‘Yo, Prof!’ is Not the Proper Way to Address Me: Using a Status Email Assignment in First-Year Legal Writing to Address Issues with Student Correspondence

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As academic success professionals, we are used to focusing on student issues with legal analysis and understanding complex legal concepts. However, often our students need help with the more mundane. One such mundane issue gave rise to a status email assignment that incorporates basic professional communication skills into the IL Legal Writing course.

My colleagues and I have often lamented the informal nature of some students’ emails, as I’m sure many reading this have as well. However, a few years ago we realized that the problems we were seeing were no longer limited to a rare few students. Instead, this problem was demonstrated throughout the class, regardless of the student’s ability as a legal writer or overall academic performance. What was more troubling was the fact that when these emails were read in total, it was evident that the students were, with few exceptions, attempting to be professional when writing in this fashion.

One common example was the “polite order” email, where the student would demand something from the recipient, for example, the request to, “please re-review this document before our meeting this afternoon.” Although emails like that are common in practice when a partner emails an associate, in law school students are the associates and professors are the partners. This relationship was not being reflected by the tone of the email correspondence we were receiving. Unfortunately, the students did not realize that by emailing a professor to “review this prior to our meeting” they were treating professors like subordinates and could be alienating the very people from whom they sought assistance.

Another commonly seen example was the email with an improper salutation, often addressed to Ms. or Mr. instead of Professor. As with the “polite order” emails, for the most part, the students whose emails were addressed in this manner often did not realize that, in the context of a law school email, Professor was the proper salutation. Presumably, students had been taught or had read that professional correspondence includes the salutation of Ms. or Mr. and were modeling that behavior.

Next, some students would send emails that over-shared aspects of their lives. In our Legal Writing classes, we do not require a doctor’s note or any detailed information regarding absences. Despite this, some students would very often send emails giving detailed explanations of the various health or personal needs.
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issues that precipitated their absences from class. The students, in attempting to explain those absences, often gave so much information as to make the reader uncomfortable, something professional correspondence should never do.

Finally, in addition to these issues, we noticed that our students were not always using professional email addresses. Very often we received otherwise perfectly professional and appropriate emails from students with addresses utilizing slang, such as “smuggling hams@provider.com,” or addresses that identified students’ love of comic books or professional sports teams. Students seemed unaware that email addresses that serve to express their individuality could be offsetting to the professional reader. As with the other issues, when reading the emails as a whole, it was evident that our students did not realize unprofessional email addresses could be problematic.

As my colleagues and I discussed these issues, the conversation turned from general commiseration to a discussion about how and when to address these issues. Since NIU Law has integrated its Legal Writing and Academic Success programs, our Legal Writing classes gave us the best opportunity to address the issue. However, our concern was that having a stand-alone class discussing email etiquette could alienate the students and make us seem even more nitpicky than we were already perceived. After a fair amount of discussion, we decided the best way to introduce these issues was to do so in the context of law practice. We decided to incorporate a status email assignment into our classes, giving students the exposure to practical legal skills while at the same time addressing the basic dos and don’ts of emailed correspondence. The assignment would be given to our students shortly after they received their Memo II assignment, the open memorandum typically given about a month before the semester ends.

Given what we were seeing from our students’ emails, putting the assignment so late in the semester may seem counterintuitive. However, by the time the second memo is assigned, we have built up a rapport with the students, which makes it easier to have this discussion with them and have them be receptive to it. Also, we did not want to chill communication with the students by putting this discussion earlier in the semester. Our concern was that students would be so busy trying to craft a “perfect” email that they would not correspond with us at all. Since our goal was to encourage professional correspondence and not to discourage communication entirely, holding off on the discussion until the students were more comfortable with the Legal Writing class was deemed more beneficial.

To ensure that it did not seem like a busywork assignment, we decided the status email would take the place of the citation list some of us required for students to document the progress of their open memorandum research. This context would open up an avenue to discuss email etiquette and the importance of creating professional email correspondence. In keeping with the desire to simulate the practice experience, this assignment, unlike prior assignments distributed in hard copy and posted on our TWEN or Blackboard sites, would be sent by email as if it were an email from a partner. This would also expose students to the kind of informal assignments frequently given in practice. Further, by ensuring that the emailed assignment was written in a professional tone with a professional salutation and closing, the assignment would serve to model professional behavior for the students.

With these broad goals in mind, each of us created our own status email assignment and the accompanying plan for class discussion. For my class, one week
after they received the Memo II assignment, the students received an email from the partner asking the student associate to update the partner as to the status of his or her research. The student was asked a few broad, general questions and told to respond by the end of the week. Once the assignment was disseminated, part of the next class was spent discussing email etiquette to give students the context for the importance of professional email correspondence. The lecture for this class included a discussion of salutations, the proper professional tone to strike in an email, as well as ensuring that the email conveys the appropriate information. This conversation also included a discussion of the many places an email can go and the risks that viral emails can pose to an attorney, especially a new associate. Many students, as part of the Internet Generation, do not see email correspondence as formal and certainly not as “writing,” the way that legal professionals do. However, an email from an associate to a partner can be printed out and placed in the file or forwarded to a client or another partner. Additionally, since by nature emails are easy to disseminate with a single click of a mouse, the fact that this ease of transmission can cut both ways is part of the email etiquette discussion. We discussed the fact that, although viral emails may be fun to read when you are not personally involved in the story, the last thing many of us want is to become fodder for late-night comedians, as a cautionary tale for use by Legal Writing instructors, or as a funny story to be told throughout your law firm.

The final piece of this class discussion was the importance of a proper and appropriate email address. Students were made aware that email addresses that seem cute or funny when in a student’s dorm room or the privacy of her home can have the opposite effect on a future employer, partner, or client. To drive home this point, I gave my students a list of email addresses that I have seen in my years of teaching. Although most students found the list humorous, some students got uncomfortable as they realize that their email addresses may not be entirely proper.

Having now done the status email assignment for several years, although we have not done research to confirm the effect this assignment has on student correspondence, anecdotally it works quite well. Once the email etiquette discussion occurs, students pay far more attention to their emails and my colleagues and I have noticed an increase in professionalism in even the most basic correspondence. Also, when there are issues with a student’s email, the email etiquette discussion gives a context to discuss those issues in a way that does not offend the students. I will miss the funny email addresses, though.