**Dear Student: My Name Is Not 'Hey'**

March 31, 2015

A recent email to me from a student:

**“Hey!**

**I wont be in class today, I feel very sick and need to sleep all day. I know we are watching the movie today so il watch that before class on Tuesday. let me know if there’s anything else I miss! I have a friend in the class who should bring u my paper but I have attached it here as well just in case.**

**Again I apologize for my absence but I wouldn’t be able to stay awake and let alone focus on the material in class and would just like to sleep out this cold/flu hybrid. Thanks a lot and have a great weekend! Also let me know if I need a Doctor’s note, the health center is just backed up on appointments and wouldn’t be able to take me till at least Monday.”**

**Unsigned.**

The student who sent me this email is not a childhood friend, my next-door neighbor, a sibling, or someone I play basketball with. I am their professor. I have a name by which I ought to be addressed. And it is not “Hey!” The student might as well have said, “Hey boo, how you doin’?”

This may seem like a simple gripe about etiquette. But for many women and professors of color who teach in predominantly-white classrooms, it’s more than that. The assumed familiarity in a message like this implies that instructors like us are more laid-back or “down,” that we don’t have to be shown the same respect as our white male colleagues, and that our classrooms are perceived as one giant bro-fest.

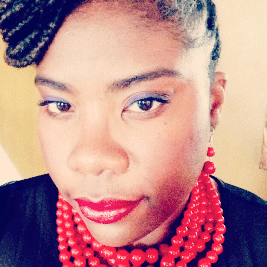
“Any professor who doesn't think this is a major issue probably isn't a person of color or a woman — or at least a woman from a working-class background,” says Lisa Guerrero, an associate professor of critical culture, gender, and race studies at Washington State University. “White male professors demand respect and it's expected. When women and professors of color demand respect we're being unreasonable.”

“Truth be told, I don't like being called ‘Doctor,’” she says. “But a student damn well better call me ‘Professor.’ Not because I said so, but because I deserve it, and all those like me who didn't have a chance to make it here deserve it.”

Different professors have different takes on this, of course. Some say they prefer that students keep correspondences casual: They’d rather be addressed by their first names. Others include guidelines in their syllabi that detail the appropriate way to communicate via email. For those professors, writing a proper salutation, spelling out words (like “you” instead of “u”), and including a signature are all things that matter.

I retracted my student’s name from the email and shared it with a few professors and asked how they could transform it into a teachable moment for students. How should faculty members respond to these types of encounters? Here are some ideas — some colorful, some a little more by-the-books.

***Here’s what we’d like to say:***

**Tracey M. Lewis-Giggetts   
*adjunct professor of English and writing***

What up, Doe!

Yoooo, thanks for the message! I feel you on that sleep thing. Sometimes when I'm just sick to my stomach over too-familiar students who think they can talk to me any ol' kind of way, as if I didn't earn the right be called ‘Professor’ or, heck, ‘Ms.’, I just want to go to the crib, slide up in the sack, and sleep the foolishness away. It feels like some crazy entitled/disrespectful hybrid is going around nowadays and it would really help to be able to sleep it out. I’m just saying.

But check it: You got that syllabus, right? You know, that large document I gave you at the start of the semester that runs down everything you need to know about class policy? Yeah, that. Pretty clearly states you need a doctor's note/documentation for the day you missed.

Sleep tight,  
ZZZZZZZZ

**Kevin Heffernan   
*associate professor of film and media arts*   
*Southern Methodist University***

Dear Student,

Thank you for the note. I am sorry you could not be with us last Thursday, and I appreciate your efforts to catch up on what you missed. I always recommend that when a student misses a class, they meet with a student who was present to meet with them for 20 minutes or so to explain what was covered in class. This gives both the student who missed class and the student who was present a chance to engage with the material and to gain greater understanding of the ideas we explore throughout the semester.

That said, your word choice baffles me. Contrary to what we heard in the schoolyard, “Hey” is not “for horses,” because it isn’t even spelled the same. In fact, it gained currency around the year 1200 as a verbal expression of “challenge, rebuttal, anger, or derision.” And those just aren’t the kind of groovy feelings I try to foster with the beanbag chairs in my office. [Note: I actually have two kissing-lips-shaped beanbag chairs in my office.] And by “man,” I certainly hope you were not abbreviating “The Man,” because I assure you that I am an ally in the struggle and seek to level all social distinctions and hierarchies as you were trying to do in the informal wording of your communiqué.

But as Saul Alinsky reminds us in Rules for Radicals, we must subvert by stealth, so future letters to teachers, administrators, prospective employers, and tax assessors should maintain the highest levels of professional courtesy. This will enable you to gain their trust and eventually subvert the system from within.

In solidarity,  
Professor

**Takiyah Nur Amin   
*assistant professor of dance*   
*University of North Carolina at Charlotte***

Good afternoon:

I hope all is well with you. Please note that all the questions you ask in your email are addressed in the syllabus. The syllabus delineates clearly what we will be doing in class each day and states that if a student misses a class meeting, it is their responsibility to get notes and information from a fellow student.

In the future, please observe the “netiquette” guidelines listed on Page 3. Beginning your email with an appropriate greeting is expressly noted there. “Hey” is shonuff not an appropriate greeting for an email between you and your professor: We ain’t homies. We ain’t friends. And while I genuinely feel warmly toward my students, the assumption of peership in your email is not cool.

I need you to consider why you thought it was alright to address me so informally. Is this how you communicate with all of your professors or just the ones that are young black women?

Look, man. This level of fooleywang has got to stop. Get it together.

Dr. Amin

***Here's what we'd really say:***

**Lisa Guerrero   
*associate professor of critical culture, gender, and race studies*   
*Washington State University***

Dear Student,

Because you are sick, I will make a one-time exception and respond to your email. But please note that in the future any emails you send to me that begin with “Hey” will not receive a response, a practice that is made clear in the course’s “netiquette” policy. While fever or dehydration may have caused you to forget, here are a few things you will want to re-familiarize yourself with when you are well again:

1. As it states in the “netiquette” policy, you should consider communications with me, your professor, as professional communications. I’m not your friend, your roommate, your parent, the Twittersphere, or your journal. In other words, don’t address me with “Hey,” “Hi there,” “Lisa,” or worse yet, no address at all. Additionally, don’t use text language, emojis, or hashtags (#thatwontendwellforU). In exchange, I will communicate with you professionally as well.

2. As it happens, you already know what you will miss in class as it is outlined in the course syllabus. You will likely want to ask the friend who’s kind enough to be turning in your paper if she’ll also be kind enough to share her notes with you. If, after reading her notes, you have specific questions, feel free to come to my office hours, which are listed (you guessed it!) on the syllabus.

3. While I appreciate you letting me know of your absence, you actually don’t have to. As it states in the syllabus, you can have four absences in my class — I don’t care for what reason. If you’re in bed hopped up on NyQuil for the plague-like cold that is hitting everyone, or you slept through your alarm, or you’re taking a “sick day” at the beach, I don’t need to know. But if you still feel obligated to let me know, you don’t need to provide details. I understand what sick means: It means you won’t be in class. Period.

I wish you a speedy recovery.

Signed,  
The Syllabus is Your Friend

**Angela Jackson-Brown   
*assistant professor of English*   
*Ball State University***

Dear Student,

Sometimes I allow myself to get troubled by things that most people would shake off. Today is one of those times. In your recent email to me, you addressed me as “Hey.” Let me preface my comments by saying that you aren’t the first. I’ve received emails the open with “Yo,” “Hey Prof,” “Miss A.” Most times I just ignore these salutations and chalk it up to youthful ignorance, but I realized today, I was doing you all a disservice by not correcting you. So today you get to hear the words I should have said to all of those others.

My name is Professor Angela Jackson-Brown and I really wish you would address me by that name. It’s the name on my syllabus and it is the name on those three, count them, three degrees hanging on my office wall. Please take the extra couple of seconds necessary to type “Dear Professor Jackson-Brown.”

I know, you get in a hurry. You have other things on your mind. And you live in a culture in which manners are no longer stressed. But believe me: It is better that you learn this lesson from me than from a future employer who might not fire you for your lackadaisical manner of addressing him or her, but might think twice about elevating you to a position in the company that requires decorum. Addressing someone who is your superior, your higher up, by “hey” sends the message you don’t value that person. It sends the message you don’t recognize that person studied long and hard, jumped through tons of hoops, and endured countless hours of sleeplessness and stress to earn that title. I’m not royalty or a pop star, so I don’t need you to “bow down.” I just need you to respect the title I spent years earning.

Best always.

## How to E-mail Your Professor

Students often tell us that they worry about how to address an e-mail message to a professor – especially one whom they don't know. Below are suggestions that answer concerns we've heard not just from students, but from professors. And note: use these tips not just for e-mailing professors, but people who work in college offices, your employers and job supervisors, and your class deans and RDs.

## On addressing your professor

**E-mail to a professor should be treated like a business letter –** at least until you know that professor's personal preferences very well. Although e-mail is widely regarded as an informal medium, it is in fact used for business purposes in many settings (including Wellesley College). You won't err if you are too formal, but there is the possibility of committing many gaffes if you are too informal.

**The subject header should be informative.** It is not a salutation line, so don't write something like "hey professor" in that line. Instead, write a few words indicating the purpose of your message: "Request for a space in your class," for example.

**Use professors' names when addressing them.** Many professors we queried said that they do not like to be called simply "professor." They prefer "Professor Lee" or "Ms./Mr. Lee"; most tell us that the title itself doesn't matter nearly so much as the fact that you also use their names ("Dr. Lee" does seem to be uncommon at Wellesley, though, just so you know). Some professors will eventually suggest that you call them by their first names, but if you are more comfortable continuing to use a title, that is always fine. Just be sure to use a name. (Note: these comments are true for personal interaction as well as for e-mail).

**Dear, Hi, Hey, or nothing?** To some eyes and ears, "Dear Professor Jones" may be too formal for an e-mail message – but in fact it will do just fine when your purpose is a business-like one. Simply writing "Professor Jones" (followed by a comma) is fine, too. Some faculty are sensitive to the word "Hi" as a salutation, whether alone or with a name (e.g., "Hi, Professor Jones"), but others don't mind it and in fact use it themselves. But avoid "hey" – no one we queried likes that one.

**Don't expect an instant response.** Although we have all become accustomed to the instantaneous quality of electronic communication, your professors want you to know that they simply cannot always answer a message quickly. Allow them a day or two, or even more, to respond. You can re-send the message if you haven't heard back in five days or so.

## On e-mail style

**Don't use smiley faces or other emoticons when e-mailing professors, and don't use all those internet acronyms, abbreviations, and shortened spellings** (e.g., LOL, or "U" for "you"). Similarly, don't confuse email style with txt style. All of that electronic shorthand signals a level of intimacy (and perhaps of age) that is inappropriate for exchanges with your professors.

**Write grammatically, spell correctly, and avoid silly mistakes.** Proofread. Use the spelling checker. Especially double-check for embarrassing errors in your subject header. Show that you care about how you present yourself in writing to your professor.

**Use paragraph breaks** to help organize your message. It's hard to read a long unbroken stream of words on a screen.

## On content

**Don't use e-mail to rant or whine.** Sometimes the very appearance of a message can signal "rant": very long paragraphs, no capital letters, no sentence breaks. These are not fun to read, and may well elicit the exact opposite response that you intend. Of course, we are all tempted to rant sometimes in e-mail, so what one professor recommends is this: Sure, rant all you want in an e-mail. But don't send it. Hit the delete button, and then write a more measured message. (Many faculty will tell you that they have files full of unsent messages; they have wisely learned that an e-mail written in the first flush of frustration must be re-crafted and sent with care.) On the other hand, an email in which you direct a constructively worded complaint to the person most able to address such complaints is just fine.

**Keep most messages to under a screen in length**; lots of readers will simply defer reading long messages, and then may never come back to them. On the other hand, a very short, terse message may simply be meaningless. Be sure to include enough information so that your reader can understand what you are requesting. Provide a bit of background or context if necessary. State your request clearly.

**Take extra steps to minimize the e-mail exchange**; for example, if you are requesting an appointment, state your purpose and name the times that you could come in in your initial message. Your respondent may then be able to answer you with only one additional message.

**Quote selectively and briefly** from any prior messages to provide context and background. Although sometimes it's good to quote an entire exchange so as to keep a record of what's been said and decided, often that's unnecessary and simply ends up making a message too long and cluttering the screen.

Many professors advise that you **think about why you are sending an e-mail message.** Are you asking something that could easily be checked if you took a few extra steps yourself? For example, e-mailing a professor simply to ask when her office hours are can be annoying when the office hours have been clearly announced on the syllabus already. On the other hand, e- mailing for an appointment is just fine. Are you asking a question privately that might be better asked on the course conference, where all the students might usefully see the response? Are you e-mailing to lodge a complaint or to ask for a letter of recommendation or to seek help with a problem set? In these cases, personal contact and an office visit might be much better.

**Be respectful, and think about what kinds of things might sound odd or offensive to your professor.** For example, don't say flippantly that you slept through that professor's class, or talk about your love life, or bash chemistry or math or writing.

Wellesley faculty think very highly of their students, and you will soon find that they will work closely with you and that you'll feel quite comfortable entering an intellectual relationship with your professors. E-mail has often been seen as a democratizing system of communication that flattens hierarchies and that allows people of all sorts to communicate comfortably and freely with each other. We value the ease of communication that e-mail offers us - but we who work at Wellesley have also learned, over time, that we don't quite want our e-mail with students to feel like an instant-message exchange. Most professors are overwhelmed by the vast number of e-mail messages they receive; some have been shocked by the sheer effrontery of some of those messages; many become frustrated if e-mail consumes so much of their time and emotional energy that they can't then spend valuable personal time with you. We hope these tips will help you - and your professors - conserve some of that emotional energy.

## And as for that emotional energy, here's one last tip:

**Be kind to yourself if you make an electronic faux pas.** All of us – even those who have studied electronic communication for years – have made some pretty monstrous errors. We learn from our mistakes, and we learn to forgive ourselves (and others).

http://web.wellesley.edu/SocialComputing/Netiquette/netiquetteprofessor.html