

How to Talk to a Professor

Talking to a professor – out of genuine curiosity, a genuine interest in learning, a genuine desire to improve – is one of the smartest things a college student can do. While some professors are genuinely unapproachable, many are happy to talk to students. Here are five points to consider when you're talking to a professor.

1. Be mannerly. Before asking “What are your office hours?”, check your syllabus. If hours aren't listed or won't work, ask your professor when he or she can meet with you. A reasonable professor will understand that office hours cannot accommodate every student's schedule.

When you arrive, knock on the door, even if it's open, and greet your professor by name. I'm always slightly amazed when a student walks into my office without saying a word and waits for me to say something. If my back is to the door, it's downright weird.

2. If you're coming in to talk because you're having difficulty in a course, there are a few familiar sentences to avoid:

“Will this affect my grade?” Whatever “this” is, it will play a part in your grade. How much or how little depends upon the rest of your work.

“Can I still get a B?” This question will usually lead a professor to think that your grade-point average, not learning, is your priority.

“I'm an A student.” Grade inflation is widespread, and some of those As may not be the most accurate evaluations of your work. Even if they are, your professor won't grade you on the basis of your reputation.

3. If you are having difficulty in a course, let your professor know that you realize it, and ask what you can do to improve. When I talk with students, I find that it's almost always possible to offer specific suggestions that can make the work go better. These suggestions often involve common-sense life hacks unrelated to course content: Move your alarm clock away from your bed. Use Post-it notes to mark up the reading. Get a planner. Break a big task into smaller tasks. Hit Control-F to find each coordinating conjunction and decide whether it needs a comma.

4. If you want to talk to a professor in some other way—about a question that you didn't get to ask in class or an idea that you want to discuss—just do the best you can. Your professor will very likely meet your genuine interest with kindness and encouragement. (If not, find another professor!)

5. Ending the conversation can be tricky. Some professors will wrap things up for you, while others will be happy to just keep talking. In other words, a signal that you're “dismissed” may not be coming. So don't hesitate to take the initiative in bringing the conversation to an end, especially if you have other obligations.

Some of my best college memories are of talking with my professors in their offices. I was a shy kid (still am!), and I treasured the chance to ask questions and try out ideas during office hours. Sitting with my coat and books piled on the floor, I found my way into the possibilities of genuine intellectual dialogue. You can do that too.