



Faculty of Engineering
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COMPOSING PROFESSIONAL E-MAILS: THE OPENING

The beginning of an e-mail, known as the opening, sets the tone for the rest of the e-mail. It is important that the opening you choose matches the intended level of formality. Additionally, mistakes in this part will create a poor first impression. This document covers how to create proper, error-free e-mail openings.

SALUTATION

This is typically the first word that will appear in an e-mail. It is possible to not have one and start with the name, but this comes off as abrupt and rude. Table 1 displays some common salutations and some notes about their usage.

Table 1: Common E-mail Salutations

Salutation	Notes
Hello	The most common salutation; usage is acceptable in most scenarios
Hi	Less formal than hello; usage acceptable with people you already know, especially if you have already had e-mail correspondence with them
Dear	Used in very formal situations or, oddly, in correspondence with very close relations
Hey	Extremely informal; reserved for casual e-mails with friends; avoid usage professionally

In cases where you do not know the name of the recipient, a phrase like "To Whom It May Concern:" can act as the entire opening (note that all letters are capitalized). However, it is always best to make the effort to try to find out the name of the person who will be reading the correspondence. With "To Whom It May Concern:" specifically, it is very commonly used in cases where the reader just does not care about the identity of the recipient. Another possibility is to say "Good [Morning/Afternoon/Evening]" instead. It does not sound as stuffy, but it could potentially create confusion in situations where the time zone is different or when the e-mail is read long after it was originally sent.

TITLES AND NAMES

The name of the recipient comes after the salutation. The next decision is how this person is to be addressed. Using a full name is uncommon and awkward. The preference is for either a title and then the **family** name or a given name alone. The combination of title plus a given name is a common mistake made by international students, and it makes the reader think the sender is inexperienced with communicating formally. Table 2 shows some common titles (formally known as *honorifics*) and notes about their usage. The abbreviated forms are more common than the full forms, and in some cases the full forms would seem odd if used in an e-mail.

Table 2: Common Titles

Title (abbreviation)	Title (full form)	Notes
Dr.	Doctor	Used for recipients who have attained a Phd in a field of academics
Prof.	Professor	Used for an instructor who is a professor as opposed to an instructor who does not have a permanent position at the university
Mr.	Mister	Used for any male, regardless of marital status
Mrs.	Missus	Used for married females exclusively, and in most cases you will not know the marital status of the recipient; avoid using this one
-	Miss	Used for unmarried females; its usage is normally reserved for girls or young teens who would be unlikely to be married in North America; due to its connotations, its usage should be avoided, even if marital status is known
Ms.	-	Used for any female recipient; this is the most versatile and most widely used for females

The use of the above comes with its own nuances. Firstly, in British English, there are no periods after these abbreviations. In North America, the tendency is to include the period. Second, there is an inherent danger in assuming the gender of a recipient, especially if the judgment is based on name alone. In recent years, the practice of putting one's accepted pronouns online has become more common, but many people still do not have this information presented in an accessible way. The old "Dear Sir/Madam" that was once widely used is now not recommended because it is presuming the recipient must be one of these two gender identities.

Additionally, the choice of using a title + family name or a given name alone is tricky. This is a personal call regarding the presumed relationship between the sender and the recipient. Some managers will prefer to be called by a given name, while others would be offended by an employee using their given name only. One strategy is to use the title + family name in the initial e-mail. When you get a response, look at how the e-mail was signed. If it was signed using only a first name, usually that means it is acceptable to use the first name only in a response. If there is just a branded signature or the person has used a full name at the bottom of the e-mail, then you should continue using a title + family name. This condition might change over time, and as you get more familiar with the person, using a given name only might become acceptable.

PUNCTUATION

While the previous material was admittedly confusing, the punctuation is straightforward. When you already know the recipient and you have some sort of relationship, you use a comma to end your opening. If you do not know the identity of the recipient, or the recipient's identity is known but you do not have any sort of relationship with the person, a colon is used instead.

Hello Dr. Gernet, ← Sender has likely communicated with recipient before; they know each other

Dear Dr. Gernet: ← Sender does not know recipient, and this is probably the first communication