Office Hours Strategies

Why

- **Getting to know your Professor.**
  Using office hours to let your professors get to know you in order to secure letters of recommendation later isn’t entirely illegitimate. However, you need to combine the visit with real classroom needs. If you are not all that engaged with the class material or if you don’t honestly need help with the work, it will show. This will not result in a good letter of rec or further opportunities. If you find yourself truly interested in the class and have honest questions, then take advantage of office hours. It will certainly help you with letters of rec later on as well as with your work now.

- **Clarify course content or make up work.** (first, get notes from a classmate)

- **Get study ideas.**

- **Ask questions about the syllabus.**

- **Figure out grades.**

When & How

- Visit early in the semester, not the day of (or possibly week of) a deadline.

- Signal your interest in an office visit. Email or talk to professor before or after class to check availability.

- If your schedule conflicts with office hours, contact the professor and ask for an appointment, offering a range of days and times you are available.

Preparation

Spend time on the homework problem/project before you visit your professor. How much time should you spend? It depends. You need to sit and sometimes struggle with the concept before asking for assistance. However, you can spend too much time on a problem before coming to get help. Some homework problems may require an hour or more to complete and yet others can be completed within a few minutes.

Prepare questions beforehand. Even if you feel generally lost in the class, your professor will be better able to help if you offer specifics. Prepare at least 3 open-ended questions about the material in order to guide your time with your professor.

Examples:

“I am struggling with topic x, is there a common example we can go over together?”

“I am unsure how to complete this problem, but this is what I have so far. I’ve tried xxx and xxx and that does not seem to work.”
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"I tried this type of solution with this homework problem and that same approach is not working on this homework problem. Can you help me troubleshoot this?"

"I understand two parts of this problem or idea, but don’t know how to connect them."

During the Appointment

• Take notes. Always, always, ALWAYS take notes.
• Ask for clarification. You can summarize what your professor said, in your own words, back to them to make sure you’re following correctly.
• Ask about supplemental readings or resources that may help.
• Be honest. Say so if you aren’t following or need more examples.
• Sum up your take-away or action plan at the end of meeting.

Etiquette

• Be on time - especially if you have made a specific appointment. Give yourself extra time to get there.
• Bring whatever materials are appropriate: book, laptop, notes, and be ready to take notes.
• Introduce yourself.
• Address the professor by their last name with the appropriate title (Professor, Dr.).
• If you want to discuss an exam or paper grade you disagree with, be careful with your tone. You can ask, "I reviewed this problem, and I’m still not sure I understand. Could you walk me through it?"
• If you want to discuss questions you missed on the test or what was lacking in your paper, not refute them, you can ask, "How can I improve my next test or paper grade?"
• Be aware that other students may be waiting.
• Thank the professor at the end of the meeting.

References:

“Using Office Hours Effectively.” Learning Center, learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/using-office-hours-effectively/.
