

How to Approach a Professor for Help

Introduction

As a student there are likely many times in which you have thought about seeking assistance from one of your professors and/or teaching assistants, yet have failed to do so for a variety of reasons (fear being seen as "stupid"; have not been to class in a while; do not know what to expect or are uncomfortable talking with someone of a different race, gender, or age). You may even come from a cultural background that discourages interactions with authority figures. Whatever the reason, you are not alone. You can learn how to approach a professor for help.

What Can You Do? Here are Four Steps You Can Follow

Step 1: Identifying Reasons for Seeking Help

There are endless reasons for why you may need to talk with a professor. Listed below are just a few:

- You performed poorly on a quiz, exam, or other class assignment.
- You are unclear about an assignment, exam/reading schedule, policy on attendance, etc.
- You want to turn in an assignment late or take a test at a different time.
- You are unsure about your current major.
- You have missed class due to sickness.
- You are considering graduate school in the professor's area of expertise and want to ask the professor for a letter of recommendation.
- Your teaching assistant has not been regularly maintaining his/her stated office hours and you need assistance from your professor.

Now, write down your reasons for approaching your professor for help.

Step 2: Determining When to Meet

Once you have identified the specific reason(s) you need or want to speak with your professor, determine how quickly to do so.

If you need to speak to him/her as soon as possible, then a phone call, email (if a professor checks it frequently), or face-to-face contact in his/her office may be warranted.

Be sure to ask if this is a good time to approach the professor for your specific need. Also, keep in mind that a professor is typically less receptive to answering questions immediately before an exam is being distributed.

One approach might be, "Professor Heart, I need to talk with you about _____ as soon as possible. When can I do that?" Try to meet during the professor's office hours.

Check your syllabus for office hours and policies.

Step 3: Organizing Your Talk with Your Professor

Arrive prepared with your list of why you need to approach your professor for help. Any anxiety you may experience can be lessened if you are organized beforehand.

Have all of your questions listed on paper beforehand. This will greatly minimize any chance of forgetting to ask a particular question of importance to you.

Have paper and pen available. It is best to record all information provided from your professor rather than rely later on your memory.

If you have a question about class material it is strongly advised to have your text, class notes and syllabus with you (in case you need to refer to such).

Step 4: Talking with Your Professor

Know your professor's last name and use it with his/her appropriate title. Do not assume an informal greeting unless the professor has specifically stated that a more casual greeting is preferred.

Be sure to arrive on time and be mindful of possible (and likely) time constraints.

Don't hesitate in asking to meet again if you did not receive all the information you needed. For example, "Professor Heart, I really appreciate you spending some time talking with me about graduate school as it will help me make some decisions. I would like to meet with you again to follow-up with some related areas. When can we arrange to do that?"

Reminders

The more often you talk with a professor, the more comfortable you will feel in doing so again (e.g. with other professors, teaching assistants, advisors, etc.)

If you still feel uncomfortable about talking to a professor (and especially if you are having difficulty performing well in your classes), we encourage you to seek assistance at the CWC, 3190 Radio Road. Call (352) 392-1575