

Emily's Tips for Using Faculty Office Hours

In college, your instructors will provide you with a set of regularly scheduled times when they are available to meet with you outside of class to discuss questions that you might have about the course or assignments. **These are known as office hours.**

Taking advantage of office hours can be one of the smartest things you can do while you are in college. Here are some tips collected from faculty members designed to help you make the most of this opportunity.

1. Make an appointment.

Although faculty members are expected to be available during posted office hours, it can be helpful to make an appointment for a specific time. Your instructors have family emergencies and last minute schedule changes – just like you. If you have made an appointment, your instructor will be expecting you and can contact you about changes in his or her schedule. If you do show up for an office hour and the instructor doesn't, make sure to follow up with an email to ask about the best way to reschedule.

2. Be on time – especially if you have made a specific appointment.

Your instructor may teach 4 or 5 courses, and his or her schedule is as busy as yours. If you are late for your appointment, chances are very good that your instructor may already be talking with another student. If you have made an appointment and an emergency comes up, email your instructor as soon as possible to explain the situation.

3. Have a clear idea of why you are using the office hour.

Your instructor's first question will probably be, "What can I do to help you?" or "So, why are you here?" Write down a list of prepared questions ahead of time so that you can refer to them during your meeting.

Be specific about what you need help with. Saying, "I am having trouble understanding the concept of acceleration when I am working on the physics problems" rather than just saying, "I need help" will make the session more productive and provide your instructor with a place to start. Having one concept explained thoroughly may help you understand others.

If you are completely lost in terms of what is being covered in class, talk about those concerns – and do it early in the semester while there is still time to drop the course and add another one. Ask your instructor about general expectations that he or she has for students taking the course. Perhaps you stumbled into a course for majors in that department, and you thought this was a course for non-majors. Ask about supplemental readings the instructor can recommend to help you with background information on the topic.

4. Bring what you need to the meeting.

If you had trouble with an exam, it's helpful to bring the exam with you. If you're working on a paper, bring what you have written. It's easier for instructors to respond to something concrete.

Keep in mind, however, that if you want feedback on a paper, it is probably wise to clear this ahead of time with the instructor. There might not be time to read and critique your entire paper during your meeting – an office hour doesn't necessarily mean you get a whole hour of your instructor's time. Highlight specific aspects of the paper that you are having difficulty with. If your instructor is willing to look at your paper, ask whether it would be helpful to email the paper in advance of your meeting.

5. Ask for clarification.

What makes sense during the office hour may be confusing hours later when you are trying to remember your conversation. Repeating back to the instructor what you have just heard – in your own words – is one way of making sure you are on the right track. Begin with, "So let me see if I got this straight..." and go from there! Taking notes of what is said during the meeting can also be helpful.

6. Schedule a follow-up meeting if needed.

Don't hesitate to use the office hours more than once during the semester if you need the help. On the other hand, if you are in a class with many students, your instructor might have limited time to see everyone who would like to take advantage of office hours. Your instructors should provide you with guidance about how they expect students to use office hours.

You can also ask for referrals to other resources on campus that can provide you with assistance. Almost all colleges and universities have some kind of program that helps students improve their chances for academic success!

7. Don't wait until you have a problem.

Office hours can be used as an opportunity to get to know your professor and to share information about your learning style or your expectations for the course. This also helps your instructor attach a name to a face. Schedule an appointment at the beginning of the semester before it gets too busy and indicate to your professor that you would like a chance to introduce yourself. Then limit the visit to five or ten minutes.

Remember, however, that if you are taking a large lecture class, your professor may not have time to meet with students except if there are specific problems. Each faculty member handles office hours differently though, so don't be afraid to ask if this kind of appointment is appropriate.