**How to Write a Professional Email**

SUMMARY

* When writing to a professor, researcher, or administrator, a more polite style of email writing may increase your credibility as a fellow professional
* Keep it short, and avoid informal slang and contractions
* Professionalism in emails is critical whether you’re writing to your professor or whether you are a professor who’s writing to a journal editor

New graduate students and early-career researchers may be daunted by having to write professional emails, particularly if English is not their native language. Most of us are used to writing quick, informal messages to our friends, often filled with slang and abbreviations and lacking any regular structure. However, when writing to a professor, researcher, or administrator, a more polite style of email writing may increase your credibility as a fellow professional. The two main practices necessary for professional email writing are **formal tone** and **concise writing**.

Formal tone

Using a formal tone will enhance the professionalism of your emails by conveying your respect for the email recipient’s position. This includes avoiding [contractions](http://www.aje.com/en/arc/editing-tip-contractions) and slang and being sure to use polite terms, such as “please,” “thank you,” “sorry,” “apologies,” “if possible,” and “at your convenience,” where needed. Your professional emails should also be well structured, with an opening and a closing bracketing the body of the message. In particular, you should begin your emails with “Dear” rather than “Hi” or a similar informal greeting, and formal closings may include “Sincerely,” “Thank you,” “Best wishes,” and “Best regards.” Depending on the context, and particularly if you have never met the person before, you should err on the side of using his or her title and last name (such as “Ms. Arc,” “Mr. Arc,” “Dr. Arc,” or “Prof. Arc”) rather than just the first name or the full name; only once you have been told that it is permissible to use the recipient’s first name or once the recipient has signed his or her first name to a response should you consider using this more informal greeting.

### Concise writing

The people to whom you may be writing are likely busy with teaching, research, and/or administrative work, so it is best to be concise and to the point to convey your respect for their time. This includes avoiding the common pitfall of spending time stating your name in the first sentence; your name will be signed at the bottom of the email, so this step is unnecessary. If possible, limit your message to only a few sentences, mentioning who recommended that you write (if applicable), briefly describing your background if the person is not familiar with you, clearly stating the purpose of your email and the expected next step (often a request), and thanking the individual for his or her time. As a result, the body of an effective professional email could be as brief as 2-5 sentences long. Note that the subject line should also directly reflect the purpose of your email.

### Example

One common situation is a first- or second-year graduate student needing to contact a professor regarding learning about the professor’s research and potentially joining his or her research group. This can be a particularly intimidating circumstance, especially if the student is new to research, the researcher is prominent, and/or the student has never met the researcher before. Here is an example of a professional-sounding, concise email that could be written in this case, consistent with the tips provided above:

Subject: Meeting request

Dear Dr. Arc,

Dr. Aje recommended that I contact you. I am a first-year graduate student in immunology with an interest in innate immunity. If possible, I would be interested in learning more about your research and potential rotation opportunities in your research group. Please let me know if you would be available to meet sometime next week.

Thank you,

Stu Dent

We hope that today’s editing tip has clarified a few ways to maintain professionalism in your emails. These tips are applicable for first-year graduate students, as described above, and for professors writing to journal editors. If you have any questions on this topic, please write to us at [AskAnExpert@aje.com](mailto:AskAnExpert@aje.com?subject=writing%20an%20email). AJE wishes you the best!