The scenario: It’s Tuesday afternoon, the day before the exam, and you’re not sure about the material. It’s too late to attend the professor’s office hours. As you sit at your computer, staring at the open email window, you freeze. How do you email the professor?

Emailing a professor might seem daunting, especially if he or she does not know you individually among the sea of hundreds of other students in your lecture class or college. But following a few general principles will help you establish communications with your professors without worrying that you’ve lost face.

Keep these five things in mind when emailing your professor.

**1. Be Formal**  
Always use a proper salutation when emailing a professor — even if you know the professor personally or professionally. Use “Dear” to begin the email and address he or she by the name you would use if speaking to the professor in person (Dear Dr. \_\_\_\_ or Dear Ms. \_\_\_\_\_\_). If you do address the professor by first name, still use “dear” to set up a respectful tone for the letter.

**2. Specify**  
Specify who you are by first and last name, and specify which class you are taking before diving into the specifics. Professors often teach anywhere from two to six classes per semester and usually have hundreds of students to serve. State your name, the class you are taking and the course section (the professor might teach three sections of your course and will need to know which one you attend).

**3. Be thorough**  
Any time you send a message, you should have two things in mind: goal and audience. Your audience here is a professor, who is an authority figure. Your goal could be any number of things, from clarifying the reading assignment to asking for an extension. Whatever your goal may be, you’ll want to anticipate any questions the professor may have and incorporate the information into your message. For example:

*Dear Professor Smith,*

*My name is John Green and I attend your ENC4214 section 9 course. I missed class on Tuesday and would like to find out the assignment for Thursday. The syllabus only lists a reading assignment, but I wanted to make sure nothing is due to hand in Thursday. Thank you for your help.*

*Sincerely,  
John Green*

The example above shows that John indicated that he had already checked the syllabus. This saves time and allows the professor to simply respond, “Yes, there is a written assignment and it is \_\_\_\_\_” or “No, there is no written assignment,” knowing that John has already gone to the syllabus.

**4. Be kind**  
Professors are people, too. They have friends, families, hobbies and favorite foods. So when you email a professor, remember that you are not writing to an entity, a building or a computer — you are communicating with a real person. Be kind, be thankful and never come across as demanding. This can be accomplished with the “You Attitude,” a concept that asks you to consider yourself as the reader. What words or sentences would be off-putting? For example:

**“Get back to me as soon as possible.”** This sentence is demanding, pushy and gives a direct command — something you want to avoid. After all, you are communicating with a higher-up.

**“Please advise me at your convenience.”** This conveys respect and awareness. The professor is not a public servant and doesn’t need to do anything as soon as possible for you.

Using the “You Attitude” establishes goodwill and respect and increases the chances you will receive the help you need. It also won’t hurt to thank the professor at the end of the email, which establishes good rapport (see the example above).

**5. Proofread**  
Perhaps the most important and final step, proofreading ensures that you come across as professional and caring. An email full of errors and faulty sentence structure is sure to enflame a busy professor. After all, if your writing is unclear, the reader has to work to understand what you want. Do the work on your end and make the message is clear and easy to read. For a short message, don’t get fancy. Use simple syntax (subject-verb-object) and proofread for run-on sentences, misspellings and other errors.

Together these tips will make emailing your professor a breeze.