How to Approach and Speak to Professors

Getting to know your professors may sound like an intimidating task and something that you may put off, especially if you are in need of something, or searching for information i.e. participating in a Research Opportunity Program project, seeking acceptance into an Academic Internship course, general assistance, reference letter, etc. But it doesn't need to be this way. Professors are people just like everyone else, and they are happy to help their students.

There are a few things you need to keep in mind with approaching or speaking with your professors, in particular if you are asking them for information or a favour. Here are some general tips to keep in mind on how you can appropriately approach your professors:
Address Them with the Right Title

A “Doctor” is someone who holds a PhD or MD and not all professors have these designations. Calling them “Professor” is usually appropriate unless you have been told otherwise. If your professors haven’t told you how to address them, you are safe by referring to them as “Professor, Mr. or Ms.” It is not appropriate to refer to a female professor as “Mrs.” unless she herself uses it.

Be Clear and Concise

If you are approaching your professor with a request, get to the point as quickly as you can. Begin with general social cues but try not to go on at length with this. Your professors are busy people and appreciate it when you can articulate your point clearly and can do so without going into too much detail. If they need more information they will ask you for it.

Be Social

Professors enjoy speaking with their students, especially if you are inquiring about the research they have been conducting or about a lecture they gave that was inspiring to you. When your professor has office hours, drop in and chat with them, but be genuinely curious. Build this relationship and when you do submit an application for an ROP or an Academic Internship, or are requesting a reference letter down the road, you have already made an impression on your professor. They will be able to easily put the face to the name and you may just get what you are looking for – no guarantees though!
Tell the Truth

Honesty is the best policy. Be upfront about why you are there and don’t make up excuses. If your professor thinks that they are being lied to, they are not going to respond well to your request. Avoid trying to game your professor into doing something for you. If you are genuine and honest about your intent and with your approach, the professor will notice this and will respond more in kind to your request.

Be Prepared to Do the Work

If you missed the deadline or are looking for an opportunity to show how capable you are, prepare to work hard. Your professor isn’t going to give you any additional advantages to allow an opportunity to take place; you are going to have to work for it. Prove to yourself, your colleagues and your professor that you are responsible and willing to put in the work required. Remember, there are still no guarantees.

Be Prepared for All Outcomes

Sometimes the best of intentions may not always work out, but that’s okay. If you have been open, honest, respectful, and tried your best, the outcome still might not be what you hoped for. It happens, and it’s important that you learn from the experience and should you find yourself in a similar situation later in life, you know the steps you took and can recalibrate how you will approach the situation again.
Remove All Signs of Flirtation

Being friendly is fine, but crossing the line to gain favour with your Professor is not acceptable. Avoid improper topics, communications and discussions with your Professor that may leave them feeling uncomfortable and question your motives. It is best to leave the door open or ajar when having a discussion with your Professor in their office, to have professionally crafted email communications and if you are unsure whether your approach is acceptable you can ask a friend, family member, or even the counsellors available at UTM.

Do Not Make Threats

Threatening your professors with lawsuits or physical/emotional violence is not tolerated. Professors and the University do not respond well to threats and you may be asked to speak with Higher Administration and Campus Police depending on the threat issued. If you find yourself getting heated, walk away and speak with someone about how you are feeling. The last thing you want to happen is for the situation to escalate beyond control. UTM has many wonderful resources available; find one that works for you.