

Why and How to Visit a Professor in Office Hours

Just like it takes effort to find your social connections, it also takes effort to find your academic connections! (starting with you need” sounded directive...) When you have a connection with a professor, they are more likely to help you find a mentor, connect you to people who share your interests, serve as a reference for a job etc. Visiting your professors in office hours is one way to start finding your academic people.

Tip for conversation starters: Ask your professor about their academic discipline: why they chose it; what kinds of research or internship opportunities there might be in the department; what careers graduates in the discipline go into. You can learn a ton from hearing others talk about themselves and their work!

You only go see the professor when you are in trouble, right?

Wrong! In college, going to seeing the professor is really good! An office visit helps you learn more effectively because you can:

- ask about things that you don't understand
- discuss parts of the course that interest you or that you want to learn more about
- learn strategies for improving your knowledge, skills and performance
- signal the professor that are committed to learning how to do well in their course.

It's also better to meet with your prof before you have a problem, so when you do, you already have the beginning of a relationship, even if it's just 5 minutes to say hello and share your experience of the class.

Tip: If you find visiting a professor intimidating, take a classmate with you. That way, you have support and the professor can help two class members at once.

Professors as Knowledgeable Guides

It helps to reframe your relationship to the people teaching you when you make the transition from high school to college. In college, you are on a journey over which you have *extensive* control. Think of your professor as a knowledgeable guide: someone to go with you on *your* journey.

College success scholar Jullian Gordon frequently tells first-year students: you are not paying for a degree. You are paying for access to people, resources and experiences for a finite period of time. It's on you to maximize that access for your personal and professional development.

What are office hours?

Office hours are times a professor sets aside to meet with students. A professor's work involves many tasks beyond teaching, so they deliberately plan to be available for students to drop in.

How do I find the professor's office hours?

- Check the syllabus or Sakai for office hours. Most post the times on their office door, as well. If they happen to be in, do not assume they can meet: they may be preparing for class or working on research. Ask if you can meet later or make an appointment.
- If the posted office hours conflict with your schedule, email or ask after class to make an appointment that works for you both.

Electronic Communications

- Be patient! Professors don't answer email instantly due to the high volume. Some have a 72-hour response time rule (be mindful of weekends too!).
- Be strategic! Ask to discuss a grade or concern in person. Email is bad at conveying tone.
- Be respectful! "Hello Prof. X" not "Hey!"
- Be polite! "Can we please meet?" not "I need you to look at my draft."

Before you meet

- Define a clear purpose for the visit, even if it is just to get to know each other.
- If you can, prepare questions beforehand and be as specific as possible. Instead of walking in and saying, "I don't get it," try to identify for the professor at what point you stopped understanding the material. "I was with you until we started talking about X, and then I started getting confused."
- Bring appropriate materials, including your book, laptop, or notes.
- Be on time- if something comes up and you can't make the meeting, communicate that in advance when possible.

During the Appointment

- Introduce yourself and share your reason for wanting to meet.
- Take notes on suggestions, information, and strategies the prof shares.
- Ask for clarification. If you are confused or unclear, don't be afraid to ask them to repeat or restate it differently. Tip: repeat back what the prof says to check for understanding.
- Ask about supplemental readings or resources that may help support your learning.
- To discuss an exam or paper grade you disagree with, respectfully seek to understand the reasons your work earned this grade and ask if you can revise it or take other steps to improve.
- Share how you have approached the work and ask how to improve your academic skills (e.g., This is how I studied. Can you recommend suggestions for how to study this material more effectively?)
- Discuss any follow up steps you need to take or whether you need to meet again.
- Thank the professor for their time and help.