

FAQ
Frequently Asked Questions
or: Excerpts from email

Below are some email messages that I have received along with my responses. Of course, all personal identifying information has been removed and I have made some editing changes to correct my grammar and spelling and to remove all appearances of “texting” abbreviations, which I do not understand.

An email from you similar to one of these questions or requests, will probably result in a similar, if not identical, reply.

If you don't get an email reply from me then check the last FAQ listed below for a possible explanation.

A recurring theme in my replies to email is that I am really not interested in reasons why you were not able to meet various course requirements. I am often overwhelmed with excuses of all sorts—some are quite good and reasonable, other are pretty silly. But, it would take the wisdom of Solomon to evaluate how your particular unfortunate situation should modify your grade. In my judgment, it is fairest to you and *to all of the rest of the students who are responsibly able to meet all of the requirements* of this course to assign grades precisely upon the total number of points obtained.

A college education is the only consumer product for which the less the consumer gets the happier he is.

Question: A friend in this class told me we don't have class on Wednesday and I was wondering if this is true?

Answer: What a disappointment that would be for all of us! I'm going to be in class teaching as always. I can't imagine why someone would think otherwise.

What are the tests like?

Question: I was wondering if the tests in PHY 2020 will be more suited to lectures rather than the textbook or homework?

Answer: I really like the way that I teach physics at this level. My lectures focus on what I think are the important parts of the subject. The homework and quizzes focus on what I think are the important parts of the subject. And my test questions focus on what I think are the important parts of the subject.

Question: Is there anything in addition to the homework sets that you would recommend us studying for the exam tomorrow? I am really not sure how else to study for this exam. Are there any book problems you would suggest we go over? We just don't know what to expect...

Answer: To prepare for the test I suggest that you (in order): go over class notes, review all quizzes and homework problems, look at examples in the textbook, read sections of the text that are related to the lectures, and try to find additional problems from the book that involve the same subjects.

In general a student who understands the quiz and homework problems and has been awake in class should do just fine on the tests.

Question: Will the test cover sections # and #? I don't believe we went over those in class and they're not included in the homework.

Answer: As to sections # and # ... I didn't talk about them in class and there weren't any homework problems on them. So, if I were studying for the test then I wouldn't spend much time on them.

What is important about homework?

Question: I have a simple question concerning a problem on the current HW assignment. Are we suppose to assume the penny is entirely formed of copper or are we to use the current construction of the coin to answer the problem (where zinc is more prevalent)?

Answer: My philosophy on homework questions is to check general understanding rather than to try to get an accurate number. So within a reasonable factor the makeup of the penny makes no difference.

What should I expect if I miss a test?

Question: I am writing you because my car broke down today at about 3:30, as I was on the way to class for the first test. My clutch mechanism malfunctioned and so I was unable to put the car in gear and move it. I had to wait for AAA to arrive and have the car towed to a repair shop on 13th. In light of this, I missed the test today. I was wondering if I might be able to take the test tomorrow instead? I understand what the policy for missed tests is, but I was hoping that you might be able to make an exception in this case. If need be, I can bring a copy of a receipt of some sort so you may verify this. Thank you for understanding.

Answer: Sorry. If a test were taken late it would create a real grading and record keeping nuisance for me. And your problem becomes my problem. Besides historical evidence shows that students who take a test late do exceptionally well in comparison with their other tests, which leads me to mistrust the results. Also, I have not accepted the other seven requests similar to yours.

Question: (Same student) I suppose I understand your predicament. Of course, I would hate to be penalized over something so silly, as I could have abandoned my car and run to the class to take the test on time, but I figured that would have been a bad decision. I truly wish there was some way I could prove to you that this happened yesterday, as my car having broke down and needing repair is grief enough! I apologize for my persistence, but small matters like this add up, and I didn't plan on missing either of the scheduled tests.

Answer: If you are planning on not "missing either of the scheduled tests," then perhaps you should have left for class earlier.

What should I expect if I miss a quiz and would like special consideration?

Question: When I got up an hour late this morning and saw that the class hour had already passed, I thought to myself, ah not the second class! I don't plan on another miss again. What can I do about missing the quiz in class today?

Answer: Nothing. Fortunately for you the quizzes constitute only a small portion of your grade.

What should I expect if I miss class and would like special consideration?

Question: I missed PHY 2020 today due to a more adverse parking situation than expected. I was wondering if you could inform me as to what topics were covered today in class.

Answer: Ask a friend. If you miss class it is your responsibility to find out about announcements and what material was covered. I spent an hour on the material in class. I won't spend that amount of time with you individually covering the same material. So don't ask me what I said in class. Instead, ask a classmate who is likely to give a much better and more concise answer than I could.

Question: (Same student as "the missed test" question...) I am writing you regarding tomorrow's exam. A couple of weeks back I missed almost an entire week of lecture due to illness (flu). As I recall, there was a question or two on the first exam that referred specifically to events in class. In light of this, and realizing your inability to jeopardize the material of the test, I was wondering if there is anything you might suggest I look over in order to be better prepared for the exam—obviously besides the material which the test is explicitly going to cover. I am aware that it is important to always be in class, however I'm sure you'll understand that it is not always possible, and I would hate to have missed something important that went on during those days that I missed.

Answer: I didn't actually reply to this email. But if I had it would have been something like this: Indeed, "it is not always possible" to make it to class—but this depends upon *your* priorities. You should know what the the consequences are. If you miss class then the best way to find out what material was covered is to borrow notes from a conscientious friend.

Question: I will be unable to attend class on Monday due to the career fair. This is extremely important because I really need to get an internship this summer. If there is any way that I could turn in the homework later that would be greatly appreciated.

Answer: The assignment has been available for a week. You can have a friend hand it in for you. When homework comes in late it creates a real grading and record keeping nuisance for me. And, your problem becomes my problem. I haven't accepted any of the 2 or 3 requests like yours that I get every week. With the Career Fair approaching, perhaps you should have started the homework earlier than usual.

What should I do if I *really* need a higher grade than I got?

Question: I was wondering what your decision was regarding the cut off for + grades after the finals. I could really use a C+. I believe that I was 1.7 points away from a C+ and was hoping my grade was in the C+ range. This would help my GPA a lot and help me keep my scholarship.

Answer: On rare occasions I change the grade cutoffs—I do this only at the end of the semester while looking at the entire grade distribution. And once I make a final decision, I don't change the cutoffs again. As I mentioned in class, with 50 students there are at least a few who will be below but within sight of a cutoff. However, my grading is generally generous, and I will not modify the cutoffs any further.

Question: I took your physics course last semester, I want you to know that I learned a lot from you and I enjoyed the course. I take great interest in physics especially astronomy. I tried very hard in your class but unfortunately came up with a D. I know they say that grades are final but there must be something you can do to help me make it a passing grade. I needed this course as part of my critical tracking and with a D in it I have not completed my tracking and am off course for my mechanical engineering major. If you could please help me change this grade I will do absolutely anything for it. I really did try to do my best in your class but I struggled and fell short. Please help me change this grade and I will do anything in return. I appreciate you taking the time and listening to me and if you could let me know as soon as possible that would be great. Thank you professor.

Answer: I have already turned down four students who requested grade changes for reasons similar to yours. And I'm sorry to turn down your request as well.

A grade must be a measure of the student's mastery of the subject. In particular, if outside circumstances effected grades then the best grades would go to the students who were best at pleading their cases. And grades would be meaningless.

I'm sorry not to accommodate your wishes, but I wish you well.

Why didn't you answer my email?

Answer: Okay, I have never actually received such an email, but I don't reply to every email that I get. Here are a variety of reasons:

(1) I don't read your email as soon as you send it, and I don't necessarily check my email everyday.

(2) If you pose a vague or very general question that requires an answer longer than one sentence, then the subject is better covered in a face-to-face conversation, so ask me in the classroom before or after class, or come by my office during office hours. *If you want an answer via email, then be certain that you are asking a clear, unambiguous question that can be answered in a few words. This is rarely the case, and that is why verbal discussions in person are so much better than email.*

(3) You asked a question about physics. Physics questions are very easy to ask via email. They are extremely difficult to answer via email. If you ask me in person and we are having a conversation, then I can tell by your facial expression whether I'm saying something that is obvious to you or not making any sense at all.

(4) Your email was something like "I missed class because ... Did you say anything important?" This never gets a reply. When I give a lecture, I believe that every word that I say

is important. If you ask a friend if I said anything important, you are likely to get a much more realistic response.

(5) Your email was something like “I am going to miss class because ... What will you say that is important?” This rarely gets a reply. See (4) above.

(6) Your email was something like “When is the next test?” or “What will the next test cover?” These subjects are regularly discussed in class and on the course website.