OFFICE HOUR ETIQUETTE

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Office hours represent a great way to get to know your professor outside of the lecture hall, and also help you master the class material. I highly encourage you to take advantage of the office hours in this and your future classes. The majority of students coming my office hours (about 20-40 people a week) use them for their intended purposes: to get help with difficult concepts, to get help with homework problems, to discuss exam results and ways of improving them in the future, to talk about chemistry in general, to investigate undergraduate research options, etc. The best way of taking advantage of office hours is by showing an active interest in the subject – the instructor will be much more inclined to help you in this case. But in every large class there is a small fraction of students who either do not understand the purpose of office hours or use them in a way professors find distressing. This is especially common in the freshman year, when students are not yet familiar with the university dynamics. To help you figure these things out, I have created a list of things that are perhaps appropriate to talk about during office hours, and another list of things that are less (or perhaps not at all) appropriate. The lists are by no means comprehensive, they are meant to give you a general idea.

APPROPRIATE TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

- **Ask how to solve a specific type of problems.** An effective question may sound like: “I tried doing it this way, but I got stuck at this step, what is the best way to do this?” A much less effective question is: “What is the answer to this problem?”
- **Ask to explain a concept we went over during lectures or discussions.**
- **Point out a mistake in the grading of your exam,** such as a score addition mistake or a correct solution overlooked by a grader. These mistakes are very common and unavoidable – I fix quite a few of those after every exam. So do not be shy about pointing out mistakes of this sort, I will be more than happy to fix them for you.
- **Discuss future career/major options in the sciences.** This is especially appropriate if you are an undecided/undeclared student. If you are genuinely interested in the research the instructor is doing, it is always an excellent topic for the conversation – all professors are very enthusiastic about their research and will gladly tell you about it.
- **Discuss an unusual situation** that is affecting you such as what to do if you got sick and had to miss an exam or need an extension on your homework deadline. I routinely give homework extensions to people for health reasons.

INAPPROPRIATE TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

- **Question the grading scheme for the class and/or suggest that it should be changed.** This is an inappropriate request, especially after one of the exams already took place. A more appropriate thing to do is to carefully examine the syllabus at the beginning of the course and discuss any potential issues you find in the syllabus with the instructor before any exam or homework assignments. If you disagree with the syllabus consider enrolling in a parallel section of the same course.
- **Question the exam grading rubric that the instructor and/or TAs used for scoring exams.** We put a lot of effort into creating what we feel are balanced grading rules, and once they are determined we stick by them. This helps ensure that all students are treated consistently and fairly. We can’t change the rules after the grading is done (even if the rules turn out to be imperfect).
- **Ask the instructor to make an exception in the exam grading rubric so that you can get more points.** This is a highly inappropriate request because making an exception for you would be unfair to the other students in the class.
- **Monopolize the office hours while a large number of other students are waiting.** This is disrespectful to your peers.
- **Attempt to extract points for the exam from the instructor using various grade grubbing tactics.** (For example, “I worked really hard on this class, so I must get an A” or “I am shocked by my grade, it cannot correct, do something about it”, etc.)
- **Use tactics of intimidation, pleas, threats, harassment, and related modes of uncivilized behavior.**

LINKS TO SHORT USEFUL ARTICLES ON THIS TOPIC (there are many others out there)

- [Office hour etiquette 101](#)
- [Professors’ Office Hours and How to Use Them](#)
- [How to Get to Know Professors Outside of Class](#)
- [18 Etiquette Tips for E-mailing Your Professor](#)