

What's the best way to talk to my instructor?

Instructors want you to use them as a *resource*. They hold office hours for a reason, yet many students still avoid their instructor's office unless required. Remember, unless you tell them otherwise, your instructors assume you're doing fine (or at least that you're fine with how you're doing). They can't help if you don't ask! So overcome your fear, and start directly talking to your instructors outside of class.

Knowing the best ways to approach your instructors will give you that necessary confidence to step into the "dragon's den." Chances are, you'll discover the "dragon" is human after all.



PROFESSOR

Call them by the right title.

Most instructors let you know what they want to be called. When in doubt, go with "Dr. [last name]." If they're not a professor, they'll let you know; but they're unlikely to be offended by the promotion.



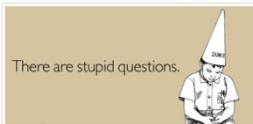
Be prepared – instructors are not mind readers.

Unless you're just stopping by to chat (which is fine, by the way), have your questions prepared in advance. You need to be able to clearly articulate what it is you need help with. Besides, planning your agenda in advance helps ensure you don't forget what you came there to do. Also, be sure to bring any necessary materials with you.

truth

The more open and truthful you can be, the more receptive your instructor will be.

When it comes to lies, instructors have no tolerance for deceptiveness and the twisting of actual events. Be honest. Whatever it is, they've heard it before, and if it's the truth, they will listen again.



Don't ask "Hey, what's on the final?"

Be diplomatic. Instead, ask "How can I best prepare for the final?" See the difference?

Avoid approaching your instructors aggressively or antagonistically, and don't whine.

Above all, don't act entitled; your instructor is not your employee. Think about how you want to be perceived and act accordingly. Phrase your questions carefully, so as not to sound like you're asking for special treatment or "inside knowledge."



Your instructor is not Harry Potter.

Don't ask the impossible of your instructors. They are here to help you, but they are also restricted by course and departmental policies. Whatever your circumstances, instructors have to hold you to the same standards and workload as the rest of the class. So go ahead and inquire about make-up work, extra credit, and other opportunities, but be prepared to do the work, and don't expect easy outs. Brace yourself for disappointment, and if your instructor says "no," follow up with damage control strategies.



At the end, it's too late.

You will not get far by approaching your instructor at the end of the semester and declaring that you will lose your scholarship, be kicked off the team, or get dismissed from school if you don't receive a certain grade in the class. As you see signs of falling short of certain requirements as a UT student, member of an organization, or scholarship recipient, meet with your instructors. They most certainly agree that your grade is important, but in the end they cannot be held responsible for your earned grade or personal circumstances.



Get to the point – your instructor's office is not a lounge.

Even if you're paying a social call, don't use up more of your instructor's time than necessary. Other students may be waiting, so be clear and concise; don't beat around the bush.



Don't flirt, don't threaten, and don't be overly informal.

In other words, be professional. Different instructors have different ways of interacting with students (some are casual, some are more proper), but ultimately academia is a professional arena, and you should conduct yourself accordingly. You might also want to consider your attire; if you're dealing with an "old-fashioned" instructor, or if you're there on a serious matter (such as asking for a letter of recommendation), it's a good idea to dress for the occasion.



Talk to your instructors early and often.

This is a proactive and professional relationship. If you know you're going to miss class, try to let your instructors know ahead of time. If you're sick, contact them. If you need an extension, ask before the due date, not after. If you're struggling, see them before it's too late (after all, there's only so much they can do if the semester's almost over). Your instructors like you and want to help, but you have to meet them halfway.