



# Asking University Faculty About Their Writing Assignments

College and university faculty are required to hold office hours, which are indicated on the course syllabi. Most faculty are conscientious about keeping these hours; however, many report that undergraduate students do not visit them often unless they are required to do so. Your success in college will be enhanced if you visit faculty during their office hours, particularly if you have done your homework by completing the reading, reviewed the syllabus and/or assignment, and have specific questions. If you are too shy to go alone, visit your instructors with a classmate.

## Reasons to Visit Faculty

- **To become acquainted with the faculty and their interests, particularly their research interests.** Most faculty love to discuss their research and those who are active researchers often mention their work in class. You can go in during office hours and ask questions like the following:
  - You mentioned that you are doing research on xxx. What are you finding out?
  - How do you become a researcher?
  - I want to be a xxx major, or I'm thinking of majoring in your discipline. How can I research the job prospects for this discipline?
  - What's the most interesting research that you've done?
- **To ask questions about a reading.** Often reading is assigned but no instructions are given on how to read the text or what is important in the text. The best way to approach this issue is to attempt to complete the reading, perhaps using some of the "Selective and Purpose-Driven Reading" (*Essential Skill 2*) activities from this curriculum or using strategies you have learned in other classes. Then visit faculty during office hours and ask questions such as:
  - This is what I think the reading says. (Then summarize.) Is this right?
  - I tried to read this text and had some difficulty because there are no bolded words or headings. How do I discover what is important?
  - I don't understand the relationships between this reading and the lecture on xxx. Would you please explain them?
  - How does this reading fit into the goals of the class?
  - When was this source written? Why was it written in this way?
  - What kind of person is the writer of this reading? Is knowing this important to understanding the class?
  - From this reading, I understand that xxx was a xxxxx. Am I right?
  - *But don't ask:* Do I have to read this? Is it going to be on the exam?
- **To discuss a lecture.** Faculty are generally very pleased when students come in and ask questions about a lecture or want to discuss further one of the lecture topics. Ask questions such as:
  - You mentioned xxx. Where can I read more about this?
  - I'm beginning to see the relationships between xxx that you talked about at the beginning of the semester and yyy that you are discussing now. That's interesting. Please tell me more.
  - I would like to write my paper about xxx that you mentioned in your lecture. Is that OK? If so, what sources should I look up?
  - I'm new at xxx, and I'm having trouble taking notes. Here are my notes, but I think that they are not very

well organized. Can you suggest ways for me to organize?

— You talked about xxx in your lecture, but I can't find any reference to that topic in the textbook. Is it there and I just missed it?

- **To learn more about an up-coming examination.** This is a tricky one, but it can be managed *if* you come to the faculty office having read the syllabus carefully—and having studied any pre-examination information given out by the instructor. Here are some questions that can be helpful, particularly when asked way in advance of the examination date:

— I've begun studying for the mid-term, and this is how I'm approaching my review of the class material. Is this the way I should be doing it?

— You indicated that one topic that may appear on the exam is xxxx. I have reread my lecture notes and the readings on this, and I still don't understand xxx. Would you please help me to understand it?

— Would it be possible for you to distribute some practice in-class essays so that I can time myself as I respond to them? I'm a slow writer, and I'm afraid that I won't be able to finish.

**Note:** If you have learning difficulties and have registered with the disabled students services office on campus, you should definitely talk to the instructor about examination accommodations.

- **To learn more about an assignment.** In some classes, take-home assignment prompts aren't very complete, that is, the questions that you have are not all answered by the assignment. In some cases, the instructor will answer the unanswered questions in class without being asked. But in other cases the instructor assumes that the you will know the answers. As soon as the assignment is given—way before the due date—visit faculty and ask a few questions for clarification. Here are some questions that have been successfully asked—and answered—and some that annoy faculty:

— Successful questions, which generally begin with a comment like: "I think that your assignment is very interesting, and I look forward to writing it, but..."

1. How many and what types of sources should I be using? It's not clear from the prompt.
2. Are you willing to look at a draft or partial draft of the assignment before I turn it in? I want to make sure that I'm responding correctly.
3. I am wondering about your criteria for grading this assignment. What are the most important things I should keep in mind as I write?
4. You didn't say much about how the assignment should be organized. Do you happen to have a paper from a previous assignment that I could look at to get some idea about what I should be doing?
5. I'm bilingual and I sometimes have trouble finding small errors in my papers. Do you mind if I have someone edit my paper as long as none of the content is changed?

— Annoying questions, generally asked just before the assignment is due, should not be asked:

1. I don't understand what you want. (Too vague.)
2. How many pages should the paper be? (Rather than: Do you have some kind of page limit I should be keeping in mind?)
3. Can you postpone the assignment? I have too much to do.
4. Will you please edit my paper?
5. Is there something I can do instead of writing this paper? I hate writing papers.

**Note:** Some questions work with some faculty, and some work with others. Some faculty are quite willing to negotiate assignments so that students are able to write about what interests them, and some are not. The important point is that faculty are people, an audience with interests, feelings, and ideas.