When you speak, you adjust your tone and vocabulary to accommodate your audience. You do this quite naturally, following skills you learned as a child: you speak to your friends in one way, to your parents in another, to teachers or grandparents or small children in yet other ways.

When it comes to speaking, you’ve had a diverse audience on which to practice this skill—an audience you’ve likely not had in regards to on-line communication. So when you e-mail professors, that adjustment requires a more conscious (but worthwhile) effort. The way you project yourself via e-mail reflects on your respect and professionalism. It influences the way your professors view you—and someday, it will influence the way prospective employers and colleagues view you! Here are a few helpful hints:

- **Professors’ expectations regarding e-mail etiquette differ.** You can adjust to these expectations as you come to know your professors—but in the beginning, it’s best to start off formally. Address your reader; explain your question or concern clearly; sign your name. If your class is large and you don’t know your professor well, you may want to indicate your course and section.
  
  For example,
  
  *Professor Smith,*
  
  *This is Tim Jones from your art history class, section B. I was wondering whether you would like a works cited page for the next paper. Thank you!*
  
  *Tim Jones*

- **Model your e-mails on the ones you receive from professors.** If a professor sends you a formal e-mail, he or she probably expects a similar style in return.

- **Many faculty members will tell you how to address them (“Dr.,” “Professor,” “Mr./Mrs./Ms.,” etc.).** If your professor does not do so, use your syllabus as a guide—and again, if unsure, start off formally.

- **Even if your professor does not use the above level of formality, you should assume that he or she expects proper grammar, spelling, and capitalization.** This reflects on your professionalism, and will be an important skill after college—so this is a good time to start practicing!
  
  o Stay away from IM-language (“u” for “you,” etc.).

  o If you know you have trouble with grammar and/or spelling, consider typing your e-mails in Word documents and pasting them into your e-mail. **Spelling and grammar checks are not foolproof, nor are they a replacement for learning these skills.** While you are learning these skills, however, the checks may provide some help. This practice can also help you avoid hitting the “send” button before you mean to!

  o Re-read what you’ve written before you hit “send.”

- **If you don’t use your Niagara e-mail account, consider the impact of your e-mail address on your reader.** “Hotstuff@yahoo.com” may be a fun address with your friends, but will probably not leave a favorable impression with a professor.

- **Ask before you send a professor a paper or assignment via e-mail.**
• Remember that there is no such thing as a “confidential” e-mail! Once you hit “send,” that information is out of your hands; even someone you trust could forward it to the wrong person accidentally. Avoid putting anything in an e-mail—whether to a friend or a professor—that you consider private.

• On the whole, e-mail offers an incredible amount of accessibility. But remember that technology cannot entirely replace face-to-face conversation.
  o If you have a complex question, your professor can probably answer it more effectively during class or office hours.
  o If you have a complaint or sensitive topic to discuss, face-to-face communication is best. E-mail does not allow for the body language and facial expressions that play such crucial roles in these conversations.
  o Because e-mail is less personal, it can be easy to forget the simple rules of politeness we use in speech—rules such as “please” and “thank you!” Which request would you rather receive in an e-mail?
    ▪ I’m available Thursday afternoons. E-mail me to let me know when we can meet to talk about my paper.
    ▪ Professor Smith,
      I’d like to talk with you about my paper. I see that you have office hours Thursday afternoons; I’m free then too. Would sometime this Thursday work? If not, perhaps we could find another time to meet. Thank you!
      Jane Jones

**Note: Many of the above suggestions relate to phone usage as well. Think about the person on the other end of your phone line (just as you are now thinking about the person on the other end of your internet connection). Professors and other professionals need phone numbers at which they can reliably reach you. You can choose the number that you give out—but when you do, consider the following questions:
• Is this a number at which you can be reliably reached?
• If callers reach your voicemail, what will they hear? What impression will this leave with professors?
• How long must callers wait before they can leave messages?

Finally, do not be afraid to leave voice messages for professors. Otherwise, they have no way of knowing that you want to reach them.

Written by Dr. Heather McEntarfer, Assistant Professor, SUNY Fredonia (former Writing Coordinator in the Office of Academic Support at Niagara University)