

Chapter 2

Salutations

What the experts say

Within the academic world, and even in an informal society such as that in North America, addressing academics using titles such as Dr and Professor, may make the recipient more willing to help you. Using titles may also help to differentiate you from those students whose emails resemble text messages to friends rather than requests to top academics. You may also get a more successful outcome to an email request if you use some apologetic or slightly deferential language such as “Sorry to bother you but ...”, “I wonder if you could ...”, “I know you must be very busy but ...”.

*David Morand, Professor of Management, School of Business Administration
Pennsylvania State University—Harrisburg*

Indian English tends to be more formal than British and American English. In emails, Indians often use the word *Sir*, even informally, for example, *Hi Sir, how're you doing*. They also use phrases such as *Thanking you*, *Sincerely yours* and *Respectfully yours*, which are rarely used by British or American academics. Sometimes Indians mix English words with words from their own languages for example, *Yours shubhakankshi*. Young Indians now use phrases such as *C ya soon*; they also adopt SMS lingo: *tc* (take care), *u no* (you know), *4ever* (forever), *4u* (for you), etc.

Tarun Huria, Mechanical Engineer, Indian Railways

Chinese students tend to address their professors in this way: *Respectful Professor Chang*. The word *Respectful* or *Honorable* is the literal translation from a Chinese three-character word (尊敬的). *Dear* is not used as much in mainland Chinese culture as in English / American cultures because it involves intimacy, because to mainland Chinese people “dear” sounds like “darling,” “sweetie,” or “honey.” In mainland China it is generally used between close female friends, girl to girl, and between lovers.

Ting Zheng, teacher

2.1 What's the buzz?

Make a list of typical salutations in your language that are used at the beginnings and endings of emails.

- 1) How many of these salutations have a literal translation into English?
- 2) Do you know the English equivalents for the ones that don't have a literal translation?
- 3) With regard to questions 1 and 2, do you know the formal and informal versions in English of the phrases you have written down?
- 4) Imagine you were going to write to a researcher called Saxon Baines, with whom you have had no previous contact. Which of the following beginnings would you use and why? a) *Dear Saxon* b) *Dear Baines* c) *Dear Doctor Baines* d) *Dear Mr Baines* e) *Dear Saxon Baines*
- 5) Now think about how you would address this researcher: Tao Pei Lin.

First impressions are very important. When you meet someone face to face for the first time, you probably take 30 seconds or less to form an impression of this person. Research has proved that it will be very difficult for you to change this initial impression. In an email you can form a bad impression within just one second. People's names are incredibly important to them. If you make a mistake in the spelling of someone's name (even by using the wrong accent on a letter), you risk instantly annoying them and they may be less willing to carry out whatever request you are asking them.

If you use standard phrases (see Chapter 14), rather than literal translations, you will ensure that your email looks professional. You will also minimize the number of mistakes you make in English.

In this chapter you will learn how to

- address someone—whether you know them, don't know them, or don't even know their name
- pay attention to titles (e.g. Mr, Dr, Professor)
- make it clear who your email is intended for
- use standard English phrases rather than translating directly from your own language

KEY 4) e, 5) Dear Tao Pei Lin

2.2 Spell the recipient's name correctly

Make sure your recipient's name is spelt correctly. Think how you feel when you see your own name is misspelled.

Some names include accents. Look at the other's person's signature and cut and paste it into the beginning of your email—that way you will not make any mistakes either in spelling or in use of accents (e.g., è, ö, ñ).

Although their name may contain an accent, they may have decided to abandon accents in emails—so check to see if they use an accent or not.

2.3 Use an appropriate initial salutation and be careful with titles

With Anglos it is generally safe to write any of the following:

Dear Professor Smith,

Your name was given to me by ...

Dear Dr Smith:

I was wondering whether ...

Dear John Smith

I am writing to

Dear John

How are things?

Note that you can follow the person's name by a comma (,), by a colon (:), or with no punctuation at all. Whatever system you adopt, the first word of the next line must begin with a capital letter (*Your ...*, *How ...*).

Dr is an accepted abbreviation for “doctor,” that is, someone with a PhD, or a doctor of medicine. It is not used if you only have a normal degree.

The following salutations would generally be considered inappropriate:

Hi Professor Smith—The word *Hi* is very informal and is thus not usually used in association with words such as *Professor* and *Dr*, as these are formal means of address.

Dear Prof Smith—Always use the full form of Professor as the abbreviation Prof might be considered too informal or rude.

Dear Smith—Anglos rarely address each other in emails with just the surname.

If you have had no communication with the person before, then it is always best to use their title. Also, even if Professor Smith replies to your email and signs himself as *John*, it is still best to continue using *Professor Smith* until he says, for instance: *Please feel free to call me John*.

In many other countries people frequently use functional or academic titles instead of names, for example, Mr Engineer, Mrs Lawyer. However, many people in academia tend not to use such titles when writing to each other in English.

In the UK the most commonly used salutation, even in professional emails, is *Hi*. Although *Hi* used to be considered very informal, this role has now been taken by *Hey*.

2.4 Avoid problems when it is not clear if the recipient is male or female, or which is their surname

It may be difficult to establish someone's gender from their first name. In fact, what perhaps look like female names, may be male names, and vice versa. For example, the Italian names Andrea, Luca, and Nicola; the Russian names Ilya, Nikita, and Foma; and the Finnish names Esa, Pekka, Mika, and Jukka are all male names. The Japanese names Eriko, Yasuko, Aiko, Sachiko, Michiko, and Kanako may look like male names to Western eyes, but are in fact female. Likewise, Kenta, Kota, and Yuta are all male names in Japanese.

If your own name is ambiguous, it is a good idea in first mails to sign yourself in a way that is clear what sex you are, for example, Best regards, Andrea Cavalieri (Mr).

In addition, many English first names seem to have no clear indication of the sex, for example, Saxon, Adair, Chandler, and Chelsea. And some English names can be for both men and women, for example, Jo, Sam, Chris, and Hilary.

In some cases it may not be clear to you which is the person's first and last name, for example, Stewart James. In this particular case, it is useful to remember that Anglos put their given name first, so Stewart will be the first name. However, this is not true of all Europeans. Some Italians, for example, put their surname first (e.g., Ferrari Luigi) and others may have a surname that looks like a first name (e.g., Marco Martina). In the far east, it is usual to put the last name first, for example, Tao Pei Lin (Tao is the surname, Pei Lin is the first name).

The best solution is always to write both names, for example, Dear Stewart James, then there can be no mistake.

Similarly, avoid Mr, Mrs, Miss, and Ms—they are not frequently used in emails. By not using them you avoid choosing the wrong one.

So, if you are writing to non-academics, be careful how you use the following titles:

Mr—man (not known if married or not)

Ms—woman (not known if married or not)

Mrs—married woman

Miss—unmarried woman

If you receive an email from a Chinese person, you might be surprised to find that they have an English first name. Most young Chinese people have English nicknames, such as university students or even teachers, basically anyone who has to deal with foreign people. They are simply used for convenience (i.e., to help non-Chinese speakers) and they are also used in email addresses.

Thus, a good general rule when replying to someone for the first time is to

- address them using exactly the same name (both first and last name) that they use in their signature
- precede this name with an appropriate title
- adopt their style and tone. If you are making the first contact, then it is safer to be formal in order to be sure not to offend anyone. Then as the relationship develops, you can become less (or more) formal as appropriate. In any case, always take into account the reader's customs and culture, remembering that some cultures are much more formal than others.

2.5 Be as specific as possible when addressing an email to someone whose name you do not know

For important emails it is always best to find out the name of the person to address. This maximizes the chances of your email (i) reaching the right person, (ii) being opened, and (iii) being responded to.

However, on many occasions the exact name of the person is not important, for example, when you are asking for information about products or how to register for a conference. In such cases, the simplest solution is to have no salutation at all, or simply to use *Hi*. Some people like to use the expression *To whom it may concern*, but this expression is really no more useful than having no salutation.

Alternatively, you can write something more specific, such as

Dear Session Organizers

Dear Editorial Assistant

Dear Product Manager

2.6 If in doubt how to end your email, use *Best regards*

There are many ways of ending an email in English, but the simplest is *Best regards*. You can use this with practically anyone—whether you have met them before or not, whether they are a Nobel prize winner or a fellow PhD student.

If you want to be very formal, then you can write *Yours sincerely* or *Yours faithfully* - today there is no difference in usage between these two forms.

Best regards is often preceded with another standard phrase, for example, *Thank you in advance*, or *I look forward to hearing from you*. For more standard phrases, see Chapter 14.

Note the punctuation. Each sentence ends with a full stop, apart from the final salutation (*Best regards*) where you can put either a comma (,) or no punctuation.

... very helpful.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

Adrian Wallwork

... very helpful.

Thanks in advance.

Best regards

Adrian Wallwork

2.7 Don't use a sequence of standard phrases in your final salutation

When writing emails in your own language, you may be accustomed to using a sequence of standard phrases at the end of your emails.

Imagine you need to ask your professor for a favor. When writing to North Americans, British people, Australians, etc., normally two phrases would be enough in your final salutation. For example:

Thank you very much in advance.

Best regards

Syed Haque

The above ending is polite and quick to read. The following ending contains too many salutations and is also rather too formal.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation of any help you may be able to give me.

I thank you in advance.

I remain most respectfully yours,

Your student, Syed Haque

Bear in mind that many people in academia receive up to 100 emails a day; thus, they do not have time to read such a long series of salutations.

2.8 Ensure your signature contains everything that your recipient may need to know

What you include in your signature has some effect on the recipient's perception of who you are and what you do. It is generally a good idea to include most or all of the following.

- Your name
- Your position
- Your department (both in English and your mother tongue) and university/institute
- Your phone number
- The switchboard phone number of your department
- Links to your homepage, LinkedIn, Academia etc

Make sure your address is spelt correctly and that you have correctly translated the name of your department.

2.9 Avoid PSs and anything under your signature

When recipients see your salutation (e.g., *Best regards*) or name, it is a signal for them to stop reading. If you write a PS (i.e., a phrase that is detached from the main body of the mail and which appears under your name) or anything under your signature, there is a very good chance it will not be read.



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