

Interacting with Your Instructor

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about some best practices and strategies for communicating with your instructors. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. The Instructor's Goals and Temperament

Each instructor is different, so it's important to be able to identify your instructor's particular goals and individual temperament and adjust your communication habits accordingly. As the tutorial on "The Syllabus" emphasized, reading your course syllabus closely is a great way to understand your instructor's aims for the course.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Some instructors may place more emphasis on your energetic participation in discussion and group projects, whereas others might favor carefully composed written work. Additionally, you can learn a lot about your instructor and how they prefer to operate by observing their behavior in the live or virtual classroom.

It is also helpful to be attuned to your instructor's personality. Observe them in class, or read something they have written. Are they genial and easygoing or more reserved and formal? Being sensitive to their temperament can help you to interact with your instructor more easily and productively.

If you are finding it difficult to read the intentions of your instructor and their goals for the course, it's best to set up some time to have a private discussion.

2. Contacting Your Instructor

It's been established that one of the best ways to ensure a positive relationship with your instructor is to initiate communication yourself, but what's the best way to do that?

If your instructor has office hours, this is the ideal time and place to introduce yourself and address any questions or concerns you may have. If you're taking an online course and office hours are not an option, send your instructor an email introducing yourself (keep it a reasonable length).

It is best to contact your instructor, whether in person or by email, early in the term. Don't just introduce yourself but establish a foundation of communication. This can serve you well if an emergency or other unforeseen circumstances arise during the course of the term.



Office hours can be the key to your success in a course! Office hours are the block of time, usually a couple of hours one or two days weekly, that an instructor has set aside for meeting with students one-on-one. If you meet with your instructor during their designated office hours to discuss a question you have about a course policy or assignment, you are not bothering them—it is part of their job and this is precisely what this time is for.

A virtual or in-person conference can make your course experience more personal—you can make yourself more than just another name on the course roster or face in the room, but also more personalized—you can get individual attention to your specific questions and concerns. Not taking advantage of office hours is a missed opportunity.

3. Meeting with Your Instructor

If speaking to your instructor in person can help to facilitate your success and optimize your experience in a course, what kinds of things should you keep in mind in order to help that personal interaction go well?

First of all, make sure you are meeting with your instructor in the most appropriate, efficient, and convenient way. If your instructor doesn't have office hours, you'll need to go about scheduling an appointment on your own. You may be tempted to approach your instructor before or after class—after all, you're both right there in the room—but sometimes this approach is not wholly welcome.

Before class, your instructor is getting ready to teach, so they may need the time to go over notes, set up technology, or just think to themselves.

After class is a better option if you have a quick question, but even then, your instructor may be on a tight schedule and have somewhere to be. The best thing to do is to email your instructor and inquire as to when they would be able to meet.

IN CONTEXT

You are really excited about a particular course, and you want to introduce yourself to the instructor so you can make a positive impression. You also want to clarify some things in order to plan ahead and put yourself in the best position to succeed. Unfortunately, your instructor's office hours are scheduled for days when you have to work at your part-time job. What do you do now?

Don't give up on your plan to introduce yourself to your instructor! Write to them and ask them if it would be possible to make an appointment for another time. Most instructors will be sympathetic to your situation, especially if you approach them early, respectfully, and work something out that can accommodate both of your schedules.

4. Speaking to Your Instructor

It isn't necessary to "study" for your face-to-face meeting with your instructor, but as with every aspect of your higher education experience, you can only benefit from approaching your meeting thoughtfully. In most cases,

a healthy balance between being genial and being respectful is advisable. Initially, you may want to err on the side of formality—for instance, start out referring to your instructor as “professor” or “doctor” (as appropriate) until you are invited to do otherwise.

But reading and adapting to cues from your instructor is equally as important as being prepared. Recall the necessity of gauging your instructor’s temperament; this skill is perhaps most relevant when meeting with your instructor in person. Be yourself—don’t put on an act for your instructor’s benefit—but remain attuned to your instructor’s mood and style of communication.

5. Writing to Your Instructor

Email is an integral part of life in higher education, and the way you write an email to your instructor can influence your instructor’s general opinion about you. At the very least, it’s another opportunity to make a positive impression.

Your approach to writing an email to your instructor should be similar to your approach to speaking to them in person. But in writing, you have more cause for formality.

In addition to addressing your instructor with their title until invited to do otherwise (“Dear Dr. Smith,” not “Dear Deborah”), you will also want to take a little bit of time to proofread your email and eliminate any typos or mechanical errors.

You don’t need to stress too much about it—your emails will likely never be a part of your grade—but you want to avoid leaving the impression that you are a careless or lazy student. On the other hand, you also want to avoid sending your instructor too many emails or writing emails that are too long or otherwise inappropriate.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You really want to take an introductory Spanish class, but by the time you were able to enroll, it was already full. You’ve heard that sometimes if you write to an instructor they will give you permission to enroll in a closed course. The course catalog gives you this information, “SPAN 101; Instructor G. Vasquez,” and you are able to track down the instructor’s email. Here is a solid example of how you might compose your email request:

Hello, Professor Vasquez,

I am a first-year student and I was hoping to enroll in SPAN 101. Is there any possibility I could get permission to enroll? I would be happy to discuss the matter in person as well.

Thank you.



SUMMARY

Observe **your instructor's goals and temperament** so you can adapt your approach to communicating with them. It is also important to figure out how to **contact your instructor**, **meet with your instructor**, **speak to your instructor**, and **write to your instructor**. Your instructor should always be treated respectfully, even if you don't agree with everything they have to say.

