

Getting More out of Office Hours

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Introduction

For many incoming students, the term "office hours" is an unfamiliar one. Office hours are times during the week that your instructor and/or graduate student instructor (GSI) sets aside in order to meet with students outside class time. In office hours, students can ask questions about any course material they find challenging. This includes clicker questions, lecture slides, quiz and exam keys, course format and organization, learning objectives, homework sets, etc. Students can also ask about grades on assignments and expectations for the course. Students are typically welcome to come in and listen, even if they don't have any questions of their own. Hearing other students' questions may stimulate questions you have, and you can practice recalling the information by helping other students.

Despite the name, office hours might not take place in an office at all; some instructors opt to reserve a classroom space, meet at a cafe in the student union, etc. (these locations are typically described in the syllabus). While many students use office hours to clarify course content, this might also be the time when you talk to your instructor about research opportunities or ask for a letter of recommendation. Office hours can be a key resource to help you succeed in your courses. Part of being a college student is having a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to access and connect with some of the most accomplished people in their field; take full advantage while you can! However, seeking out help from your instructor or GSI may seem like a daunting task. Maybe the office hours in the syllabus don't quite fit in to your schedule. Or perhaps you've never been to office hours before, and you don't quite know what to expect. Following are several tips and suggestions that will help you navigate office hours this semester.

Introduce yourself to your instructor early in the term.

Especially in large lecture courses, faculty members and GSIs often have hundreds (if not thousands) of students at a time. Introducing yourself at the start of the term can go a long way. Doing so can help break the ice between you and your instructor, and it will help them to remember you throughout the term. This can be especially beneficial if you ultimately decide to ask your instructor about research opportunities and/or a letter of recommendation. Further, an instructor is more likely to remember you from a smaller setting like office hours, as opposed to the start or end of class, when they might be setting up, packing up, and/or approached by a number of students with questions. You might consider attending office hours at the start of the term even if you don't yet have a lot of questions about course content. Doing so will help you to get to know your instructor, and you will also begin to make a habit of dedicating time to studying for your course. During these conversations you may even find that you are interested in your instructor's own research, as they would likely be happy to share this information if you asked about it. These conversations may even lead to a research position for you in the future. Also remember that you should view office hours as an opportunity not only to get your questions answered or content clarified, but also to show your instructor what you know and demonstrate your understanding.

Don't be afraid that you are an "inconvenience."

Instructors or GSIs often hold several office hours throughout the week. If students don't come with questions, they will frequently use this time to catch up on work and email. However, they know that the first priority is helping students in their course! Don't feel like you are interrupting if you come during scheduled office hours with questions. Additionally, talk with your instructor if you have unavoidable conflicts in your schedule that make it impossible to attend. Often instructors are willing to schedule an appointment with you at a different time that works better for you. Some will even list this as "or by appointment" under the normally-scheduled hours in the syllabus or on the course website. Follow your instructor's suggestions for setting up these office hours. Often this will require only a short email; remember to be professional and use proper email etiquette when making your request.

Be prepared.

Your instructor will likely expect you to have questions prepared when you come to office hours. Make sure you bring detailed questions, notes, and any problems that you have been working on. It will also be helpful for you to be able to show your instructor how you have been approaching each problem. They may be able to suggest a different or more efficient process. They may also be able to identify misunderstandings or misconceptions that you yourself have not yet identified. Coming prepared will ensure that you make the most out of every minute. However, if you are not perfectly prepared, don't let this deter you from attending!

Ask thoughtful questions.

Remember that telling your instructor “I’m confused” will not be as helpful to them as asking a detailed question. For instance, you might say, “I was looking over my notes from the last lecture, and my understanding of the Hardy-Weinberg principle is X. Someone in my study group said that this is flawed because of Y. Could you please help me to clarify this?” Keep in mind that you shouldn’t be discouraged if you do not have a specific question; often narrowing it down to a topic that confuses you is sufficient. Also remember that while office hours can be a useful place to discuss a grade with your instructor, there are better ways of doing so than others. Approaching your instructor in an aggressive or demanding manner will likely be off-putting. Before approaching your instructor about your grade, first try to understand any mistakes that you made. If there was a legitimate grading error, your instructor will very likely be open to making a correction for you or the entire class. Always remember that as important as grades might be, your primary focus should be on learning and personal growth.

Be ready to work individually or with others.

Sometimes instructors hold one-on-one office hours and ask students to line up outside and wait their turn. Others hold group office hours in larger classrooms, and everyone attends at once. Be prepared for either format. If you find yourself in a group setting, keep in mind that research has shown time and again the benefits of collaborative learning. Even if it makes you uncomfortable to work with students whom you do not know, you will likely benefit tremendously from working with them. You will also find that in addition to being a time when you can have your questions answered, office hours can also serve as an opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge and test your understanding. Try your best to really listen to others’ questions instead of waiting to have yours answered; you may be surprised by how much you learn by doing so.

Be aware of how much you’re speaking.

If you are in a group setting, you should be thoughtful about how much you are contributing. If you tend to be more reserved, you may need to challenge yourself to speak up a bit so that your questions are addressed. If you are more talkative, you may try to hold yourself back a bit to listen to other students’ questions. You may find that other students ask good questions that you hadn’t even yet considered. Most instructors will understand if you would like to sit in and listen to other students’ questions.

Be honest with your instructor.

Don’t feel badly if your instructor is explaining something, and you still don’t understand. It will do more harm in the long run to pretend that you understand and then miss out on the opportunity to clarify a confusing concept. Keep in mind that if you are confused about a topic, many other students in the class (or in office hours) are likely struggling with the same thing.

This is not to say that everything will always be perfectly clear when you walk out of your instructor's office...but try your best to be upfront when you still feel unclear about something. If you are having difficulty understanding a concept, ask your instructor to provide a new example, draw a graph or a picture of the process, evaluate whether an online video is correct, etc. Even asking your instructor to listen to you explain and then provide feedback on your explanation can be a very useful activity. If you are in a group setting and feel you are taking up too much time and still do not understand, feel free to ask the instructor to meet with you separately at another time.

Know how your instructor can (and perhaps cannot) help you.

As a student you are likely juggling many things in addition to your studies. You may wish to share some of this with your instructor. Keep in mind that your instructor may not be a licensed therapist or counselor, and they might not be able to provide you with the resources that you need. You might need to seek out Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), the Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center (SAPAC), or experts in other areas. They will be best equipped to assist you with other challenges that you might be experiencing outside your coursework. Also remember that your biology instructor is there to answer your questions about biology...and you should not ask them about the challenges that you are facing in organic chemistry! You can also ask your instructor about supplemental resources. You might find that you benefit from a different textbook, or perhaps you had never heard about study groups and tutoring through the [Science Learning Center](#) or the [Engineering Learning Center](#). There are countless resources available to you, but you may need to do some research to find out what works best for you. You can also ask your instructor and/or GSI what resources they might suggest.

Develop an action plan.

Going to office hours just once may not be enough. In fact, you might find that attending regularly throughout the term is what helps you succeed in your course. After you leave your instructor's office hours, don't let too much time pass before you draft a plan for yourself moving forward. You may decide that you need to do more problems in the coursepack. Perhaps you decide that your next step will be to work through several practice exams. Make sure you identify topics that you might not be as confident about, and write these specifically into your plan. Also make sure to identify specifically how you will study. Instead of just passively looking at lecture notes, try to fit in activities such as making flashcards, doing a certain section of the coursepack, etc. Your activities should be specific; i.e., it is more helpful to say "I will do 40 questions from Problem Roulette" as opposed to "I will study for Chem 130." Again, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Make sure that you set SMART goals (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, **T**ime-bound) to ensure you are working toward concrete deliverables throughout the term. And remember that if you do not do as well on an exam as you hope or expect, this is another opportunity to speak with your instructor, learn from your mistakes, and do better the next time.

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