Traditionally, out-of-class communication between students and faculty involved meetings during office hours or informal meetings. These meetings have been shown to contribute to a positive student outcome.[1-3] Today, e-mail communication between students and faculty is common at all levels of education. It provides students with a convenient and efficient method of interacting with faculty outside of class and can be a means of discussing information they may not feel comfortable discussing face-to-face. However, e-mail communication differs from face-to-face communication because it does not allow the participants to clarify information on-the-spot or to interpret nonverbal cues and feedback. Stephens et al. identified that overly casual e-mails from students to instructors created a less than positive attitude toward the message and significantly impacted student credibility and an instructor's willingness to comply with a simple request for a face-to-face meeting.[4]

Aurora Denial, OD, FAAO
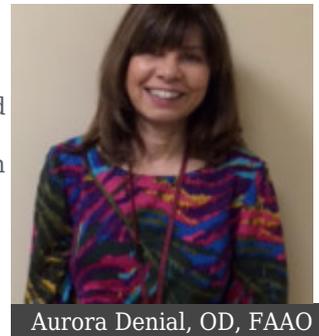
Faculty are Inundated

According to the New York Times, student e-mails that are unprofessional with regard to etiquette, grammar and content are overwhelming faculty.[5] Attributes of unprofessional e-mails include an inappropriate salutation such as "hey," use of first names, or use of Mr./Miss./Ms. Other contributors to unprofessional e-mails are poor grammar, lack of capitalization, inappropriate abbreviations, lack of subject line information, no signature, grade-begging, negotiating work assignments, or an unprofessional tone. Studies have indicated that grade-begging — asking for a higher grade without a legitimate reason — occurs more frequently in e-mails than in face-to-face meetings.[6,7]

TABLE 1
E-Mail Guidance for Students

A sampling of tips for professional e-mailing, from various sources, that can be shared with students
E-mail is forever, once it is sent you cannot get it back.
Think about the content. Would you feel comfortable discussing the e-mail content in a face-to-face meeting?
Always use subject lines. This can help a professor identify the importance of the e-mail.
Address professors correctly with proper titles and salutations.
Be polite and concise.
Never send an e-mail while you are angry or upset. This includes being upset about a grade. Wait until you are calm and can compose a professional e-mail.
Don't use texting abbreviations or otherwise inappropriate abbreviations.
Do not write in all capital letters. This can be interpreted as shouting.
Grammar and spelling matter. Use spell-check and review the e-mail again, before sending.

Table 1. Click to enlarge

Anecdotal reports from faculty in optometric education confirm they are receiving a large amount of unprofessional e-mails. Recently, I received an e-mail from a student that referred to me as "Mrs. Denial" and included "Im having trouble with a topic u covered in class. Can u meet at 11 tomorrow." I've had students use idk (I don't know) in an e-mail to me as well. In another example, a student contacted me with a legitimate concern about a quiz taken with the college's learning management system. I was sympathetic to the concern until I read the last sentence of the e-mail: "if this issue is not resolved I will have to take it to a higher power." I'm not sure if the student would have used the same phrase in a face-to-face meeting, but my level of sympathy towards the student changed immediately.

Generational or Not, Inappropriate E-mail is Unacceptable

Can generational differences account for the unprofessional nature of students' e-mails? Perhaps the issues are related to the types of expectations held by Millennial students, which include a quick response, the right to have a voice, informality, negotiation, and the use of titles as inauthentic.[8] It's worth asking, too, whether students ever formally learn how to compose an e-mail. One might assume that most students learn informally and from e-mailing peers. Aquilar-Roca et al. studied whether a two-minute training class significantly increased the use of professional e-mails in student-to-faculty correspondence.[7] The study demonstrated "a significant increase in overall professional quality of student e-mails in the trained class due to more frequent use of proper salutations, appropriate capitalization and a class-specific subject line."[7] However, no difference was detected in professional content or grade-begging between the trained and untrained group.[7]

Unprofessional e-mails should not be tolerated by faculty. Discussing unprofessional e-mails with students can help to alter the behavior. A plethora of websites offer tips for composing professional e-mails. **(Table 1)** Faculty often include these guidelines in course syllabi. Providing students with some common-sense tips may help to guide them toward more professional e-mailing and maintaining a positive relationship with faculty.

I welcome optometric faculty and administrators to share their experiences and ideas on this important topic.

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