

# E-anxieties: or, a step-by-step guide on how not to write an email

Audrey Lacuna

**1. Begin with a simple greeting. This should be polite and concise. You must make a good first impression. In fact, you must make a good impression, period.**

Greetings

Hello

To whomever-it-may-concern

It is 12 midnight, and I should be preparing to sleep. Instead, I'm staring at the screen of my phone, thumbs hovering above the keyboard, kept awake by my own guilt.

I've put this off the whole day, I think to myself. It would have been ideal to have done this earlier, while my mother asked me if I was working and I replied "of course," a little too quickly, too high-pitched. It would have been more appropriate to have finished the tasks I assigned myself for today (after all, discipline is the path to passing this semester) earlier so I could follow a better sleeping schedule. Mostly, it would be better if I wasn't such a procrastinating, lazy piece of shit.

I stare at the screen. My thumb lands on the backspace, and I delete all the words I just wrote. Somehow, despite all my thoughts blaring sirens and emergencies at me, telling me to go, go, go and write, write, the screen where I am meant to *Compose* email remains blank.

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My father is always surprised when I say that I have a hard time writing emails. “You’re a writer,” he points out. (Technically, by which I mean considering my lack of profitable activities, I would be classified as a student, with the caveat that I might be planning to be a writer in the future. A hopefully writer?)

To him, a writer is one who never has any problems with writing: like a magician, the writer pulls out shiny words from under her metaphorical hat, and then the reader bursts into applause. Personally, I’m no magician, or if I were, I would be a really terrible one. Magic is about control, after all: when a magician asks you to pick a card, any card, he’s only pretending you have a choice. He’s already predicted just what you’ll do, has already forced a card into your hand, and even as you put it back—anywhere in the deck—and he reshuffles, brings it back up, then gives you a pointed smirk and asks “Is this your card?” he is secure in the knowledge that he’s only letting you see what he wants you to see. Meanwhile, I agonize over every word when I write an email (and everything else, to be honest)—will Miss Librarian find *To whomever it may concern* too presumptuous? Because the only thing I know with certainty is that I don’t know how they’ll react.

If only my words were cards! I’d be able to hold them securely in my hand, and if a particular turn of phrase didn’t quite work the way I wanted it to, then I could just take the whole deck back, put it in a case, and forget about it.



My father is a hopefully magician (he’s just recently gotten back into the hobby after a decade of hiatus; his work eats up all his free time) who performs/practices his card tricks for an audience of one when he gets home from work, 10 P.M. or so every weeknight. That audience of one is me, someone who should be working on an email concerning certain forms required in order for her to borrow books. It’s very important.

This email would maybe take three-to-five sentences, which, as a hopeful writer, should not take this much time to produce. Instead, I’m staring blankly at my screen as I debate with myself on what the correct greeting for this email is. Right now, there are two choices. (*Greetings*, I concluded, was too grandiose.) While *Dear Sir/Ma’am* is (I reason) reasonably standard and clearly greets a person, the tone is that of a business email addressing a client. *Good day!*, meanwhile, has the advantage of being correct no matter what time the recipient reads it, but what if it comes off as too friendly with the exclamation point?

I stand and pace, my usual routine when I have trouble with writing. “Hey,” my father calls.

“How about some *magiks*?” There are cards in his hands, and he’s grinning. I should be working on this email.

I plop down in front of him. “Let’s go!” Later, I tell myself. I’ll finish that email later.

**2. Introduce yourself. Include your name, and if this a school email, your student number, which is even more important than your name. You are, after all, a student first.**

My name is Audrey Lacuna, student number 201X-XXXXX...

There's at least one line in my emails that remains the same, that, thankfully, I never need to edit. How many times have I repeated this line in my correspondence? "My name is Audrey Lacuna, student number 201X-XXXXX..." These are undoubtedly two true (technically, as in they're written in legal paperwork) facts about myself. My first name is Audrey (only close friends are allowed the use of a nickname) and I was born to the clan of Lacuna. My student number of 201X-XXXXX was assigned to me before I even stepped foot in the University of the Philippines Diliman's campus. Yet somehow, whenever I write them all down, they feel false.

Audrey is a name that people whom I've met (talked with, laughed with, argued with) call me, a call to a friend, a response to a peer. The Lacunas are a family in a large house whom I visit on Sundays. 201X-XXXXX is a string of numbers this university gave me when I passed its entrance exam and decided to enroll. Summed up together in the body of an email, they feel like another identity entirely—no, not even an identity. They feel like a list—of all I am, offered up into single line. Like the stakes you put up, say, in poker.

**3. State the purpose of the email. Make sure this purpose is coherent and reasonable. Make sure you are coherent and reasonable, but if you aren't, at least try to sound like you possess these qualities.**

I am writing to you because I'd like to  
 May I request that  
 I'm unsure how to proceed, please advise

"So, look at the cards."

My father begins his trick. Dutifully, I stare at his hands. He holds two cards. He fans them out and turns them face-up. Two black aces.

He then shows me the rest of the deck. "Pick a card, any card," he says, tone shifting into something overly dramatic. I resist the urge to laugh. It's one of the things I know he struggles with right now: what magicians call the patter.

The patter is, more or less, the magician's script. Whether the magician tells the audience to watch a specific card or to anticipate this or that effect—even if a magician pretends to fail (a psychological tactic meant to impress the audience that much more when the magic actually succeeds)—it's all planned in advance. Right now, my father's keeping it fairly

simple; he's focusing more on the trick itself. I pick a card, randomly, turn it around. A red card—the 2 of Hearts. I'm instructed to remember the card, then to put it back in the deck, anywhere I want. He takes back the deck, then holds out the black aces over it. I watch as he shakes his hands, and the 2 of Hearts appears as if it rose to the top of the deck. But...

My father is a critical man, one who does not hold back his opinion for any reason. He married a critical woman and raised a critical child. Following that philosophy, he also invites criticism of himself, taking it as a way to improve. I always comment on the magic tricks he's done. Up until this point, they've always been positive (except when I tease him about his terrible skills at patter). However, at this moment, I feel obligated to point out a flaw I've noted in his trick.

"I *saw* that," I stress. "The 2 of Hearts, you put it back into your hand." Most likely, he had intended to have it hidden behind the first ace, but it appeared by mistake, face-up in-between the aces—a grave mistake, a tell-all that ruined the entire illusion.

Despite the severity of that mistake, he's still smiling. "Aww," he says, exaggeratedly shrugging his shoulders and snapping his fingers. He turns his attention back to the cards. "Guess I have to practice more." He begins to practice shuffling, and the sounds of cards fill the room.

As they say, the show's over. I should go back to my work — but I can't take my eyes off of him. To me, this is the real magic: the ability to not be fazed by someone pointing out failure.



My mother comes downstairs, to check on us. (Our apartment unit has two floors; the upper one is where our bedrooms are located; mine has no doors.) She does this daily, consistently: earlier she kicked me out of my bedroom and asked me to come down here, knowing that I still needed to work; now that I've been down here for some time she expects me to have finished my tasks. Are you done, she asks, and I flinch out a no. She turns to my father, and begins to launch a complaint about what must be the thirtieth card deck he's bought this quarantine alone. "Don't you have *enough*?"

My mother, unlike myself and my father, has no hobbies—she devotes herself entirely to the running of our household, financially and mentally. She knows everything we buy, everything we do, even everything we think. I admire her, and I fear her. I could never devote myself so single-mindedly to that level of management; I could never trust myself with the wellbeing of the people I love when I can't even help myself.



A half year ago, I was working on the registration process for the first semester of my third year in college. I had completed most of the steps necessary to be enrolled, filling up the required number of units as a good student should. Due to the tight competition for slots in the classes I need to take, however, I completed post-advisement late. Due to my own monumental stupidity and failure to check the process, I managed to forget to complete my registration process for a solid 3/4ths of the semester.

I discovered this lapse at home, late at night, while attempting to complete the required Student Evaluation Forms, and my immediate reaction was, of course, the exact same reaction I have whenever I encounter an unforeseen difficulty. I escaped to the shower and broke down in a panicked crying fit. How could I have missed something so important? What if I can't fix this? Would my classes not be counted towards my degree? My worst fear—being a failure as a student—was coming to life. What the hell will I do? The shower head ran a steady stream of water. I kept crying.

Eventually I calmed down (as much as I could calm down with my brain screaming at me), stepped out of the shower, and went to my dad. It was abundantly clear that this was a problem I could not merely ignore; I would need to appeal to the proper authorities to be forgiven for my mistake. For that, I will have to do some writing. And when it came—comes—to writing correspondence, whether a long official letter or a simple email, I always sought—seek—advice from my father, a man very used to the ins and outs of professionalism. I show him my draft and ask again and again whether it sounds O.K. to send. (Really, I'm just unbelievably lucky that he doesn't get mad at me for all the times I've pestered him.)

Why, I wonder? Why do I compulsively need to have everything I do checked and assured of its quality? The answer is simple but terribly persistent—it's because I can't help but always know that I'm on the verge of failure of all I am, of all I want to be.

**4. Add whatever information the recipient requires to act on your request. This must be all relevant information, and the request must be phrased politely.**

***You do not have the right to make demands,  
you absolute failure.***

This is because I

The situation is due to

I have previously

Failure is one thing if it's self-contained, but the feeling of failure, perceived by others, is so, so much worse. It's a feeling I've always dreaded, and it's only gotten worse since I began my studies in university, where I chose—committed to—a major, Creative Writing—that people saw, at best, as idealistic and at worst wasteful and impractical.

My parents never tried to dissuade me from my decision, and I think I know why—neither of them pursued what they thought they loved when they went to university. My father was forced by his father to take up Architecture, while my mother was forced by her father to continually shift schools and degrees. I'm grateful to them, but somehow their kindness makes the pressure worse.

In my first year of university, I took a required Filipino class, a subject concerning a language I was (and still am) not too confident in—and for a writer, discomfort with a language is akin to a death sentence. Nevertheless, I managed to write my essays, with a mix of Google Translate and luck. *Sa Diyos ang awa, sa tao ang gawa*, as they say.

But Google Translate couldn't save me from the oral exam. We were divided into groups: each group would be called into the room where Ma'am was waiting to individually pick out a question from a little fishbowl and answer it in a minute. It was — it seemed — easy enough. Except that I froze when it was my turn to present my answer. The words — the few pieces of Filipino vocabulary I'd acquired — that I meant to say rattled around like so much useless junk in my head.

Ma'am looked at me, and I could feel the *singko* emanating from her eyes.

"Anxiety?" she asked.

I felt—surprised, shocked, overwhelmingly grateful—that she could see, that she understood what was happening without me saying a word. She allowed me to write my answer, and I went home feeling dizzily relieved—the exam was over, I didn't fail.

My mother, who of course knew I had my exam, asked me how it went. She asks me about my day, every day: some may call it care, but a cynical part of me thinks that it is merely monitoring. I told her honestly—of the stress and the struggles, how I was so afraid that I couldn't even speak.

She laughed at me when I mentioned that I had had a panic attack.

It feels contradictory to me, the fact that my mother, a woman who majored in Psychology, could disregard mental illness in such a way. She ignores me when I tell her that I'm physically in pain. Perhaps it's because bruises and blood are easy to understand. They're sensible, and they're guaranteed to heal eventually—not like the wounds of the mind, these contrary fears that roar when I need them to be quiet. Yet my brain insists on dwelling on these paradoxes—a psychology major who doesn't believe in anxiety, a creative writing major whose anxiety stops her from writing. It conjures up paragraphs and paragraphs to try and justify the ways it works and does not work. It refuses to produce even two sentences when I need to write any formal correspondence.



The letter I wrote in order to get my registration approved was the longest one I have ever written in my life.

In hindsight, the whole affair was wrapped up in two weeks, wonderfully efficient considering it was practically already the end of the semester. But when I actually was living those two weeks, I felt like I was in hell inside a mental waiting room.

I handed over the letter to my college's office to have it signed and then I took the letter to the office of registration and left it there; it wasn't signed due to some administrative issue. I had to take it back to my college's office, have it re-checked, and then take it, again, to the registration office to finally get everything settled.

The staff in both offices scolded me for how late I was in the enrollment process. They were, of course, right to do so, and it's only thanks to their kindness in helping a mere student fix her horrendous mess that I am still here, a student, after my failure.

Still, I felt secretly, absolutely terrible while being chewed out. I bit my lip, reminded myself that I was in front of people, that they didn't have to care about my state of mind, and didn't cry.



Somehow, it got even worse. I was notified that due to my extremely late registration, I would have to pay for the classes I'd taken that sem.

I had anticipated the rest—the letter-writing, the scolding—but this was a surprise (I am qualified under universal free tuition). In fact, they later told me that since I was qualified, I did not have to pay after all. At the time, I, again, panicked. My tuition wouldn't put us in bankruptcy, but still. Money was money, and my mother would kill me. (Sometimes, I feel like a broken record that only plays sirens.) I was still in school, but immediately called my father.

"Do you have money?" I confessed that I didn't have enough on hand, but could probably get more from our house. My own savings, of course. He disagreed, and insisted to pay for it (and not tell my mother). "This is my fuckup," I argued, crying.

"Yes, and you're my daughter."

I couldn't argue against that, but it made me wonder—what would I do when I could no longer rely on my father to solve everything?



My father is a hopefully magician, but he's also a professional urban planner, and just as he can dedicate himself wholeheartedly to a magic performance he can also dedicate himself wholeheartedly to a planning project.

I lift my thumb, numbly. *Compose email* flickers on a blank screen.

Every insecurity is screaming in my face. The words I just erased—stupid. The words I’m planning to replace them with—useless. I could just give up. Go to sleep, says cowardice disguised as concern. Don’t stress yourself, except there’s no avoiding stress in a stressful world such as this, and that’s not fair, but if I took the time to really run through all the reasons why, I’d never get to writing that email. I’ve already wasted enough time as it is.

My overindulgent thoughts are interrupted by a loud snore from my father on the couch. It hasn’t been ten minutes since he told me to do my work, and yet he’s already passed out. (I say passed out because once he told me that he never dreamt while asleep. I, in contrast, dream often.)

That’s what finally pushes me out of my stupor: the thought that this man, my father, works so hard to provide for me and my mother. It’s sacrifice that has kept him away from his hopefully magic, that exhausts him and robs him of dreams. And yet, despite working, earning enough money to be called successful, for us to live comfortably, he accepts failures, his and mine.

For the sake of all the sacrifices and failures, the people (my father, the administrative staff, every teacher who receives my work and my emails), I cannot give up now.

*Greetings.*

*My name is Audrey Lacuna...*

Audrey Lacuna, college student is what I am at this point in time. Later on, I plan to be Audrey Lacuna, writer. Right now, I am Audrey Lacuna, email composer—and my guilt finally shifts from keeping my brain awake to beginning to move my fingers.

## **6. Send it.**

I’ve walked myself through all the previous steps, and now I have an email—or at least I have some words, trembling with the dissatisfaction that comes from knowing they could always be better. Yet somehow, these final moments are always the hardest.

It is past 2 in the morning. My father’s been asleep for three hours. The room is dark. I watch the standing fan, caged blades swiveling back and forth. I watch it because it’s more bearable than watching myself, my thumb, pressing down on a particular button on the screen.

*Email sent.*

The writer—of an email or otherwise—my father thinks, is meant to be like a magician with cards in their hands, only letting the reader see the perfected trick, never, ever revealing how scared they are for something to fail. In that sense, I’m no writer. A magician—of a card trick or otherwise—is meant to be like a writer with words on their screen, perfect



in their patter, picking only the best phrases without a second thought, weaving with words the illusion they need the audience to see. In that sense, my father's no magician. We are only hopefully a writer, hopefully a magician, suffering through late nights of work in order to steal time for our dreams.

I may never feel perfectly confident with writing emails or never be the perfect student. This sort of anxiety is not something that I can make disappear: I have to live with it, manage it, surpass it over and over again. This is not the last night that I will stay up late, stumbling over basic communication. It may sound paradoxical, but I'm certain I will come back to doubt myself endless times. Never mind, I've gotten quite used to paradoxes.

I'm working on accepting it. There's no magic to writing, no trick to avoiding failure. I just need the courage to try and try again. I have to try again, move forward no matter who laughs at me. I have to keep writing and writing, placing myself in my words, until it becomes instinct. Perhaps one day, I'll be able to write with ease, words flowing from my keyboard as quickly as patter. Perhaps I'll conjure up stories and emails with the panache of a seasoned performer. Perhaps there will be an audience there, hungering for my words. And perhaps they'll read them: they'll laugh, they'll cry — their minds will be overtaken by their hearts, and they will forgive all of my imperfections.

