



## How To Talk To Your Professor

Students will hear lots of advice that they should get to know their professors because they not only are the people handing out their grades, they can be one of your most valuable campus assets. However, many students find themselves anxious and tongue-tied when it comes down to actually approaching them. Here are some suggested conversation starters:

- *Professor X, I need your help.*
- *Professor X, if you were a student in your class, what would YOU do to get an "A"?*
- *Professor X, I'm not getting the kind of grades I know I can in your class; if you don't mind being candid with me, what do you think I'm doing wrong?*
- *Professor X, would you mind if I came by during your office hours to get some additional help?*
- *Professor X, what do you think the key is to mastering (whatever the subject is)?*

### Tips for a Successful Visit

1. **Visit your professor during posted office hours or (better yet) schedule an appointment.**  
Dropping in can leave you and the professor frustrated because they already have appointments scheduled or they are just busy with something else at the time. Remember, your professor uses office hours to grade papers, prepare for classes, and do research. When they are expecting you (and maybe even have an idea about what you want to discuss) you will probably have a better experience. If you are not available during their office hours, don't give up. Contact your professor to see if there are alternatives.
2. **If you're not sure how your professor prefers to be addressed, ask them.**  
Not all professors are PhD's (Dr. X) and some may prefer to be called by their first names. Rather than possibly offending someone, ask them what they prefer.
3. **If you make an appointment, show up on time.**  
If you show up and your professor is late, wait at least 5 to 10 minutes, and then leave a note. If you miss an appointment, apologize in person and reschedule.
4. **Adopt the attitude that your professor wants to help you.**  
Eliminate negative thoughts such as: "She'll just tell me it's my fault." "He uses trick questions on the test." "He requires too much work." Instead, tell yourself "He can't solve my problem for me, but he can help me figure out what I can do." "She can help me understand how to study for her tests so I can do better." Keep in mind that your professor is teaching because he or she loves the subject. Try to look at the subject from the perspective of someone who is fascinated by it and respect your instructor for their expertise. Being defensive is the quickest way to turn off your instructor's desire to help, so be open to suggestions. If you have questions about what they recommend, just ask.
5. **Visit your professor with specific things to discuss.**
  - a. *Questions about course content.* Be specific when you meet with your instructor. An example of an appropriate question is: "I used my notes to outline my ideas but they still seem disorganized and unclear. What suggestions do you have that can help me make a better study guide?" (Show the instructor your notes.)

- b. *Needing additional help.* Professors are the best source of advice for how to succeed in their classes. If you are investing sufficient study time and still not doing well, schedule an appointment. Be honest and communicate non-defensively. Let your professor know what you are already doing (how many hours you spend reading, reviewing notes, studying with other students, etc.) If you know the reason for your performance is lack of preparation and you know what to do, just do it. Communicate with your professor that you care about the class, that you intend to turn things around and then start today!
- c. *Appealing a poor grade.* If you are appealing a poor grade, come prepared with ideas of extra work you are prepared to do: "I am really concerned about my grade in this course. Would you be willing to give me extra credit if I did a 5-10 page research paper on the health crisis in the U.S.?" Offer to retake an exam. If they say it won't change your grade but you think you could do better, ask to do it anyway to see if you can improve. It may make an impression on your professor about your dedication.
- d. *Concerns about tests.* Remember, talk in ways that are not defensive or hostile toward the instructor: "I am really upset about my performance on the last test. The week before the test I studied 2 hours every night and reviewed all the readings and notes with a study partner. But none of the questions seemed to be related to the material I studied. I want to do better on your tests. Can you give me some suggestions?" If you do poorly on the first midterm, it is not too late to turn things around but you will need to change some study habits. Even if you know what to do, let the professor know you're trying. If you don't know what to do, don't give up. Go to see your professor for some suggestions.
- e. *Asking for an incomplete grade or other special exceptions.* Don't waste your professor's time with fake or repetitive excuses but if you have valid reasons that you didn't finish a paper or do well on an exam, talk to them to see if you can have any extra time to complete work or other special exceptions. Make sure you are clear and honest.
- f. *Interview your professor about their field of expertise.* Some examples would be: "I'm considering majoring in Criminal Justice and would like some information." "I'm thinking about going to graduate school in Special Education and wondered if I could talk to you." "How did you decide to major in your area and are you glad you made that decision?" "Other than being a teacher, what other career opportunities exist with a major in this area?" "Are you aware of any internship opportunities that would help me explore this major further?"

**6. Be prepared for the meeting.**

Know exactly what you want from your professor. Write out questions to help you narrow things down and help you not to forget if you become anxious. Take your graded material with you, along with your lecture notes and study aides. Come up with options BEFORE you go in. Then he or she can help you decide if those options are possible.



Remember, professors may all be different but they are human. Many are surprised that students feel uncomfortable in approaching them, so try to relax. Be yourself—open, friendly, and academically curious. The relationships you form with your instructors can be instrumental to opening opportunities for success.