



Guidelines for Students when Writing Emails

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Introduction

For some time now, emails have been the preferred means of communication between students and lecturers, outside face-to-face interaction in class or during office-hours.

These emails are usually short and to the point, but often they contain grammatical mistakes and/or stylistic infelicities which students can avoid by adhering to some basic guidelines.





Forms of address

The easiest way to address someone is to write *Dear X*. English does not distinguish between *Liebe(r)* and *Sehr geehrte(r)* as German does.

Do not write *Hallo X* (as you might in German). The English equivalent might be *Hi*, but that is very colloquial and would be normal among students but not appropriate between students and their lecturers. You must be on firstname terms to say *Hi* to someone.

Titles

In the university context, there are three options: *Mr.*, *Dr.* and *Prof.* (do not write *Prof. Dr.*, this is not done in English).

Note that although it is normal to address a doctor or professor as *Herr X* in German *Mr. X* is used only for people who are neither doctor nor professor. In the American context, it is, however, common to address professors as *doctor*, or *Dr.* in writing, in order to be slightly less formal.



Titles

Sensitivity to titles is a personality issue. Some individuals do not mind a somewhat informal address, others take umbrage at not seeing their academic title in the opening of an email.

You may write in English: *Dear Peter Jones* (firstname + surname). This is not disrespectful and is very common when writing to strangers in contemporary English. Only use the firstname of a lecturer when you have agreed on this with him or her already.

If you want to be on the safe side, simply write *Dear Dr. Jones* or *Dear Prof. Smith* and nobody can take offence.



How to address a lady

When you are writing to a female member of staff, who is not doctor or professor, then you must use the currently accepted method in English of addressing females without indicating their marital status. This is done by using the form *Ms*, e.g. *Dear Ms Jones*.

German students should note that this is not *Miss* (the older method of referring to an unmarried woman) and it is not *Mrs* (again an older address form, this time for a married woman).

When speaking remember that *Ms* is pronounced [miz] with a voiced [z] at the end (the older form is [mis] with a voiceless [s]).



Body of email

To illustrate the text of an email a simple example is discussed. This is where a student is sending a presentation to a lecturer.

Opening a sentence: do not use *herewith*. This is a literal translation of *hiermit* but it is archaic in English and sounds very stilted. The same is true of *hereby*.

Choice of tense: do not use the simple present because in English this implies a repeated action, e.g. *I send you my presentation* implies that you do this again and again. So what you do in English is use an imperative preceded by *please*, e.g. *attached please find our presentation for Tuesday*.



Body of email

If you wish, you may use the present continuous in an email, i.e. you could say *I am sending you our presentation for tomorrow as an attachment.*

If you are referring to the future, then use this tense in English, e.g. *I will bring along the copies to class tomorrow.*

Requesting a reply: be indirect and use the conditional. For instance, *perhaps you might let me know if the presentation is acceptable, could you please drop me a line when you get a chance.*

This might seem unduly verbose in German but is normal in English correspondence.



Body of email

Some typical vocabulary you might need in an email to a lecturer:

Outline	(G. Struktur)
References	(G. bibliographische Angaben)
Thesis	(G. schriftliche Examensarbeit)
Term essay	(G. schriftliche Semesterarbeit)
Written exam	(G. schriftliche Prüfung)
Orals (usually in the plural)	(G. mündliche Prüfung)
Mark (English)	(G. Note)
Grade (American)	





Salutation

There are a variety of ways to end an email in English. The simplest way is *Best regards* or *Best wishes*. The expression *Yours truly* is quite stilted as are all the other variations on this, e.g. *Yours sincerely*, *Yours faithfully*, etc.

In email correspondence, shortened forms are very common so that *Regards* or just *Best* is frequently found. That is not considered impolite and is fitting to this digital medium.



Identifying yourself

The easiest way is simply to use your own firstname and surname: *Petra Schmitz*. If you know your lecturer well, you can just use your firstname, that is up to yourself. Again, whatever you feel comfortable with should be your guideline.

You may find that your lecturers reply using your firstname, e.g. *Dear Petra*. This is not an encroachment on your privacy, but just a sign of informality or friendliness. Some lecturers use both firstname and surname, i.e. *Dear Petra Schmitz* which is the more neutral address.



Identifying others

If you have call in an email to refer to another student, then just say *my fellow student* (note: the word *colleague* is only used for professional co-workers) or just the firstname (and surname) of the person in question.

Do not refer to another student using *Mr* or *Ms*. This sounds very strange in English; it is not polite, just weird.



And don't forget

1) For security reasons and to ensure that your email gets through to its addressee, use your university email address, e.g. maria.schmitz@stud.uni-due.de.

2) Always specify the topic of the email (German: *Betreff*). Some spam filters will not allow emails through which do not have a topic.

3) If you are sending an attachment, give it an explanatory name, e.g. not: *mein-referat.ppt* or *my-essay.doc*, but something like: *English_in_China_(Schmitz_and_Meyer).ppt*.





Think about your lecturers...

We all get lots and lots of emails (not just from students) so do not expect us to always answer within ten minutes.

A reasonable time frame for an answer would be: two or three working days during term or five to seven outside of term.

If you do not get a reply within this time, then just send the email again. It may well be that the receiver of the email did not notice it in among all the others or that it was suppressed by the spam filter (see above) or whatever.





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