
How to Talk to Faculty

Talking with Professors

Approaching faculty members can be intimidating, but it is an essential part of being a successful student. Check out the following “Do’s & Don’ts” for communicating with faculty members at SPS!

✓ DO:

Remember faculty members are people, too. Often times, students are afraid to talk to faculty because they forget that their instructors are human. Faculty members watch TV, take walks, enjoy time with family and friends, and do chores just like the rest of us. While they give you grades and critique your assignments, they are also people trying to do their job the best they can – just like you.

Know that talking to you is part of their job. Students sometimes worry that showing up to office hours or sending an email is irritating to their professor. Remember that communicating with students is part of their job, and also helps them teach better. All students are different: some of them grasp materials better during one-on-one office hours, and others learn better via email conversations. When you can articulate what helps you learn best, your professors are more effective and the class is a better experience for everyone. Do not be hesitant or apologetic for taking advantage of email and office hours – they exist for a reason!

Be proactive. Waiting until the night before an assignment is due to email your professor with questions is poor practice and generally unfair to expect a response. If you get a difficult assignment, ask questions as soon as you can. This will save you time and trouble down the road. If you know a few weeks in advance that you have three finals scheduled on the same day that a final paper is due, ask for an extension right away or plan your time accordingly. It is rare that a faculty member will grant extensions right before the deadline unless there is an extenuating circumstance.

Keep your professor’s communication preferences in mind. Most professors write on the syllabus and/or state in class their preference for how students should get in touch with them. Office hours are always a safe bet, especially if you have a question that will take some time to discuss or if you want to get to know your instructor better. If you are not sure, just ask!

× DON'T:

Ask questions if you can easily find the answers. As much as students are encouraged to ask questions, there are certain things not worth sending emails about. For basic information, check your syllabus, course announcements on Canvas, and assignment instructions before reaching out to your professor. For content related questions, it is good practice to demonstrate to your professor that you have already tried to figure out the question on your own.

Assume your professors are mind-readers. If you are having issues connecting with or understanding course material, have conflicts with scheduled office hours, or experience any other issues that might hinder your success in the course, *let your professor know*. They cannot read your mind, nor do they know your personal schedule. This also goes for students who are ill, have religious or athletic obligations, or are struggling for any other reason.

✓ DO:

Communicate anything that may negatively affect your performance in the class.

There are many obstacles that may arise during the semester: difficulties with class, time management issues (work/school/socializing), homesickness, trouble making friends, roommate or housemate conflict, illness, stress... the list goes on. Sometimes, students think that if their problem is not academic in nature, they should not tell their professors about it; however, students should let their professors know if something is going to negatively affect their coursework. This does not mean you need to disclose intimate personal details about your life or your relationships. It is enough to say that you are going through a hard time or are experiencing things that make it difficult to study or sleep. The faculty member will most likely check in with you to ensure you are doing okay, and they might even refer you to some helpful campus resources. This also does not mean you will receive a higher grade in the course, but the faculty member will better understand the context and be more likely to grant extensions or take into consideration your personal circumstances.

Use proper etiquette and grammar. Most students are polite in office hours, but sometimes etiquette is lost through email. Here are some quick pointers for emailing faculty members:

- Use an informative subject line. Include the course number. (APAN PS5100 HW #1 Question)
- Always start with a proper greeting, such as: "Hello/Dear Professor X."
- Request — do not demand — what you need: "I can't make your Thursday office hours and was wondering if you'd be available to meet another time."
- Give options: "I could come to office hours between 12–2pm on Monday or between 1–3pm on Tuesday. If that doesn't work, I could send you an email with my questions."
- Thank your professor at the end and sign off with your full name.
- Proofread! Even though it's just an email, most faculty members do not want to see typos or text speak ("txt, c u l8r!"). Proofreading emails is a good habit in general

✓ DO:

Accept Responsibility. Ultimately, you are in charge of your own learning. It is easy to shift the blame to faculty members if they are not as attentive as you would like them to be – unfortunately, you cannot expect responses to every email you send during peak grading times or exam periods, especially if your question requires a detailed and thoughtful response. Be conscious of your requests and remember that if you miss class, it is your responsibility to approach your professor and get what you need.

× DON'T:

Suffer in silence. Once you have understood that your professor is not a mind reader, the next step is to reach out for help. It is better to discuss these things early to avoid disappointment and frustration at the end of the semester. The vast majority of the time, problems can be resolved quickly and easily if you speak up.

Faculty members are here to help you succeed. Remember that you are not their only student; make it as easy as possible for them to understand what you are looking for, be polite, and respect their time. By keeping these ideas in mind, you will be able to effectively communicate with SPS faculty and get the most out of your time here at Columbia University.

Information adopted from [this article](#).