

REACHING OUT TO INSTRUCTORS

Talking to professors, teaching assistants and other staff in your classes or programs can feel intimidating, but building a relationship with your instructors can help your learning a lot. As experts in the subjects they're teaching, they have a wealth of information to offer and can be great allies in helping you engage with the material and succeed in your work.

In certain circumstances, you might need to communicate your needs for learning or meeting academic requirements. Students are often worried that asking for things like help, extensions and accommodations will annoy their instructors or give them an "unfair advantage", but that's probably not the case. Remember that most instructors like to teach and connect with students, and will likely consider requests for what you need to do your best. Here are some guidelines in determining if what you're asking for is reasonable, as well as some ways to communicate effectively with your instructors.

Recognize what you're working with.

Everyone is dealing with a different situation, set of experiences and toolkit of abilities. People learn and engage with their courses in different ways! You should feel justified in speaking to your course instructors in situations like these:

- You're taking classes from a different time zone that makes it difficult to participate in things like synchronous discussions or regular office hours.
- You have other commitments or deadlines to navigate at the same time as your work in the course.
- You're not as practiced or familiar with the course materials as other students.
- You've experienced or are experiencing something that hinders your ability to focus or do work.
- You have a learning disability or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), have a temporary disability or recent injury, are on the autism spectrum, have a chronic or mental health issue, or have a sensory or physical disability.

Especially in situations like these, asking for help or clarification is part of full participation in the course. Remember that even if other people are dealing with the same things as you, they might be handling them in different ways. Bringing your challenges to the instructor's attention might even spark a change for the entire course, meaning that your request could benefit everyone.

If you're registered with [Accessibility Services](#), be in touch with your accessibility advisor to help you advocate for what you need. If you're not registered but think you should be, you can [start the registration process online](#).

Think of a constructive solution.

There are many things you could propose to your instructors that might help you.

For example:

- Emailing conversations, thoughts or questions to bridge a time difference might be an acceptable substitution for class participation.
- An extension might help with your conflicting deadlines or commitments. Asking for an assignment's requirements to be released earlier can also give you more time to complete it.
- Further discussion of a topic might bring you more clarity.
- An alternative assignment or means of assessment might allow you to play to your strengths and interests. Try to find the learning objectives of what you're being asked to do (check the syllabus or assignment sheet) and see if there is something else that might fulfill the same objectives.

Being able to propose a solution that would work for you can help demonstrate your commitment to the work of the course and your desire to collaborate on finding a solution.

Figure out the best way for you to talk with your instructors.

Remember that your instructors have multiple commitments, prefer certain ways of communicating and dislike repeating their work. Before contacting them, check that the information you're seeking wasn't already explained in the syllabus, on the course website(s) or in class.

They might not always be available, so be patient and try to find a way of communicating that suits you both. Sometimes instructors are very clear about

the way they want to be contacted: in office hours, by email, through Quercus, and so on. Check the course syllabus to see if there are any guidelines, but remember that their preferences might not always match with your own or be possible in your circumstances. If you find it hard to write emails but can find a way to talk to your instructor instead (or vice versa), it's worth checking to see if the alternative is acceptable to them.

Sooner is better than later.

Even though there are situations where they might be unavoidable, last-minute requests for extensions aren't always well received. Remember that some alternative arrangements can take time to put into place, so bring a problem to your instructor's attention as soon as possible.

Anticipating your needs in advance is a sign of proactive planning, so read through your course and assignment instructions as soon as you get them. If you're uncertain, ask just in case.

Effective emailing.

The power difference between students and their instructors can make emails difficult to write. The following suggestions can help you figure out what to say and can be modified for effective conversations. In general, keep your emails short, polite and to the point. Avoid slang and check for spelling and grammar errors before hitting "send."

- Put the course code, section and the assignment/test in question in the subject line.
- Unless you've been told to use their given name, begin your email with "Dear Professor X" or "Hi, Dr Crusher." Using family names is a sign of respect, although not all instructors expect this. You can determine how formal you should be from previous interactions you might have had with them.
- In a sentence or two, explain the obstacle(s) you're facing that you think justify the request.
- If you're making an accessibility-related request, you don't have to disclose the nature of your disability. Instead, you can share your Letter of Accommodation and/or explain how your

learning and coursework are impacted by what you're experiencing. Talk to your accessibility advisor for advice on this or ask them to contact your instructors on your behalf.

- Affirm that you want to come up with a solution together and make your proposal. You should explain why you think your idea works for your situation and/or the course expectations. Your instructor might not accept your idea, but their response will be more likely either to explain why they think it doesn't work or to come up with an alternative solution that suits you both.
- Thank them for considering the request, and sign off with your full name and student number.

If your instructor says no:

- Instructors are unlikely to be angry or mark you unfairly. They're used to such requests, as long as they're justified and polite.
- If possible, try to figure out a way to change other aspects of your situation to meet your professor's expectations. For instance, you might be able to move other deadlines or commitments.
- If you think they're being unfair, you can try again with them. Respectful, well-argued discussion is a key part of the university experience. You can also talk to your registrar. Depending on the situation, they can help you figure out a plan or advocate on your behalf.
- If you're asking for an accessibility-related accommodation, be in touch with your accessibility advisor immediately.
- If all else fails, carefully consider the repercussions of not being able to complete the work on time. Depending on the late penalty policy of the class, it might be worthwhile to accept it by handing in better work a few days late. Figure out the benefits and drawbacks of each course of action before making a decision on what to do.

Want to know more?

The Centre for Learning Strategy Support has resources, workshops, events and appointments to support you.

→ look us up online at learningstrategy.utoronto.ca

→ register for appointments and events at folio.utoronto.ca

→ or email us at clss@utoronto.ca