

Responding to Student E-mails

The [Association for Psychological Science attributes much of the more problematic behavior of students using e-mail to three factors](#): asynchrony, depersonalization, and immediacy.

- **Asynchrony:** e-mail is a one-way communication system, and instructors cannot use subtle comments or non-verbal cues to encourage students to modify their message as they might in a verbal interaction.
- **Depersonalization:** e-mails are written by students at a distance, and without the face-to-face presence of the instructor, many norms of social interaction can be easily discarded.
- **Immediacy:** e-mails can be sent “within seconds of a student becoming frustrated. Communicating while emotions are running high tends to make these messages less thoughtful, so they’re more likely to come across as rude and demanding.”

When responding to student e-mails, here are some [suggestions for creating effective message content \[pdf\]](#):

- **Encourage communication:** Even if the e-mail asks a question that could have been answered by reading the syllabus or that you already addressed in class, redirect the student gently. If you discourage students from sending e-mails with a dismissive or harsh comment, they may never reach out to you again.
- **Acknowledge the student’s issues:** If a student has disclosed a personal problem, whether it’s related to financial, health, or family concerns, always address this first, with compassion and empathy, before addressing whatever requests they have with regard to your course and whether or not you plan on giving them any exceptions or accommodations.
- **Respond 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.” Always model appropriate behavior for students.

The [Association for Psychological Science has developed some sample responses to address specific issues, from encouraging student ownership to helping students put things in perspective](#).

Managing Your E-mail

To handle a large volume of e-mails from students, [the following suggestions](#) can help you manage the flow:

- **Leverage the tools available in your e-mail program:** Different e-mail clients have different capabilities, from automatic responders to sorting features, which can help you manage your e-mail more efficiently.
 - **Require the course name in the subject line:** Inform students that you will only respond to e-mails with the course code in the subject line. You can even have them specify the semester and year. For example, you could say that all e-mails

for your Winter 2017 Biology 101 course *must* have W2017Bio101 in the subject line. Put this in the course outline, in D2L, and tell them again in class. If students e-mail you without the proper subject line, gently remind them again. This will help you sort and scan your e-mails easily. Use your e-mail client to set a filter that will pull all e-mails with that particular course code into one folder where you can review them all at once, rather than having them clog up your inbox. This also has the added benefit of keeping your records organized for the future. To create a filter in Gmail, follow these directions:

- [Search operators: Words in the subject line](#)
 - [Create rules to filter your e-mails](#)
- **Customize your signature:** You can use the signature area of your e-mail to include a statement on expected response time, direct students to contact the TA, or send students to the course website or discussion board.
 - [Create a Gmail signature](#)
- **Use canned responses:** In Gmail you can enable a feature that will allow you to create a collection of canned responses that you can send out to students as needed. These can also be combined with filters to send out automatic replies to your students.
 - [Enable and create canned responses](#)
 - [Send canned responses automatically using filters](#)
- **Set expectations:** There are a few ways to go about setting student expectations regarding e-mail, but the most important factor is consistency. Whatever you choose to do, stick to it.
 - **Dedicate specific hours to responding to e-mail:** Tell students that you have a specific time span during which you will respond to e-mails, regardless of when they send them.
 - **Define a response time:** Tell students that you will get back to them within a defined time frame. When dealing with a large volume of e-mails, you can use the custom signature or automatic canned responses mentioned above to automate this task.
 - **Set the tone:** Include an e-mail policy in your syllabus that not only sets out your availability and response times but also provides guidance on how students should structure their e-mails. Beyond requiring them to use their Ryerson e-mail address and including specific subject lines, you can also lay out some standards for what you feel constitutes appropriate e-mail etiquette.
- **Dealing with frequently asked questions:** No matter how clearly you outline things in the syllabus or explain them in class, you will be sure to get the same questions over and over. Rather than responding to them one by one, consider ways to answer them in bulk. Canned responses directing students to read the syllabus or check D2L are one possibility, some other ideas include:
 - **Set up a course discussion board:** Suggest students use it for questions about course requirements, assignments or exams, rather than sending e-mail. Just as with e-mail, be clear and consistent about how you expect students to use the discussion board. If you encourage students to answer each other's questions, make sure you check regularly to prevent incorrect or erroneous information from being spread. You can specify a time when you will check the thread to curb the

urge of students to send follow up e-mails when forum posts aren't immediately addressed.

- **Answer e-mails globally:** When you receive an e-mail that you know is asking a question that is likely to be asked again, send a general response to the entire class, rather than respond individually.
- **Build a Frequently Asked Questions document:** Create your own FAQ for your course and upload it to Google Drive. A Google Doc is an ideal way to create an easily updated document that you use again and again. You can include a link to the Google Doc in canned messages to common questions and in your course shell.
 - [Create a Google Doc and share it with your class](#)

Work Cited

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