Why this guide?

As a future lawyer your products are primarily your words and ability to navigate the legal system. Your client pays you money because you understand the law, the legal process (and the rules therein) better than they do. That is:

- Your ability to read, understand and comply with instructions are at the core of your business. If you fail to do these things, or you do not do them properly, your client’s interests will be undermined, and your business will suffer.

- Your client also pays you for your ability to express yourself both to them and to other people on their instruction. Sloppy communications evidence a substandard product.

You are at the outset of your legal education; we do not expect you to have the fully-fledged skills of a graduate lawyer. However, the legal market is very competitive and will only become more so. The earlier you work on your communication skills the better prepared you are to secure employment in the legal market and, more importantly, be a good lawyer when you do get a job. To that end we would like to provide a gentle reminder to students - as future lawyers and professionals - about the importance of reading instructions and writing requests/responses to them.

1. **Read instructions thoroughly and comply with them (even if everyone else isn’t).**

   This is a big university class. We cannot guide all of you personally, you must take responsibility for fully informing yourself using all the information and instructions to hand. This is an essential professional skill, especially for lawyers; indeed there are few professions where such skills are not relevant.

2. **Develop your letter writing skills.**

   You may not yet been taught how to draft a legal letter, but, at this early stage, you should at least endeavour to be professional and polite in your communications so that it becomes second nature. The more you practice now, the less you will have to break yourself of bad habits when you reach legal practice. Some tips on good legal/professional correspondence are:
Use an acceptable salutation, or better still, drop it altogether.

In some circumstances you might write ‘Dear John’ to your client, if you consider that appropriate. However, your client, who has a right to access and review all communications made on their instruction, probably doesn’t want to see you being overly familiar with opposing counsel and parties. So you may simply write “To Mr John Smith ... etc” or even “Mr John Smith ... etc” (without "To" or "Dear" as a salutation) to opposing counsel in official communications. Even if the opposing counsel is your friend, they will understand you are not being rude, but rather adhering to professional protocol.

Whatever you choose to do, don’t write “Hi” / “Hello”, “Hey” or worst still “Yo” in any of your letter writing – this is overly familiar and should be restricted to personal communications.

Use titles (flexibly)

Use titles – “Justice Higgins”, “Professor Snape”, “Ms Black” – until you are asked not to by the recipient. In Australia we tend to drop titles, but internationally (especially the U.S, Asia and much of Europe) this is not the case, and many senior professionals here still prefer you use their titles as an indication of professionalism. It is better to err on the side of caution and open all your initial letters to a person with their proper title, that way you can be assured you are not going to give offence from the very outset of your letter! Once the recipient has asked you to drop the title however, make sure you do, otherwise you just appear obsequious.

Use an introductory sentence or short paragraph.

Legal letters are ordinarily written in an ‘inverted pyramid’. That is, putting your conclusion – what you recommend, assert, request, instruct – in the introduction. You make the (often incorrect) assumption that the person to whom the letter is addressed will probably not read beyond the first few lines anyway, so it’s best to set out your demands while you still can be assured of their attention.

Clarity is paramount.

Make the body of the letter clear, concise and polite. If it is very long, or you have multiple points, consider breaking them up with headings.

Close the letter appropriately.

You should use a closing that best suits the letter ("Regards", "Sincerely", "Thank you") and then write your name underneath it and include a Student ID number so we can identify you against our records.
Avoid: "Cheers" (unless you are organising drinks); "Ciao" (unless you're writing an Italian); "See you" (Unless you actually can, which means your letter writing is either redundant, or somewhat creepy).

Remember the rule about posting to MyLo before resorting to email still applies, but it doesn't hurt to frame that post as a professional legal letter.