Asking a Professor for Help: Four Steps You Can Follow

Step 1: Identifying Reasons for Seeking Help

There are endless reasons for why you may need to talk with a professor. Listed below are just a few:

- You performed poorly on a quiz, exam, or other class assignment.
- You are unclear about an assignment, exam/reading schedule, policy on attendance, etc.
- You want to turn in an assignment late or take a test at a different time.
- You are unsure about your current major.
- You have missed class due to sickness.
- You are considering graduate school in the professor's area of expertise and want to ask the professor for a letter of recommendation.

Now, write down your reasons for approaching your professor for help.

Step 2: Determining When to Meet

Once you have identified the specific reason(s) you need or want to speak with your professor, determine how quickly to do so.

- If you need to speak to him/her as soon as possible, then a phone call, email (if a professor checks it frequently), or face-to-face contact in his/her office may be warranted.
- Be sure to ask if this is a good time to approach the professor for your specific need. Also, keep in mind that a professor is typically less receptive to answering questions immediately before an exam is being distributed.
- One approach might be, "Professor Heart, I need to talk with you about ______ as soon as possible. When can I do that?" Try to meet during the professor's office hours.
- Check your syllabus for office hours and policies.

Step 3: Organizing Your Talk with Your Professor

- Arrive prepared with your list of why you need to approach your professor for help. Any anxiety you may experience can be lessened if you are organized beforehand.
- Have all of your questions listed on paper beforehand. This will greatly minimize any chance of forgetting to ask a particular question of importance to you.
- Have paper and pen available. It is best to record all information provided from your professor rather than rely later on your memory.
- If you have a question about class material it is strongly advised to have your text, class notes and syllabus with you (in case you need to refer to such).

Step 4: Talking with Your Professor

- Know your professor's last name and use it with his/her appropriate title. Do not assume an informal greeting unless the professor has specifically stated that a more casual greeting is preferred.
- Be sure to arrive on time and be mindful of possible (and likely) time constraints.
- Don't hesitate in asking to meet again if you did not receive all the information you needed. For example, "Professor Heart, I really appreciate you spending some time talking with me about graduate school as it will help me make some decisions. I would like to meet with you again to follow-up with some related areas. When can we arrange to do that?"

Reminders

- The more often you talk with a professor, the more comfortable you will feel in doing so again (e.g. with other professors, teaching assistants, advisors, etc.)
- If you still feel uncomfortable about talking to a professor (and especially if you are having difficulty performing well in your classes), you are encouraged to seek assistance at the Student Success Office in Williams Center, ext 5227.