

English Solutions for Graduate Research Writing: Formal Email

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This is a self-study guide written to help graduate students and researchers at Hanyang University in Seoul, Korea write for publication in English in engineering and applied sciences. It may be helpful to other non-native speaking scientists writing in English. This edition is being revised. Any part may be freely distributed in electronic or print form for non-commercial, educational purposes either for self-study or classroom use **as long as information indicating attribution is included as follows:**

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1.0 Formal Email

1.1. Introducing yourself

The ability to write email to foreign researchers and companies using a style and tone that is appropriate is an essential professional skill. In this chapter we will cover the basic format for formal email used for professional communication as well as the basic grammar for polite requests in English.

1.1.1 Introducing yourself at a conference or in email

Imagine that you meet a well-known professor in your research area at a conference. It is a great opportunity to ask a question, but first you must introduce yourself. Also, when writing an email to a foreign professor, writing an application, or writing to a foreign company, it is common to introduce yourself in the beginning of your email using the same structure.

EXAMPLES

- Hello, my name is Ji-Sung Park. I am a master's student in the Department of Chemical Engineering at Hanyang University in Seoul, Korea. I am currently researching hybrid materials.
- Hello, my name is Hong-Mahn Choi. I am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Chemical Engineering at Hanyang University in Seoul, Korea. I am currently researching self-assembling molecules and nanoparticles.

Any of these structures are correct for talking about your student status. Master's candidate is not as common, but it is not wrong.

I am a	master's student.
	master's candidate.
	doctoral student.
	doctoral candidate.
	Ph.D. student.
	PhD candidate.

1.1.2 Writing a bio statement for a conference or journal

Some journals and conferences will require you to submit a bio, which is a paragraph about your background and research interests of about 75-100 words. It is written in the third person, meaning that you do not use "I" to describe yourself. Bios seem to be more common in electronic engineering journals than in chemical engineering journals. It may depend on your field. There are many possible formats. Below is a real example from a Hanyang author in an IEEE journal.

EXAMPLE

Chul-Ho Choi (M'99) received the B.S. degree in control and instrumentation engineering from Hanyang University in 1998 and the M.S. degree in EECI from Hanyang University. He is currently pursuing the Ph. D. degree at the same university. In 1998, the 3rd TI DSP contest prize was awarded to him. He has been engaged in research and development of control system for flat panel displays

and has designed LCD controller for UXGA. His research interests include image processing, VLSI design, 3D display, and flat panel displays.

Source: C.-H. Choi et al.: IEEE Transactions on Consumer Electronics, Vol. 50, No. 3, AUGUST 2004 p. 909 ©2004

A bio can include

- where you got your previous degrees and what year you graduated.
- which lab you are part of.
- any prizes or awards you have received such as outstanding student conference paper.
- any professional associations you are a member of such as IEEE.
- any poster or conference papers you have presented and at which conference (usually only for graduate student conferences.)
- any other papers you have published (not as common).
- your research interests.

1.1.3 Common mistakes when writing formal email

1) When you are introducing yourself, don't just mention that you are a graduate student. Say what kind of student you are, master's or doctoral.

2) Major is used only for undergraduate students. Major is a type of student; it is not a field of study. If you introduce yourself at a conference and say, "My major is mechanical engineering," then people might think that you are an undergraduate student who is helping to move tables and give directions at the conference, not a presenter!

3) "Course" refers to a program of study or a class, but not a person. Don't use it to introduce yourself.

EXAMPLES

X: I am a doctor's course student

O: I am a doctoral student

4) For doctoral degrees, use either periods after both "h" and "D" or no periods at all, not just one period. It is an abbreviation of Doctor of Philosophy from the Latin, *Philosophiae Doctor*, or D.Phil., so the "h" is not a full word. Traditionally in Europe, all those who gained the highest degree in a field except for theology, medicine, or law were awarded a Doctor of Philosophy. The modern trend is to write it without periods.

EXAMPLES

X: She is a Ph.D student.

O: She is a PhD candidate.

O: She is a Ph.D. student.

5) Don't use an abbreviation for the word "university" in normal writing unless you are filling out an application form or you lack space to write in a document like a brochure.

EXAMPLES

X: I graduated from Hanyang Univ.

X: I graduated from Hanyang U.

O: I study at Hanyang University.

O: I am studying at Hanyang University in Seoul, Korea.

6) Do not use "about" or "part" to describe your research.

EXAMPLES

X: I am currently researching about fuel cells.

X: My research part is nanoparticles.

O: I am currently researching fuel cells.

O: My research field is nanoparticles.

O: My area of research is hydrogen storage materials.

7) There is an official difference between Ph.D. student and Ph.D. candidate. A Ph.D. candidate is considered to have finished taking courses, and is currently researching or writing a dissertation whereas a Ph.D. student is still taking classes. Although many people are not aware of this difference, it might be a good idea to follow this usage for formal job, scholarship, or post-doc applications.

8) You receive a degree in a subject or from a university, but not a department or a division.

EXAMPLES

X: He has a M.S. in the Department of Materials Science and Engineering.

X: He has a M.S. in the Division of Materials Science and Engineering.

O: He has a M.S. in Materials Science and Engineering from Hanyang University.

O: He is a master's student in the Division of Materials Science and Engineering at Hanyang University.

1.1.4 Undergraduate student introductions

These examples are appropriate for introducing undergraduate students.

EXAMPLES

O: My name is Ki-Hyun Seol, and I am a senior in the Department of Civil Engineering at Hanyang University in Seoul, Korea.

O: I am studying civil engineering at Hanyang University.

O: My major is civil engineering. I go to Hanyang University.

1.2. Format for writing the date

There are a surprising number of differences in how the date is written in Korea, America, Europe, and in the international standard used in many scientific documents. Not knowing these differences can cause confusion. You may need to know this difference for organizing business meetings by email, proposals, orders, contracts, business letters, or applications.

1) Korea

2008.05.10

↑ ↑
Month Day

2) The United States

May 10, 2008

↑ ↑

To avoid possible confusion, the month is often spelled in Western languages.

Put a comma here. The formats 25th, 2nd or 3rd are more traditional, but are becoming less common in modern business writing.

3) Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada

10 May 2008

↑ ↑

No commas required here

4) ISO 8601 International Standard <http://www.iso.org/iso/en/prods-services/popstds/datesandtime.html>

2008-05-10

↑

Year-Month-Day

When writing the date on a business letter or document, spell the month and there will be no confusion. As you can see, confusion can result between British and American English. The date 06/01/08 would be 6 January in Europe, but June 1st in the US. Slash marks “/” or a “-” hyphen (not a period) are used when writing a numerical date in English. The official style in Canada is the same as Europe, but some Canadians use the American format. The next time you are looking in Hyundai or Lotte Department Store in Seoul, look at the expiry date on items in the foreign food section such as cheese, and see if you can understand the dates on the packages. It might not be as easy as you think.

Note also that abbreviations of the names of long months can be either three letters “sep” or four letters “Sept.” depending on whether the format of a specific styleguide for references is required or a general English standard. Check the style used in the journal or in your department.

1.3. Names and titles

Names and titles are difficult because there are so many cultural differences. This section tries to explain some of these differences. The first step is to understand the difference between first and last names in English. I sometimes see incorrect references in papers resulting from confusion between first and last name.

1.3.1 Titles and greetings

I sometimes receive email or telephone calls that start like this:

“Hello, this is Choi.”

What is the problem here? Family name only without any title such as Mr. is not usually used to refer directly to everyday people. In English, however, it is used in newspapers and current events, sports, the military, and some traditional private schools when teachers are calling students, but it should not normally be used in regular speech or email.

1) If you are emailing a foreign professor whose name is John Jones, the format is as follows:

EXAMPLE

O: Dear Professor Jones:

X: Dear Jones

2) There are actually very few titles in English. They are professor, Dr., Mr., Ms., Mrs., and many military and some political titles. Use only one title with a family name, however, and not both Dr. and Prof. together.

EXAMPLE

X: Prof. Dr. Dong-guk Lee

O: Professor Jones

O: Dr. Jones

3) In Korean, it makes sense to say, “안녕하십니까? 김 센터장” in an office. However, addressing someone as “Director Kim” in English sounds strange. We would just say “Mr. Kim.” In short, the only titles you will probably ever need to use in English are Mr. Ms. Mrs. Dr. or professor. Teacher, director, and manager are not titles in English to be used to refer to a another person, to speak directly to a person, or to address a greeting in an email. One exception here is that the word “Teacher” is used by children to refer to their teacher in elementary school. The word “Miss” is also sometimes used with first name “Miss Mary” by children referring to their elementary school teacher.

EXAMPLES

X: Dear Turner
X: Dear Adam Teacher
X: Dear Manager Turner
X: Dear Director Turner
O: Dear Mr. Turner
O: Dear Professor Turner
O: Dear Adam, (but see 1.4.)

4) The abbreviation Prof. is usually only used with the full name, not with family name only, but this is not a serious mistake. The abbreviation Dr. is used with family name only, except for very formal introductions such as introducing a guest speaker. The full name and title format is mostly used for registration, government applications, and other documents that are kept by alphabetical order. Writing the word “Doctor” is only used for medical doctors, M.D.

If you are sending an email to a faculty member then use title and family name.

EXAMPLE

Dear Professor Jones:

It is generally true that North American culture is more casual than Korean culture. I usually call other foreign English teachers or professors by their first names, but I always use the title “Professor” when speaking or writing to Korean professors. Be careful not to exaggerate how casual western culture is, however. I called all of my professors “Professor [+ family name]” when I was a university student in Canada. However, especially in small American colleges or between graduate students and professors, first names may sometimes be used.

5) If the title is used with the family name then it is capitalized. If you are talking about a job in general it is not.

EXAMPLE

Many professors applied for government funding, but only Professor Kang from Hanyang University was awarded the research grant.

6) Writing to female office staff is more complex. Ms. is most commonly used for women today as the equivalent to Mr., because it does not show if a woman is married or not. Only use Mrs. or Miss if a woman asks you to do so.

Dear Ms. Smith		single
Dear Mrs. Smith		married
Dear Ms. Smith		married or single

If you are emailing female office staff at a foreign company or university and you know their name, I suggest using “Ms.”, unless you know that they have a Ph.D.

EXAMPLE

Dear Ms. Smith:

7) Here is a review of the different combinations of name and title that are acceptable.

Title	Family Name
Dr.	Park
Dr.	John Jones
Professor	Oh
Prof.	John Jones
Mr.	Turner
Ms.	Lee
Mrs.	Kim
Miss	Smith

TIP

There is no period after titles like Mr Mrs Dr or Ms in British English.

1.3.2 Korean names

Korean names are very interesting and complex in English. Imagine a foreigner who did not know anything about Korean names and they saw the name of this woman from Korea. How would they understand the name?

Ha Ha Na	Three words?
Ha Ha Na	Miss Ha, first name Hana?
Ha Ha Na	Miss Na, first name Haha?
Na Ha Ha	Miss Haha, first name Na?

A space in English means a word. Therefore, if you put a space between the two syllables (sounds) of your first name then logically in English it is two words. Although a Korean name may be made up of two Chinese characters, it is not really two separate words as a name. This is why most people use a hyphen.

To prevent confusion in English, I recommend using a hyphen or one word for Korean names.

EXAMPLES

O: Ji-sung Park

O: Jisung Park

O: Ji-Sung Park

In Western culture hyphenated first names also exist, usually of French origin and for women, for example, Anne-Marie Wilson.

Note that some Korean authors are using hyphens for initials in references, for example, "C.-H. Choi et al." Although this is not standard, it may be a reasonable solution to the problem of distinguishing Korean names when there are so many similar family names in Korea. Other Journals in Korea are using the full Korean first name or the first initials of the author's first name in author-date format in-text references, (Jisung Park, 2007).

1.3.3 Middle names

As well as first and family names, most western people have middle names. Jonathan is my middle name. My full name then is “Adam Jonathan Turner.” However, middle names are usually only used in reference abbreviations such as A.J. Turner, in passports, or in government documents. The second letters G and M indicate middle names in this reference.

EXAMPLE

Raleigh, G.G.; Cioffi, J.M.
Communications, *IEEE Transactions on*
Volume 46, Issue 3, Mar 1998 Page(s): 357 – 366

Western middle names are not the same as the second part of Korean first names, as the “ho” in Chan-ho Park. In Korean names, the second letter is not really a middle name, but since so many Koreans have similar family names, the second part of the first name is often used like a middle name in references like this one.

EXAMPLE

[1] J. G. Choi, S.W. Lee, and S. D. Kim, “Spatio-temporal video segmentation using a joint similarity measure,” *IEEE Trans. Circuits Syst. Video Technol.*, vol. 7, pp. 279–285, 1997.

1.4. Understanding the format of an email

Correct punctuation is important because it can show the relationship between the speakers. It is meaningful. When I email other English professors for the first time, I often start like this:
Dear Professor Taylor:

After we exchange email and I know a bit more about the person, such as that they are a similar age and status, I might change to
Dear Professor Taylor,

Finally, as we get to know each other or after we have met in person, I might change my greeting to
Dear Robert,

If we become friends or colleagues then I might change to
Hi Rob.

If you use the wrong level of politeness, it is not just a punctuation mistake; it could be interpreted as a lack of respect for the recipient of your email.

1) There are also other interesting differences in the ways that different languages organize information. David Shaffer, an English professor who has spent decades in Korea, explains that information in Korean is usually given from larger to smaller units. In English, it is often the opposite. Korean addresses start with the city; English starts with the apartment or house. Notice that Korean also starts with the group (family) and then the individual, but English is the opposite. Keeping this in mind, here is a properly formatted example of a signature line of an email. All professors and graduate students in engineering should have an email signature line for the address they use to communicate for professional purposes.

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dgchang@hanyang.ac.kr
<http://www.apvlab.com>

1.4.1 Common email errors

1) "Dear" is the correct formal greeting for all types of email and letters. It is not only for personal email.

2) You should always try to find the name of the person you are sending applications to, but if you can't then you should use either of these two examples:

Dear Sir or Madam:
To Whom It May Concern:

3) The use of "Hi" should only be used for personal emails, or if you know the recipient of the email well. The use of "Hello," is generally acceptable for the first line of an email.

4) Handphone is Asian English. Mobile is European or Australian English, and cell phone or cell is American English. The abbreviations H.P. or C.P. are not common in English in signature lines or business cards.

5) With the exception of some personal names, only capitalize the first word of any word containing a hyphen:

EXAMPLES

O: E-mail

O: Email

X: E-Mail

6) The correct format for university names can be quite complex. "University of" is used to describe a university that belongs to a specific city or province. Other university names have the same format as Hanyang with the name first. State universities in the US don't always follow this rule, however. Pennsylvania State University is not the same as the University of Pennsylvania.

It is a good idea to maintain consistent format, color, style, and spelling for university documents to establish the identity of a university. This is seen as important by many American universities <http://www.cmu.edu/styleguide/>. I have seen all of the different spellings below on Hanyang webpages, email signature lines, business cards, signs, and vehicles. The abbreviation HYU is also not standard because Hanyang is only one word, but it is a reasonable choice because there are so many Korean university names that start with H.

EXAMPLES

X: HanYang University

X: Han-yang University

X: Han-Yang University

X: University of Hanyang

X: Hanyang Univ. (unless there is some reason for the abbreviation like a lack of space in a table or a long list)

O: Hanyang University

O: HYU

1.4.2 Signature lines

Use a colon (:) to introduce information. There is no space before a colon, but one space after it. A period can also be used for telephone numbers.

EXAMPLES

X: Tel)+82-02-2261-4915

O: Tel: +82-02-2261-4915

O: Tel. +82-02-2261-4915

Capitalize the official name of your department or lab if you include the name of the specific university, but do not capitalize it if you are just talking about the subject in general.

EXAMPLES

X: He is a student in the department of mechanical engineering at Hanyang University.

O: He is a professor in the Department of Mechanical Engineering at Hanyang University in Seoul, Korea

O: He is studying mechanical engineering.

1.5. Formal email style

Always organize your formal emails into logical paragraphs. Do not write emails line by line. Most formal emails contain a three or four paragraph structure that includes the following:

1. An introduction that introduces yourself or reminds the person who you are
2. An explanation of the request or problem
3. A request for action or information
4. A closing sentence.

1.5.1 Email ID name

You might want to write your name in both English and Korean *Hangul* or other Asian languages for your email ID if you email foreign professors, companies, or for applications abroad. Some recipients of your email might not have Korean (*Hangul*) or other fonts loaded on their computer unless they work with Koreans. If they don't, your name in the email containing your resume or CV attachment may look like this! “±³°,¹®°í”. I have actually received email that looks like this from students whose languages are not as common internationally. Note also that the standard Korean default fonts Batang and Gulim are not used for English text when writing international documents in English.

1.5.2 Emoticons

Don't use emoticons or unnecessary punctuation when mailing foreign professors, universities, companies, journals, or graduate students. In most cases, common usages in East Asia such as Okay ^^ H!!! Bye~~ just look childish for graduate students. Female students in particular should make sure they avoid sending cute avatars in signature lines for very important email. A student of mine realized that she had a cute angel avatar for her hanmail.net signature line only after sending an email for an important post-doctoral scientific research application!

For example, subject lines such as "Re: here you are, sir~^^" or a closing "ok bye~~" are not appropriate for formal email. Tilde~~ is not used in formal email except for scientific equations (See Chap. 10). You may, of course, use these forms in personal email between friends. I would also not advise you to include personal www.cyworld.co.kr or other personal homepages or blogs in your formal email signature line unless you use them to discuss research or issues related to your field.

1.5.3 Have a clear subject line

Make sure the person can find as well as recognize your email easily in their inbox. Unrecognized email addresses might be deleted if there is no clear subject line.

1.5.4 Use your professional email address, not your personal one

If you have a university account, try to use your real name, not a nickname for your ID if possible. Don't use an account like toughguy@ihanyang.ac.kr for formal email or job applications. It is a good idea to have one email for your professional purposes and another one for your school or job related mail. You can add some numbers if you have a common family name as I have done, adamturner7@gmail.com.

1.5.5 Do not rely on spell check

There are many common errors that spell check programs cannot find. It is better to proofread very important documents on paper before sending them.

EXAMPLES

It's -> its form -> from there -> their

It is a good idea to write the first draft of an important email in a word processing program to allow you to check the grammar and spelling. You can then copy and paste the text into your email program.

1.6. Politeness in English email

Writing with an appropriate level of politeness is very difficult in a foreign language. Here are some guidelines for email.

1) Don't be too demanding

Imagine that you are asking a foreign professor, English instructor, or colleague to help you with your paper.

EXAMPLES

X: Can you edit my paper? I need it on Friday
(too demanding, could be used between a boss and an employee).

X: I expect your answer soon.

O: Would it be possible for you to edit my paper by Friday? The deadline is next Tuesday
(acceptable, background reason and polite form used).

2) Avoid use of “you” when disagreeing

Using “you” makes it feel more personal. If you disagree with a reviewer’s comment on your paper you might change to passive sentence structure to make it more polite.

EXAMPLES

X: The comments were very helpful and we have changed the text as recommended. However, we disagree with one of your comments.

O: The comments were very helpful and we have changed the text as recommended except for page two paragraph six, which was not changed because ...

3) Be specific

Think of your audience. Give them the complete information to solve the problem, answer your question, or complete the task. Give them exact page references of articles, product numbers, or shipping orders that they might need to do a job or fix a problem without looking up the information.

EXAMPLE

X: It would be very helpful if you could send me some image data that is mentioned on your website.

The recipient might ask: Which website? What data? What section or page? Which article? These are all types of questions that the reader of your email should not have to ask.

4) Use “-ing forms” for politeness

The past continuous verb tense (was +ing verb) is often used in polite expressions.

EXAMPLES

X: Can you check my paper?

O: I was wondering if you could review my article.

There seem to be some cultural differences in closings in email. Don’t demand or ask for a positive result, whether it is for a job or a journal article. Also, don’t say that you are waiting for an answer, but instead give a specific reason why they should contact you by a specific time.

EXAMPLES

X: Please send E-mail to me, I hope with good news.

X: I look forward to your positive reply.

X: I am waiting for your answer soon.

X: I expect that I get help from you.

O: Thank you for considering my application.

O: I would really appreciate any advice you could give me.

O: I look forward to your reply.

O: If you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me at ...

1.6.1 The grammar of politeness

In Korean, the grammar of politeness is very complex and difficult to use correctly. You must change verbs and even nouns. However, in Korean, at least the rules for politeness are more clear and systematic. On the other hand, in English the rules are not as well defined, but you may use the following guidelines when considering the level of politeness necessary. When writing formal email to a person you do not know well, use politeness levels 3 or 4 below.

There are four basic steps to increased levels of politeness:

1) Change from imperative to question form

Edit this paper -> Can you edit this paper?

2) Change from question form to modal question form (could, would)

Could you edit this paper please?

3) Add politeness phrase to modal question form

I would really appreciate it if you could review this article this week.

4) Add background, a reason, an excuse, or an explanation to your request.

Your paper entitled, "_____" has been essential for my work on _____. Would it be possible for you to explain the method for _____ on page 23 of that article. How does your proposed algorithm...?

Internet Links

It is fairly common practice in East Asia for some professors to ask students to write the first draft of their own reference letters themselves in English before the professors edit and sign the final draft. Here is a useful link for students and faculty who must write letters of recommendation for those who want to work or study, particularly in North America. Note that there are some important cultural differences in what is considered appropriate in a letter of reference.
<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/Verba-recs.html>