

Tips from Faculty: Professionalism and Self-Presentation

Expectations when working with a faculty member on a research, scholarship or creative project

- In general, faculty expect students to
 - be interested in the work they will conduct with the faculty member
 - be willing to work hard and give 100% of their effort while they are working with the faculty member
 - commit to working with them for an agreed-upon number of hours per week for an agreed-upon period of time
 - think critically, analytically and creatively
- Faculty have different expectations regarding the types of work students will perform, the kinds of products they expect students to produce, and the evaluation of student work
 - Faculty expectations may differ based on whether the student is receiving academic credit or financial compensation or volunteering, but in all cases, the student is expected to bring his/her “A” game. This is not a line on your CV; it’s a commitment to conduct a project.
- In order to ensure a meaningful experience, students should
 - Find a faculty member who is doing work that excites you
 - How do you do this? Look at the faculty member’s webpage. Read primary articles/books written by the faculty member – or at least read the article abstract or book summary.
 - You are not expected to be an expert in the subject, but you are expected to be knowledgeable about what the research group is investigating and you need to be able to talk about what it is about the topic that excites you.
 - Talk to the faculty member before committing to working with her/him
 - Ask about the faculty member’s expectations. Specifically ask about
 - the kind of work you will do
 - the products (manuscript, poster, oral presentation, etc.) you will be expected to produce

- how your work will be evaluated
 - the time commitment that will be expected of you
 - what you can expect to learn
 - whether you need any prior experience and/or courses
- Be clear about *your* expectations upfront
 - For example, if you would like a letter of recommendation or to be co-author on a scholarly publication, let the faculty member know that at the beginning and ask what you will need to do to achieve your goal.
 - Agree on a plan of action for the semester to achieve benchmarks towards the agreed-upon goal.

How to approach a faculty member when you are interested in working with her/him on a research, scholarship or creative project

- Preparing to approach a faculty member
 - Learn about the work that the faculty member does. Review his/her website, read her/his articles/books (or at least the article abstract or book summary), attend talks the faculty member gives and/or search the internet to see if any of the faculty member's talks are posted.
 - Think about how the faculty member's work intersects with your interests. Think about how you will talk about this intersection when you meet the faculty member. Are there research questions that interest you that are compatible with the work the faculty member is doing?
 - Use your classes to start developing research questions that interest you. When a class topic or discussion sparks your interest, write down your questions.
- Contacting the faculty member
 - Faculty members have different preferences when it comes to how they prefer to be contacted by students who want to work with them, but, in general, your first contact should either be via email or by introducing yourself to the faculty member after s/he has given a talk that you have attended.
 - In both cases, you should address the faculty member formally and professionally, i.e., "Dear Professor Jones" or "Hello Dr. Smith." Never use the faculty member's first name in your initial contact.
 - If you use email
 - Use your college email address to contact the faculty member.
 - Personal email addresses (e.g., sweetiepie@yahoo.com) can send the wrong message. If you are interested in doing scholarly or creative work with a faculty member, you want to present yourself in a professional manner.
 - Spam is also less likely to originate with a college email address than with some other email providers.

- Personalize your message so that it is clear that you've done your homework and you know the faculty member's areas of interest. Indicate your specific interest in working with this particular faculty member.
- Attach your CV and unofficial transcript or a list of the relevant courses you have taken.

Example of a Flawed Email

Hey Professors,

I am looking for an honors thesis sponsor for this semester. Would one of you please be my sponsor?

Sincerely,

Jane

“Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today.”

Example of an Effective Email

Dear Professor Miller,

I am a Hunter College junior and psychology major interested in going to graduate school in social psychology and would like to obtain research experience. I am very interested in learning more about your research examining how mental representations of important relationships affect emotional functioning in young adults. I was intrigued by your recent findings (published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*) on gender differences in how young adults apply significant-other representations in their daily lives. Do you have any volunteer research positions available in your lab?

I would be very interested in meeting with you to discuss potential involvement in your lab. I am attaching my CV to give you more information about my previous experience. As you will see, I have taken courses in experimental psychology and statistics, which your website lists as a requirement for volunteers. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jane Doe

Hunter Class of 2015

How to request a letter of recommendation

- Who should you ask?
 - Ask faculty members who know you well so that they can write a substantive letter for you.
 - Professors in your small seminar courses will typically know you better than the professor who taught your 500-student survey course. Faculty with whom you've worked on research, scholarly or creative projects are also good choices.
- When should you ask?
 - Start talking to potential letter writers as soon as you start considering applying to graduate school – even up to a year before you will apply. They can provide advice about how to find a good program, the application process, what to include in your personal statement, etc.
 - Ask the faculty member to write your letter at least two months before the letter is due.
 - If you don't give the faculty member enough advance notice, s/he may not have enough time to write you the best possible letter.
 - If you plan to take a break/gap year between college and graduate school, before you graduate from college, ask the faculty member if s/he would be willing to write you a letter and then make sure you keep in touch with the faculty member during your break/gap year.
 - If you worked with the faculty member on a research, scholarly or creative project, ask the faculty member if s/he would like you to prepare a summary of the work you did. Do this before you graduate.
- What should you ask?
 - Ask the faculty member if s/he can write you a strong positive letter of support to accompany your application. If s/he says no, thank the faculty member and let him/her know that you will ask someone else. A negative, or standard letter indicating only that you were a student in the faculty member's class and got a grade of A, will not help you.
 - Ask the faculty member if s/he has the time to write you a good letter by the submission deadline.
- What should you give the faculty member if s/he agrees to write a letter for you?
 - Provide the faculty member with:
 - A list that includes all schools/programs along with their submission deadlines, instructions and materials (e.g., link to online submission site, addressed stamped envelopes if letters need to be mailed)
 - Your CV or resume and unofficial transcript.
 - Your personal statement
 - The names of faculty with whom you'd like to work at each graduate program (this is a good idea if you are applying for doctoral programs, but isn't typically necessary for medical, law or other professional schools)

- Ask the faculty member if s/he would also like you to provide a draft letter or bullet points indicating how you are a good fit for each program (based on your achievements, interests and experience) and why are excited about each program

How to project a professional and self-confident demeanor

- Address faculty and other professionals using their professional titles (e.g., Professor Jones, Dr. Smith).
- Communicate clearly, effectively and concisely:
 - This applies to written (e.g., email) as well as face-to-face communications
 - If necessary, practice what you want to say in advance or write several drafts of an email to make sure that your points are clearly communicated.
- Seize opportunities:
 - In an academic setting, you have access to a vast array of resources – in all likelihood, more resources than at any other time in your life. Take advantage of them.
 - Faculty expertise is one of the most important resources you have available to you.
 - Faculty, regardless of their field of study, seek out and appreciate creativity. Convey your ability to think creatively when approaching faculty – whether you want to work with them or not.
- Think critically:
 - College is probably the last time you will have experts telling you how you are doing on a regular basis. Take advantage of this critical feedback.
- Plan extracurricular:
 - Consider creating an “opportunity list” for skills you’d like to acquire
- Go to meetings, seminars and talks and model the professional behaviors you observe at these events.