

*Seriously you need to...*

# **TALK TO YOUR PROFESSORS**

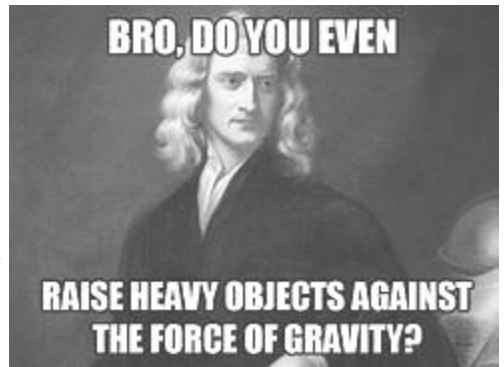


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# Professors are our super power

Seriously, the thing that sets a school like UC San Diego apart from other schools is that we are a research school. We are filled with faculty who are members of elite groups of academics like the American Physical Society, who have won Fields Medals and McArthur Genius Awards and who have written important books and articles that have influenced their fields. Like seriously, I was interested in Distributed Cognition and Activity Theory in grad school, read articles about the pioneering scholars, then got to meet and talk to them because they were professors here at UC San Diego. Like was taking classes from professors in one class and reading their articles in another class. That kind of famous.

Not getting to know professors is like having an Olympic weightlifter available as your personal trainer at the gym available to help you get stronger and saying “nah, man, I’m good. I got this on my own.” And then wondering why some other students are getting internships and publications while you are just feeling like you just go to class and never do anything interesting with your education.



Seriously.

So the deal is, you get more out of school if you talk to professors.

And, on top of that, if you want to go on to graduate or professional school later in life, you will need letters of recommendation from professors. And you know what is worse than a bad letter of recommendation? A boring form letter that reads like the professor is repeating your grades but knows jack spit about you. And professors gotta write those all the time.

So get to know your professors because:

1. Most are actually pretty cool nerds. And cooler out of class than in front of a lecture hall.
2. Even if they aren't cool, they often know a lot about their area of expertise and may have useful career advice.
3. You may need to tap into their knowledge to find research or internship opportunities some day.
4. You may need a professor to know you well enough to write you a good (or at least not crappy) letter of recommendation some day.

# How to Impress Your Professors

Want your professors to remember you in a good way? Professors tend to like students who seem to actually engage with the course, work well within the course, and be passionate about learning. What does that look like from the perspective of a professor?

- ❑ **Read the syllabus.** Seriously, professors hate having to constantly reiterate what is in the syllabus.
- ❑ **Attend class:** do this regularly, and be on time. Do not leave early.
- ❑ **Be prepared.** Do the reading ahead of class, and have questions ready to ask. Professors hate having to cover material from the assigned reading instead of covering the material they planned in their lectures. Lecture and reading are usually intended to complement each other, not duplicate each other.
- ❑ **Participate.** Ask and answer questions. Participate in discussions. Apply concepts to real world examples or current events.
- ❑ **Don't disrupt class:** Don't sleep in class, and try not to eat or drink in class unless you know the professor is down with that. Don't argue or challenge the professor, don't make noise, don't leave early or come late.
- ❑ **Be a decent person.** Don't disrupt or disrespect your classmates or the professor. Treat your professors and peers' opinions with respect and an open mind. Don't grandstand or make class about you.
- ❑ **Turn in assignments on time.** If you have an emergency that will keep you from meeting a deadline, contact the professor before the deadline.
- ❑ **As much as you can, sit front and center,** where you can see the professor and they can see you. They tend to notice not only who is up front and engaged, but who slips into the back of the class and hides out there, too. But that kind of noticing is not good.
- ❑ **Talk to the professor outside of class.** This means either *going to office hours or setting up meetings outside of office hours* if you can't make them. Only talking to professors after class may mean that they or you are rushed, and does not tend to highlight you as a student making a strong effort to connect (and suggests you are not reading the syllabus and following the ways they are available to you!)

# How to Email Your Professors



## Subject Line

Summarize the main point of your email. Do not put your question here. Example: *"PSYC 1 syllabus question"*



## Greeting

Address your professor in a way that they will see as professional. *"Hello, Prof. Srinivasan, I am a student in your PSYC 1 class, and I had a quick question."* When in doubt, refer to your professor as Professor and their last name.



## Message Body

Use complete, grammatical sentences (and spell check your words) to ask your question(s). If you have more than one question, make sure each question is a separate sentence, if not a separate paragraph or bullet point.

*"I am writing because I see that your second midterm is falling on a religious holiday for me. Is it possible to discuss an alternate test date to accommodate my religious observance?"*



## Sign off

Make sure you share your full name, your email contact, and thank the professor for their time and assistance.

*"Thank you for your time and consideration!"*

*"John Muir, [jmcadvising@ucsd.edu](mailto:jmcadvising@ucsd.edu)"*



## Other Things to Remember

- Think about any email address you use. (Do you want to *really* want to use your *pokeman420@gmail.com* email address?) It's best to use your UCSD email address.
- Reread your email before you send it. More than once.
- Double check you are sending your email to the right email address!
- If you are worried about the tone of your email (too angry, too demanding, too upset), don't send it until you have someone you trust read it, too!

# What to talk about....

## Talk About Class

If you want to talk about something with a professor whose class you are taking, talk shop with them. When I was in graduate school, I used to talk about topics from class with my professors whenever I had time (and I was working full time in grad school, too!) Because of that, I ended up getting two of them to become part of my dissertation committee so I knew I had people evaluating me based on knowing my strengths and where I needed to grow. When I was an undergrad, I was a literature major, and talked to my professors about books, and what classes they thought would help me fill in areas of my interest and outside of my interest so I was ready for my senior oral examinations. I even talked to my calculus professors when I took calculus to help understand the conceptual side of calculus so I could make sense of applications and not just memorize equations. Talking about class meant that I had an easy connection, and a clear thing to gain from conversations.

Because of those conversations, when I went to an alumni event 22 years after I graduated, my wife was astounded that there were (mostly retired) professors who came up and talked to me, remembering who I was. One even came up, was surprised to see me, and gave me a hug.

## Professors are Nerds

When you don't know what to talk about with a professor, remember that professors are, by and large, a bunch of nerds. That's what it takes to become a professor, after all. You have to really nerd out about some kind of subject enough to study it intensely all through grad school, write a long dissertation that may be uninteresting to anyone else, talk about it to other people, then spend years afterward studying about and teaching that subject with real enthusiasm.

Now they might *not* be the same kind of nerd (no guarantee they have seen the latest MCU film or have a favorite D&D character... though they might). But at least in terms of their academic interests, they are nerds.

And you know what nerds like? Other people nerding out about their favorite nerd topics! A simple starter question: "what got you interested in studying in your field?"

## Professors Love Their Research

UC San Diego is a research university, which means our professors generally live and breathe their research work. That looks differently for each field and each professor. So an easy way to engage a professor is to ask about their research. Better yet, you can look up the professor's research interests on the de-

partment web site and let them know something like “I see you are interested in the representation of women in Renaissance and Romantic art. How did you end up with that focus?” Engage them in their research.

## **Professors Usually Want to Talk to Students**

I have worked with many projects to get professors to meet one-on-one with students during and after school hours, in residence halls, in office hours, and in informal settings. And most professors are really open to that, but always with one condition: that students actually show up.

Most professors I know feel frustrated that their office hours go unused throughout the quarter except in the days just before an exam. The rest of the quarter, students don't come to clarify questions, go over difficult homework exams, or to get advice on their careers. There are a lot of good(ish) reasons, but most of them revolve around the fact that students are intimidated by professors. But here's the deal – when are you going to have access to people that knowledgeable about your academic field of interest who feel obligated to give you time whenever you need it? Not often, even if you become a professor yourself!

## **Professors Love Free Food**

And, to be honest, who doesn't? I had an old colleague who used to tell students “everyone needs to eat and use the bathroom, and only one of those is an appropriate place to have a conversation with a professor.” I am not telling you that you need to take a professor to lunch on your dime. But lunch is good. It's even better if there is a program like “Dine with a Prof” in which the college will foot the bill for the meal, and you can still have a meal and bond with a professor who interests you.

## **Professors Like Sincerity**

Professors can usually smell B.S. a mile away. Insincere students who approach a professor just for a letter of recommendation who have never seemed interested in their course but got a good grade, who never really asked questions or seemed to value lecture (or even attend it) when then show up around time for grad school applications telling the professor how much they loved their class and the professor and can you please write me a letter of recommendation are annoying. Because everyone is annoyed by someone coming to get someone to say good things to you after they ignored you, even if they are talented otherwise. This is as true of your future bosses as it is of professors, by the way. So be honest and sincere. “I know that I have not really been in touch with you during this class, Professor Yang, but I'm really not very outgoing. I really loved the class, and I hope that my writing assignments reflected my enthusiasm, even if I wasn't very vocal.” is much better than kissing up insincerely.

# Asking for letters of recommendation

Okay, it's time to head on to graduate or professional school. You have taken your GRE or MCAT or GMAT or whatever, you have your applications and personal statement ready, and the school now wants a letter of recommendation. Actually, they usually want 2 or 3., and often they want the letters to come from professors, or at least some of them, so they can talk about your strengths and challenges as a student. You're a senior, and you need to ask a professor to write a letter of recommendation for you:

1. Give the professor at least 3-4 weeks before the deadline. No one likes to be rushed. I know this because when students can't get an professors who can meet their deadline because they waited to long, they get desperate and ask the Dean of Advising, and give me a week. I will help them, but that short a turnaround all but guarantees that the letter I write will not be strong. So giving a short turnaround means you either get a no or a crappy letter.
2. Approach a professor who hopefully might remember you because you went to office hours, did multiple classes with them, worked in their lab, did an independent study with them, or just because you talked a lot in class. The more they know you as a person, the better the letter as a general rule.
3. When you ask for a letter, have a polite letter. Remind them who you are and let them know what you need and when you need it, and give them an out:

*"Dear Prof. Yang, my name is Doug Easterly, and I was a student in your Ethnic Studies 127 class. I don't know if you remember me, but we had a long conversation one time about horror movies and how they can either be really reactionary or revolutionary, but always allowed some covert political discussion. Anyway, I really enjoyed your class and thought we connected well, and I was hoping you could write me a letter of recommendation for a Ph. D. program in Ethnic Studies at Berkeley. I need a letter by June 5. Please let me know if you are open. Thanks. Doug."*

4. If the professor, give them an information packet electronically with:
  - Your resume or curriculum vitae.
  - Your personal statement for graduate school.
  - Any forms or links they need to fill out your recommendation
  - Your heartfelt thanks for their time and support.
5. Follow up at least once, a couple of weeks before the letter is due, but don't bug them constantly. That crap is annoying. Just thank them again, and say you are checking in to see if they have been able to write the letter.
6. Once they have submitted the letter, send them a thank you card or letter.

