

# Explore Other Genres: Formal Emails

One of the common types of writing you will encounter is writing emails in English. The expectations for formality and content vary dramatically in this format depending on to whom you are writing and the topic of the email. For this section of the course, we will focus on formal emails like the ones you will likely send in the future to professors or employers.

The image shows an email interface with the following components and labels:

- subject**: Points to the "Subject: Speaking request" line.
- salutation**: Points to "Dr. Damron,".
- opener**: Points to the Korean greeting "안녕하십니까?".
- introduction**: Points to the first paragraph of the body text.
- short (polite!) request**: Points to the sentence "I'm reaching out to ask if you'd be willing to come to the ELC and present at our weekly soup 'n' seminar."
- details (if necessary)**: Points to the second paragraph of the body text.
- closer**: Points to "We look forward to hopefully hearing from you!".
- signature**: Points to "AnnMarie Saunders" at the bottom.

# The Structure

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An email has a very different look than the other types of writing discussed in this text. However, there are still similarities when you are writing a formal email. The basic outline of a formal email is as follows:

## 1. Subject line (similar to an essay title)

Although the subject line is similar to a title for a typical essay, it is important to keep the information limited to only what is necessary. This type of "title" is not meant to be creative, but rather to give the reader an immediate idea of the content of the email. Do not leave this field of the email blank. Keep the ideas brief, and put the most important information first.

Most purposes for emailing can be boiled down to a single noun phrase that highlights the most important information.

## 2. Salutation

The salutation is where you address the reader. You should use the title that best shows the level of formality. If the reader has a title, be sure to use the appropriate form. Do not assume it is appropriate to use only a first name in the salutation.

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### Most Common English Titles (honorifics)

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Mr.	all men
Miss	unmarried women
Mrs.	married women
Ms.	woman regardless of marital status
Dr.	someone with a PhD, a medical doctor or veterinarian

Professor	used less frequently in the US than Dr.
President/Principal/Dean/Director/Chief Executive	other titles specific to the job may also be used
To Whom it May Concern	when emailing to a general office/business account without knowing the name of the person to address your question to

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Some examples of different formal salutations include:

- (Title + full name of recipient only)
- Hello
- Good morning/afternoon
- Dear (full name of recipient)

### **3. Opener (similar to an essay hook)**

The opener should match the level of formality of the email and reflect your relationship with the reader. In other words, a salutation such as "How's it going?" would only be appropriate in an email to a friend. A more common formal version of this would be "I hope this email finds you well."

Similarly to how a conversation in English begins with a pleasantry, or a polite question about your well-being that is not intended to get a true response, this opener exists only for the sake of manners. No one expects an actual response to the opener.

### **4. Introduction**

At this point in the email, you will introduce yourself to the reader. This helps to create context for why you are sending the email. For example, you might mention the course you are taking or the department you work in. Unless you have communicated with the individual multiple times, it is helpful to use this space to help the

reader identify you.

## **5. Short request (similar to an essay thesis)**

After you have created this brief introduction, you can immediately introduce your purpose for the email. Remember to keep his request polite and clear. Include any references to specific times, places, or products involved in the request. In general, you should try to limit an email to one main idea.

At some point in your email, it is good to acknowledge that you are likely asking them to do additional work, adjust their schedule, or some otherwise inconvenient favor. Where possible, provide some flexibility in the request and emphasize gratitude.

## **6. Necessary details (similar to an essay supporting ideas)**

You may need to include additional information about the request after it is clearly stated. For example, the reader may need to know about the topic of the presentation, concerns about a project, or an outline of the agenda for a meeting. The request should be separate enough to be quickly understood, and this section allows for the additional clarification of the situation. Again, remember to maintain appropriate distance from the reader by not oversharing beyond what is essential to know.

In this section of the email, it may be helpful to use a numbered or bulleted list to separate pieces of information related to the topic. This is a good way to create blank space in the email and to keep it focused on the essentials.

## **7. Closer (concluding sentence)**

As with a typical concluding sentence, it can be helpful to end your

email with a sentence that states expectations or a call to action. The most common closers are either in the form of requesting a timely response or a proposing a meeting time.

## 8. Signature

Always remember to close the email with your name and any other identifying information. This could include a phone number (if needed) or your job title, but can also be as simple as just your name. Don't forget to use the form of your name that would be most easily recognizable to the reader.

### 1 Exercise: Outline

*Read the situation below and create an outline to show how you would organize your email.*

Your professor has scheduled office hours. Unfortunately, you are unable to make it at that time because of a schedule conflict. You have a question about the course that would be too difficult to discuss over email.

### 2 Exercise: Draft an email

*Read the situation below and create an email draft explaining the situation and offering a solution.*

You transferred from Ensign College to BYU Provo. Although you took an Introduction to Economics class as part of your Associate's Degree at Ensign, the class credit did not transfer and you are expected to take the class again. Write an email to the BYU Enrollment Services explaining why you think the course should be re-evaluated to count toward your degree at BYU.

## Polite Requests

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One of the important aspects of writing a formal email is using polite language to make requests. Culturally speaking, a request in English is more polite the less direct it is. Note the difference between someone saying "I would appreciate it if you would wash your hands before dinner." vs "Wash your hands."

Two ways that grammar can support creating a polite request is through the use of modals and *if* clauses. In the example above, the word *would* is used to soften the request. This can also be done using modals like *could*, *might*, and *can*. Dependent clauses with *if* soften a request as well by focusing on the reader's ability to decline the request and the writer's awareness of the potential disruption the request may cause.

Examples of polite requests:

- "I would appreciate it if you could [request]."
- "It would be [adj] if you could [request]."
- "If you could [request], that would be [adj]."
- "Can/Could you/I [request]?"
- "Would you/I be able to [request]."
- "Would [time/request] work for you?"
- "If possible...?" / "Would it be possible to [request]?"
- "Do/would you mind [request]?"
- "Would you be willing to [request]?"

### 3 Exercise: Polite requests

Your teacher will assign a partner to you. With your partner, practice 2-3 different ways of making a polite request in each of the following scenarios:

- You need to borrow a stranger's phone to make a call because you lost yours.
- You are sick on the day of a major presentation and need to reschedule it.
- You need your team at work to come to an urgent extra meeting about a project.

Other common words used to demonstrate politeness are known as hedging adverbs. These are words such as *just*, *only*, *possibly*, *maybe*, and *perhaps*. Writers will include these to increase the courtesy felt in a request.

- I am just emailing to ask if you could check the budget report attached in this email.
- Would you possibly be available for me to interview for my career development course? It would only take twenty minutes, I know you are very busy.

### 4 Exercise: Draft an email

Read the situation below and create an email draft explaining the situation and offering a solution.

You have a personal emergency that you need to take care of during one of your class times. However, the schedule for that class day includes information that is essential for the upcoming test. You know that the professor teaches another section of that class at a later time which you could attend after resolving the personal issue.

# Formatting

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Formal emails follow many of the same conventions of formatting and style as an essay. It should be written in an easy to read font in a 10-12pt size. Colorful text should be avoided unless necessary to draw attention to something (such as a deadline). Do not use ALL CAPITAL LETTERS at any point in your email because the internet culture designates this as yelling (angry). You are welcome to instead use bolded, italicized, or underlined text to make an emphasis. Expressive punctuation (such as multiple exclamation points or ellipsis) and emojis should also be avoided. The main difference between an email and an essay is that an email does not need to be indented, and can instead just be left-aligned.

## 5 Exercise: Choose a prompt

*Choose one of the prompts below as your situation for an email that you will submit as your final assignment. Remember to explain the situation, propose solutions, and maintain an appropriate level of formality.*

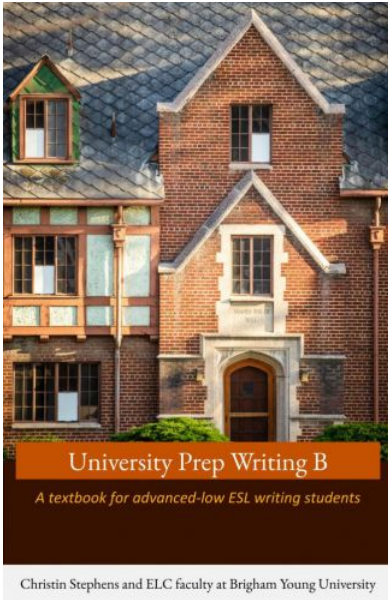
- Request to add a course that is currently full
- Contact a potential employer about your interest in applying for a job (no job is currently open)
- Invite a speaker to present at an upcoming club event
- Ask for a prerequisite class to be waived
- Send a thank you after an interview



## **Responding to a formal email**

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The advice here applies to responding to a formal email, not just when you initiate the conversation yourself. In some cases, someone in higher authority may not begin the conversation in a formal manner, but you should still maintain the standards here unless told otherwise. For example, a professor may ask students to call her by her first name rather than her last name or an office environment may frequently use emojis. Once you are aware of the expectations for that context, you are able to adjust your writing accordingly.



Ward, J., , Lutz, S., Freeman, S., & Woffinden, K. (n.d.).  
*University Prep Fall Writing B*. EdTech Books.  
[https://edtechbooks.org/up\\_writing\\_fall](https://edtechbooks.org/up_writing_fall)