

Common Questions and Answers on College Academic Life

Below you'll find answers to some common questions about college academic life. If you do not see the answer to your question below, ask your academic advisor, they can help!

How do I...

Address my professor?

You should call your university instructors Professor [Insert Last Name] unless explicitly directed to do something different. Do not use Mr. or Ms., as you might in a business situation, and do not ever use Mrs. If your professor is Abigail S. Adams, then in class and e-mail you should address her as Professor Adams (most common at Northwestern) or Dr. Adams.

If you have a TA (teaching assistant), you will likely call that instructor by their first name, but feel free to inquire. Simply ask in class or e-mail, "How would you like to be addressed?"

Some professors, especially in collaborative disciplines, prefer to be addressed by their first names. A good indicator that a professor wants to be called by their first name is if they sign their e-mail with only their first name (Best Wishes, Abigail) versus signing off with both names (Best Wishes, Abigail Adams), initials (ASA) or by her formal title (Prof. Adams). These other examples indicate that you should continue to address the professor as Professor Adams. Also, look at the syllabus: If the syllabus simply says Dr. Abigail S. Adams, then call her Dr. Adams until you are told to do otherwise.

In general, a good practice for life is to start with the most formal form of address until you are told something else. And remember, if your professor explicitly says to call them by their first name, then it really is okay to do so.

For more information on interacting with professors, see this guide put together by the [Searle Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning](http://www.northwestern.edu/searle/resources/undergraduate-academic-resources/study-smarter/communicating-effectively-with-faculty.html) (<http://www.northwestern.edu/searle/resources/undergraduate-academic-resources/study-smarter/communicating-effectively-with-faculty.html>).

Write an e-mail to my professor?

An e-mail to anyone should contain a salutation, (their title), their name, complete sentences with attention to grammar and punctuation, a valediction, and your name. Do not consider e-mail to faculty or university staff as informal correspondence. It is official and you should demonstrate that you understand how to write e-mail in an official capacity.

The importance of corresponding in this format cannot be overstated. Also, you should consider how your professor or a university staff member corresponds with you. If their e-mail looks like this:

Dear YourName,

Full sentences. Full sentences. Full sentences.

Sincerely,
TheirName

then you should always respond in a similar fashion. They're not doing it just because. They're writing you like that because it is official university correspondence.

If you are unsure about how to address your professor in an e-mail, then always default to "Dear Professor LastName" and see the above question. You must always give the e-mail a subject. You should also try to be brief, to the point. You should also be comfortable not receiving a reply until *at least* the next day, especially if you are writing an e-mail after business hours (9am-5pm, M-F).

For example:

Subject: Reading for Tuesday?

Dear Professor Adams,

Yesterday, at the end of class you mentioned that one of the readings was now optional. I looked through my notes and checked with a classmate, but I can't remember which one we need to read for sure. Is it the one on Media Persuasion or the one on Political Persuasion?

Thanks,

Abe Lincoln

What if my professor doesn't return an e-mail?

As stated in the above question, you should be comfortable not receiving a response to e-mail until *at least* the next day, especially if you have sent your initial e-mail after business hours. Although some faculty do respond to e-mail at night and on weekends, you should realize that this is exceptional and not an expectation.

If you have an urgent request, do not continue to send e-mail if they have given you an option to call. If they have provided a number for you, whether it is an office phone number or a personal phone number, you should call that number. Leave a message if you get their voice mail. If they have told you not to text them, then do not text them.

If it has been only a day and your professor has not responded, then wait. Do not continually blast them with more e-mail, especially over the weekend. This only crowds their inbox. If it has been more than 24-48 hours, then you should send a follow up e-mail, like the one below:

Subject: Re: Reading for Tuesday?

Dear Professor Adams,

I just wanted to follow up on my message from the other day. Should we read the Media Persuasion or the Political Persuasion articles for Tuesday?

Best,

Abe

It is important to note that it is completely inappropriate to begin a follow-up e-mail with something along the lines of, "I still haven't received a reply to my e-mail from the other day." Simply stating that you're following up accomplishes the same thing in a polite way. And for students who are nervous about sending follow-up e-mail, know that it's not impolite to follow-up when it's been a few days! Sometimes e-mail gets lost in the hundreds of messages your professors receive every day or even gets filtered out accidentally. A follow-up message is the right thing to send when needed.

Arrange to meet with my Professor or TA?

It is expected that your professor or TA holds **office hours**. Office hours are specially scheduled time slots for instructors to meet with their students outside of class time. Sometimes, professors hold office hours "by appointment," which means you'll need to e-mail to arrange a time.

If your instructor has scheduled office hours, for example, MW 1-2:30pm, then you should attempt to make those hours. You can either drop by your professor's office at that time, or you might e-mail your professor and ask if their office hours are open – that is, another student might have already requested to meet on Monday 1-1:30.

If you cannot meet during advertised office hours due to a justifiable reason like other classes or work commitments, then you should e-mail your professor to request to meet during another time. They may or may not be able to meet you during your open time slots, but you should always inquire.

Here is an example of an e-mail to arrange a meeting:

Subject: Arranging to Meet to Go Over Paper

Dear Professor Adams,

In class, you said that we should come to office hours to go over our papers if we wanted to discuss how to improve our writing. Unfortunately, I have class every Monday and Wednesday from 1-2:20 on the other side of campus from your office. Would it be possible to arrange another time? Would you be able to meet from 2:45-3:15 one afternoon?

Best,

Abe

Figure out what to do during office hours?

What you might discuss or work on during office hours with your professor or TA will be determined by the type of class you are taking. For example, if you're in Statistics, you might be asking about specific methods or working through a problem set that you found particularly difficult. If you're in philosophy or film studies, you might ask more about concepts or theories. If you're in a writing-focused class, you might have a "conference" about a paper you're writing – that is, generate a thesis or talk about what sort of evidence you might use in the paper. If you're in a practice-based class, such as drawing or acting, you might use that time to go over a particular skill.

Office hours are a time to get further explanation of class material or concepts you found difficult, expand upon an interesting idea that wasn't able to be addressed in class, go over past assignments/exams, get help with current assignments, and plan for future assignments. If you have extensive questions about assignments, like how to revise a paper or how you should study for an upcoming exam, you should definitely arrange to go to office hours rather than sending e-mail. Much more can be accomplished in office hours than through e-mail.

You will get the most out of office hours the more you have prepared for the meeting with your professor. If you did the reading, went to class, took notes, and are still unsure of the material, this is an especially good reason to set up an appointment. Sometimes, you might not be as prepared as you will have liked. This does not mean you cannot meet with your professor – do not fail to make an appointment with your professor or TA because you feel like you didn't prepare enough for class, etc.

When preparing to meet with your professor or TA, it will help if you have planned for the meeting. You might write down 2-5 questions or things you need further explanation about. You might also go over notes or re-read (or finally read for the first time). This will keep things focused during your meeting and will help you feel less nervous about having something to say, if this is a difficulty for you. And don't worry, it's common!

What is a syllabus?

The syllabus is a document that your professor typically hands out to you on the first day of class that includes information about the course you are taking.

A syllabus often lists the name of the course, the professor and/or TA(s), a description of the subject matter, learning objectives and outcomes, assignments, how your grade will be computed, required course materials, and a schedule of readings/homework, assignments, tests, and papers. Additionally, class, school, or University policies, including attendance policies and the acceptable format for papers, homework, and lab reports, are also included.

You are 100% responsible for anything that is on the syllabus, and that's why this document is so critical to your learning. If the syllabus states that your work should be turned in double-spaced, in a certain font, and in APA (American Psychological Association) format, then you are responsible for doing that. If the syllabus states that you have a draft paper due at 8 p.m. on October 7 by e-mail, then it is unacceptable to do anything else.

When you are given a syllabus, you should pay attention to how you will be assessed, what you are expected to do in class, what course content you will be expected to know, and when papers, tests, and other assignments are due. Before you ask your professor any questions about course material, assignments, or deadlines, you should first consult the syllabus. If anything is unclear, then ask your professor or TA as soon as it comes up.

What do I do if I need to miss class?

The syllabus should usually give you a concrete policy on absences. If not, ask your professor directly.

Typically, you will be allowed to miss one class (maybe two) in a quarter. After that, you will likely only be able to miss class without consequence for a confirmed illness or a family emergency (additionally, [here](#) is the Provost's statement on accommodations for religious holidays). You should consult the syllabus for how the professor requires these additional excused absences to be confirmed.

There are many reasons that a student might miss class beyond the above reasons, such as fatigue, co-curricular activities, work, leisure, vacation, or finishing a paper for another class. You might have a "good" reason, but if it's not an excusable reason for an absence, it could negatively impact your grade. For this reason, you should make every effort to attend every class. This should be your priority as a student.

What if I can't turn an assignment in on time?

You should make every effort to turn your work in on time and in the format the syllabus states.

If you will be unable to submit an assignment on time, contact your professor as soon as possible to let them know of your situation. Be sure that you have read and understand their late work policy; it is usually included in the syllabus. Depending on the reason for your lateness, the professor may or may not accept a late paper or assignment. They may also impose a grade penalty for late work.

Find resources to help me with writing papers?

Writing is hard for everyone who does it. The only way to get better at it is to keep writing. It is common for First-Year Students to struggle with writing as they transition into college; it is also common for students to struggle again with writing as they transition from beginning to intermediate classes in the sophomore or junior year. As writing gets more complex, it also continues to get more challenging. If this is happening to you, you are not alone!

[The Writing Place \(http://www.writing.northwestern.edu\)](http://www.writing.northwestern.edu) at Northwestern offers a number of resources for student writers, including individual appointments with writing tutors who are especially adept at helping you with the grammar and mechanics of writing. The rest of that website offers some [online resources \(http://www.writing.northwestern.edu/writing-place-resources/\)](http://www.writing.northwestern.edu/writing-place-resources/) on all sorts of things related to writing, from preparing for an appointment with a tutor to preparing to write an essay.

For help with the content of your paper, you should utilize your professor or TA as much as possible. Try to meet with them during office hours – this is much more productive than e-mail. Again, it's okay if you feel that you don't have a handle on the material. Your professor or TA can help you even in the beginning stages of a paper, so talk to them!

You also can and should talk with your advisor if want support with writing. Finally, three members of the SoC advising team are available to talk with you about paper writing: Gina Di Salvo (g-disalvo@northwestern.edu), Kyla Katz (kyla.katz@northwestern.edu), and Roberta Stack (r-stack@northwestern.edu). Even if you are not their particular advisee or are in a program they advise, you can call the Student Resource Center (847.491-7214) to make an appointment with them.

Make a resumé?

There are a number of events at Northwestern, especially those focused on career and professional development that tell you, Bring your resumé! But what if you don't have one? You are not alone. Many students do not have one and it is not expected that you should enter Northwestern with one. Even if your professor or advisor says, "Send me your resumé," it's

okay if you are putting one together for the first time to send to them. They understand that this might be the case, too.

Begin by making a list of all jobs, volunteer work, leadership positions, and internships you've done. This runs the gamut, from babysitting to serving as Treasurer of a student organization to interning in Hollywood. Then, take a look at [these \(http://www.northwestern.edu/careers/job-intern-prep/resume-building/resume-samples/index.html\)](http://www.northwestern.edu/careers/job-intern-prep/resume-building/resume-samples/index.html) sample resumé from Northwestern Career Advancement for formatting help. (There's more on this website to help you with this as well). As you can see, it does not include everything a student has ever done and it doesn't go beyond a page in a normal size font. Pick and choose a few things. If you are in your first year of college, you might still include things from high school. If you are in your second year of college, most of your high school activities and accomplishments will have dropped off of the resumé, unless they are work, internships, or study abroad.

After putting together an initial version, you can ask for an appointment with EPICS (External Programs Internships and Career Services), School of Communication's in-house career services program or with Northwestern's university-wide NCA office. Career counselors at these offices can then help you edit your resumé. You might even create a general version and a few specific versions if you are applying for particular jobs, internships, or scholarships. This might seem like a daunting task, but there are friendly professionals at NU that can help you along each step of the way.

Find computers, iPads, or other electronic equipment on campus?

The Northwestern University Library is your best bet for using electronic equipment for school-related work. Computers are available in the Info Commons, you can check out iPads from the circulation desk, and the MMLC (located in the basement of the library) has an Equipment Checkout Counter should you need to borrow a particular kind of cord or hookup, such as one that you might need to project a presentation from a laptop or iPad. The library also has a number of locations where you can print using your WildCard at the rate of \$0.05/page. The Info Commons is a particularly popular place at NU to write papers. Additionally, there are a few more computers available in Periodicals (on the first floor) and the Transportation Library (on the fifth floor). Ask the friendly library staff if you need help finding one of these locations!

Computers are also available on the ground floor of Norris University Center. These computers are generally better for checking e-mail quickly rather than writing a paper.

For students affiliated with Student Enrichment Services (SES), there are a limited number of [laptops](http://www.northwestern.edu/enrichment/services/laptops-and-gear/index.html) available for loan (<http://www.northwestern.edu/enrichment/services/laptops-and-gear/index.html>). If you are eligible, you should contact them directly to inquire about borrowing (enrichment@northwestern.edu).

Get or borrow books for class?

Professors at Northwestern generally order course materials into three places: Norris University Center Bookstore on campus, Beck's Books at 716 Clark Street in Evanston, and Quartet Copies at 825 Clark Street. Your professor will usually state on the syllabus what the course materials are and where they are at for purchase. If you prefer to purchase books through Amazon or another retailer, especially to find used books, you should feel empowered to do so. If you know you will need to do this before the start of the academic quarter, then always feel that you can e-mail your professor to ask what course materials you will need to buy.

Course materials might also be available from the library. Sometimes professors put materials "on reserve," (<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/services/getting-materials/materials-scan-delivery/course-reserves>) which means that the book or electronic copy will be available to students. Books on reserve are available through the circulation desk and electronic materials are available through Canvas. Additionally, our library might have a copy of the a course book that you can check out; if it doesn't, you might be able to request it through [Inter-Library Loan](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/services/getting-materials/interlibrary-loan) (<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/services/getting-materials/interlibrary-loan>) or [UBorrow](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/find-materials/materials-other-libraries/uborrow) (<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/find-materials/materials-other-libraries/uborrow>), free library services that borrow books from other lending libraries. (Be sure to give yourself a week or two if you are going to request material for class this way).

If you have difficulty accessing or acquiring materials, especially because of the cost, you should talk first with your professor about your options. You should also talk with your advisor as soon as possible, so that all resources can be considered.

Get help with studying?

Not to be repetitive here, but your advisor is a great resource for figuring out how to ask for help and who would be best to help you with course material.

A common challenge for first-year students is figuring out how much time you have to study for a particular class/subject and how you should be studying for that class. In high school, a lot of studying is simply completing homework on a regular basis. In college, the completion of homework is important, but it does not guarantee that you will master the material or will be able to achieve a desired grade on an exam. How to study for success is different for every student.

As you figure out how to study, you should be open to trying out new methods of studying and increasing the amount of time you are studying for a particular course, even if you think that it shouldn't take that much time.

If you go to your professor or TA for help, be sure to tell them how you have been studying and ask them how they think it would be best to study for the class. Ask them what successful students have done in the course in the past. Remember, however, that professors and TAs

have a limited amount of time to meet with you (see office hours) and that you have other options for regular help or tutoring.

[The Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching](http://www.northwestern.edu/searle/programs-events/undergrad/index.html)

(<http://www.northwestern.edu/searle/programs-events/undergrad/index.html>) runs a number of programs to help students at Northwestern with studying. There are specific group study programs for help with introductory courses in Chemistry, Economics, Physics, Statistics, Biology, Math, and Psychology. Additionally, the Searle Center runs [NULearn](http://www.northwestern.edu/searle/programs-events/undergrad/academic-skill-advancement/nulearn.html) (<http://www.northwestern.edu/searle/programs-events/undergrad/academic-skill-advancement/nulearn.html>), a series of 50-minute workshops aimed at college success. There is also an [Undergraduate Academic Resource Portal](http://www.northwestern.edu/searle/resources/undergraduate-academic-resources/index.html) (<http://www.northwestern.edu/searle/resources/undergraduate-academic-resources/index.html>) with links to find [tutors](#) through academic departments and [tips](#) for studying.

Get better at time management?

In spite of managing challenging schedules in high school or during a gap year, many college students struggle with time management.

The most important thing you should do is keep a calendar that works for you, whether an electronic calendar on your computer or phone, or a day planner. You should create a systematic way of entering class assignments and tests, co-curriculars, appointments, and meetings. You should also think about blocking out and scheduling time for doing assignments. The Searle Center has some resources and links related to time management at <http://www.northwestern.edu/searle/resources/undergraduate-academic-resources/study-smarter/managing-your-time-well.html>.

One of the biggest things to remember is that you will not get better at time management unless you want to. If you block out 3 hours for studying for an exam, you go to the library, but spend 2.5 hours on your phone or on social media, then you know what the difficulty is. It's not knowing that you need to spend the time on assignments, it's staying focused and on task. Limiting distractions during scheduled study or writing time is your best bet. This is why studying with a study partner or group is a good idea. Also, getting away from a computer or your phone for set times will also help you.

How do I stay on track? How do I get back on track?

You should attempt to attend every single class, submit work on time, and not over-commit yourself. This is the best way to keep on track with your academics.

However, this is easier said than done.

If you find that you're struggling, however, you should keep attending class and make an appointment with your academic advisor. The importance of attending class cannot be overstated here. Missing class will not allow you to catch up on anything; on the contrary, it is a sure way to get more behind.

You should also be honest with your advisor when you need to talk about getting back on track. You should let your advisor know if you've had absences in class, if you've failed to turn in work on time, if you're not completing homework, and what your overall schedule looks like. Your advisor is your number one resource for putting you in touch with other resources at Northwestern, such as tutoring services and counseling. Your advisor can also help you identify particular challenges with courses and help you navigate them.

What is a midterm? What is a final exam?

Some high schools give midterms and finals, and some do not. In college, you can expect to regularly encounter midterms and final examinations.

These are tests that often account for a large portion of your grade – check the syllabus to see exactly how much. In some courses, the midterm and the final might account for 50-90% of your overall total grade, even if you've had quizzes, homework, and other assignments throughout the quarter.

A midterm will often test your mastery of material up to the middle of the academic term. A final will either test you on all course material between midterm and the end of term, or it will be cumulative, covering everything taught, discussed, or assigned over the entire academic quarter. You should be sure to ask or check the syllabus as to what the final will cover.

Figure out how to begin an application for a program, grant, or scholarship?

Applications for grants, scholarships and fellowships, internships, research opportunities, and selective academic programs often require some sort of written component such as a personal statement or a research statement. It is not expected that you will have ever had to write a document like this before, and there are resources to help you.

The Office of Fellowships at Northwestern has an online [Application Guide](http://www.northwestern.edu/fellowships/application-guidance/index.html) (<http://www.northwestern.edu/fellowships/application-guidance/index.html>), but don't forget that they also can consult with you if you're applying for certain scholarship or fellowship programs. Contact them at fellowships@northwestern.edu.

Not only does the Office of Undergraduate Research give out grants to support exciting student research, but they also hold info sessions and [individual fellowship and grant advising](http://undergradresearch.northwestern.edu/advising-request) (<http://undergradresearch.northwestern.edu/advising-request>) appointments.

The Summer Internship Grant Program (SIGP) at Northwestern also has information about how to put together a good application on its [webpage](http://www.northwestern.edu/sigp/resources/index.html) at <http://www.northwestern.edu/sigp/resources/index.html>.

Before you submit the application letter, be sure to get another set of eyes on it. You can always make an appointment at the Writing Place, ask a friend or roommate to proofread, or ask a faculty mentor for feedback (be sure to give them ample time to get back to you, at least a week!).

If you really don't know where to start or what the format of the application letter should look like, see if you have a friend, acquaintance, or classmate that can show you an example of a successful application letter. Many successful applicants are successful because they were shown examples of how to craft an application letter or personal statement. Never feel like you should have to come up with something out of nowhere and on your own, especially if you don't know anyone who has ever had to write an application letter before. The Office of Fellowships also has examples of past successful applications so that you can get an idea of how to present who you are and why you are an excellent fit for the scholarship or program. And, as always, ask your advisor!

Ask for a letter of recommendation?

Letters of recommendation are an important component of applications for programs, scholarships, and, sometimes, jobs and internships. Who you ask for a recommendation will vary based on the type of program and the type of recommendation required. If you are applying to a costume internship, then you will probably be asking your costume design professor for a letter of recommendation. If you are applying for a German-language scholarship, you will probably ask your German professor. If you are applying to a research-based scholarly society, you will probably ask a professor that taught a class that included research.

If you are unsure of whom to ask for a recommendation, you should talk with your advisor. Even if you know whom you'll be asking, you might also run it past your advisor for the best advice. (Some recommendations can also be written by your advisor).

When asking for a recommendation, you should be sure to ask 3-4 weeks in advance of the deadline. It is also normal to send a follow up e-mail or two, reminding the recommender of the deadline as it approaches. You should also offer to send supporting materials to your referee, such as a résumé, transcript, personal statement, or writing materials that you must submit as part of the application. It is helpful to include if the recommendation should be uploaded or copied electronically, if a link will be sent, if it should be a letter with a signature across the seal, and how you will pick it up, etc. Finally, it is polite to remind your recommender how they know you, if there is any question. If you are asking a professor from a quarter or two ago, just remind them what class you took with them and, possibly, what grade you received in the course.

Subject: Request for Letter of Recommendation

Dear Professor Adams,

I am writing to ask if you would be willing to write a letter of recommendation for me for a [Insert Name] Scholarship? The scholarship is for [describe briefly]. I realize that you have not known me that long, but I feel that you got to know my work very well in your seminar on media and politics last quarter.

The recommendation deadline is Friday, April 17 at 5 p.m., which is four weeks from now. A link will be sent to you for the recommendation letter and you can simply upload it.

If you are agreeable to this, then I will get you my draft personal statement and resumé by this Friday.

Best,

Abe