

Communications Skills

Interacting with your Professor

Communicating with your Instructor

The relationship between you and your professor is unlike most other relationships in your life. By its very nature, it is not an entirely equal relationship—the professor is responsible for assessing your learning and grading your performance. However, in the best professor–student relationships, each party works together with a common goal of helping the student learn and master the course material.

The way in which you communicate with your professor can have a direct bearing on how well they will be able to help you. The mode of communication—in person, over email, and so forth—and the environment—in the classroom, in the hallway, in the professor’s office, and so forth—will affect how you should interact with your professor. Here are some guidelines:

The Effect of the Environment

- ***The most formal environment is the classroom.*** Do not address the instructor as “Yo teach!” If you are not sure, then calling them “Professor” is always acceptable. Be polite, make eye contact, listen actively, ask questions in a respectful tone, and save questions about your personal exam and/or grade for after class or during office hours. The classroom is for questions that would benefit everyone, not just you.
- ***The second most formal environment is usually the professor’s office.*** Most professors are *absolutely delighted* to have you come ask questions or chat, so use office hours! Follow the same rules of how to address the instructor, make eye contact, listen actively, and ask questions in a respectful tone. This is the time to ask questions about your personal exam, your grades, or any item of a personal nature that you need to share with the professor. Always introduce yourself with “Hello, Professor XXX, I’m *Your First Name Your Last Name*, and I am in your *Day of the Week, Time of the Day, Name of the Course* class.” While the professor will recognize you, they can have over 100 students at a time; help them place you into a class.
- ***Hallways, the campus café, and other places on campus are not as formal.*** You can relax some of your more formal behavior, depending on the professor. Take your cue from them.
- Professors are good people on which to practice your handshaking skills. (Yes, it is a skill, and yes, you will be judged on how well you shake hands when you go for job interviews.)

Communicating via Email

I have no doubt that your professor enjoys having you in class very much, but they may have 5 Alex’s this semester. Don’t assume they will know which Alex you are when you email them. Sometimes, all they see is your email address which may be only initials and or letters and numbers. ***You must tell them your name (first and last), the days and time your class meets, and the name of your class.***



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Be very specific about the help you need from them. Professors work very long hours and really appreciate it when you get to the point quickly!

Don't ask the professor a question you could answer yourself if you went and looked it up on the course calendar, in the Syllabus, in the learning management system (D2L), or in the homework system. While you may think it only takes a minute to answer the question (and it probably does!), if the professor has 100 students asking a one-minute question, well, you see the problem.

Here is a **sample email template** you can use to properly communicate with your instructor via email.

Dear Professor *Name*, my name is *your name here*, and I am in your *name of class*, that meets at *time of class* on *day(s) of class*.

- I need help on problem # *X* on page # *X* in the textbook. The difficulty I am having is *state your very specific, detailed issue here. Upload a pdf or picture of your work if possible.*
- I must miss class on *date you have to miss* due to *give brief reason here*. I noticed from the schedule that we have a *missed assignment name* on that day. Can I take the *missed assignment name* early on *day* at *time*?

Thank you for your help.

Your first and last name here, Your student ID here.

Last Words on Communication and Interpersonal Skills

We all know we should not stereotype others, nor should we judge people based on their appearance. That is a given.

However, it is also a fact that humans are biologically predisposed to do exactly that. In studies, it takes the average human being less than 1/10th of one second to form a first impression and decide whether they like someone.

Be professional and respectful and make a good first impression.

- Where you sit matters. (Front or middle, avoid the sides and back.)
- How you dress matters. (Class is not a rock concert or a rave. Be neat and clean.)
- How you speak matters. (No *\$#!, be respectful in tone, no "Hey miss!")
- How you write matters. (Clearly, legibly, with proper grammar.)