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Dear Student: My Name Is Not 'Hey'

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Original image by Wikimedia user Albertomos.

A recent email to me from a student:

“Hey!

I wont be in class today, I feel very sick and need to sleep all day. I know we are watching the movie today so il watch that before class on Tuesday. let me know if there’s anything else I miss! I have a friend in the class who should bring u my paper but I have attached it here as well just in case.
Again I apologize for my absence but I wouldn’t be able to stay awake and let alone focus on the material in class and would just like to sleep out this cold/flu hybrid. Thanks a lot and have a great weekend! Also let me know if I need a Doctor’s note, the health center is just backed up on appointments and wouldn’t be able to take me till at least Monday.”

Unsigned.

The student who sent me this email is not a childhood friend, my next-door neighbor, a sibling, or someone I play basketball with. I am their professor. I have a name by which I ought to be addressed. And it is not “Hey!” The student might as well have said, “Hey boo, how you doin’?”

This may seem like a simple gripe about etiquette. But for many women and professors of color who teach in predominantly-white classrooms, it’s more than that. The assumed familiarity in a message like this implies that instructors like us are more laid-back or “down,” that we don’t have to be shown the same respect as our white male colleagues, and that our classrooms are perceived as one giant bro-fest.

“Any professor who doesn’t think this is a major issue probably isn’t a person of color or a woman — or at least a woman from a working-class background,” says Lisa Guerrero, an associate professor of critical culture, gender, and race studies at Washington State University. “White male professors demand respect and it’s expected. When women and professors of color demand respect we’re being unreasonable.”

“Truth be told, I don’t like being called ‘Doctor,’” she says. “But a student damn well better call me ‘Professor.’ Not because I said so, but because I deserve it, and all those like me who didn’t have a chance to make it here deserve it.”

Different professors have different takes on this, of course. Some say they prefer that students keep correspondences casual: They’d rather be addressed by their first names. Others include guidelines in their syllabi that detail the appropriate way to communicate via email. For those professors, writing a proper salutation, spelling out words (like “you” instead of “u”), and including a signature are all things that matter.

I retracted my student’s name from the email and shared it with a few professors and asked how they could transform it into a teachable moment for students. How should faculty members respond to these types of encounters? Here are some ideas — some colorful, some a little more by-the-books.

**Here’s what we’d like to say:**

https://chroniclevitalae.com/news/964-dear-student-my-name-is-not-hey
Tracey M. Lewis-Giggetts
adjunct professor of English and writing

What up, Doe!

Yoooo, thanks for the message! I feel you on that sleep thing. Sometimes when I'm just sick to my stomach over too-familiar students who think they can talk to me any ol' kind of way, as if I didn't earn the right be called ‘Professor’ or, heck, ‘Ms.’, I just want to go to the crib, slide up in the sack, and sleep the foolishness away. It feels like some crazy entitled/disrespectful hybrid is going around nowadays and it would really help to be able to sleep it out. I'm just saying.

But check it: You got that syllabus, right? You know, that large document I gave you at the start of the semester that runs down everything you need to know about class policy? Yeah, that. Pretty clearly states you need a doctor's note/documentation for the day you missed.

Sleep tight,
ZZZZZZZZ

Kevin Heffernan
associate professor of film and media arts
Southern Methodist University

Dear Student,

Thank you for the note. I am sorry you could not be with us last Thursday, and I appreciate your efforts to catch up on what you missed. I always recommend that when a student misses a class, they meet with a student who was present to meet with them for 20 minutes or so to explain what was covered in class. This gives both the student who missed class and the student who was present a chance to engage with the material and to gain greater understanding of the ideas we explore throughout the semester.

That said, your word choice baffles me. Contrary to what we heard in the schoolyard, “Hey” is not “for horses,” because it isn’t even spelled the same. In fact, it gained currency around the year 1200 as a verbal expression of “challenge, rebuttal, anger, or derision.” And those just aren’t the kind of groovy feelings I try to foster with the beanbag chairs in my office. [Note: I actually have two kissing-lips-shaped beanbag chairs in my office.] And by “man,” I certainly hope you were not abbreviating “The Man,” because I assure you that I am an ally in the struggle and seek to level all social distinctions and hierarchies as you were trying to do in the informal wording of your communiqué.
But as Saul Alinsky reminds us in Rules for Radicals, we must subvert by stealth, so future letters to teachers, administrators, prospective employers, and tax assessors should maintain the highest levels of professional courtesy. This will enable you to gain their trust and eventually subvert the system from within.

In solidarity,
Professor

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Takiyah Nur Amin  
*assistant professor of dance*  
*University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

Good afternoon:

I hope all is well with you. Please note that all the questions you ask in your email are addressed in the syllabus. The syllabus delineates clearly what we will be doing in class each day and states that if a student misses a class meeting, it is their responsibility to get notes and information from a fellow student.

In the future, please observe the “netiquette” guidelines listed on Page 3. Beginning your email with an appropriate greeting is expressly noted there. “Hey” is shonuff not an appropriate greeting for an email between you and your professor: We ain’t homies. We ain’t friends. And while I genuinely feel warmly toward my students, the assumption of peership in your email is not cool.

I need you to consider why you thought it was alright to address me so informally. Is this how you communicate with all of your professors or just the ones that are young black women?

Look, man. This level of fooleywang has got to stop. Get it together.

Dr. Amin

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*Here's what we'd really say:*

Lisa Guerrero  
*associate professor of critical culture, gender, and race studies*  
*Washington State University*

Dear Student,
Because you are sick, I will make a one-time exception and respond to your email. But please note that in the future any emails you send to me that begin with “Hey” will not receive a response, a practice that is made clear in the course’s “netiquette” policy. While fever or dehydration may have caused you to forget, here are a few things you will want to re-familiarize yourself with when you are well again:

1. As it states in the “netiquette” policy, you should consider communications with me, your professor, as professional communications. I’m not your friend, your roommate, your parent, the Twittersphere, or your journal. In other words, don’t address me with “Hey,” “Hi there,” “Lisa,” or worse yet, no address at all. Additionally, don’t use text language, emojis, or hashtags (#thatwontendwellforU). In exchange, I will communicate with you professionally as well.

2. As it happens, you already know what you will miss in class as it is outlined in the course syllabus. You will likely want to ask the friend who’s kind enough to be turning in your paper if she’ll also be kind enough to share her notes with you. If, after reading her notes, you have specific questions, feel free to come to my office hours, which are listed (you guessed it!) on the syllabus.

3. While I appreciate you letting me know of your absence, you actually don’t have to. As it states in the syllabus, you can have four absences in my class — I don’t care for what reason. If you’re in bed hopped up on NyQuil for the plague-like cold that is hitting everyone, or you slept through your alarm, or you’re taking a “sick day” at the beach, I don’t need to know. But if you still feel obligated to let me know, you don’t need to provide details. I understand what sick means: It means you won’t be in class. Period.

I wish you a speedy recovery.

Signed,
The Syllabus is Your Friend

Angela Jackson-Brown
assistant professor of English
Ball State University

Dear Student,

Sometimes I allow myself to get troubled by things that most people would shake off. Today is one of those times. In your recent email to me, you addressed me as “Hey.” Let me preface my comments by saying that you aren’t the first. I’ve received emails the open with “Yo,” “Hey

https://chroniclevitae.com/news/964-dear-student-my-name-is-not-hey
Prof,” “Miss A.” Most times I just ignore these salutations and chalk it up to youthful ignorance, but I realized today, I was doing you all a disservice by not correcting you. So today you get to hear the words I should have said to all of those others.

My name is Professor Angela Jackson-Brown and I really wish you would address me by that name. It’s the name on my syllabus and it is the name on those three, count them, three degrees hanging on my office wall. Please take the extra couple of seconds necessary to type “Dear Professor Jackson-Brown.”

I know, you get in a hurry. You have other things on your mind. And you live in a culture in which manners are no longer stressed. But believe me: It is better that you learn this lesson from me than from a future employer who might not fire you for your lackadaisical manner of addressing him or her, but might think twice about elevating you to a position in the company that requires decorum. Addressing someone who is your superior, your higher up, by “hey” sends the message you don’t value that person. It sends the message you don’t recognize that person studied long and hard, jumped through tons of hoops, and endured countless hours of sleeplessness and stress to earn that title. I’m not royalty or a pop star, so I don’t need you to “bow down.” I just need you to respect the title I spent years earning.

Best always.

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Stacey Patton is a senior reporter at Vitae.

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