As teachers, we are expected to have regular office hours where students can approach us and ask for help. However, while we are required to be there, we often find that students do not attend, and we are left alone with our thoughts. Why bother with this ritual?

There are several reasons why office hours can be worthwhile for both teacher and student:

- The personal interaction helps to break down the inevitable distance that exists between teachers and students in most classrooms.
- There is an opportunity to have a detailed discussion on topics or questions.
- Instructor and student get to know each other, something students value.
- The teacher has a chance to get a sense of how students are responding to the course.

This module will help you think about how to structure office hours, get students to come, and make the most of it when they do. Two points are important to keep in mind:

- For students to want to come to office hours, it is important that they view you as approachable, interested in them, and committed to their learning.
- During your office hours, it is important to create a welcoming atmosphere. Listen to your students, giving them your full attention, and asking thoughtful questions.

**Structuring Your Office Hours**

Planning your office hours wisely and creating the right atmosphere are important steps in reaching your goal of having students attend them. Here are some tips:

- Divide your “hours” into segments. For instance, if you are required to have three office hours, try breaking them into three, one-hour segments. Schedule these segments on different days, at various times, to accommodate students with busy schedules.
- Stagger your office hours across class times. If classes begin on the hour, have your office hours begin on the half-hour. That way, if classes begin at 3:00 and 4:00, and your hours start at 3:30, students who have a class at either time can see you.
- Hold office hours in a private location. If possible, meet with students in an office. If this is not possible, find a semi-private place such as a little-used lounge to talk with students.
- Keep the office door open, if you are in an office and no one is with you, the door should be open to indicate that you are available and there expressly for students. However, even if you are with a student, it is generally a good idea to keep the door open.
Holding Office Hours

- Be encouraged to not sit behind a desk. When you talk with students, it is preferable not to place barriers between them and you. Try to sit out in the open, where they can see your full body, as this removes some of the formality from the situation.

- Relax and try to help the student do so as well. Yes, students can be intimidated coming to see the instructor, even if you are “just” the TA. If this is the student’s first time to your office hours, begin with some casual conversation about the weekend, how their semester is going, or something else to break the ice. Let them see that you are interested in them.

Getting Students to Come to Office Hours

More than likely, you will have at least one or two students who come to your office hours, especially if you are approachable and have structured them well. However, following are some suggestions for how to have even more students visit you:

- Publicize your hours and give periodic reminders. Your hours should be on the syllabus and on the office door. The time right before tests or assignments is an excellent opportunity to remind students about when you are available.

- Ask students who struggle to come see you. Writing “see me about this during office hours” on tests and papers gets a 75 percent response rate (Davis, 1993).

- Require students to meet with you once. Ask all students to arrange a ten or fifteen minute appointment to talk with you, perhaps about a paper, proposal, or project, and preferably early in the semester.

- Have “special topics” office hours. Announce that you will be using office hours to discuss topics of particular interest to you and the students. You might even have students suggest ideas. Then, announce in advance what the topic will be for that week. Students who have an interest in that topic will be happy to come.

- Stay late after class and come early. Students will feel more comfortable approaching you in your office if they feel like they already know you.

- Check with students about the most convenient times for office hours. We often set up our hours before the semester begins. You might decide to wait until you can poll students about the best times for them.

- Be consistent. Once you establish your hours, keep them. There is nothing more frustrating than to expect to find the instructor there and learn he or she is not present.
Making the Most of Office Hours

Once you’ve got the students coming, you must make the office hours worthwhile:

- Explain the purpose of office hours. Especially if you have new or international students, they may not be aware of what office hours are. Some even think they are mandatory. Explain that they are an option for students who want to meet with you for extra help or to explore ideas in greater depth.

- Have students sign-up for time slots. If you find that your hours are heavily attended, have students sign-up in advance. This helps them plan and reduces the time they must wait outside your door, but only if you keep to the schedule.

- Set guidelines for how office hours are used. You may find that students expect you to brief them on the class they missed or explain a reading in detail. If so, you should let students know you expect them to arrive with specific questions in mind, something for you to review, or some other evidence that they have made some effort to prepare.

- Solicit feedback on the course. If you are meeting with a student and no one is waiting, ask what he or she likes about the class and how it is going for him or her.

Sources


TIPS FOR...

Building Community

- Form small groups for getting acquainted; mix and form new groups several times.
- Solicit suggestions from students for outside resources and guest speakers on course topics.
- Utilize small group discussions whenever feasible.