Office Hours and Asking Good Questions

Office hours are free one on one teaching. The students who use them early, with a specific question, get the most out of them.

AFTER THIS GUIDE YOU CAN

- Explain what office hours are and why to use them before a crisis.
- Prepare a specific question that shows your attempt.
- Write a clear, respectful email to an instructor.
- Turn feedback into a change in how you study.

Key terms

Office hours	Times an instructor sets aside to meet with students, in person or online.
Specific question	A question that names the exact problem, what you tried and where you got stuck.
Attempt first	Working the problem before asking, so you and the instructor can see where your reasoning slips.
Feedback	Comments on your work that show what to keep and what to change.
Growth mindset	The belief that ability grows with effort and good strategies. Asking for help is part of it.
Teaching assistant	A graduate or advanced student who helps teach the course and often holds office hours too.
Tutoring center	A campus service where trained tutors help with course content, usually free.
Professional email	A clear subject line with the course name and topic, a greeting, a short message and your full name.
Exam wrapper	A short reflection after an exam on what you missed, why, and what you will change.
Help seeking	Using people and services as a normal part of learning, not only in an emergency.

The big ideas

- Go early, not only after a bad grade. Week 4 is a better time than week 14.
- Bring your attempt. A worked problem with a wrong turn is easier to fix than a blank page.
- Climb the question ladder: the more specific your question, the faster and better the help.
- Instructors cannot read your mind. If you are lost, say exactly where.
- Write down what you learned before you leave, then change one study habit because of it.
- Help seeking is a skill strong students use all the time, not a sign of weakness.

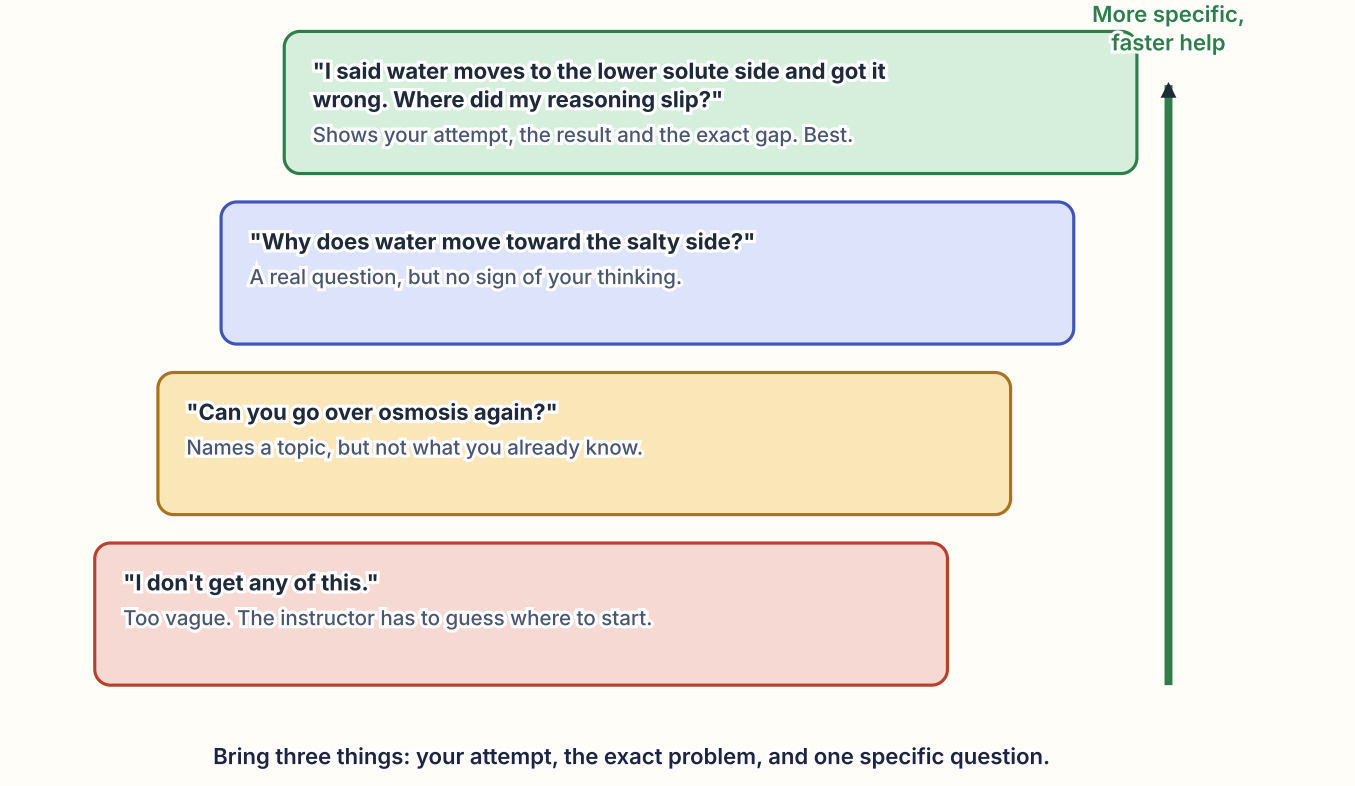

Figure. The question ladder.

Worked example

Week 4. Your Biology Quiz 3 came back at 64. You missed the osmosis questions. Professor Okafor holds office hours in the Clock Tower.

1. Before you go, rework the missed questions and write down the answer you chose and why.
2. Write one specific question: "I said water moves toward the side with less solute. Where did my reasoning go wrong?"
3. At office hours, show your work and ask your question. Listen for the rule: water moves toward the side with more solute.
4. Ask one follow up: "Is there a way to practice this kind of question?"
5. Afterward, write a two line summary and add osmosis practice to next week's study blocks.

Common mistakes

- Waiting until the end of the term to ask for help.
- Showing up with "I don't get any of it" and no work.
- Sending an email with no subject, no course name and no signature.
- Asking to be told the answers to a graded assignment.
- Getting good advice and not changing anything afterward.

Check yourself

1. When is the best time to start using office hours?
2. What should you bring to office hours?
3. Which is the stronger question: "Can you explain chapter 5?" or "I got problem 3 wrong after step 2; why does the sign flip?"
4. List three parts of a professional email to an instructor.
5. What is an exam wrapper?
6. Who else besides the instructor can help with course content?
7. What should you do right after office hours?
8. What does a growth mindset say about asking for help?

Answer key

1. **Early in the term, before a crisis.** Small gaps are easier to fix than big ones.
2. **Your attempt, the exact problem and a specific question.** It shows where your reasoning slips.
3. **The second.** It names the problem and the step.
4. **Any three: subject line with course and topic, greeting, short clear message, your full name.** It helps the instructor answer quickly.
5. **A reflection on what you missed, why, and what you will change.** It turns a grade into a plan.
6. **Teaching assistants and the tutoring center.** Most are free and underused.
7. **Write down what you learned and change one study habit.** Advice only helps if you use it.
8. **It is part of how ability grows.** Strong students seek help often.

Help is real. If you or a friend are struggling, talk to your campus counseling center. In the United States you can call or text 988 (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline) any time. Outside the US, contact your local crisis line.

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