

Asking for Help in College + Using Your Resources

“Everyone else seems to be fine.”

“I don’t want to bother anyone.”

“I’ll figure it out on my own.”

If you’ve had something like the above run through your mind before, you’re not alone: it’s standard human behavior to tell ourselves we don’t need help or shouldn’t ask for it. You’re in college now, so you should be able to handle whatever comes your way by yourself, right?

Nope.

College is a time of academic and personal growth. A normal and necessary part of growth is stepping out of your comfort zone by doing things you’ve never done before. If you’d never driven a car before, would you expect yourself to embark on a solo cross-country road trip tomorrow? No way. You’d start in an empty parking lot, maybe with your mom telling you which one is the gas pedal, learning to slowly navigate between lanes. Why should navigating college be any different?

That’s why your university has so many resources in place: to help you with the steep learning curves of being a college student.

In this guide, we’ll look at the ins and outs of asking for help, and we’ll identify some resources you can use for support throughout college.

Table of Contents:

- 5 Tips for Asking for Help
- Making the Most Out of Office Hours
- Writing Centers
- Accessing Other Resources On Campus
- Developing Mentor Relationships
- So, What Are You Waiting For?

5 Tips for Asking for Help

Asking for help can feel daunting—culturally and maybe just biologically, we’re not well built for it. So here are some tips for overcoming the (totally normal) fear and anxiety you may be feeling.

- 1. Remind yourself that faculty and staff are there to help you.** There's no need to feel embarrassed or worry you're bothering anyone. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness—it's a sign of maturity.
- 2. Reach out early.** Try to avoid emailing your professor at 2 A.M. on Sunday about an assignment due Monday morning. Many professors will inform you of their communication boundaries, so refer to a syllabus or course site and ask if you're not sure. As a general rule, allow at least 24 hours for a response Monday through Friday, and don't expect a reply over the weekend. By asking for help early on, you'll lower the anxiety of needing a last-minute response.
- 3. Use your university's website to identify contacts and email addresses.** If you're not sure whom to contact, search on your college's website for keywords. (Think: "study abroad" or "tutoring.") You can also refer to the list below of common university resources as a place to start, then research the specifics at your college. Your academic advisor and RA can also be excellent resources to point you in the right direction.
- 4. Start with email, then move to an in-person appointment as needed.** Start with a concise and professional email stating who you are and what you're looking for. If you want to meet in-person, indicate that you'd like to set up an appointment in your email, and include several times you're available to make it easier for the other person to schedule with you. Some resources may also have "open office hours," in which case it's fine to show up during the designated times without an appointment (though you can likely still make one in advance). Generally, it's not a good idea to show up unannounced outside of office hours.
- 5. If you don't hear back within two days, send a follow-up email.** It's not personal. Your message may have slipped through the cracks in the onslaught of emails university employees receive every day. Reply to your original sent email, change the subject line to "Follow-up" or "Second request," and briefly ask your question again. The person on the other end won't think twice about a reminder—in fact, they'll probably appreciate it.

Making the Most Out of Office Hours

One of the most common laments upperclassmen will share with first-year students: "I wish I'd gone to Office Hours more!" But what does that mean and why should you definitely follow their advice?

What are Office Hours?

Office hours are designated times professors are in their on-campus office, available to meet with students. Most universities have a policy for the amount of time professors should host office hours based on their teaching load. In other words, they're an important part of a professor's job—just like teaching. You're *not* bothering them, any more than you are when you show up to class. In fact, they *want* to see you.

When are my professor's office hours?

Your professors will likely discuss the times and location of their Office Hours during the first week of classes, as well as list this information on their syllabus. You might also notice this phrase: "...or by appointment." That means you can email them to set up a different time to come by. Try to meet during their Office Hours out of courtesy, but if you have a scheduling conflict or an issue that can't wait until the next Office Hours, by all means set up that appointment.

Why should I attend office hours?

There's a whole spectrum of reasons. Here are a few common ones:

- You have a question about an assignment or content from the course.
- You have some ideas for an assignment, and would like help choosing which to pursue or narrowing your topic.
- You started a draft of an assignment and would like your professor to look it over to see if you're headed in the right direction.
- You would like more insight into the feedback you received on an assignment.
- You thought the reading from Tuesday was super interesting/confusing/troubling/mind-blowing/all those things, and you want to talk more.
- Something happened during class that you want to make your professor aware of.
- You think this course is awesome, and you're curious about other courses offered in this department and what your professor recommends exploring next.

I'm going to office hours! How do I prepare?

Chatting with your professors will become easier with practice. Here are some tips for making your first trip to Office Hours less intimidating:

1. **Make an appointment, even if drop-ins are allowed.** Just because you *can* show up unannounced, doesn't mean you have to. Scheduling a time during their Office Hours is helpful because: 1) Your professor will be expecting you, 2)

You won't have to worry about interrupting another student or having to wait, since appointments take priority over drop-ins, and 3) You'll be less likely to talk yourself out of going at the last minute.

- 2. Write questions down in advance.** We've all been there: you know exactly what you're going to say, and then your mind goes blank. Reflect on what you'd like to get out of this meeting, then write bullet points and questions so you don't forget. Double-check that your questions aren't answered on the syllabus or course materials. Taking time to prepare will ensure the meeting is meaningful for you and your professor.
- 3. Bring something to write with/on.** If you aren't ready to capture a lightbulb moment, you may well arrive back at your dorm racking your brain for what caused that bolt of inspiration just twenty minutes ago.
- 4. Start with something easy, if possible.** Maybe don't use your first visit to Office Hours to discuss your long-term struggles with anxiety. That's not an easy conversation to have with anyone, let alone when you're talking one-on-one with a professor for the first time. Choose something simpler and less personal at first, like questions about an assignment. Once you adjust to attending Office Hours, you can choose to have those deeper conversations with professors you trust. (Of course, it's okay and often important to bring up mental health or other challenges your professor should be aware of, and it's up to you if and when you want to discuss them.)

Writing Centers

Writing Centers offer one-on-one support with—you guessed it—your writing. Often, Writing Centers are staffed with highly trained peer undergraduate or graduate tutors. They usually offer in-person sessions, and some may also offer online session options. As an added benefit, professors often love when students use the Writing Center, since it demonstrates your initiative and commitment to the course.

What should I expect at my appointment?

Typically, you'll meet with a Writing Tutor for about an hour. Tutors can help with anything from choosing a paper topic, to looking over a final draft, or anything in between. What you focus on will depend on where you are in the writing process.

If you come with a complete or partial draft, the Writing Tutor will often ask you to read the paper aloud while they follow along. This serves a couple of purposes: 1) It gives the

tutor a chance to become familiar with your paper, and 2) Reading aloud is an excellent revision technique for *you*—you’ll often catch mistakes or realize that something needs to be clarified, added, or condensed.

Writing Tutors ask questions more than they give directives, because they want you to maintain ownership of your writing. If you’re seeking help with selecting a paper topic, a Writing Tutor won’t tell you what to choose. Instead, they’ll ask about your experience in class, what you found interesting from the reading, what you’re wondering about ... and through this line of questioning, they’ll help you identify some options.

Writing Tutors will *not*:

- Write your paper for you.
- Edit your paper for grammar and spelling mistakes.
- Tell you what to write or exactly how to write it.
- Tell you what grade they think you’ll get.

Writing Centers aren’t a “quick fix” solution for the paper you’ve procrastinated on. Their mission is to help you become a stronger writer by developing better long-term practices that you can apply throughout college and beyond. Strengthening these skills takes time and practice, so the more regularly you visit the Writing Center, the more beneficial it will be.

How do I prepare for an appointment?

1. **Schedule.** If you’re having trouble figuring out how to make an appointment, try visiting their office. When scheduling, remember that the more time you allow before your paper deadline, the more time you’ll have to make meaningful changes before your paper’s due.
2. **Think about what you’d like to work on during your session.** Imagine your Writing Tutor asks, “So, what do you want to work on today?” If you answer, “This paper,” it’s going to take time for the two of you to identify what to focus on. Now, imagine your answer is more like this: “I have a potential topic I’m interested in, and I want to talk it through to see if there’s an argument I could develop.” Or this: “I’m wondering if I’ve used enough evidence in this draft. My professor also mentioned in my last paper that I need to work on transitions.” Now, you and your Writing Tutor have a direction and can dive in.
3. **Come to your appointment with...**
 - the assignment prompt
 - something to write with/on

- a laptop
- assigned reading you may incorporate
- any notes you've taken
- questions for the Writing Tutor
- a draft or partial draft, if you have one.

Remember that you're not going to finish a paper in an hour. Writing takes time, and the main purpose of these sessions is for you to gather ideas and a direction for moving forward—then, it's up to you to do the work.

Immediately following your session, look over your notes. Spend a few minutes translating those notes into actionable items so you can develop a list of next steps. When it's time to take the paper out again, you'll know exactly what to work on.

Accessing Other Resources On Campus

Your school has a unique set of resources designed to support you in all sorts of capacities, and it's a good idea to become familiar with these early on. Here's a run-down of common resources many schools offer. You'll want to research your school-specific versions.

University Libraries and Research Librarians

Libraries aren't just for checking out books and movies (though they're great for that, too). Your school's library is an incredible resource for navigating databases, gaining access to additional research, and technology support. You can make an appointment with a research librarian, who will teach you how to find material for a research assignment, including identifying the types of information and the kinds of sources that would be most beneficial. If you don't know how to use a recommended database, the research librarian will walk you through the process.

Office of Student Success

Transitioning to college is tough, and not just because of the course material. You now have an unbelievable amount of freedom with your time, and learning to use that time well to balance several classes and other activities can be overwhelming. The Office of Student Success can help you build these skills. They may offer resources and workshops on best practices for note-taking and studying, developing organization techniques, and learning to manage your time. They may also be home to a **Peer Tutoring Office**, or can direct you to **Department Help Rooms**, which offer

discipline-specific tutoring. Since these two resources are student-staffed, they often have evening hours.

Student Inclusion Office

This office, which may go by many names, focuses on inclusion and equity. They'll provide resources about having meaningful dialogue on diversity and community, including race, gender identity, sexual orientation, disabilities, neurodivergence, religion, socioeconomic background, and more. In addition to providing a safe space for all people on campus to feel welcome, they will often support or host programming and events, as well as collaborate with other campus organizations to help the school continue to foster inclusion.

Student Counseling

Many schools offer free counseling for students seeking support for mental health and wellness. You can sign up for regular appointments, and some will also have crisis drop-in hours, during which you can stop by without an appointment for support with pressing issues.

Disability Accommodation Office

If you had an IEP in high school, that doesn't automatically get carried over into college. Even if you never had an IEP, if your disability is impacting your learning, you may be eligible for accommodations. This allows for reasonable adjustments to certain class standards or requirements, such as extended exam time or note-taking accommodations.

Career and Professional Development Office

While your career may seem a long way off, it's important to begin preparing for post-graduate life while you're in college. And the Career Office isn't just for job hunting. The staff can help you decide on a major, apply to internships, build interview skills, research and apply to graduate school, write a resume and cover letter, connect you with alumni, and build your network beyond school. Working with a career coach early on can help you set long-term goals to work toward as you choose classes and other opportunities throughout college.

Study Abroad Office

If you're considering studying abroad at some point during college, having an initial session to introduce yourself to the staff and talk through your options can help clarify your decision and get the ball rolling. If you do end up studying abroad, you'll be visiting this office to prepare for your trip, and they'll be your go-to contacts back on campus when you're across the world.

Developing Mentor Relationships

Seeking out resources will not only help you feel more connected to your school and college experience, but will also open the possibility of developing mentor relationships as you become more familiar with faculty and staff around campus.

A Few Benefits of Having College Mentors

- You get to connect with faculty experienced in the topics you're interested in. There's nothing cooler than geeking out over differential equations or villanelles with someone who loves them (almost) as much as you.
- You can turn to mentors for advice and guidance as you face the many decisions presented to you throughout college.
- Mentors can provide you with undergraduate research opportunities, whether inviting you to work in their lab or pointing you towards a summer internship. As they get to know you, they'll be able to offer personalized recommendations based on your strengths and interests.
- Down the road, you can ask mentors for letters of recommendation. Mentors will be able to provide detailed letters that go beyond grades and show who you really are—exactly what jobs, internships, and graduate schools are looking for.

Mentors don't have to be limited to faculty. You may find mentors through extracurricular activities, sports teams, on-campus jobs, internships, or through accessing some of the resources listed above. The more adults on campus you meet, the more likely you'll connect with people who will support and challenge you.

So, What Are You Waiting For?

Whether you're struggling with a difficult course load or would like to get more out of college, seeking help is a sign that you're being proactive about your learning and development. From improving your grade on one assignment to strengthening your overall study skills, using your resources is the Number 1 way to get the most out of your college education.

So dive in, and keep growing into the human you want to be.

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