

# TEACHING TEACHING

## Office Hours



This guide will be divided into two parts: for teachers and for students.

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### For teachers:

Since not many students have information about office hours, it's on you to make this easy for them. Here's how.

**1. Explain what office hours are.** Don't assume your students know what office hours are and just list it on the syllabus. Set aside 5 minutes during your first class to explain what office hours are and why they are useful. Try to convince your students that they need to go. I like to list out all the reasons office hours are helpful to them, like I have above.

**2. Make it less daunting.** I tell students: "Every week from 2-3pm on Tuesdays, I will be sitting in my office doing absolutely nothing. I will not be doing work, I will be doing nothing and I will be very bored. I'm counting on you to give me someone to talk to." It sounds a little silly (and I still do work if no one shows up), but it shows students my commitment to them. My office hours are entirely devoted to them, and they are not a burden if they show up.

**3. Give ideas for what to talk about.** I also tell students: "You do not need to have a problem in this class to come to office hours. You don't even need to have anything to talk about. I can guide the conversation, I'll come up with things to say. I just want to get to know you all better." This tends to work well – students will show up with nothing in particular to talk about, and I've learned about the classes they love ("Design of Reinforced Concrete Structures" was my favorite), the projects they're working on (a web extension that makes healthy eating easier), and their goals (lots of grad school ambitions).

**4. Cookies!** By far the most effective technique to get students to show up is cookies. Any baked good will do, but I bake them every week and put up a picture of them at the end of class. I remind students that the baked good is available in my office hours, and they just have to show up if they'd like any. They don't have to stay or talk (though they usually do), they just have to show up.

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## For students:

When I was in undergrad, friends sometimes asked me for advice about office hours. They wanted to go but were too nervous to actually do it. My secret? Go the first week.

If office hours is there to help you when you're struggling, why go the first week?

*Here's my reasons:*

**1. You're not struggling.** It's harder to overcome anxiety when you're stressed and confused in the class. If you get to know your professor right away, you won't have that hurdle to jump through once you actually need office hours.

**2. No one else is struggling.** It's fine to go during midterms and finals (it can be super helpful to hear other students ask questions), but you'll get more one-on-one attention during less busy weeks. Typically no one goes to office hours the first week of class, so use this opportunity to get to know your professor.

**3. You don't need to come with any questions.** The first week is an awesome opportunity for small talk. I usually showed up and said I wanted to introduce myself. Most professors will ask questions like "why are you taking this class?" or "what's your major?". You can ask questions like "why did you choose this field?" or "what's your favorite thing to teach in this class?". Even if you only talk for 5-10 minutes, your professor now knows your name and a bit about you.

**4. Going twice is easier than going once.** Going to office hours the first time is always the hardest: Where is their office? When should I show up? What do I say? Will they be annoyed that I'm there? By doing it the first week, every time you need to go after will be easier and easier.

*Why go at all?*

**1. You need help.** The most obvious reason to go to office hours is that your professor can help you. Not only can they answer questions and explain things in more depth, but they can also help you figure out what to focus on. In my own office hours, I often say "don't worry about that." For example, students in my developmental psych class don't need to worry about memorizing every part of a neuron or every region of the brain.

**2. You want a job.** Professors make great references for early career internships or jobs, and office hours is the best way for them to write something more personal.

**3. You really like the class.** If you love the class and want to learn more, most professors are happy to talk about their own research. They can direct you to more resources and other classes.

**4. You want advice.** Particularly if you're interested in research or academia, professors can give great career advice, like which labs to join, conferences to attend, or answer questions about grad school. They can also recommend classes, clubs, and events you might be interested in.