

# How to Approach a Professor for Help

From Tara Kuther, Ph.D., Your Guide to Graduate School.

<http://gradschool.about.com/cs/survivaltips/a/helpprof.htm>

Few students make it through college or graduate school without seeking assistance from a professor for help at one time or another. In fact, it's important to seek help rather than let problems fester and intensify. So, how do you approach a professor for one-on-one time?

## Why Seek Help?

What are common reasons why you might seek out professors for assistance?

- You've fallen behind in class because of illness
- You've failed a test or assignment and do not understand the course material
- You have questions about the requirements of a given assignment
- You need advice on the subject of your major
- You cannot reach the class teaching assistant during his or her posted hours
- You need clarification on policies and/or schedules

OK, so there are lots of reasons to seek assistance from professors.

## Why Do Students Avoid Seeking Professors' Help?

Sometimes students avoid asking for assistance or meeting with their professors because they're embarrassed or intimidated. What are common anxieties experienced by students?

- Feeling "out of the loop" after missing several classes
- Fear of asking a "dumb question"
- Fear of confrontation
- Shyness
- Discomfort over approaching a professor of a different age, gender, race, or culture
- Tendency to avoid interactions with those in authority

If you're going to progress as a student -- and especially if you wish to attend graduate school, you must set your intimidation aside and ask for the help that you need.

## Approach Your Professor (with Courtesy)

- **Contact.** Determine the preferred mode of contact; check the course syllabus as professors indicate their preferred methods of contact and related information. Ask yourself: Is this urgent? If so, then contact by phone or stopping by his or her office during office hours is probably the most logical step. Otherwise, you can try e-mail. Wait a few days for a response (remember that teaching is a professor's job, so don't expect replies over evenings, weekends, or holidays).
- **Plan.** Check the syllabus for the professor's office hours and policies before you make your request so that you are already familiar with their schedule. If the professor requests that you return at another time, do your best to meet at a time which is convenient for him or her (e.g., during office hours). Don't ask a professor to go out of his or her way to meet you at a time that is inconvenient because professors have many more responsibilities than teaching (e.g., lots of meetings within the department, university, and community).
- **Ask.** Asking is the only way to learn your professor's preferences. Say something like, "Professor Smith, I need a few minutes of your time so that you can help me with a question/problem I'm having with \_\_\_\_\_. Is this a good time, or can we set up something that is more convenient for you?" Keep it short and to the point.

## Prepare for Your Meeting

Pull your thoughts together beforehand (as well as all of your course materials). Preparation will permit you to remember to ask all of the questions that you need answered and arrive with confidence to your meeting.

- **Questions.** If you are anxious at all about talking with your professor, prepare a list of your questions beforehand. Be efficient and try to accomplish everything in one meeting, rather than coming back time and time again with further questions.
- **Materials.** Bring your class notes and syllabus with you to refer to, if you have questions specifically related to course materials, so that you have all the details you need. If you need to refer to a text book, bookmark the pages that you will need to refer to so you can get to them quickly.
- **Notes.** Come prepared to take notes (i.e., bring a pen and paper to your meeting). Notes will help you record and remember the responses to your questions and prevent you from asking the same questions later in the course.

## At the Meeting

- **Be punctual.** Punctuality signifies respect for your professor's time. Do not arrive early or late. Most professors are pressed for time. If you need to meet with your professor again, ask him or her if you can set up another appointment, following the suggestions above.
- **Address.** Unless your professor has indicated otherwise, address him or her by last name and with the appropriate title (e.g., Professor, Doctor).
- **Gratitude.** Always thank the professor for his or her time and express any gratitude that you feel is appropriate for the specific help that he or she has provided. This rapport will leave the door open for future appointments.