Email communication

Using email to ask questions

Before you email a member of University staff to ask a question, go through the following list:

→ Have you checked whether the answer is in the unit Subject Outline?

→ Have you checked the unit vUWS site?

→ Is the answer available somewhere on the Western website?

→ Did your tutor or lecturer discuss it in class?

→ Have you asked your fellow students?

Staff can receive hundreds of emails a day, so it is quite an exhausting task to respond to emails. If the answer is easily available elsewhere, then find it for yourself first. But of course, if you are struggling and need help, do not hesitate in reaching out to university staff.

University email etiquette

First things first: any Western-related communication needs to be sent from your Western email account. This is because it's an official communication channel, and there's some legal stuff about checking your email regularly as a condition of your enrolment. It's also so that staff can know they are contacting the right person, and not giving away sensitive information to strangers or breaching your privacy.

Related to this, staff will sometimes send emails to you and Cc to TRIM. TRIM is a records management system. Any email that includes you and is sent to TRIM goes on your record. So if you weren't already aware, anything you send using your Western account may one day become public. That's nothing to worry about, but just don't assume no one will ever see the emails you send.

Emails may seem transient, but they don't disappear just because you've deleted them from your inbox. Over the past two decades many public figures have found themselves in trouble over the contents of their emails, for example when emails and other files from Sony Pictures were made public. So because you can't assume that any email you send will be read only by the recipient, it's important to compose emails that are both polite and readable.

The Online Netiquette vUWS site (video, 3:30) will help you understand the Western systems and preferred practices.

Subject line

First, choose an appropriate subject line. Some email addresses receive hundreds or even thousands of emails a day, and may have filters in place to forward your message to the right person or department. So you can't just write 'assignment' in the subject line – your tutor or lecturer won't know what assignment, or what unit, or what aspect of the assignment. Be as clear as possible and include unit or course codes. For example, '401003 essay referencing question' tells the recipient everything they need to know about the possible contents of the email.

Body

In the body of the email, greet your recipient. If you don't know the person's name, use 'Dear Madam' or 'Dear Sir', or if you don't know the person's gender, 'Dear Sir or Madam'. First names are usually considered appropriate in the Australian university community, especially if that's what your teacher has asked you to call them in class. However, if you haven't met the person you're emailing, you should use their last name and title, e.g. 'Dear Dr Urbach' or 'Dear Mr McKnight'. If you're not sure of a person's title, look them up in the staff directory. When the person replies, they might sign off with their first name, and you can then address your next email using their first name. Sometimes people use 'if I may' here to be polite, e.g. 'Dear Anna (if I may)'.

Can you use a greeting less formal than 'Dear'? Yes, but with caution, and everyone has a different preference. 'Hi' or 'hello' can be considered acceptable, but probably not 'hey', and never 'yo!' Remember, you are writing to a staff member, not your friends. Your tutor may be friendly, but they still deserve respect.

Next, state who you are and your purpose as clearly as possible, even if that means repeating information from the subject line. E.g., 'I am in your Wednesday tutorial for Professional Communication at 11am, and I have a question about the essay due next week.' Remember that staff are often teaching for multiple units or courses or even across different schools, and they don't have time to figure out which essay you're talking about out of five that are due this month.

Ask your question clearly. One practice that is gaining popularity is the five-sentence email. Regardless of the number of sentences you write in an email, make sure that you have included all necessary information, and try to be as concise as possible.

Sign off politely, stating your name and your student ID number. 'Best wishes' is polite; 'Thank you' is often appropriate. Business emails often end with 'Regards' or 'Kind regards', or you can go a little old-fashioned with 'Yours sincerely' (especially if your email is really a formal business letter that just happens to be in electronic format).

A note about sending emails

When you send an email, you have choices about how you send it to more than one person, using the 'To', 'Cc', and 'Bcc' fields. These fields are explained in the following table. Figures 1 and 2 below show how the fields appear in the 'new message' screen from two commonly used email providers.

Field	Purpose
To:	This is where you put the email address of the intended recipient. Multiple recipients can be included here, usually separated by a comma or semicolon depending on the email client.
Cc:	Carbon Copy.
	This is a holdover from the days of typewriters when the only way to duplicate a typed message was to place a sheet of carbon paper between two sheets of normal paper and type the message. Use this field to send a message to people who need to know the content of the message but aren't the primary recipient.
Bcc:	Blind Carbon Copy.
	Including someone in the Bcc field sends them a copy of the message, but the person in the To: field won't know that the message has been copied to anyone. The Bcc field can be useful if you want to send a message to a lot of people but you don't have permission to share everyone's email addresses. Think carefully before using the Bcc field for any other reason, as it's kind of sneaky to send someone an email without other recipients knowing that that person was also included.

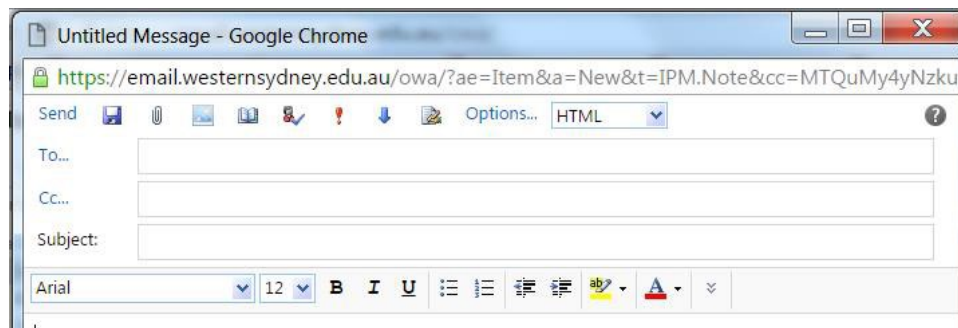Figure 1. Sending a message using Gmail.

Figure 2. Sending a message using your web-based Western Outlook account.

Checklist for sending effective emails

→ Try to find the answer to your question yourself before emailing
→ Email the right person/address
→ Treat email as public correspondence
→ Write an accurate subject line
→ Include a polite salutation
→ State who you are and what you need, preferably in five sentences or less
→ Sign off politely

More information

→ School of Humanities and Communication Arts: Communicating Professionally - 5 videos, including writing email (10:16), and using the phone (4:23)

→ Productivity Lifesaver: The 5-Sentence Email