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.\(^1\)

### 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.\(^6\)\(^7\)

#### 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.

### References


5. Glater JD. To: professor@university.edu Subject: why it’s all about me. The New York Times, Feb. 21, 2006.


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