

Tyro Tracts

## **E-Mail Boundaries**

February 6, 2012 - 3:00am

**By**

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Every university that I've been associated with as a student or instructor has designated e-mail as the "official means of communication." Specific policies vary from place to place, but generally there is an explicitly stated expectation that both students and instructors regularly check their e-mail accounts and respond to messages in a timely fashion.

I've had to learn that being too responsive too quickly to e-mail messages can give students unrealistic expectations. In some cases I've had students grow frustrated when I don't respond to a query immediately. That's an unreasonable expectation for a student to have, though, and in my course policies I've had to set some boundaries to quash the problem. I promise in my policies to respond to student e-mail within 24 hours, but with several caveats. I now will only respond to student e-mails during standard work hours, Monday through Friday, between the hours of 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.

As a result, students have to plan accordingly when asking questions. They can't e-mail at 10 p.m. the night before class and expect to get an answer about the next day's assignment. Of course, very few of us are actually able to limit our working hours to a standard work day in academe. I frequently answer messages from students in the evening or very early morning hours, but by setting a defined, reasonable expectation, I have a boundary for those times when I can't get to a message until the next work day. Reading through a draft of a document or handling a big question may take more time, but I can still acknowledge receipt so that the student knows that I'm on the case.

No student will ever fault an instructor for answering a message sooner than promised, but by setting reasonable expectations I am now able to prevent students from expecting responses at all hours (and I might also be compelling them to look over our course materials a little sooner than they would otherwise). And it works both ways — in my policies I also state my expectation that students check their own university e-mail account at least once each week day, in case I need to initiate contact with them about the course or their individual work for the course.

Students don't have the right to an immediate response to their e-mails. But they do have the right to a timely, respectful response. I simply cannot count the number of times that students have approached to ask for advice on how to get in touch with other instructors. Savvy students know that calling an instructor's office could be perceived as aggressive and intrusive (and I actually request in my own policies that students not call my office — I almost always see my e-mails before I check my messages anyway). But what are students to do when repeated e-mail queries about important issues are repeatedly ignored by their instructor?

I know that we all have more work than we can handle, and I know that it is easy to forget to respond to a message. Both situations are understandable and forgivable. What's less forgivable is when an instructor repeatedly ignores messages from a student or students, when an instructor

is routinely unavailable to students via what is most universities' officially designated means of communication. Ignoring a student has a cascading effect. At the very least, the student suffers, but at the worst, ignoring a student's messages might create extra work for your colleague, such as when the student has to make an inquiry with a second faculty member as to why they cannot get a response from the first faculty member. Unnecessary and uncomfortable queries on the student's behalf then ensue, all easily enough prevented.

I also know that some students will pepper us with trivial questions that they could easily answer on their own by, say, reading the syllabus or visiting the library. The first time I receive this sort of question from a student, I will quickly and politely respond, not answering the question, but directing the student to the appropriate resource, and the strategy generally prevents similarly trivial queries, so that I can focus my time and attention on more important, meaningful questions from students.

Because I teach rhetoric, my students and I spend large portions of the semester talking about and practicing how to communicate in writing with different audiences. Inevitably we spend at least one class session talking about e-mail communications, and how to communicate with professors and professionals in a manner that is respectful, but not obsequious. Without fail, the students have horror stories about truly malicious treatment they've received over e-mail at the typing hands of their instructors. Students in my classes have talked about, in addition to their ignored messages, receiving responses from professors that were baldly insulting, sarcastic to an almost shocking degree, and in many cases grossly unprofessional. In most cases I'm willing to bet that the students did something to trigger the rude responses from their professors, such as addressing the professor too informally, or using in their messages the shorthand lingo of text messaging. Nonetheless, responding rudely to a student is unwarranted. If you can muster the self-righteousness to feel disgusted by a student e-mail, it's probably worth an instructor's time to model professional behavior by addressing the issue in a professional manner.

It is reasonable to have certain expectations for e-mail decorum, and to communicate those expectations to students. But it is unreasonable to have specific expectations for students and to neglect to communicate those expectations to students. Students can't guess your mind, and shouldn't be expected to. And I also think there's a limit to what's reasonable to expect from students.

For example, refusing to respond to an e-mail because there is a grammar error in the message strikes me as shockingly unreasonable. First, grammar rules are infamously unstable, and there is wide room for interpretation as to what constitutes a grammar "error." Moreover, if a student does make a legitimate grammar error in a message to an instructor, presumably they made the error out of ignorance of the rule, not out of maliciousness. What does the student learn when an instructor refuses to answer their error-plagued message? Nothing. Instead of learning to remedy an error that they are probably not even aware of, students learn that their instructor is callous and unresponsive, and I'd bet that the students become far less receptive to very lessons that the instructor is attempting to instill. Similarly, would you ignore on principle a message from your harried department chair if she dashed off a question to you that contained a typo? I bet not.

Occasionally we all encounter a student who will lob into our inboxes a genuinely rude message.

Over the years I've learned that trying to tackle such rudeness in an e-mail response only exacerbates the situation. Some problems are better remedied in person, and I now only deal with such situations in person. It takes a lot more guts for a student to act rudely to an instructor's face, and most won't take the liberty of behaving badly in person the way they might over e-mail, which gives you as an instructor a way to address the situation at hand without it spiraling out of control.

I hope it's obvious that everything here that applies to our students applies equally with colleagues across the university, who also deserve timely, respectful responses to the queries that they direct to us personally. We all receive tons of irrelevant, unnecessary e-mail, but it's easy enough to sift through the digital pile.

There are parts of an academic career that can be very, very difficult — producing timely, relevant scholarship, teaching and all that it entails, administering complex programs. Answering the routine e-mails strikes me as an unusually easy part of the job. Certainly bigger questions or sensitive issues require more measured, deliberate responses, but the routine stuff is easy. I don't like making students' lives, or my own, any more difficult than they need to be by neglecting the routine.

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