales & Feak, *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*. Michigan, 2004, p. 310)

Set the right tone in your email – that means, if you’re writing to a professor, be polite and slightly formal unless you know it’s OK to be more relaxed. In this example, the email starts politely, but the subject line is unclear, and her request is awkward and even rude. [Read] What exactly does she want the professor to read? When will she leave the draft? And the command form “pick it up” is too strong – using “please” doesn’t help here. A better expression might be “Could you please ..” or “Would you be able to ...”? Keiko should also close the email more politely, as we’ll see shortly.



## 6. Use abbreviations carefully (or not at all)

- ASAP
- BTW
- FYI
- :-) 😊
- :-( ☹️
- C U L8R

Abbreviations are not usually appropriate in a formal email. Save them for emails to your friends. Here are some examples which I would not recommend when writing in professional contexts. [Read]

## 7. Use short paragraphs

Hi Dr. Jones,

I am in your ENGL 101 class on Thursdays, and I have a question about the paper that is due next Tuesday. I'm not sure that I understand what is meant by the following sentence in the prompt:

"Write a 10 page paper arguing for or against requiring ENGL 101 for all UNC students and provide adequate support for your point of view."

I am not sure what you would consider "adequate" support. Would using 3 sources be OK?

Can I come by your office tomorrow at 2:00 pm to talk to you about my question? Please let me know if that fits your schedule. If not, I could also come by on Friday after 1:00.

Thank you,

Tim Smith

Source: "Effective Email Communication", UNC Writing Center Handout.  
<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/Email.html>

Here's a good example of an email to a professor, which I've borrowed from the Writing Center's handout on email. [Read it]

As you can see, the student has broken the email into several short paragraphs, which makes the information clear. In the first paragraph, he introduces himself and his problem. In the next one, he quotes from the assignment. In the third, he explains his confusion and his question. In the last paragraph he makes a polite request for a meeting.

## 8. Close your email

See you in class,

Thank you,

Have a good weekend,

Best wishes,

Sincerely,

I look forward to meeting you,

[Nothing]

Guideline number 8 is to close your email properly. As with greetings, most but not all emails need a closing. Always use a new paragraph for the closing, and end it with a comma – your name comes next.

If you know the person, some good choices are See you in class, Thank you, Have a good weekend, etc.

If you don't know the person, or you are writing a formal email, Sincerely or Best wishes (a bit less formal) are always safe.

I look forward to meeting you works if you are requesting a meeting.

Many emails have no closing, but again this is most appropriate if you know the person well. Even if you don't use a closing, you should sign your name, which is guideline 9.

## 9. Sign your email

- John
- John Smith
- Dr. Smith
- John Smith, Ph.D.

You will sign most emails with your first name, but if you are writing to someone for the first time, or if the person might not remember you, use your full name. Always use the English style of given name followed by last name.

If you're a professor, you might prefer to sign as "Dr. Smith" – that way, students know that you prefer them to call you "Dr. Smith" and not "John."

We usually only include degrees (John Smith, PhD) in very formal settings and job applications.

## 10. Signature

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And finally, use an appropriate signature – that’s usually your title, address, and phone number which your email software adds to the end of your messages. You can also use a simpler signature:

John Smith,  
Doctoral Candidate in Chemistry,  
UNC-Chapel Hill.

This may seem obvious, but make sure there’s nothing unnecessary in your signature when writing a formal email. I’ve received emails with strange quotations, Chinese sayings in Chinese characters, and little pink jumping dogs, which doesn’t help the tone of the email!



Website: [www.unc.edu/writingcenter/elac](http://www.unc.edu/writingcenter/elac)

Blog: [eslonthehill.wordpress.com](http://eslonthehill.wordpress.com)

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Your feedback is very important to us! Thank you!



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I hope you now have an idea how to compose a good, appropriate email in English. Thank you for watching this English Language & American Culture online presentation. Please take a quick survey to evaluate this presentation. The address is on the screen and on the webpage where you found the link to this presentation. There you can also find a link to the UNC Writing Center's useful handout on email communication. For more information about other ELAC services, please visit our homepage or my blog, ESL on the Hill.

This has been an ELAC Online presentation, a service of the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm Nigel Caplan, and I hope to see you again online or in person very soon.