

Your Instructor

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WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial prepares you for your relationship with your instructors by considering the scope of their job and their experience, and introducing you to some best practices and strategies for communicating with them. Here is what will be discussed:

1. The Role of the Instructor of Higher Learning
2. The Role of an Instructor's Assistant
3. The Instructor's Expertise
4. The Instructor's Goals and Temperament
5. Contacting Your Instructor
6. Meeting with Your Instructor
7. Speaking to Your Instructor
8. Writing to Your Instructor

1. The Role of The Instructor of Higher Learning

Your instructors at this level are different from your teachers in high school in a couple of significant ways. First, though you may have had some brilliant and accomplished teachers in high school, all instructors of higher learning are experts in a specialized field. They will likely have or be working toward an advanced degree in the subject they teach.

Be aware that there are other distinctions between what a high school teacher does and what an instructor does. Your high school teachers may have kept track of your progress and reminded you when assignments are due, but at the college level that responsibility rests solely with you. Higher education entails being a more independent student; you are in charge of your destiny. Taking an active role in forming a relationship with your instructor is a part of that responsibility.



THINK ABOUT IT

In some online courses, you may have little or no interaction with an instructor or an instructor's assistant. At the same time, it's important for you to understand what the norms are for other types of higher education courses in the likely event that you will continue your education in a traditional classroom or instructor-led online course. This tutorial will help you prepare for those types of experiences.

2. The Role of The Instructor's Assistant

Some instructors may be supported by an instructor's assistant. An instructor's assistant or teacher's assistant, often called a "T.A." for short, is a bridge between the instructor and the student. Their job is to work more closely and directly with the students than the instructor is able to, so they can be a great resource for you when it comes to clarifying instructions or answering questions you might have about assignments or policies. Assistants usually perform much of the grading and evaluation of your coursework.

While your instructor's assistant is not your instructor, they are not your peer either. Take advantage of your instructor's assistant's approachability and availability, but be respectful of their role and the work it took for them to arrive at their position.

3. The Instructor's Expertise

In addition to teaching classes, your instructor's job may entail working professionally in their field, publishing academic books and articles, or speaking at conferences nationally and internationally. They have spent years focusing on the topics covered in your course. Even if these topics are not the same ones that interest you, you can appreciate their commitment to knowledge. In addition to letting that knowledge facilitate your success in the course, let their expertise inspire you as you make your own path through higher learning.



THINK ABOUT IT

You can think of your instructor as a sort of "native" to the classroom environment. You are just starting out in higher education and getting acclimated in the ways of this new world. Your instructor has been a student too, of course, and at one point they were new to it all just like you. Then they advanced toward their major and their degree and then probably on to graduate school. Now they work in a classroom; they have chosen this environment as the setting for their professional life and they have accrued terms, years, even decades of experience designing courses like the one you are taking and teaching students like you. Who better to help you get oriented in a new place than a local?

4. 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 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. For instance, 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. 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 your instructor and their goals for the course, it's best to set up some time to have a private discussion.

5. 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, not only to introduce yourself but to 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.

6. 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 for a particular course and you want to introduce yourself to the instructor so you can make a positive impression and also 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 and respectfully, and work something out that can

7. 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.

8. 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

This tutorial has discussed several aspects of knowing who your instructor or your instructor's assistant is—their role, their expertise, their goals and temperament. Also covered was how best to

interact with your instructor or instructor's assistant step-by-step—how to contact them, meet with them, speak to them, and write to them.