

Talking With Your Professor

So let's face it, talking with your professor can be extremely stressful, and most of us only do it when we have to—like for a mandatory mid-semester meeting about your writing; or because the professor has specifically requested it. Some of us just wait until something's wrong, and unfortunately this is often at the end of the term (a time that is hectic and nerve-racking for students and teachers alike). However, a lot of professors like to have at least one one-on-one conference with each of their students, sometimes just to get a sense of how the class is going, or to give students an opportunity to talk about things that they may not want to bring up in class. Additionally, it gives you a chance to do something you rarely get to do in class: talk directly and individually with your instructor about your writing. This is a great way to get clarity on assignment instructions, understand your instructor's comments on your papers, and get advice on how to approach a topic or improve your writing skills—all of which can help you do better in the course as well as develop your skills as a writer. But for whatever reason you are meeting with your professor, there are some important things to remember to help you get the most out of the conference. Here are a few of them:

- **Start early.** If math isn't your strong suit, but you're scheduled to take a mandatory advanced calculus class in the fall of your freshman year, then meet with your professor early in the semester. Explain your difficulties, and express your willingness to work hard to succeed in the class in spite of them. Professors like to know if/when a student has problems at the *beginning* of the semester—not two weeks before the final exam when it is usually too late to do anything about it. Furthermore, professors are extremely helpful—many of them are willing to schedule additional meetings with you outside of class in order to help you understand coursework; and those who can't do that can guide you to vital campus resources, like study groups or a tutoring center. Information like this is especially helpful if you are a new student, because it educates you about the available (and free) tools for success that are right at your fingertips.
- **Be prepared.** If you are going to your professor's office to discuss a text from the course, make sure you know what the agenda is, and that you are acquainted with the necessary materials. If you are planning to talk about a specific piece of writing, be sure to reread your work, your instructor's comments, and peer review notes, making note of any specific issues you have or questions you would like to ask. **Also**, if you are supposed to bring something with you (like a rough draft, a graded exam, or a returned assignment), don't forget to do so! Even if it will take only a few minutes to return to your room or your car to get it, that is time that could be better spent in the meeting.
- **Be on time.** Sometimes (and especially during mid-terms) professors may schedule back-to-back conferences with individual students so that they can have enough time to meet all of them. What that means for you is that, even if your professor is willing to extend your meeting because you were late, it may be impossible, because doing so would infringe on another student's time slot. Indeed, although this person is *your* professor, he or she has other students and obligations; be mindful of that, and don't assume that you can just tack a few minutes onto the end of a meeting to cover the things you would have discussed if you had been punctual. Furthermore, such meetings are designed to help you get the most out of the course, so wasting your professor's time may ultimately hurt you, especially if you are meeting about performance issues, or for help understanding course material.
- **Be specific.** Sometimes students go to their professors for "help"—and that's exactly what they say when the appointment finally arrives—expecting the instructor to know exactly what that means. Such statements are too general, and sometimes they can make a student seem unconcerned about addressing his/her weaknesses and/or improving performance. Instead, come with some specific questions; identify

passages that you would like to discuss, and don't be afraid to ask for clarification about comments your instructor has written on your work. Knowing exactly what your professor is telling you about your writing is essential to improving your skills and successfully completing the course.

- **Be polite.** If you are meeting to talk about grade-related issues like a missed assignment, poor attendance, or a paper that you simply did poorly on, don't start off with accusations and demands—not only is such behavior rude and disrespectful, but it may also be unfounded. Stay calm, and give yourself time to cool off if you're upset about a grade—in fact, many instructors *require* that students keep returned assignments for 48 hours (or more) before scheduling a meeting. Those few days that you have to wait before approaching your professor may feel like torture, but they are extremely important: they give you time to really think about the issues; and you may ultimately decide that, in order to strengthen your performance in class, the only person you really need to have a talk with is yourself.
- **Take Notes.** You certainly do this in class, and this conference is no different. Write down the specifics of the conversation: ideas for paper topics, plans for revision, and even thesis statements and outlines you may have come up with during the conference. It is a great way to help you remember what you talked about as you sit down to work on your paper.
- **Review! Review! Review!** At the end of the conference, review what you have discussed in the meeting and what you need to do next in the writing process. This is a good way to double-check that both you and your professor agree on what needs to be accomplished. It can also help you remember where to focus once you return to your work.
- **Relax!** In most cases, the first visit to your professor's office is the hardest, but once you are comfortable talking to her in a more private setting, it ultimately becomes a task that is rewarding and beneficial. This is especially true if you're interested in doing more work in her field, or if you are getting some much-needed help with the coursework.