

12 Communicating with staff and classmates

When attending university or college, you'll have to communicate with a variety of academic staff: Professors/Lecturers/Teaching Assistants/Tutors/Advisors/Departmental secretaries. You'll also have to talk to your classmates and you'll use a different communication style to do this. In this chapter we discuss the different styles, and prepare you for college/university life abroad by providing you with the strategies for successful communication.

Interactions with academic staff

Tips for talking to academic staff:

Do:

- Remember that academic staff are very busy, especially if they're professors/lecturers at a major research university. If you need some important information from your professor/lecturer or Teaching Assistant (TA), don't put it off until the last minute. It may take time for him or her to get back to you via phone or email.
- If you want to ask questions, make an appointment with your professor/lecturer, or see him or her during consultation times/office hours (usually posted on the door of their office). They may not have time to talk to you after class or if you see them on campus. Make a written list of your questions before you go to the meeting and bring it with you, to save time and make yourself clear.
- When addressing a professor/lecturer, try to be as polite and deferential as possible. This way they'll be more likely to help you.

- Check your English whenever you write to professors/lecturers. Or before you speak to him or her, take some time to prepare what you want to say. Refer to your books for help. This way, you'll be able to express what you want to say efficiently, without misunderstandings. Remember that many of your professors/lecturers will not be ESL/EFL teachers so they may struggle to understand you if you don't express yourself clearly.
- Always be kind and polite to your Departmental Secretary. This person knows a lot of useful information and he or she can help you with so many things. They can also be very good at contacting a professor/lecturer for you.

Don't:

- Don't rely on others to help you through any communication that you need to make with your professors/lecturers or TAs. If you're coming from an ESL program, you've probably had many people throughout your studies help you navigate the difficulties of communication in your new country. Now, you need to be confident and do it for yourself.
- Don't forget that in Western culture, equality is extremely important. You're expected to be equally polite to everyone, from academic staff to the cleaner.

deferential (adj): Someone who is deferential is polite and respectful toward someone else. English can be a very deferential language. We show respect through choice of words and tone, not specific pronouns or separate forms of address.

By phone

When you call your professor/lecturer, (or anyone else for that matter), and they answer saying "Hello," you should say: "Hello, **this is Jun. Could I please speak to Professor Adams?**"

You shouldn't say:

"I am Jun. Is Professor Adams there?"

Tip:

If you're nervous on the phone, as many international students understandably are, practice with a friend, or at home, before your call. If you know you have problems pronouncing the names involved, practice them before you make your call. This will make you feel more confident, and able to communicate what you need to.

Texting your professor/lecturer

It's unusual for professors/lecturers, or anyone else in authority at the college/university, to give students their cell/mobile number. If they do, however, you should not text your professors/lecturers. That's too informal.


By email

Email has become one of the most common ways to communicate with anyone. When writing an email to your professor/lecturer, TA, or advisor, be as polite and formal as you can.


Start with a clear subject line. For this example email, the subject line could read:

RE: Paperwork

An example email:

Dear Dr. Smith, I hope that you are well. I appreciate how busy you are, but I'm hoping you would be able to sign some paperwork for me. Thank you so much for your time. I look forward to hearing from you. With regards, Cheng Ju Huan	
---	--

Sometimes, students write emails that are more like this:

Ms. Jones I am [name]. I want you to sign some papers for me. I will come to your office tomorrow.	
---	---

This isn't a good example of how to write. "Ms. Jones" is not the correct way to formally address someone in English. The second sentence is too direct and demanding. The third sentence assumes that this is OK with the professor/lecturer, which it might not be. She might be busy, or have specific office hours only. This kind of email makes you appear rude and will give the person who receives it a bad impression of you.

When you've received an email reply from a tutor, always send an answer, even if it's a short one, e.g. to say thank you.

RE: is an abbreviation of "regarding" and it means "subject."

By letter

Letters of recommendation

Letters of recommendation ask for a professor/lecturer or former employer to tell someone else that you're good for a place at college/university, or good for a job. Professors/Lecturers and former employers in English-speaking countries write these letters only for their strongest students. If you received a low mark for a course, it's not a good idea to ask that professor/lecturer. Ask a professor/lecturer whose course you did well on. Also, remember to give the professor/lecturer enough advance notice, for example at least 3–4 weeks, before your deadline. If you ask for this letter at the last minute, he or she might have to say no.

In the letter you should:

- say why you're writing to him or her;
- help them remember how they know you, and say which class you were in;
- compliment them on their class/course and how it might be relevant to what you're doing now;
- remind them of what you achieved in the class (be specific here, and try to refer to any special projects you did, or interesting things you brought to class discussion);

- tell them specifically what your letter of recommendation is for (which course or which job);
- give them the name and contact details of that person. Letters of recommendation normally have to go directly to the admissions department or other specific area of the college/university;
- thank them for their time.

Tip:

Many colleges/universities now require these letters to be sent via email or as an attachment within the online application system. Be careful to check those details before you send your letter in. Either way, the format of the letter stays the same. If it's sent via mail/post, you may not open it, but should instead send it on to the relevant person.

An example letter of recommendation:

Dear Dr. Jones,

I am writing to ask if you would be willing to write a letter of recommendation for me.

As a student in your Economics of the Great Recession class, I learned a great deal about the recent global financial crisis and its effects on the world economy. I found your course so fascinating that I have decided to pursue this subject further. I am now hoping to be accepted into the PhD program in International Economics at the University of Smallville.

I hope that you will remember that I was a very diligent student, and tried to regularly participate while sharing my knowledge of the Chinese situation particularly. I hope to apply my analytical skills to this program, and one day teach Economics at the university level.

If you are able to do this for me, the letter can be sent to:

Dr. Jane Robertson

[ADDRESS or other contact details here (it will vary by university and by program. Make sure you check exactly what it should be)]

If you would like to contact me for any reason, please email me at chengj@globalemail.com. Thank you so much for your time.

Yours truly,

Cheng Jung

In person

What does OK *really* mean?

Students often get themselves into trouble by misunderstanding the word “OK” when discussing things with their professors/lecturers.

For example, a student might go up to his professor/lecturer to say that he will not be able to take the quiz/test tomorrow. The professor/lecturer might then say, “OK,” and the student walks away, happy in the knowledge that the professor/lecturer is not angry.

On the day after the quiz, the student approaches the professor/lecturer again, to ask when he can take his quiz.

“You can’t, you missed it, it was yesterday,” says the professor/lecturer.

The student is understandably confused. “You told me it was OK,” he says, worried.

What the professor/lecturer meant was: OK, *I understand what you’re saying to me.*

Because professors/lecturers in English-speaking countries don’t typically allow students to change test days without an explanation of why their situation is an emergency, or so fixed, the professor/lecturer often says “OK” to signal “understood, you won’t be here.” It’s then understood that you’ll receive a zero for that quiz. He doesn’t need to explain this, because English-speaking students understand that this would be a consequence of this situation. This also applies to absences from discussion groups and course lectures. If it clearly states on the syllabus that only a note from the doctor will get an absence excused, then make sure you do that, don’t just rely on that word “OK.”

Other meanings for OK:

= That’s fine, that’s not a problem.

“Can I open the window during the test? We need some air in here.”

“OK,” says Professor Jones.

= I understand. (as shown in the example of the quiz/test)

= Really? That's weird/awkward/strange.

You see a man wearing underwear on his head and say, "Okaaaayyy" in an exaggerated tone.

= Are you OK?

(When we say it with a question rise in intonation, someone's just fallen over on their bike and you want to make sure they haven't hurt themselves, or someone you're speaking to looks upset).

= I'm ready.

You and your friend are going to ride on a motorcycle. You're waiting for your friend to get her helmet on.

She looks at you and says, "OK!"

How to communicate problems

If you're struggling with the language level of a class, you need to take action straight away. Many colleges/universities have tutoring programs for international students where you can be paired with a student to help you with your class readings. There are also writing centers that can help both international and local students. In the UK, these are not so common, but there's likely to be some "in-session" support (help with language while you are on your course). Sometimes this is organized by your department, sometimes it requires a language test, and sometimes you have to ask for help yourself.

If it's a subject-related problem, and you don't understand the content of the course, then you must also take action right away. Many students wait until it's too late. Most colleges/universities have tutoring programs where other students tutor lower-level students. You can also hire private tutors if you have the money and time. Your TAs can also spend time explaining things to you in discussion groups.

If you're unclear about what's expected of you on any assignment, paper, or project, make sure you ask for clarification at the time it's being assigned. Professors/Lecturers should make sure that you understand what you're being asked to do.

These actions of addressing a problem straight away are examples of being proactive, which means dealing with future problems early, so that they don't become a major problem later on. This is a highly valued skill both in academia, but also in the working world.

Emergencies

People in English-speaking countries value deadlines, punctuality, and efficiency. If you're experiencing a true personal emergency, most professors/lecturers will understand and try to help you reschedule assignments, etc. However, some cultures have a very different idea of what "emergency" means. The following situations are ones that a professor/lecturer in an English-speaking country would consider an emergency:

- death in the family (from your immediate family)
- major accident (car accident, broken limb)
- your house burned down
- you were admitted to the hospital with a very serious illness

Women

In some countries, it's acceptable for a female student to be excused from certain responsibilities because she's menstruating or pregnant. You should never use these two situations as an excuse for absences or other problems. Women generally get on with things as normal in almost all circumstances.

Sometimes women do have health issues related to their pregnancy. Still, you might be amazed to see that many women work up until the due date for their baby. If you're experiencing physical illness because of pregnancy, for example, very prolonged morning sickness or something as serious as preeclampsia, then of course, you should tell your advisor or professors/lecturers about your situation.

If you're from a gender-segregated society such as those in the Middle East, you'll have to get used to working with, talking with, and sitting with men in many situations. If you wear a hijab (or niqab), local people may look at you and ask you about it. This is because Western women are not used to covering their hair and body in this way, and wouldn't feel comfortable doing so themselves.

Men

Remember that you're in societies that are, for the most part, gender equal. You should try to avoid making any sexist comments about women's abilities in class or with your professors/lecturers.

If you come from a strongly patriarchal society (dominated by men) such as many in the Middle East or Africa, you might be asked awkward questions about women's rights in your country. Try to understand that your classmates or professors/lecturers will be naturally curious about these issues. If you don't feel comfortable answering a question, you should say so. You can say: "I don't feel comfortable answering that question." This goes for women too.

Referring to religion

For most people in English-speaking countries, religion is a deeply personal thing that isn't usually openly talked about in mixed company, especially not in a college/university setting. Remember too that some people in the Western world have no religion (atheism) or have a casual, flexible relationship

with religion where they believe in some kind of power, but aren't sure what name or form it takes (agnosticism). Not having a religion doesn't mean people are "immoral." Many people in the West who do not believe in God have very strong morals and beliefs about how people should be treated and what people should do.

In the US, you may find areas where people openly talk about their Christian faith, but again, this is not common in a college/university setting, or in big cities, for example. If you're having a problem and you want to talk about your religious beliefs during a discussion, you may find that people feel a bit uncomfortable. Speaking in more general terms is probably best. Imagine you're talking with your classmates about an upcoming final exam. When wondering if you'll pass, instead of saying, "God willing," you could say "I hope so" or something more general. Having said that, people tend to be very respectful of the religion of others and you'll normally find that people are accepting of your religious views.

Religious holidays and your studies

The Christian holiday calendar is usually the only one followed for holy days (which normally means, a day off from work and college/university). These days normally fall during normal college/university breaks. In the US especially, some colleges/universities will also take into account Jewish holidays, for example, allowing students to reschedule exams that fall on Rosh Hashanah, but some don't.

Students are not excused from taking exams or handing in assignments on other religious holidays in Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam. If you're Muslim, and it's Ramadan, feel free to inform your professors/lecturers that you're fasting, but again, that won't excuse you from any assignment or test. Thankfully, for the next few years, this holiday would only affect you if you're taking summer school! If you're studying

during Ramadan, you need to understand that trips home for Eid-ul-Fitr will not be excused at most colleges/universities.

If you're going to go home regardless, make sure you let your professors/lecturers know, and be sure you don't miss any midterm or final exams, or other major assignments. In the UK, most universities provide quiet rooms or prayer rooms somewhere on the campus. They will try not to schedule classes during Muslim prayer times and on the Jewish Sabbath, but this is often not possible. Any requests for time off during exams may be considered but again, the university will often not be able to agree to this. They should normally give enough advance notice of assignment deadline dates so that students can try to write them on days that are not religious festivals.

Interactions with your classmates

Tips:

Do:

- Be friendly with your classmates. Talk with them outside of class/lectures whenever you can. They'll often form study groups that can be very helpful for you, and you could also make new friends.
- Participate a lot whenever your professor/lecturer asks the class a question. You have a lot of interesting insights to offer as a foreign student. Share your experiences and viewpoint!

Don't:

- Don't be afraid to ask your classmates for help from time to time. Many people in English-speaking countries are friendly and helpful.
- Don't ask to cheat from, or plagiarize, your classmates' work. Though, like in all countries, cheating does happen, it's taken very seriously in Western cultures.