

Responding Effectively to Student E-mail: Nine Tips

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“E-mail makes my job so much more work,” a colleague said recently. I couldn’t believe it. E-mail makes my job a lot easier; I could hardly do my job without it. I find that following these nine “best practices” helps.

Managing the Flow of Messages

- **Read your mail regularly**, perhaps twice a day on weekdays, depending on the course, and more frequently near due dates. If a message demands a longer response than you have time to write at the moment, reply with something like this: **Thanks for your message about ... It may take me a while to send you a full response, but in the meantime I’d suggest [some generic good advice for making progress].** At least the student knows you’re not ignoring the message. Of course, if you put the message aside, don’t let it get buried. Conversely, responding to e-mail hourly may create an expectation of unrealistically rapid response time.

- **Encourage students to distinguish their messages from spam** by sending from their on-campus e-mail accounts and choosing subject lines that stand out from spam. Starting the subject line with the course name or number is a good approach.

- **Save all correspondence** with students, both their messages and your replies. You never know when you might need to establish what was said.

- **If TAs are available, spread the e-mail response duties.** Here are three techniques:

- With multiple sections, encourage students to write to their own TA first.

- Establish a course-wide address for e-mail questions, with messages to that address going to the entire teaching staff. Then, the first staff member to read a message can respond (with a cc to the same address so everyone on the staff sees that the message has been answered and what the answer was). You may need to respond to the first few messages to provide examples of the tone you want responses to take.

- Give each TA responsibility for responding to questions on a given issue from the whole class (e.g., TA 1 on homework assignments, TA 2 on the project, TA 3 on system problems).

- **Exploit the time delay of e-mail.** Instant messaging has its uses for “virtual office hours,” but e-mail’s time delay has two advantages:

- It forces the student to think independently about the problem for a little while, rather than asking for and expecting an immediate response.

- It makes the student articulate the problem in writing. This is a good skill by itself; it also, surprisingly often, brings a solution to light for the student before he or she even sends the message.

Effective Message Content

- **Don't discourage communication.** If you need to redirect a student from e-mail to office hours, the TA, or the textbook, take care to do it gently: not, **Don't send me questions like this**

by e-mail, but Thank you for writing. You're not alone in having difficulty with Topic X. E-mail isn't the best way for me to help you with it; I'd be glad to go over it with you in office hours, or you can check with the TA or look at Chapter 17 in the book. It doesn't take much to make students, especially first-year students, feel that you don't really want to hear from them. It's better for students to communicate with you the "wrong way" than for them not to communicate at all. If they have frustrations, it's best for you to know about them and deal with them before they escalate.

- **Train students gently about what kinds of questions are answerable by e-mail** and what kinds aren't. Examples of the latter category:

— Attached is a draft of my 10-page paper; could you look it over and give me some advice? Response: I'm sorry; I can't give you a full pre-reading since I can't make that available to the whole class. But I'd be glad to discuss specific parts of your paper or your overall approach. [And good writing assignments often use peer editing or graded drafts to avoid this situation.]

— Attached is my code; can you fix it for me? Response: I'm sorry; debugging over e-mail isn't usually very productive. You're the expert on your own code; you should start with the last working version and test each change so you can localize the source of the problem. [In introductory classes, at least, you might take a quick look at the code in case the solution actually does jump out at you.]

— I missed class; can you tell me what you covered? Response: Give the one-sentence overview, then refer the student to the textbook or slides, suggest looking at a classmate's notes, and invite the student to your office hours.

- **Acknowledge the student's issues.** If the student mentions a personal problem like illness or a family difficulty, the first thing you should say in your reply is I'm sorry to hear about *[the issue]* and I hope you feel better/get the issue resolved soon. These issues are more important to the student than your course is, and you should acknowledge that, whether or not you decide to grant any relief the student may request.

- **Respond to messages in a calm, professional tone,** even if the original message was disrespectful, presumptuous, or annoying. If the student's message makes you angry or upset, wait a while before responding. If it's grossly inappropriate, such as threats or hate speech, share the message with someone in authority. You're the professional; the student is still learning how to use computing in a professional context instead of a recreational one, and part of our job is to model appropriate behavior.

Even with the advent of new communications technologies such as text messaging, instant messaging, and blogs, electronic mail retains a unique mix of characteristics that, used with care, contribute invaluable to effective instruction.

This document is available on line at <http://www.ics.uci.edu/~kay/email.pdf>.