



## **“Teacher, it’s me!!”: Teaching Formal Email Writing**

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As email writing in academia and in business is the norm today, it’s important that students are guided into writing emails properly. The challenges that students face with formal email writing can be exacerbated by the power distance between their home cultures and what English-speaking culture deems appropriate (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). This is especially important because poorly written, inappropriate emails can negatively impact a student’s reputation; for example, a demanding email can make students seem discourteous and impolite. Research suggests that students who grow up in cultures outside of an English-speaking context can format emails successfully—with guidance (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). After we received numerous inappropriate emails from our students, we decided to teach them formal email etiquette. Our goal was to provide students with a skill they could use not only in academia, but also in their future careers.

In this article, we discuss our experiences teaching email etiquette to university-age national and transnational students in South Korea, share the email writing lesson, and provide suggestions for expanding or adapting the lesson in diverse contexts.

### **How to Teach Email Writing**

#### **Warm-Up**

Begin class with a discussion on formal email writing. Ask students to work with a partner and discuss what a formal email is and when and to whom students might write one. Then, as a class, discuss the expectations for formal email writing in students’ home languages.

During these rich discussions with our students, it became clear that there were certain formalities and expectations in writing formally in their language(s), which made it easier for students to make the connection that there could also be rules when writing a formal email in English.

Next, provide students with three sample emails. (You can use emails sent by former de-identified students or create your own examples). In pairs, have students discuss their impressions of the sample emails. Each email should lack certain necessary components of

formal emails, such as a greeting, a closing, or an appropriate subject. The emails may also include emojis, spelling errors, and/or directive language. (See Appendix A.)

Once they have finished discussing their impressions of the emails, have students share their observations with the whole class. Observations should revolve around what is appropriate and inappropriate in each email, which should lead students to come up with the “rules” of email writing. Afterward, provide students with a worksheet on what needs to be included in a formal email along with a model email. (See Appendix B.)

## **Components of an Email**

### *1. Subject Line*

Explain that a formal email must include an appropriate subject line so that when the recipient receives the email, they know exactly what the email is about. For writing to a professor, students could write a simple subject, such as *Homework March 19th* or *Absent May 1st*. In this way, their professor would know immediately what the email is about and its sense of urgency.

### *2. Greeting*

It is important to address someone in a formal email with Mr./Mrs./Ms./Dr. This provides a chance to discuss and teach students a cultural norm in English speaking contexts—that is, married women taking their husband’s family name. In South Korea, like many other countries, women do not change their surnames once they are married. Though some women in English-speaking countries today are choosing to keep their maiden names, there are women who still take their husband’s name. Therefore, take this as an opportunity to talk about the appropriate titles to use when formally addressing men and women in English.

### *3. Self-Introduction and Purpose*

It is important for students to say who they are and why they are writing to the recipient. This way, the recipient does not have to guess who is writing and why. You can also use this time to discuss how to request something in the email or how to apologize. (E.g., “Could you please let me know what the homework is for next class?” or “I apologize for missing class on Monday.”) You can also discuss what to write when students need to add an attachment to an email. For example, “Please find the attached homework assignment.”

### *4. Closing*

Lastly, give students email closing options such as, “Thank you for your time.” and “I look forward to hearing from you soon.” Follow these with examples of how to format a signature, such as, “Sincerely, Minsu Park.” At this point, take the time to remind students of name ordering. In South Korea, it is typical to address someone by their last name first followed by their first name, the opposite to English. Thus, we reminded students not to sign their names as *Park Minsu*, but rather *Minsu Park*. This last name–first name ordering is also a common practice in other cultures.

See examples in Figures 1 and 2 of before and after emails.

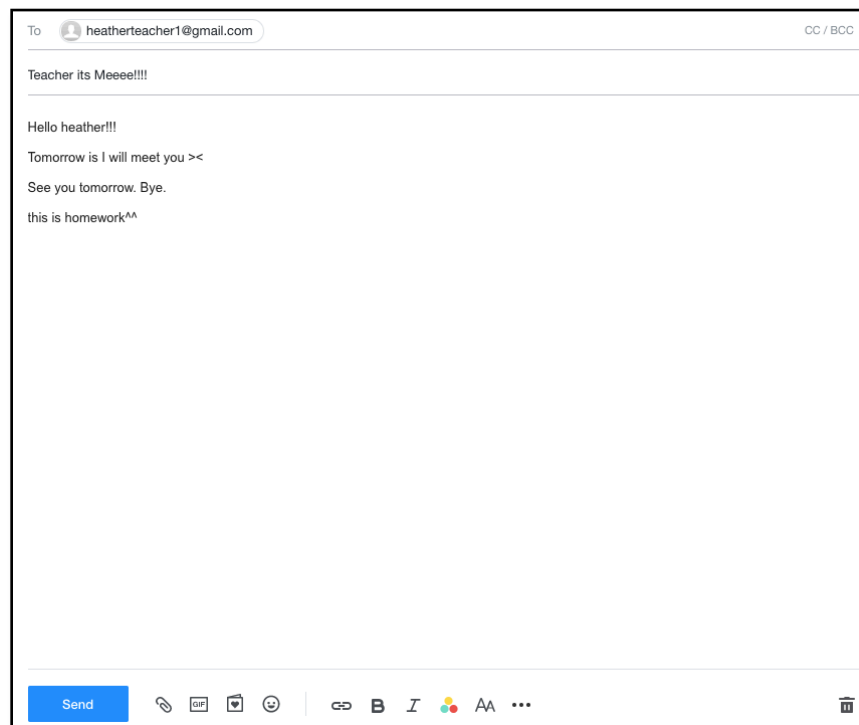


Figure 1. Before email example.

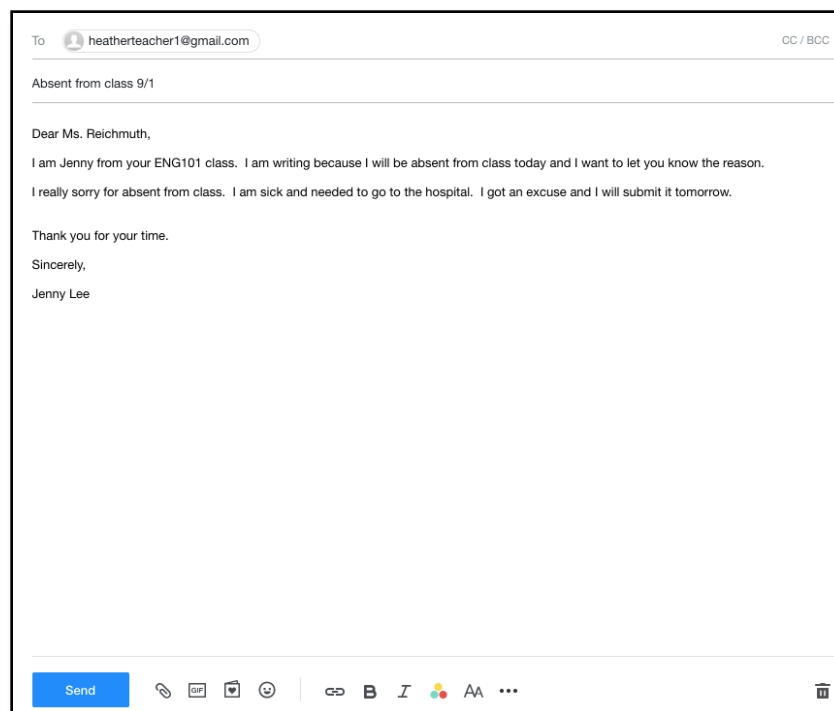


Figure 2. After email example.

## Email Writing Activity

Following the email writing lesson, give students an assignment to apply what they have learned. Ask them to write a formal email in which they introduce themselves. In the email, have them include information such as their hobbies, interests, major(s), and family. We also asked students to mention something funny or interesting about themselves for us to remember them by. Additionally, have them share their strengths and weaknesses in English and their goals for the course. Finally, have them attach a picture, which will help you put a face to their self-introduction email. (See Appendix C.)

## Assessment

At the university where we taught, there was a computer lab where students could work on this assignment during class time. We would walk around, answer questions, and advise students on how to improve their emails. Final emails were assessed based on whether or not students included all components of the email correctly. They were also graded on the content, capitalization, and grammar. To help guide students, we gave them the grading rubric for the assignment and encouraged them to use the rubric as a checklist (See Appendix C). We found that providing students with the grading rubric allowed them to look at their work more closely.

## Additional Lessons and Alternatives

Proper capitalization can be challenging with the informality of the internet today. Additionally, a student's home language may not distinguish between capital and lower-case characters, such as with Korean. A quick exercise reviewing capitalization rules can be a helpful reminder when writing formal emails. Formal email writing etiquette also allows for teachers to integrate grammar lessons as well. The teaching of indirect vs. direct language is one possible grammar point that can be applied to email etiquette because it is nuanced and often challenging for students to apply to their writing. Using sample sentence starters provided in class, students could be given different scenarios in which they need to email a teacher, a future boss, or a real company where they make a request or complaint using indirect speech.

If computers are not available to students, this assignment can still be done quite easily. You can make an email template and provide a paper copy for students to fill in. Handwriting the assignment still allows students to construct a formal email they can apply later when they have access to a computer and the internet. An alternative to this lesson is to have students email each other or a student in another class. Students can enjoy the interaction with a peer and possibly create a long lasting pen-pal relationship. In order to assess whether or not students are formatting the email properly, have them carbon copy (Cc) you when they email their pen-pal.

## Conclusion

After teaching the lesson, some students approached us, apologizing. They said they were embarrassed by the emails they sent to us prior to learning formal email writing. We told them that they had nothing to apologize for because they had never received the tools needed to

construct a formal email in English. Just as Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) found, with guidance these students were taught proper email writing that they could use in their real lives; it is a skill that can be easily learned, and it is up to us teachers to provide students with this practical learning experience—one that’s important for their academic and future professional careers.

## References

Biesenbach-Lucas, S. (2007). Students writing emails to faculty: An examination of e-politeness among native and non-native speakers of English. *Language Learning & Technology*, 11(2), 59–81.

Economidou-Kogetsidis, M. (2011). “Please answer me as soon as possible”: Pragmatic failure in non-native speakers’ e-mail requests to faculty. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43, 3193–3215.

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