



Professors' Guide

to

GETTING GOOD GRADES IN COLLEGE

CHAPTER TWELVE

Do's and Don't's for Going to See the Professor

As your work on the paper progresses, many roads lead to the professor. Lots of students at some point in their thinking about the paper (be it an analytical or a research paper) find themselves confused about one or another point, or unsure whether they're on the right track. If and when this happens, the simple solution is to head directly to your professor's (or TA's) office hour to consult. Your little tête-à-tête with the professor might last only 15 or 20 minutes. But this quarter of an hour could have more impact on your grade than all those hours spent holed up in the library—times two. Like any other human interaction, the office meeting with the professor can hit the rocks. Especially if you don't have the right combination of academic and interpersonal savvy to pull it off. Follow our do's and don't's and you'll be sure to reap the full benefit of your excursion to see the one who holds your fate in their hands. Your grade fate, we mean.

DON'T : Don't Be Afraid to Go See the Professor

Some students avoid going to see their professor simply because they're intimidated. Perhaps they have heard how

erudite the professor is, how much of an expert in the field he or she is, or how much he or she has published. And the last thing they want to do is have a one-on-one discussion with the world's leading authority on the topic that they have to write about in their paper.

But if you have questions about your paper—if you really don't know what to argue in the paper, whether a given point should be included or left out, or what point should come next in your presentation—then you should just suck it in and go. Don't worry, it won't be as scary as you think. Did you know that this professor is just a regular person once he or she steps out of the academic world? That there are normal, everyday people who flip this guy (or gal) the bird for cutting them off on the freeway? You have a question that needs to be answered. And your professor is clearly capable of giving you an answer—one that could really help your grade. Live brave. And get your answer. Who knows, a good dose of adulation—not to mention genuine intellectual engagement—might do your professor some good.

You see, some schools have an environment in which professors are seen as there to help. But at other colleges, professors are held up as demigods. We have a friend who taught at Harvard for a while and was astonished to have students coming in quaking with fear. Once he moved to another, somewhat less prestigious school, in Southern California, he was amazed to find students perfectly comfortable treating him in their standard snarky way. Same super-nice and supersmart guy, completely different student reaction. When it comes to seeing the professor, try to forget about the school's culture and the professor's reputation.

Another thing to keep in mind is that you have prepaid for the course, and that part of the piles of money you (and your classmates) have paid goes to pay for the prof's office hour. The one you're weighing whether to exploit. Would

you go out and buy a pair of Manolo Blahnik shoes for \$500 and then be too scared to wear them? Would you buy a Harley and be too timid to ride it? Why pay good money to study at a school with distinguished faculty and be unwilling to ask them to do what they're getting paid to do?

DON'T : Don't Worry about Seeming Stupid or Hurting Your Grade

Some students are loath to go to see their professor because they think that the questions they have will seem too basic or plain stupid. Or because they find the paper—and perhaps even the whole course—to be very hard. They think, “If I go meet with the professor, I might make a terrible mistake, one that could really hurt my grade. After all, the same professor who’s answering my dumb-ass question about what to put in my paper is the one who’s going to be grading that same paper—in a little over a week.”

But there’s really no problem here. There’s no need for conservatism. Office hours are not graded activities. Not even as part of the class-participation grade (if even there is any). Think about it. Which will make a better impression on your professor: if you come in, make a mistake and it’s corrected, or if you write that mistake into your paper in bold, 12-point, Times New Roman font, and it’s corrected—this time with points taken off? When it comes to papers, talk is free; writing is where the jeopardy comes in. So don’t worry about talking stupid, just worry about *writing* stupid.

And don’t let the fear of making mistakes keep you from seeing your professor. The office hour is a free throw. If you go in having given any thought at all to the assignment—and if you treat the professor with even a modicum of politeness

(always a swift idea)—you have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

It's particularly important to capitalize on this advantage in killer courses. Most professors respond particularly well to students who find the course tough but are bearing down and working hard. In some instances that's even part of the "plot of the course" in the professor's mind—how he or she thinks it's *supposed* to go. Indeed, professors often find themselves secretly rooting for students of this kind, wanting them to do well. And next thing you know, the professor is giving that student extra help, even more than that professor might ordinarily give. It's well worth making a mistake or two to get this kind of deal.

How to Make a Good First Impression on Your Professor

Be a pleasure to meet with. Make the professor happy you've come in. And leave the prof looking forward to your return visit.

- ☑ **Go to scheduled office hours (if possible).** Though the professor might be willing to see you "by appointment," such visits are extra work for the professor and can mean wasted time during the regular office hours.
- ☑ **Ask nicely for any special appointment.** Ask the professor when it is convenient for him or her to meet you, rather than reciting your almost full booked schedule. And don't be a "no-show." A no-show student equals very ticked-off professor.

- ☑ **Be on time, and bring your own notebook and writing implement.** Show that you came ready to work and don't need to bum pens or paper off the professor.
- ☑ **Smile when you come into the office.** It's nice to be nice, and besides, the nicer you are, the more likely it is that the professor will invest time in your case.
- ☑ **Never talk while your professor is talking.** Can you spell R-E-S-P-E-C-T?
- ☑ **Be sure to thank the professor cordially when you're finished.** Not one in a hundred students does it, but face it, the professor is human, too—and will remember these little niceties when you're back in a couple of days for more help.

DON'T : Don't Expect the Professor to Give You the Answer

Some students make the mistake of thinking that they can just go to the professor's office hour and the professor will give them the answer to the paper assignment. But see, if professors wanted to "give you the answer," they wouldn't bother giving you the paper assignment. They'd just write the paper for you. Or skip it altogether. No, professors aren't the "Answer Man (or Woman)"—though, on some level, every student wishes they were. Professors think it's *your* job to come up with the ideas, to have some thoughts about how to develop them, and to have at least a preliminary guess as to where the paper will wind up. Professors will, however, help you get your paper started, they will help you move it along, they will help you navigate it around the

bends, and they will help you assess what you've really shown in the paper.

When you deal with professors, keep in mind that if you put nothing in, you'll get nothing out. If the professor senses you haven't put any energy into the paper, he or she is unlikely to give you much time or much feedback. But the more professors see that you've been wrestling with the issues posed by the paper assignment, the more likely it is that they'll give you information, suggestions, and advice. *Whenever you go to see a professor, have a few specific ideas or questions prepared.* Show what work you've done and ask particular questions about the trouble you're having. If you've got nothing like that to ask, you need to do more legwork before embarking on that pilgrimage to the professor.

DON'T : It's Good to Come Prepared, but Don't
Ramrod through an Agenda

You are not likely to have a fully successful meeting with a professor if you come in with a point-by-point agenda that you are determined to get through, no matter what. Here's how such a meeting typically goes. You start explaining your points, one by one. The professor sits and listens for a while, then when something strikes him or her as interesting, suggestive, insightful, or significant, he or she stops you and raises a question or thought. Often quite briefly and tentatively, at first. You provide some brief answer (perhaps even meeting head-on the question asked), but then you put your head down and move on to the next point you had prepared. And then the next one, and the next. These later points are sometimes less important or even irrelevant. At least from the professor's point of view (which, when it comes to grading, is the only point of view that really counts).

Keep in mind that the more a professor engages in a topic, the more likely it is that he or she thinks it's important for that paper. So don't shut down the discussion of a central issue in order to jam through your agenda. Rather, run with the ball and see where it goes. Look, there's nothing wrong with having an agenda (though a more fluid series of "working points" is often better). But be sensitive to the other half of the interaction. The professor who's trying his or her level best to guide you in the direction of the right answer. And the good grade.

We've witnessed many an office hour in which a student's preconceived agenda put an early end to what could otherwise have been a very productive discussion. Sometimes the student simply wants to show off the good work he or she has already done. Sometimes the student is inattentive or insensitive to clues the professor is giving about what direction the discussion should take. And sometimes the student is simply unwilling to participate in the normal give-and-take of a cooperative (and dynamic) exploration of a topic or issue. But whatever the reason, the student has deprived him or herself of a great opportunity. To engage one-on-one with a genuine expert in some field, and to have the student's own ideas worked on by the professor.

**IN OUR HUMBLE OPINION . . .**

In all your meetings with the professor, we suggest you *take notes* on the issues that are being discussed. This way, whatever you learned from the meeting you won't forget. And it'll keep you 100 percent focused on what the professor is suggesting. Though it might seem a bit awkward to take notes in the office hour, most professors won't mind note taking a bit. They might even think it shows motivation, a desire to learn, and a sense that the student values what the professor is saying.

★★★★★ 5-Star Tip

Once in a while it happens. You're sitting in the office with a professor and you have a true meeting of minds. Genuine intellectual engagement. The professor is talking about some subject—perhaps his or her own research—and all of a sudden you could see yourself actually going on to work in that field. Or you're putting up some idea, and the professor sees in you a version of him or herself at that stage of intellectual development, and goes on to encourage you to pursue your interests in that area. Though it is rare, when this happens it is a genuinely life-changing moment. Stop taking notes. Listen to what the professor has to say. What started out as a discussion of some or other paper topic has morphed into something much more powerful and important. Something that will alter your life.

If this ever happens to you, we'd like to hear about it. Take a moment to e-mail us at: Lynn@ProfessorsGuide.com or Jeremy@ProfessorsGuide.com. A place of honor is reserved for you in the next edition of *Professors' Guide*.

DO : Be Willing to *Rethink* Your Ideas

Imagine this scenario. A student comes in to discuss how best to write the conclusion of his or her paper. But the professor quickly realizes that the student has made a pretty big mistake in the main body of the paper. And that the conclusion is the least of the problems here. Obviously not so pretty.

Professors don't relish encountering a student who has

gotten well into the paper, but is substantially off track. A problem that's especially acute when the student is hoping the professor will help him or her just shut it down—while the professor knows that what's really needed is a trip back to some earlier stage, perhaps even step one. It doesn't take a Ph.D. to realize that if you tell students straight out that all their hard work to date is for naught they are likely to get pretty upset.

Many professors confronted with this situation resort to gentle hints. They try to suggest that there are "problems" with earlier stages, that some previous point needs "re-thinking" or "recasting." They point to some earlier stage in the outline or draft you've been kind enough to provide them with, and ask a question or two about why this or that is there. They resolutely avoid talking about any issues that come up *past* the point where the paper has gone off the track. But if the student fails to take the hint, the professor isn't about to hit him or her over the head with a baseball bat. Be attentive to clues that some earlier stage in your argument is defective. Don't let your eagerness to get this thing out of the way blind you to the need to redo or re-think parts of the paper that you thought were finished.

And it's often a good idea to go to see the professor sooner rather than later. When the ideas are just beginning to percolate, and you don't have so much invested that you can't change your ideas in light of the professor's input. *Involve your professor in the generation and development of the ideas.* While there's still plenty of time.

DO : Be Willing to *Extend Your Ideas*

There may be times when you're having a meeting with the professor that is going fabulously. The professor is really lik-

ing your ideas and telling you how insightful they are. But then your professor drops a bombshell. He or she suggests you might want to do some additional work! Read another text, look up another source, get an article from Interlibrary Loan, consider an additional ramification of your idea, answer an objection, provide another example to support your point, whatever. And you're left wondering whether you really need to do the extra work, given that the professor seemed to like what you'd already done just fine.

No, you don't *have* to. Unless you want an A. You see, professors really enjoy seeing students who have already made good progress on their papers. And when professors see that, there's nothing they enjoy more than offering up words of praise and making suggestions for even more ways to make the paper better. If you get these sorts of suggestions, it's a pretty good idea to pursue them. Sure, it means more work. And yeah, it requires you to push harder when you've already pushed plenty (and done a pretty good job at it, too). But it is exactly this professor-directed extra work that could land you an A- instead of a B or B+. Or an A instead of a B+ or A-. (And, of course, there's the satisfaction to be had at a job well done. Really well done.)

DO : Make Positive Use of Criticism

It's a very real possibility that any meeting you have with the professor will involve some element of criticism. Of you, in particular. Especially if you give the professor a full presentation of your ideas or even an outline or a draft of your project. It's always upsetting to get criticism. That's one of the hardest parts of college. And of life. You've invested your heart and soul (or at least a few hours of your brain time) in your work, and now your professor is coming at

your work like a freight train. With no sign of slowing down.

But it's an intrinsic part of the learning process—and of the grading process, too—that professors raise criticisms about student work. Not necessarily in a nasty way (at least, most professors aren't deliberately *trying* to be nasty), but often in a reasonably direct way. Professors have to be able to communicate what the deficiencies of a paper are, if students are ever to correct their thinking and, in so doing, improve their grades. Whether they like it or not, college students need to learn to live with criticism. The strongest students are the ones who can turn criticism to their advantage. The ones who respond to the criticism in ways that can enhance, rather than detract, from learning. Which all boils down to: Don't get upset, get busy. View criticism as an opportunity, not a problem. If a professor will give you a full explanation of problems in your outline or draft, he or she is giving you a real shot at improving your paper—and your grade!



You Can Do It!

It's helpful to remember that some of the upset you feel when your ideas are criticized is a matter of perspective and timing. During the meeting, when the professor is evaluating your ideas, it's natural to feel that you're under attack, being assaulted from all sides. But later on, when your paper is handed back with a crowning A, you might feel that the professor's questions, comments, and objections were on the mark. And that they turned out to be extremely helpful in getting you that A. Resist the temptation to be overwhelmed by the emotions of the (first) moment.

**EXTRA POINTER**

Sometimes, when all seems lost, it's worthwhile asking the professor what he or she would recommend at this point. If every word that's come out of the professor's mouth is critical or disparaging, a radical break may be in order. Simply say, "This doesn't seem to be going too well. What would *you* recommend I do?" Then don't talk, and listen very carefully. Sometimes the professor, so struck by your candor and willingness to come for help, will actually begin to make useful suggestions. Press for more. Ask, "What would *you* do next?" Then listen more.

DO : Tell the Prof When You're Not Understanding

There is no point bluffing your way through a meeting with your professor. No point pretending that you understand what he or she is saying when you don't.

How is your professor going to help you if you're not honest with him or her? Let your professor know if you can't understand something he or she tells you. And don't worry, your professor can handle it. It's not exactly like it's the first time the professor caught wind that some student didn't understand something. One of the biggest impediments to student learning is failure of communication between professor and student. All professors want their students to learn the material they are teaching. Whether they succeed or not depends largely on good two-way communication. It doesn't help the communication any if a student feigns an understanding that he or she doesn't have.

Most professors can simplify their presentation—down a

number of levels, if necessary—and are happy to do so if a student needs it. And if the professor is going too fast, ask him or her to slow down. They can talk slower, too. It's easy for a professor to get caught up in the excitement of the moment and fail to notice that the student is lagging about four steps behind.

DON'T : Never Lock Horns with the Professor

The worst meetings between professors and students are the ones that turn into major-league fights. Usually this gets started when the professor says something that the student feels is dismissive of his or her work. In response, the student doesn't just engage in a normal intellectual discussion—he or she becomes very angry, sometimes to the point of yelling or even swearing at the professor. Yes, it happens. And it's not a good thing for either the student or the professor. When you go to see your professor, it's best (everything else being equal) not to engage your professor in *mano-a-mano* combat—even if he or she says things about your work that you don't want to hear.

If despite your best intentions—and our fine advice—you still end up in a pitched battle, it's not likely that the professor will take it out on your grade. Most professors are committed to basic fairness. The professor will probably grade your paper without regard to the outburst and average it in with the rest of your work (just as he or she does for all the other students). Or maybe the professor's not even your grader (in which case you blew your stack for nothing).

Still, it'd be a nice touch if you went back to apologize during the next office hour. Professors like that sort of stuff. Who knows, maybe the professor is feeling bad, too. While you're there, you might do something to really help your



Jeremy Remembers When . . .

One time when I was a TA at UCLA, my office-mate Ron was talking to a particularly contentious student. I could overhear the discussion starting to boil over, and the next thing I saw, the student was clenching his fist on the desk. Without missing a beat, Ron jumped to his feet and said, “Mr. M., if you don’t unlock your fist, you’re going to find your head on the other side of the room.” And he meant it. (The student, suitably chastised and maybe even a little scared, seemed very polite after that.)

grade. Like having a *nondefensive* discussion of what you’re going to argue in your paper.

DON’T : Don’t Come Off as Mr./Ms. Know-It-All

There are some students who decide that *they’re* the real experts in the field. That they have an incredibly brilliant idea for their paper. That they are able to solve a problem that no one has been able to solve before. So any suggestions or criticisms that the professor raises are either ignored or taken as signs that the professor is simply too stupid to understand.

It goes without saying that professors do not like meeting with know-it-alls. But more important, the boy-genius or girl-genius attitude is not very helpful for the learning process.

Even if you think you’ve hit upon a major discovery in writing your paper, never come in to see the professor with the attitude that you are absolutely, positively, 100 percent correct. And that you don’t need to pay attention to any

corrections or suggestions for improvement. Even the leading authorities in a field have to consider objections to their theories or take into account new evidence that comes up. That's what learning and intellectual progress are all about. And face it, it's not really so likely that you, as a beginner in a field, are going to have come up with ideas that will land you a MacArthur Fellowship (at least not without some further tweaking).

DON'T : Never Tell the Professor What You Really Think of the Course

Always remember that the office hour is not the time to level with the professor—if by “level” you mean telling the professor that you hate the course. That you wouldn't be taking it except that it's required. Nor is the office hour a good time to ask the professor when the course will get better or the lectures more interesting.

No one wants to hear *that*. And no one will give you a good hearing after you've kicked him (or her) in the face.

DON'T : Don't Second-Guess the Results of Your Meeting

Sometimes a student will bring some ideas to the meeting with the professor, and the professor will suggest changes to, or improvements on, the ideas. Everything seems to be going great. Everyone walks away from the meeting with that feeling of accomplishment you get only after making some real intellectual progress. But then, when the student sits down at the computer to write, something strange happens. The student decides to revert to plan A. To write what

he or she had planned *before* the meeting with the professor.

You should never second-guess the professor's suggestions—or the additional thoughts you yourself had during the meeting—only to go back to your old way of thinking about the paper. If the old way was so great, the professor wouldn't have suggested an alternate route, and you wouldn't have had the new thoughts that you did. And why did you even bother to go talk to the professor if you were just going to do what you wanted all along? Students who backslide are giving back all the extra points they would have gotten if they had followed the advice that their professors so nicely gave them. Not to mention losing the intellectual benefit of a productive work session with a professor on a topic of joint interest.



IN OUR HUMBLE OPINION . . .

Some students, in large courses with lots of TAs, confuse going to see the TA with a trip to the mall. They go from store to store, and keep coming back, till they find the merchandise they want. Or maybe they don't buy at all. Don't succumb to this mind-set. TA-shopping can be highly inefficient (you waste time waiting till that other TA has an office hour). It can get you very confused very quickly (as you try to process all sorts of different, and sometimes even contradictory, advice about how best to proceed in your paper). It can represent avoidance-behavior with regard to the real task at hand (getting down to writing some words on that blank piece of paper). And far and away the worst, it could cause you to ignore specific suggestions from the person whose opinion counts most (your

own TA who in just three days is going to be grading your paper).

Of course, there can be cases in which it is beneficial to seek a second opinion. Sometimes another TA (or the professor) can suggest ways in which you can probe a point more fully, or extend your thinking more broadly, or consider other sources than your own TA has suggested. Sometimes your TA simply didn't have the time to address your concerns fully enough. And sometimes the communication between you and your TA just isn't that good. But whoever else you see, always keep in mind that in the end it's going to be your own TA who (unless otherwise indicated) will be deciding on that grade at the end of your prize paper. You won't be able to duck him or her, so be sure you adequately address whatever he or she has said.

DO : Go Back to the Professor If You Have More Questions

After you've seen the professor, you might find yourself with new questions that you'd like to ask. If so, you might wonder if it's okay to go back for another meeting. Or whether, if you do, you'll be regarded as a total pest.

You are probably in the best position to read the vibes of your professor. But in general, most professors don't mind if a student comes in a couple of times while preparing the paper, especially if the first meeting went well. You could probably even come in a third time if needed. Just watch for clues that the professor has had enough of you—like if he or she slams the office door, or hangs out a Do Not Disturb sign, the minute he or she spots you coming down the hall.

How to Go See Your Professor— Electronically

Though you might not have thought about it, most professors are willing to offer help and answer questions by e-mail. Current trends suggest that e-mail will become an increasingly important mode of communication between student and teacher—and an increasingly useful way to enhance learning—as time goes on.

E-mail communication with professors usually works best when your questions are relatively confined and can be answered in a paragraph or two. Longer questions or questions requiring significant interpretation and judgment are almost always best taken up in an office hour.

To make the best use of the e-mail option when preparing your paper, follow our top 10 tips for e-mailing your professor:

- 1. Be sure that you send your e-mail to an active e-mail address**—one that your professor actually uses (not an address assigned by the university that the professor hasn't even heard of).
- 2. If possible, send your e-mail from a reputable university account**, not one whose address could be confused with an adult or weirdo site (professors are less likely to respond to mail from Hotchick or even Squidboy).
- 3. Write an informative—but nondemanding—subject line.** Professors may be getting as many as fifty e-mails a day, and you're likely to get a better

response with “request for meeting” than with “must meet—NOW!”

- 4. Be sure you begin your e-mail with a pleasant and respectful salutation** (“Dear Professor Hyman” would be a better choice than “Yo, Jero!”); and end with a gracious “thank you for your kind help” (especially if the professor actually provided, or could conceivably provide, kind help).
- 5. Don’t expect your professor to give you instant feedback** (professors don’t like to feel like they are on call 24/7; they’re Ph.D.’s not M.D.’s).
- 6. Don’t make unreasonable demands on your professor** (like asking him or her to e-mail you a copy of the paper assignment that you lost, and while they’re at it, include their notes for the classes that you missed).
- 7. Don’t submit drafts of papers** for the professor to review without confirming in advance that he or she is willing to review drafts (amazingly enough, some professors just aren’t up for reading 50 pages of drafts the day before 250 pages of papers are submitted to them). And don’t submit your completed paper electronically unless your professor specifically allows you to (downloading and printing 250 pages of papers might also not be your professor’s cup of tea).
- 8. Confine your e-mails to academic issues** that are directly related to the paper assignment or the

course (don't ask your professor to suggest places where you might locate a good printer, now that your printer just broke down).

- 9. Don't e-mail your professor incessantly** (keep in mind that your professor could have hundreds of students and doesn't want to see your name in his or her inbox on a constant basis).

- 10. If your professor doesn't answer your e-mail, don't assume that he or she doesn't care about you or hates you** (the professor might not even have gotten the e-mail in the first place, or might have mistakenly deleted it—most don't have the best hand-eye coordination in the world). Either retransmit your message (with an apology for double posting) or get your question answered the old-fashioned way—in the office hour.

And finally, and most important,

BONUS TIP: Keep in mind your prof is a fellow human being, and might actually read (and have feelings about) the e-mail you've dashed off.



Review Session

There are as many ways for an office hour to go wrong as there are kinds of professors and kinds of students. Like any human interaction, the success of the encounter depends on dozens of intangible factors—the personalities of the two people involved; how those personalities engage (or fail to engage); how certain key comments are taken (or not taken); whether the people establish a rapport (or don't feel all that comfortable together); how relaxed the meeting is (or how much of a rush the people are in); and even what each had for breakfast (or didn't).

Nevertheless, there are some objective strategies you can use to maximize your chances of a productive meeting—and to improve your grade on that all-important paper. Here are our best ideas grouped under four headings (it'll be easier to remember them that way):

- 1. Don't be afraid to go see the professor,** or worried that you'll seem stupid or damage your grade. The professor (or TA) is just an ordinary Joe or Jane, he or she knows that the course is difficult for some students, and besides, office hours don't even count for the grade.

- 2. View your meeting as a joint exploration of the topic.** Realize that the professor won't just give you the answer; that you won't be able to ramrod through an agenda; that you might have to rethink, or extend, the ideas you came in with; and that you might have to accept criticism or tell your professor when you're not understanding something. (But in exchange for these minor unpleasantnesses you might get one of the best experiences of your college career—and in any case, the best help for an A that money can buy.)
- 3. Don't act like a jackass (even accidentally).** No professor likes students who are combative, or conceited, or overly "honest." Always try to imagine the other side of the interaction (that is, how *you* might be seeming to the professor). Then act accordingly.
- 4. Keep your momentum going after the meeting.** Try to incorporate the results of the meeting into your own thinking. Seek another opinion if you think it would be helpful. And feel free to make a return visit to the prof if you've got more to ask.

The office hour is one of the best—and one of the most underused—resources of the American University. Learn to use it well.