

Hosting Office Hours

Engaging students in office hours provides instructors the opportunity to meet the specific needs of individual students in a less formal, more interpersonal setting. Whether working with students on a one-on-one or small group basis, instructors can leverage alternative explanations and real-world examples to complement content described in lecture. Additionally, instructors can implement guiding questions to assist students with the development of their problem solving skills. The following tips describe best practices for scheduling, preparing, and facilitating office hours.

Scheduling Office Hours – Be aware of students’ busy schedules and coordinate with other instructors in the course.

- Vary the time and day of office hours to accommodate different student’s schedules.
- Hold some office hours immediately after the class.
- Solicit input from students (e.g. via a short survey) before finalizing your schedule.
- Offer extra office hours before major assignments are due, and right after graded assignments are handed back.
- Be willing to meet by special arrangement if students are unable to adapt their schedules to the regular times, but set boundaries and limits to your availability, so the time you spend is consistent with your appointment
- Use technology to answer student questions (e.g. email, Canvas, piazza). Again, set expectations for appropriate questions, when and how quickly you might respond, etc. Consult with your professor or teaching team on this.

Preparing for Office Hours – Anticipate student needs.

- Complete all assignments in advance thinking of the students’ perspective. What might they have trouble with?
- Think of different ways to explain difficult concepts (use visuals, analogies, equations, graphs, etc.)
- Think of ways to help students make connections (e.g. real-world examples, how the topic fits into the larger picture, why it’s important to learn this).
- Develop a strategy for solving problems that you can teach students.
- Come up with questions you can ask to: a) promote metacognition, b) check for understanding, and c) help students progress to the next step.
- Know course policies (e.g. for grading, late assignments, group work, email communication, etc.). If these are not in the course syllabus, discuss with your professor or teaching team.
- Announce your office hours to students explaining their purpose (some students may not know), and give frequent reminders. Describe what typically happens at office hours to alleviate fears of the unexpected for some students.

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Facilitating Office Hours – Demonstrate a genuine willingness to assist students by showing empathy, patience, and interest in their learning. Use a framework to organize your time. For example:

- **Establish rapport** – learn and use their names.
- **Diagnose the need (concern, information, problem)** – ask questions and listen carefully to the student. Find out what students are lacking in terms of information and/or skills.
- **Set objectives for the session** – ideally with the help of the student
- **Assist the student in addressing the need** – This requires more than explaining, giving examples, or telling students what to do. Teach metacognition. Help students develop study skills and problem-solving strategies. Use guiding questions to move them forward. For example:
 - "What is the problem asking you to do?"
 - "What information do you have and what information do you need to solve the problem?"
 - "Where can you find the needed information?"
 - "How would you proceed then in using the information to solve the problem?"
 - "How could you check to see if you have solved the problem correctly?"
- **Assess whether the student understood** – Ask the student to talk through the concept discussed, paraphrase, give a different example, or work through a similar kind of problem.

Most students would benefit from attending office hours. To manage attendance, consider the following ideas.

- If attendance is low, require students to attend one office hour before the first major assignment.
- In larger classes, allow students with similar questions to work in small groups. Emphasize that the purpose is to learn from each other (i.e. copying deprives them of a learning opportunity and it will show in the exam or major assignment).