



Peru State College
CATS: Center for Achievement and Transition Services

Talking with Your Professor

Professors and teaching assistants generally like talking with students. They appreciate students who ask for help, and they don't consider it a waste of time to answer students' questions, either in class or out of class. In fact, most professors believe that the better students seek extra help, and they often wonder why more students don't take advantage of the opportunity to talk with them. This handout discusses how and when to talk to your professor.

In-class questions

Asking questions in class takes a lot of courage at first. Students may fear that they will be wasting their classmates' time or that they will look stupid if they ask what seems to be a simple question. Most professors appreciate that courage and will support your efforts to participate in class. If the answer is appropriate for the entire class, the professor will answer. If it's better to answer you individually, the professor will say something like, "Let's talk about that after class" or "We can talk about that outside of class." If you're uncomfortable asking questions in class, make an effort to see your professor during office hours.

Office hours

Office hours are regular times each week that instructors reserve for conversations with students. These hours are listed on the course syllabus. Professors might work on their own projects to stay busy while they wait for students, but they genuinely welcome student visits. You can drop by the office without an appointment during these hours, but it's a good idea to let the professor know in advance that you'd like to come in to discuss a particular topic. Just say something like, "Could I come see you during your office hours to talk about...?"

Appointments

You might have another class or some other schedule conflict during the instructor's office hours. Professors know this, and will often list office hours on their syllabus as "Tuesday 2-4 p.m. or by appointment." When you ask for an appointment, offer the instructor several options to choose from. Say something like, "I have class during your office hours, but I'd like to make an appointment to talk about [the topic you need help with]. Do you have time on Wednesday or Thursday afternoon?"

Making polite requests

At times, you may need a favor or you may need to notify your professor about your situation. Most professors are willing to work with students who make reasonable requests, as long as they believe that students are trying their hardest to be respectful.

To make polite requests, explain your situation and then make the request. The verb "would" is particularly useful here.

“I have three papers due on the same day and I’d really like to do my best. Would you mind letting me have one more day?”

“I need to visit Campus Health, but the only available appointment is at our class time. Would it be alright if I ask my classmate to take notes for me?”

Asking for clarification

There will be times when you don’t understand the concepts presented in class, the language used in lecture, or the instructions for an assignment. At these times, it’s tempting to smile and nod as if you do understand. This is a huge mistake!

You can politely ask for clarification in several ways:

“I’m sorry. I’m not sure I understood that.”

“I’m sorry. Would you mind explaining that last point one more time?” “Let me make sure I understand you correctly. You’re saying that...”

Asking for feedback

Professors and teaching assistants appreciate it when students ask for feedback on their work. They will not suggest every single change that should be made for you to get the highest grade possible. They will suggest the two or three most important things you can do. You’ll get much better feedback if you make specific requests.

“Could you read this and give me some suggestions?” (Too vague)

“Could you give me feedback on my logic and organization?” (Much better!)

Ending the conversation

Every culture has social rules for how people behave at the end of a conversation and how students leave a professor’s office. In some cultures, students are expected to maintain eye contact until the professor looks away and starts working on something else. This is a signal that they’ve been dismissed and are free to go. At UNC, most professors will maintain eye contact until students turn around and walk away.

When the conversation is over, say thank you, pick up your things, say goodbye politely, then turn around and walk away without looking back.



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