



## Email Messages Guide: Reading Cues for Shifting Tone

As you develop relationships on campus, you may find that the tone of your communication, both written and spoken, changes over time and shifts between more and less formal based on the content of the email. When you are communicating with professors, mentors, peers, or academics who are in a supervisory position, you can see what tone they set in emails and use a similar or slightly more formal style and level of formality. If you have a supervisory role, you will likely be expected to set the tone.

### Greetings

If you are sending an email to a new contact, such as someone you have not met in person, or a new professor, supervisor, or mentor, use a formal greeting. Also, use the most formal title the recipient has. For example, if the recipient has a Ph.D. and is a professor, use *Prof.* or *Dr.* in the greeting.

A formal greeting: **Dear** + {**Mr./Ms./Dr./Prof.**} + [**Last Name**]

With friends, colleagues you work with regularly, and professors who have used these informal greetings with you, use an informal greeting: “**Hi/Hello** [**First Name**]”. If you are sending an email to a new contact, a professor, supervisor, or mentor, first use a formal greeting, such as “Dear Prof. [Last Name]”. Then, see how they sign their name in their reply and use that in your next email. For example, if they sign the reply with their first name, you can start your next email with “Hello [First Name]”.

If you are emailing back and forth with the same person, you may begin to leave out the greetings and closing lines. At that point in the exchange, you and the recipient know who is emailing, and the conversational nature of the longer email chain does not require greetings or closing lines. In this case, the email signature block is enough.

### Word Choice

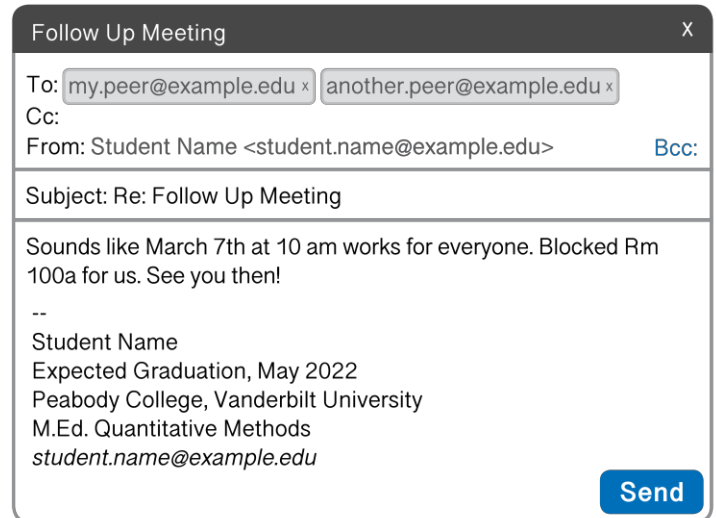
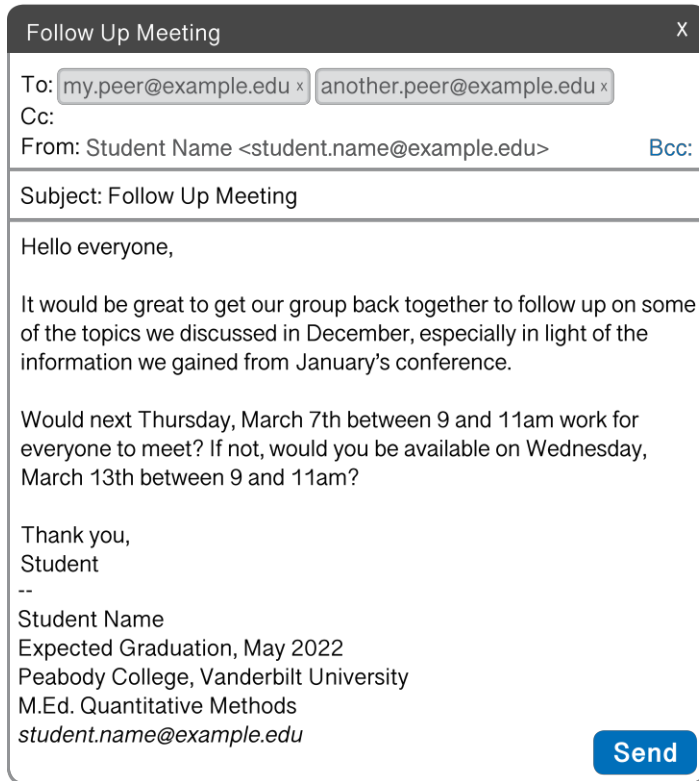
Emails cannot include your body language or intonation: they are only written words. Therefore, the significance of your word choices is magnified. At first, emails sent to new contacts will use more academic and formal word choices. As email exchanges continue, and as you get to know the recipient better, see how their use of language shifts and you can follow their lead. Over time you may notice that their word choices become more casual, and you can mirror their language use. Below are three example sentences that mean the same thing but vary in formality:

- “Thank you for **your patience** as we **coordinate** the details.” (Formal)
- “Thanks for **waiting** while we **work out** the details.” (Informal: sent to a professor, supervisor, or mentor)
- “Thanks for **hanging in there** while we **figure out** the details.” (Informal: sent to a peer)

The informal examples use more idiomatic language and phrasal verbs common to spoken exchanges, while the formal example has a single-word verb that is more scholarly. These changes have been highlighted for you. Also, notice that the language sent to the supervisor is slightly more formal than the email sent to the peer.

## Sentence Structure

When emails are formal, you will be expected to use full sentences with more complex structures like you would often see in an academic writing setting. However, after several emails are exchanged, and as you work more closely with the recipient, you may start to see reduced sentence structures and more casual language. The email on the left is a sample of a first email, and the email on the right is a sample after four emails have been exchanged with the group.



As you read these examples, notice:

- the use of formal phrasing in the first email such as, “in light of the information we gained.”
- the first email uses a greeting and closing, but the fourth email does not because everyone knows who is writing.
- the fourth email contains reduced sentence structures (for example, there is no subject in the sentence).
- the more casual language choices in the fourth email such as, “sounds like” and “works,” have colloquial meanings.
- both emails keep the automatic signature block.

## Summary

Our Email Messages Guide resource series was developed as a way to provide English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners the opportunity to better write and edit emails.

We hope this guide will provide you with strategies for more productive email communication. If you have questions, please contact [elc@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:elc@vanderbilt.edu).

Find this guide and more online at: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/elc/resources/email-messages-guide/>