



This is “Interacting with Instructors and Classes”, chapter 7 from the book [Success in College \(index.html\)](#) (v. 1.0).

This book is licensed under a [Creative Commons by-nc-sa 3.0](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/) license. See the license for more details, but that basically means you can share this book as long as you credit the author (but see below), don't make money from it, and do make it available to everyone else under the same terms.

This content was accessible as of December 29, 2012, and it was downloaded then by [Andy Schmitz](#) (<http://lardbucket.org>) in an effort to preserve the availability of this book.

Normally, the author and publisher would be credited here. However, the publisher has asked for the customary Creative Commons attribution to the original publisher, authors, title, and book URI to be removed. Additionally, per the publisher's request, their name has been removed in some passages. More information is available on this project's [attribution page](http://2012books.lardbucket.org/attribution.html?utm_source=header).

For more information on the source of this book, or why it is available for free, please see [the project's home page](#) (<http://2012books.lardbucket.org/>). You can browse or download additional books there.

Chapter 7

Interacting with Instructors and Classes

Figure 7.1



© Thinkstock

Where Are You Now?

Assess your present knowledge and attitudes.

	Often	Sometimes	Seldom
1. I talk with my college instructors outside of class.			
2. I participate in class discussions, ask questions in class, and volunteer to answer questions posed by my instructors.			
3. I go to all my classes except when prevented by illness or an emergency.			
4. I prepare for classes and make an active effort to pay attention and get the most from class lectures.			
5. In lecture classes, I read other materials, check for phone messages or e-mail, and talk with friends.			
6. I don't sign up for classes when I hear other students say the instructor is boring or difficult.			
7. I talk to my instructors in their offices only if I have a problem with a specific assignment.			
8. I write effective, professional e-mails to my instructors when appropriate.			
9. I am comfortable giving presentations in class and know how to prepare successfully.			
10. When assigned to work with a group to give a presentation, I take the lead and help ensure everyone works together well in his or her specific roles.			

Where Do You Want to Go?

Think about how you answered the questions above. Be honest with yourself. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your interactions with your instructors and other students at this time?

Not very effective					Very successful													
1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8		9		10

In the following list, circle the three most important areas in which you think you can improve:

- Attending classes
- Networking and studying with other students
- Going to classes fully prepared
- Interacting with instructors through e-mail and telephone calls
- Paying attention in lecture classes
- Resolving a problem with an instructor
- Asking questions in class
- Interacting with the instructor and students in an online course
- Answering questions in class
- Giving presentations in front of the class
- Participating in class discussions
- Creating and using visual aids in a presentation
- Speaking with instructors outside of class
- Working with a student group to give a presentation

Are there other areas also in which you can improve how you interact with instructors and other students to get the most out of your college education? Write down other things you feel you need to work on.

How to Get There

Here's what we'll work on in this chapter:

- Understanding why it is so important to interact well with your instructors and participate in class
- Understanding why it is essential to attend classes and actively engage in the learning process
- Preparing for and being comfortable participating in class
- Discovering the best communication practices for asking and answering questions in class
- Staying active in lecture classes to increase your learning
- Adapting your learning style when an instructor has a different teaching style
- Building a relationship with an instructor outside of class and finding a mentor
- Writing professional e-mails to instructors and others
- Interacting with the instructor of an online course and coping with its difficult issues
- Preparing for and delivering a successful class presentation
- Working with other students on a group presentation

Interacting with the College Experience

Throughout this text you have been reading about how success in college depends on your active participation in the learning process. Much of what you get out of your education is what you yourself put into it. This chapter considers how to engage in the learning process through interactions with your instructors and other students. Students who actively interact with others in the educational experience are much more successful than passive students who do not.

Yet relatively few college students consistently interact with their instructors and other students in class. Typically only five to seven students in a class, regardless of the class's size, do most of the participating. Why is that? If you're just too shy, you can learn to feel comfortable participating.

Interacting with instructors and participating in class discussions with other students is among the most important steps you can take to make sure you're

successful in college. The real essence of a college education is not just absorption of knowledge and information but learning a way of thinking that involves actively responding to the ideas of others. Employers seek graduates who have learned how to think critically about situations and ideas, to solve new problems, and to apply traditional knowledge in new circumstances. And these characteristics come from active participation in the learning process.

Differences from High School

To understand why interaction is so important in college, let's look again at some of the typical differences between high school and college instructors:

- **Many college classes focus more on how one thinks about a subject than on information about the subject.** While instructors in some large lecture classes may still present information to students, as you take more classes in your major and other smaller classes, you'll find that simply giving back facts or information on tests or in assigned papers means much less. You really are expected to develop your own ideas and communicate them well. Doing that successfully usually requires talking with others, testing out your thoughts against those of others, responding to instructors' questions, and other interactions.
- **Instructors are usually very actively involved in their fields.** While high school teachers often are most interested in *teaching*, college instructors are often more interested in their own fields. They may be passionate about their subject and want you to be as well. They can become excited when a student asks a question that shows some deeper understanding of something in the field.
- **College instructors give you the responsibility for learning.** Many high school teachers monitor their students' progress and reach out if they see a student not doing well. In college, however, students are considered adults in charge of their own learning. Miss some classes, turn in a paper late, do poorly on an exam—and you will get a low grade, but the instructor likely won't come looking for you to offer help. But if you ask questions when you don't understand and actively seek out your instructor during office hours to more fully discuss your ideas for a paper, then the instructor will likely give you the help you need.
- **Academic freedom is very important in college.** High school instructors generally are given a set curriculum and have little freedom to choose what—or how—to teach. College instructors have **academic freedom**¹, however, allowing them to teach controversial topics and express their own ideas—and they may expect you to partake in this freedom as well. They have more respect for students

1. The concept present in almost all colleges that instructors are free, within the boundaries of laws and ethics, to pursue studies and to teach topics they deem appropriate within their field, without interference from administrators, officials, or others.

who engage in the subject and demonstrate their thinking skills through participation in the class.

7.1 Why Attend Classes at All?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe reasons why it is important to attend classes.
2. Know what to do if you must miss a class.
3. Explain the benefits of participating in class for both students and instructors.

Among the student freedoms in college is the choice not to attend classes. Most college instructors do not “grade” attendance, and some college students soon develop an attitude that if you can get class notes from someone else, or watch a **podcast**² of a lecture, there’s no reason to go to every class at all. What’s wrong with that?

It is in fact true that you don’t have to attend every single class of every course to get a good grade. But thinking only in terms of grades and how much one can get away with is a dangerous attitude toward college education. The real issue is whether you’re trying to get the most out of your education. Let’s compare students with different attitudes toward their classes:

Carla wants to get through college, and she knows she needs the degree to get a decent job, but she’s just not that into it. She’s never thought of herself as a good student, and that hasn’t changed much in college. She has trouble paying attention in those big lecture classes, which mostly seem pretty boring. She’s pretty sure she can pass all her courses, however, as long as she takes the time to study before tests. It doesn’t bother her to skip classes when she’s studying for a test in a different class or finishing a reading assignment she didn’t get around to earlier. She does make it through her freshman year with a passing grade in every class, even those she didn’t go to very often. Then she fails the midterm exam in her first sophomore class. Depressed, she skips the next couple classes, then feels guilty and goes to the next. It’s even harder to stay awake because now she has no idea what they’re talking about. It’s too late to drop the course, and even a hard night of studying before the final isn’t enough to pass the course. In two other classes, she just barely passes. She has no idea what classes to take next term and is starting to think that maybe she’ll drop out for now.

2. An audio or video recording, such as of a class lecture, made available online; so named because podcasts were originally developed to be downloaded and played on iPods.

Karen wants to have a good time in college and still do well enough to get a good job in business afterward. Her sorority keeps a file of class notes for her big lecture

classes, and from talking to others and reviewing these notes, she's discovered she can skip almost half of those big classes and still get a B or C on the tests. She stays focused on her grades, and because she has a good memory, she's able to maintain OK grades. She doesn't worry about talking to her instructors outside of class because she can always find out what she needs from another student. In her sophomore year, she has a quick conversation with her academic advisor and chooses her major. Those classes are smaller, and she goes to most of them, but she feels she's pretty much figured out how it works and can usually still get the grade. In her senior year, she starts working on her résumé and asks other students in her major which instructors write the best letters of recommendation. She's sure her college degree will land her a good job.

Alicia enjoys her classes, even when she has to get up early after working or studying late the night before. She sometimes gets so excited by something she learns in class that she rushes up to the instructor after class to ask a question. In class discussions, she's not usually the first to speak out, but by the time another student has given an opinion, she's had time to organize her thoughts and enjoys arguing her ideas. Nearing the end of her sophomore year and unsure of what to major in given her many interests, she talks things over with one of her favorite instructors, whom she has gotten to know through office visits. The instructor gives her some insights into careers in that field and helps her explore her interests. She takes two more courses with this instructor over the next year, and she's comfortable in her senior year going to him to ask for a job reference. When she does, she's surprised and thrilled when he urges her to apply for a high-level paid internship with a company in the field—that happens to be run by a friend of his.

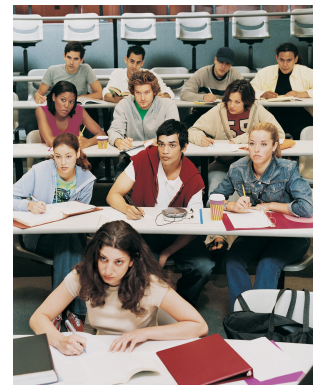
Think about the differences in the attitudes of these three students and how they approach their classes. One's attitude toward learning, toward going to class, and toward the whole college experience is a huge factor in how successful a student will be. Make it your goal to attend every class—don't even think about not going. Going to class is the first step in engaging in your education by interacting with the instructor and other students. Here are some reasons why it's important to attend every class:

- Miss a class and you'll miss *something*, even if you never know it. Even if a friend gives you notes for the class, they cannot contain *everything* said or shown by the instructor or written on the board for emphasis or questioned or commented on by other students. What you miss might affect your grade or your enthusiasm for the course. Why go to college at all if you're not going to *go* to college?
- While some students may say that you don't have to go to every class to do well on a test, that is very often a myth. Do you want to take that risk?

- Your final grade often reflects how you think about course concepts, and you will think more often and more clearly when engaged in class discussions and hearing the comments of other students. You can't get this by borrowing class notes from a friend.
- Research shows there is a correlation between absences from class and lower grades. It may be that missing classes causes lower grades or that students with lower grades miss more classes. Either way, missing classes and lower grades can be intertwined in a downward spiral of achievement.
- Your instructor will note your absences—even in a large class. In addition to making a poor impression, you reduce your opportunities for future interactions. You might not ask a question the next class because of the potential embarrassment of the instructor saying that was covered in the last class, which you apparently missed. Nothing is more insulting to an instructor than when you skip a class and then show up to ask, “Did I miss anything important?”
- You might be tempted to skip a class because the instructor is “boring,” but it's more likely that you found the class boring because you weren't very attentive or didn't appreciate how the instructor was teaching.
- You paid a lot of money for your tuition. Get your money's worth!

Attending the first day of class is especially critical. There you'll get the syllabus and other handouts, learn the instructor's policies and preferences for how the class will function, and often take notes in an opening lecture.

Figure 7.2



In a large class, your instructor will still notice if you are paying attention.

© Thinkstock

If You Must Miss a Class...

- If you know that you will miss a class, take steps in advance. Tell your instructor and ask if he or she teaches another section of the course that you might attend instead. Ask about any handouts or special announcements.
- Ask another student whose judgment you trust if you can copy his or her notes. Then talk to them after you've read their notes to go over things that may be unclear to you.
- It may not be necessary to see your instructor after missing a lecture class, and no instructor wants to give you fifty minutes of office time to repeat what was said in class. But if you are having difficulty after the *next* class because of something you missed earlier, stop and see your instructor and ask what you can do to get caught up. But remember the worst thing you can say to an instructor: "I missed class—did you talk about anything important?"

The Value of Interaction in Class

As noted earlier, there are many good reasons to attend every class. But it's not enough just to *be* there—you need to interact with the the instructor and other students to enjoy a full educational experience:

- Participating in class discussions is a good way to start meeting other students with whom you share an interest. You may form a study group, borrow class notes if you miss a class, or team up with other students on a group project. You may meet students with whom you form a lasting relationship, developing your network of contacts for other benefits in the future, such as learning about internships or jobs.
- Asking the instructor questions, answering the instructor's questions in class, and responding to other students' comments is a good way to make an impression on your instructor. The instructor will remember

Figure 7.3



In a small class, it's easy to interact with the instructor.

© Thinkstock

you as an engaged student—and this matters if you later need extra help or even a potential mentor.

- Paying close attention and thinking critically about what an instructor is saying can dramatically improve your enjoyment of the class. You'll notice things you'd miss if you're feeling bored and may discover your instructor is much more interesting than you first thought.
- Students actively engaged in their class learn more and thus get better grades. When you speak out in class and answer the instructor's questions, you are more likely to remember the discussion.

Are Podcasts and Recordings an Effective Alternative to Attending Class?

Why not just listen to a recording of the lecture—or a video podcast, if available—instead of going to class? After all, you hear and perhaps see the lecture just as if you were there, and you can sleep late and “go” to this class whenever it's convenient for you. What could be wrong with that?

This issue has received considerable discussion in recent years because many colleges and universities began videotaping class lectures and making them available for students online or in podcasts. There was a lot of debate about whether students would stop coming to class and simply watch the podcasts instead. In fact, some students do cut class, as some always have, but most students use podcasts and recordings as a way to review material they do not feel they grasp completely. A video podcast doesn't offer the opportunity to ask questions or participate, and even if you pay close attention to watching a video, it's still a passive experience from which you're likely to learn much less.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The benefits of attending every class include not missing important material, thinking more clearly about course topics, developing a better relationship with the instructor, and being better prepared for tests.
- When possible, prepare in advance for missing a class by speaking with your instructor and arranging to borrow and discuss someone's notes.
- Students benefit in many ways from class interaction, including more actively engaging in learning, developing a network with other students, and forming a relationship with the instructor.
- Podcasts, lecture recordings, and similar learning methods can supplement lectures but cannot replace all the benefits of attending class in person.

CHECKPOINT EXERCISES

1. Why is it more important to interact with your instructors in college than it was in high school?

2. Give an example of something important you may miss in a class from which you are absent—even if you read a friend’s notes and hear a recording of the lecture.

3. List at least three potential benefits of forming a network with other students.

4. What can you do as a student to be more engaged during a lecture if you are finding it boring?

7.2 Participating in Class

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how to set yourself up for successful participation in class.
2. List guidelines for effectively asking and answering questions in class.
3. Describe how to interact successfully with an instructor in a large lecture class.
4. Explain strategies for effective learning if your learning style is different from your instructor's teaching style.

We've already discussed the many benefits of participating in class as a form of actively engaging in learning. Not everyone naturally feels comfortable participating. Following some general guidelines makes it easier.

Guidelines for Participating in Classes

Smaller classes generally favor discussion, but often instructors in large lecture classes also make some room for participation.

A concern or fear about speaking in public is one of the most common fears. If you feel afraid to speak out in class, take comfort from the fact that many others do as well—and that anyone can learn how to speak in class without much difficulty. Class participation is actually an impromptu, informal type of public speaking, and the same principles will get you through both: preparing and communicating.

- Set yourself up for success by coming to class fully prepared. Complete reading assignments. Review your notes on the reading and previous class to get yourself in the right mind-set. If there is something you don't understand well, start formulating your question now.
- Sit in the front with a good view of the instructor, board or screen, and other visual aids. In a lecture hall, this will help you hear better, pay better attention, and make a good impression on the instructor. Don't sit with friends—socializing isn't what you're there for.
- Remember that your body language communicates as much as anything you say. Sit up and look alert, with a pleasant expression on your face, and make good eye contact with the instructor. Show some enthusiasm.

- Pay attention to the instructor’s **body language**³, which can communicate much more than just his or her words. How the instructor moves and gestures, and the looks on his or her face, will add meaning to the words—and will also cue you when it’s a good time to ask a question or stay silent.
- Take good notes, but don’t write obsessively—and never page through your textbook (or browse on a laptop). Don’t eat or play with your cell phone. Except when writing brief notes, keep your eyes on the instructor.
- Follow class protocol for making comments and asking questions. In a small class, the instructor may encourage students to ask questions at any time, while in some large lecture classes the instructor may ask for questions at the end of the lecture. In this case, jot your questions in your notes so that you don’t forget them later.
- Don’t say or ask anything just to try to impress your instructor. Most instructors have been teaching long enough to immediately recognize insincere flattery—and the impression this makes is just the opposite of what you want.
- Pay attention to the instructor’s thinking style. Does this instructor emphasize theory more than facts, wide perspectives over specific ideas, abstractions more than concrete experience? Take a cue from your instructor’s approach and try to think in similar terms when participating in class.
- It’s fine to disagree with your instructor when you ask or answer a question. Many instructors invite challenges. Before speaking up, however, be sure you can explain why you disagree and give supporting evidence or reasons. Be respectful.
- Pay attention to your communication style. Use **standard English**⁴ when you ask or answer a question, not slang. Avoid sarcasm and joking around. Be assertive when you participate in class, showing confidence in your ideas while being respectful of the ideas of others. But avoid an aggressive style that attacks the ideas of others or is strongly emotional.
- When your instructor asks a question to the class:
 - Raise your hand and make eye contact, but don’t call out or wave your hand all around trying to catch his or her attention.
 - Before speaking, take a moment to gather your thoughts and take a deep breath. Don’t just blurt it out—speak calmly and clearly.
- When your instructor asks you a question directly:
 - Be honest and admit it if you don’t know the answer or are not sure. Don’t try to fake it or make excuses. With a question that involves a reasoned opinion more than a fact, it’s fine to explain

3. Another term for forms of nonverbal communication, including gestures, postures, and facial expressions.

4. Use of relatively formal English language with correct grammar and syntax, avoiding slang, colloquialisms, and irregular phrasings and word meanings that may be common to a particular cultural group but that differ from those generally accepted by the larger culture.

- why you haven't decided yet, such as when weighing two opposing ideas or actions; your comment may stimulate further discussion.
- Organize your thoughts to give a sufficient answer. Instructors seldom want a yes or no answer. Give your answer and provide reasons or evidence in support.
- When you want to ask the instructor a question:
 - Don't ever feel a question is "stupid." If you have been paying attention in class and have done the reading and you still don't understand something, you have every right to ask.
 - Ask at the appropriate time. Don't interrupt the instructor or jump ahead and ask a question about something the instructor may be starting to explain. Wait for a natural pause and a good moment to ask. On the other hand, unless the instructor asks students to hold all question until the end of class, don't let too much time go by, or you may forget the question or its relevance to the topic.
 - Don't ask just because you weren't paying attention. If you drift off during the first half of class and then realize in the second half that you don't really understand what the instructor is talking about now, don't ask a question about something that was already covered.
 - Don't ask a question that is really a complaint. You may be thinking, "Why would so-and-so believe that? That's just crazy!" Take a moment to think about what you might gain from asking the question. It's better to say, "I'm having some difficulty understanding what so-and-so is saying here. What evidence did he use to argue for that position?"
 - Avoid dominating a discussion. It may be appropriate in some cases to make a follow-up comment after the instructor answers your question, but don't try to turn the class into a one-on-one conversation between you and the instructor.

Lecture Hall Classes

While opportunities are fewer for student discussions in large lecture classes, participation is still important. The instructor almost always provides an opportunity to ask questions. Because time is limited, be ready with your question or comment when the opportunity arises—and don't be shy about raising your hand first.

Being prepared is especially important in lecture classes. Have assigned readings done before class and review your notes. If you have a genuine question about something in the reading, ask about it. Jot down the question in your notes and be ready to ask if the lecture doesn't clear it up for you.

Figure 7.4



Don't use your cell phone during class time.

© Thinkstock

Being prepared before asking a question also includes listening carefully to the lecture. You don't want to ask a question whose answer was already given by the instructor in the lecture. Take a moment to organize your thoughts and choose your words carefully. Be as specific as you can. Don't say something like, "I don't understand the big deal about whether the earth revolves around the sun or the sun around the earth. So what?" Instead, you might ask, "When they discovered that the earth revolves around the sun, was that such a disturbing idea because people were upset to realize that maybe they weren't the center of the universe?" The first question suggests you haven't thought much about the topic, while the second shows that you are beginning to grasp the issue and want to understand it more fully.

Following are some additional guidelines for asking good questions:

- Ask a question or two early in the term, even on the first day of class. Once the instructor has "noticed" you as a class participant, you are more likely to be recognized again when you have a question. You won't be lost in the crowd.
- Speak deliberately and professionally, not as you might when talking with a friend. Use standard English rather than slang.
- If you're very shy about public speaking or worried you'll say the wrong thing, write down your question before asking. Rehearse it in your mind.
- When you have the opportunity to ask questions in class, it's better to ask right away rather than saving a question for after class. If you really find it difficult to speak up in a large class, this is an acceptable

way to ask your question and participate. A private conversation with an instructor may also be more appropriate if the question involves a paper or other project you are working on for the course.

A note on technology in the lecture hall. Colleges are increasingly incorporating new technology in lecture halls. For example, each student in the lecture hall may have an electronic “clicker” with which the instructor can gain instant feedback on questions in class. Or the classroom may have wireless Internet and students are encouraged to use their laptops to communicate with the instructor in “real time” during the lecture. In these cases, the most important thing is to take it seriously, even if you have anonymity. Most students appreciate the ability to give feedback and ask questions through such technology, but some abuse their anonymity by sending irrelevant, disruptive, or insulting messages.

Teaching Style versus Learning Style

As you learned in [Chapter 1 "You and Your College Experience"](#), students have many different **learning styles**⁵. Understanding your learning style(s) can help you study more effectively. Most instructors tend to develop their own teaching style, however, and you will encounter different teaching styles in different courses.

When the instructor’s teaching style matches your learning style, you are usually more attentive in class and may seem to learn better. But what happens if your instructor has a style very different from your own? Let’s say, for example, that your instructor primarily lectures, speaks rapidly, and seldom uses visuals. This instructor also talks mostly on the level of large abstract ideas and almost never gives examples. Let’s say that you, in contrast, are more a visual learner, that you learn more effectively with visual aids and visualizing concrete examples of ideas. Therefore, perhaps you are having some difficulty paying attention in class and following the lectures. What can you do?

- Capitalize on your learning strengths, as you learned in [Chapter 1 "You and Your College Experience"](#). In this example, you could use a visual style of note taking, such as concept maps, while listening to the lecture. If the instructor does not give examples for abstract ideas in the lecture, see if you can supply examples in your own thoughts as you listen.
- Form a study group with other students. A variety of students will likely involve a variety of learning styles, and when going over course material with other students, such as when studying for a test, you can gain what they have learned through their styles while you contribute what you have learned through yours.

5. A person’s preferred approach to or way of learning most effectively.

- Use ancillary study materials. Many textbooks point students to online resource centers or include a computer CD that offers additional learning materials. Such ancillary materials usually offer an opportunity to review course material in ways that may better fit your learning style.
- Communicate with your instructor to bridge the gap between his or her teaching style and your learning style. If the instructor is speaking in abstractions and general ideas you don't understand, ask the instructor for an example.
- You can also communicate with the instructor privately during office hours. For example, you can explain that you are having difficulty understanding lectures because so many things are said so fast.

Finally, take heart that a mismatch between a student's learning style and an instructor's teaching style is not correlated with lower grades.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- To prepare for class participation, come to class ready, sit in front, and pay attention to the instructor's words and body language.
- Use good communication techniques when asking or answering questions in class.
- Take advantage of all opportunities to interact with your instructors, even in large lecture classes.
- If your learning style does not match the instructor's teaching style, adapt your learning and study with other students to stay actively engaged.

CHECKPOINT EXERCISES

1. For each of the following statements about class participation, circle T for true or F for false:

T	F	To avoid having to answer a question in class when you don't know the answer, sit in the back row and avoid making eye contact with the instructor.
T	F	If you haven't finished a reading assignment before coming to a lecture class, bring the book along and try to complete the reading during the lecture.
T	F	Although it is OK to disagree with something in your textbook, never disagree with something the instructor says in a lecture.
T	F	If you are asked a question but don't know the answer, it's best to be honest and admit it.
T	F	Before raising your hand to ask a question, take a moment to consider whether maybe it's a stupid question.
T	F	Because you don't want your instructor to form a poor impression of you, wait a week or two into the term before starting to ask questions in class.
T	F	If you're shy, it's best never to speak up in class at all.
T	F	If you are struggling with a class during the first two weeks of the term, it's always best to drop the class immediately because the situation won't improve.

2. List two things you can do if you are having difficulty understanding what your instructor is talking about.

7.3 Communicating with Instructors

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe additional benefits for interacting with your instructor beyond the value for that particular course.
2. List guidelines for successfully communicating individually with an instructor, such as doing so during office hours.
3. Write e-mail messages to instructors and others that are polite, professional, and effective.
4. Know how to graciously resolve a problem, such as a grade dispute, with an instructor.
5. Understand the value of having a mentor and how interactions with instructors, your academic advisor, and others may lead to a mentoring relationship.
6. Explain what is needed to succeed in an online course and how to interact with an online instructor.

So far we've been looking at class participation and general interaction with both instructors and other students in class. In addition to this, students gain very specific benefits from communicating directly with their instructors. Learn best practices for communicating with your instructors during office hours and through e-mail.

Additional Benefits of Talking with Your Instructors

College students are sometimes surprised to discover that instructors like students and enjoy getting to know them. After all, they want to feel they're doing something more meaningful than talking to an empty room. The human dimension of college really matters, and as a student you are an important part of your instructor's world. Most instructors are happy to see you during their office hours or to talk a few minutes after class.

This chapter has repeatedly emphasized how active participation in learning is a key to student success. In addition, talking with your instructors often leads to benefits beyond simply doing well in that class.

- Talking with instructors helps you feel more comfortable in college and more connected to the campus. Students who talk to their instructors are less likely to become disillusioned and drop out.
- Talking with instructors is a valuable way to learn about an academic field or a career. Don't know for sure what you want to major in, or what people with a degree in your chosen major actually *do* after college? Most instructors will share information and insights with you.
- You may need a reference or letter of recommendation for a job or internship application. Getting to know some of your instructors puts you in an ideal position to ask for a letter of recommendation or a reference in the future when you need one.
- Because instructors are often well connected within their field, they may know of a job, internship, or research possibility you otherwise may not learn about. An instructor who knows you is a valuable part of your network. **Networking**⁶ is very important for future job searches and other opportunities. In fact, most jobs are found through networking, not through classified ads or online job postings.
- Think about what it truly means to be “educated”: how one thinks, understands society and the world, and responds to problems and new situations. Much of this learning occurs outside the classroom. Talking with your highly educated instructors can be among your most meaningful experiences in college.

Guidelines for Communicating with Instructors

Getting along with instructors and communicating well begins with attitude. As experts in their field, they deserve your respect. Remember that a college education is a collaborative process that works best when students and instructors communicate freely in an exchange of ideas, information, and perspectives. So while you should respect your instructors, you shouldn't fear them. As you get to know them better, you'll learn their personalities and find appropriate ways to communicate. Here are some guidelines for getting along with and communicating with your instructors:

6. The process of engaging others in helping reach an objective.

- **Prepare before going to the instructor's office.** Go over your notes on readings and lectures and write down your specific questions. You'll feel more comfortable, and the instructor will appreciate your being organized.
- **Don't forget to introduce yourself.** Especially near the beginning of the term, don't assume your instructor has learned everyone's names yet and don't make him or her have to ask you. Unless the instructor has already asked you to address him or her as "Dr. _____," "Ms. _____" or "Mr. _____," or something similar, it's appropriate to say "Professor _____."
- **Respect the instructor's time.** In addition to teaching, college instructors sit on committees, do research and other professional work, and have personal lives. Don't show up two minutes before the end of an office hour and expect the instructor to stay late to talk with you.
- **Realize that the instructor will recognize you from class—even in a large lecture hall.** If you spent a lecture class joking around with friends in the back row, don't think you can show up during office hours to find out what you missed while you weren't paying attention.
- **Don't try to fool an instructor.** Insincere praise or making excuses for not doing an assignment won't make it in college. Nor is it a good idea to show you're "too cool" to take all this seriously—another attitude sure to turn off an instructor. To earn your instructor's respect, come to class prepared, do the work, participate genuinely in class, and show respect—and the instructor will be happy to see you when you come to office hours or need some extra help.
- **Try to see things from the instructor's point of view.** Imagine that you spent a couple hours making PowerPoint slides and preparing a class lecture on something you find very stimulating and exciting. Standing in front of a full room, you are gratified to see faces smiling and heads nodding as people understand what you're saying—they really get it! And then a student after class asks, "Is this going to be on the test?" How would you feel?
- **Be professional when talking to an instructor.** You can be cordial and friendly, but keep it professional and on an adult level. Come to office hours prepared with your questions—not just to chat or joke around. (Don't wear sunglasses or earphones in the office or check your cell phone for messages.) Be prepared to accept criticism in a professional way, without taking it personally or complaining.

Figure 7.5



Your instructor can often help explain course topics.

© Thinkstock

- **Use your best communication skills.** In [Chapter 9 "The Social World of College"](#), you'll learn the difference between assertive communication and passive or aggressive communication.

Part-Time and Returning Students

Students who are working and who have their own families and other responsibilities may have special issues interacting with instructors. Sometimes an older student feels a little out of place and may even feel “the system” is designed for younger students; this attitude can lead to a hesitation to participate in class or see an instructor during office hours.

But participation and communication with instructors is very important for all students—and may be even more important for “nontraditional” students. Getting to know your instructors is particularly crucial for feeling at home in college. Instructors enjoy talking with older and other nontraditional students—even when, as sometimes happens, a student is older than the instructor. Nontraditional students are often highly motivated and eager to learn. If you can't make the instructor's office hours because of your work schedule, ask for an appointment at a different time—your needs will be respected.

Part-time students, especially in community colleges where they may be taking evening courses, often have greater difficulty meeting with instructors. In addition, many part-time students taking evening and weekend classes are taught by part-time faculty who, like them, may be on campus only small amounts of time. Yet it is just as critical for part-time students to engage in the learning process and have a sense of belonging on campus. With effort, you can usually find a way to talk with your instructors. Don't hesitate to ask for an appointment at another time or to meet with your instructor over a cup of coffee after class before driving home. Assert yourself: You are in college for reasons just as good as those of other students, and you have the same rights. Avoid the temptation to give up or feel defeated; talk with your instructor to arrange a time to meet, and make the most of your time interacting together. Use e-mail to communicate when you need to and contact your instructor when you have any question you can't raise in person.

E-mail Best Practices

Just as e-mail has become a primary form of communication in business and society, e-mail has a growing role in education and has become an important and valuable means of communicating with instructors. Virtually all younger college students have grown up using e-mail and have a computer or computer access in college, although some have developed poor habits from using e-mail principally with friends in the past. Some older college students may not yet understand the importance of e-mail and other computer skills in college; if you are not now using e-mail, it's time to learn how (see "Getting Started with E-mail"). Especially when it is difficult to see an instructor in person during office hours, e-mail can be an effective form of communication and interaction with instructors. E-mail is also an increasingly effective way to collaborate with other students on group projects or while studying with other students.

Getting Started with E-mail

- If you don't have your own computer, find out where on-campus computers are available for student use, such as at the library or student center.
- You can set up a free Web-based e-mail account at Google, Yahoo! or other sites. These allow you to send and receive e-mail from any computer that is connected to the Internet.
- If you don't have enough computer experience to know how to do this, ask a friend for help getting started or check at your library or student services office for a publication explaining how e-mail works.
- Once you have your account set up, give your e-mail address to instructors who request it and to other students with whom you study or maintain contact. E-mail is a good way to contact another student if you miss a class.
- Once you begin using e-mail, remember to check it regularly for messages. Most people view e-mail like a telephone message and expect you to respond fairly soon.
- Be sure to use good e-mail etiquette when writing to instructors.

If your instructor gives you his or her e-mail addresses, use e-mail rather than the telephone for nonurgent matters. Using e-mail respects other people's time, allowing them to answer at a time of their choosing, rather than being interrupted by a telephone call.

But e-mail is a written form of communication that is different from telephone voice messages and text messages. Students who text with friends have often adopted shortcuts, such as not spelling out full words, ignoring capitalization and punctuation, and not bothering with grammar or full sentence constructions. This is inappropriate in an e-mail message to an instructor, who expects a more professional quality of writing. Most instructors expect your communications to be in full sentences with correctly spelled words and reasonable grammar. Follow these guidelines:

- Use a professional e-mail name. If you have a funny name you use with friends, create a different account with a professional name you use with instructors, work supervisors, and others.
- Use the subject line to label your message effectively at a glance. “May I make an appointment?” says something; “In your office?” doesn’t.
- Address e-mail messages as you do a letter, beginning “Dear Professor ____.” Include your full name if it’s not easily recognizable in your e-mail account.
- Get to your point quickly and concisely. Don’t make the reader scroll down a long e-mail to see what it is you want to say.
- Because e-mail is a written communication, it does not express emotion the way a voice message does. Don’t attempt to be funny, ironic, or sarcastic. Write as you would in a paper for class. In a large lecture class or an online course, your e-mail voice may be the primary way your instructor knows you, and emotionally charged messages can be confusing or give a poor impression.
- Don’t use capital letters to emphasize. All caps look like SHOUTING.
- Avoid abbreviations, nonstandard spelling, slang, and emoticons like smiley faces. These do not convey a professional tone.
- Don’t make demands or state expectations such as “I’ll expect to hear from you soon” or “If I haven’t heard by 4 p.m., I’ll assume you’ll accept my paper late.”
- When you reply to a message, leave the original message within yours. Your reader may need to recall what he or she said in the original message.
- Be polite. End the message with a “Thank you” or something similar.
- Proofread your message before sending it.
- With any important message to a work supervisor or instructor, it’s a good idea to wait and review the message later before sending it. You may have expressed an emotion or thought that you will think better about later. Many problems have resulted when people sent messages too quickly without thinking.

Resolving a Problem with an Instructor

The most common issue students feel with an instructor involves receiving a grade lower than they think they deserve—especially new students not yet used to the higher standards of college. It’s depressing to get a low grade, but it’s not the end of the world. Don’t be too hard on yourself—or on the instructor. Take a good look at what happened on the test or paper and make sure you know what to do better next time. Review the earlier chapters on studying habits, time management, and taking tests.

If you genuinely believe you deserved a higher grade, you can talk with your instructor. *How* you communicate in that conversation, however, is very important. Instructors are used to hearing students complain about grades and patiently explaining their standards for grading. Most instructors seldom change grades. Yet it can still be worthwhile to talk with the instructor because of what you will learn from the experience.

Follow these guidelines to talk about a grade or resolve any other problem or disagreement with an instructor:

- First go over the requirements for the paper or test and the instructor’s comments. Be sure you actually have a reason for discussing the grade—not just that you didn’t do well. Be prepared with specific points you want to go over.
- Make an appointment with your instructor during office hours or another time. Don’t try to talk about this before or after class or with e-mail or the telephone.
- Begin by politely explaining that you thought you did better on the assignment or test (not simply that you think you deserve a better grade) and that you’d like to go over it to better understand the result.
- Allow the instructor to explain his or her comments on the assignment or grading of the test. Don’t complain or whine; instead, show your appreciation for the explanation. Raise any specific questions or make comments at this time. For example, you might say, “I really thought I was being clear here when I wrote....”
- Use good listening skills. Whatever you do, don’t argue!
- Ask what you can do to improve grade, if possible. Can you rewrite the paper or do any extra-credit work to help make up for a test score? While you are showing that you would like to earn a higher grade in the course, also make it clear that you’re willing to put in the effort and that you want to *learn more*, not just get the higher grade.
- If there is no opportunity to improve on this specific project, ask the instructor for advice on what you might do on the next assignment or

when preparing for the next test. You may be offered some individual help or receive good study advice, and your instructor will respect your willingness to make the effort as long as it's clear that you're more interested in learning than simply getting the grade.

Tips for Success: Talking with Instructors

- When you have a question, ask it sooner rather than later.
- Be prepared and plan your questions and comments in advance.
- Be respectful but personable and communicate professionally.
- Be open minded and ready to learn. Avoid whining and complaining.
- There is no such thing as a “stupid question.”

Controlling Anger over Grades

If you're going to talk with an instructor about your grade or any other problem, control any anger you may be feeling. The GPS LifePlan project of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System offers some insights into this process:

- Being upset about a grade is good because it shows you care and that you have passion about your education. But anger prevents clear thinking, so rein it in first.
- Since anger involves bodily reactions, physical actions can help you control anger: try some deep breathing first.
- Try putting yourself in your instructor's shoes and seeing the situation from their point of view. Try to understand how grading is not a personal issue of "liking" you—that they are really doing something for your educational benefit.
- It's not your life that's being graded. Things outside your control can result in not doing well on a test or assignment, but the instructor can grade only on what you actually did on that test or assignment—not what you *could have done* or *are capable of doing*. Understanding this can help you accept what happened and not take a grade personally. Adapted from "How to Communicate and Problem Solve with Your Instructor," <http://www.gpslifeplan.org/generic/pdf/how-to-communicate-with-professor.pdf> (accessed December 27, 2009).

Finding a Mentor

A **mentor**⁷ is someone who is usually older and more experienced than you who becomes your trusted guide, advisor, and role model. A mentor is someone you may want to be like in your future career or profession—someone you look up to and whose advice and guidance you respect.

Finding a mentor can be one of the most fulfilling aspects of college. As a student, you think about many things and make many decisions, large and small, almost daily: What do you want to do in the future? How can you best balance your studies with your job? What should you major in? Should you take this course or that one? What should you do if you feel like you're failing a course? Where should you put your priorities as you prepare for a future career? How can you be a better student?

7. A trusted individual, often an older and wiser role model, who provides guidance and advice.

The questions go on and on. We talk about things like this with our friends and often family members, but often they don't have the same experience or background to help us as a mentor can.

Most important, a mentor is someone who is willing to help you, to talk with you about decisions you face, to support you when things become difficult, and to guide you when you're feeling lost. A mentor can become a valuable part of your future network but also can help you in the here and now.

Many different people can become mentors: other students, family members, people you know through work, your boss. As a college student, however, your best mentor likely is someone involved in education: your advisor, a more experienced student, or an instructor. Finding a mentor is another reason to develop good relationships with your instructors, starting with class participation and communication outside of class.

A mentor is not like a good friend, exactly—you're not going to invite your instructor to a movie—but it does involve a form of friendship. Nor is a mentor a formal relationship: you don't ask an instructor to become your mentor. The mentor relationship is more informal and develops slowly, often without actively looking for a mentor. Here's an example of how one student "found" a mentor:

As a freshman taking several classes, Miguel particularly liked and admired one of his instructors, Professor Canton. Miguel spoke up more in Canton's class and talked with him sometimes during office hours. When it was time to register for the next term, Miguel saw that Canton was teaching another course he was interested in, so he asked him about that course one day during office hours. Miguel was pleased when Professor Canton said he'd like to have him in his class next term.

By the end of his first year of college, Miguel seemed to know Canton better than any of his other instructors and felt very comfortable talking with him outside of class. One day after talking about a reading assignment, Miguel said he was enjoying this class so much that he was thinking about majoring in this subject and asked Professor Canton what he thought about it. Canton suggested that he take a few more classes before making a decision, and he invited Miguel to sit in on a seminar of upper-level students he was holding.

In his second year, Miguel's interests turned in another direction as he began to think about his future job possibilities, but by then he felt comfortable enough talking with Canton that he occasionally he stopped by the professor's office even though he was not taking a class with him. Sometimes he was surprised how much

Professor Canton knew about other departments and other faculty, and Canton often shared insights about other courses he might be interested in that his advisor had not directed him to. When Miguel learned about a summer internship in his field and was considering applying, Canton not only volunteered to write him a letter of recommendation but even offered to help Miguel with the essay part of the application if he wanted.

Some colleges have more formal mentoring programs, and you should become involved in one if you have this opportunity, but often a mentoring relationship occurs informally as you get to know an instructor or another person over time. In your first year, you don't go searching frantically for a mentor, but you should begin interacting with your instructors and other students in ways that may lead, over time, to developing that kind of relationship.

Similarly, your academic advisor or a college counselor might become a mentor for you if you share interests and you look up to that person as a role model and trusted guide. Your advisor is so important for your college success that if you feel you are not getting along well, you should ask the advising department to switch you to a different advisor. Take the time to build a good relationship with your advisor, the same as with instructors—following the same guidelines in this chapter for communication and interaction.

Relating to an Instructor of an Online Course

Online courses have grown tremendously in recent years, and most colleges now have at least some online courses. While online learning once focused on students at a distance from campus, now many students enrolled in regular classes also take some courses online. Online courses have a number of practical benefits but also pose special issues, primarily related to how students interact with other students and the instructor.

Some online courses do involve “face time” or live audio connections with the instructor and other students, via Webcasts or Webinars, but many are self-paced and asynchronous, meaning that you experience the course on your own time and communicate with others via messages back and forth rather than communicating in real time. All online courses include opportunities for interacting with the instructor, typically through e-mail or a bulletin board where you may see comments and questions from other students as well.

Many educators argue that online courses can involve *more* interaction between students and the instructor than in a large lecture class, not less. But two important differences affect how that interaction occurs and how successful it is for engaging students in learning. Most communication is written, with no or limited opportunity to ask questions face to face or during office hours, and students must take the initiative to interact beyond the requirements of online assignments.

Figure 7.6



Online courses let you study when you want, where you want.

Many students enjoy online courses, in part for the practical benefit of scheduling your own time. Some students who are reluctant to speak in class communicate more easily in writing. But other students may have less confidence in their writing skills or may never initiate interaction at all and end up feeling lost. Depending on your learning style, an online course may feel natural to you (if you learn well independently and through language skills) or more difficult (if you are a more visual or kinesthetic learner). Online courses have higher drop-out and failure rates due to some students feeling isolated and unmotivated.

© Thinkstock

Success in an online course requires commitment and motivation. Follow these guidelines:

- **Make sure you have the technology.** If you're not comfortable reading and writing on a computer, don't rush into an online course. If you have limited access to a computer or high-speed Internet connection, or have to arrange your schedule to use a computer elsewhere, you may have difficulty with the course.
- **Accept that you'll have to motivate yourself and take responsibility for your learning.** It's actually harder for some people to sit down at the computer on their own than to show up at a set time. Be sure you have enough time in your week for all course activities and try to schedule regular times online and for assignments. Evaluate the course requirements carefully before signing up.
- **Work on your writing skills.** If you are not comfortable writing, you may want to defer taking online courses until you have had more experience with college-level writing. When communicating with the instructor of an online course, follow the guidelines for effective e-mail outlined earlier.
- **Use critical thinking skills.** Most online courses involve assignments requiring problem solving and critical thinking. It's not as simple as

watching video lectures and taking multiple-choice tests. You need to actively engage with the course material.

- **Take the initiative to ask questions and seek help.** Remember, your instructor can't see you to know if you're confused or feeling frustrated understanding a lecture or reading. You must take the first step to communicate your questions.
- **Be patient.** When you ask a question or seek help with an assignment, you have to wait for a reply from your instructor. You may need to continue with a reading or writing assignment before you receive a reply. If the instructor is online at scheduled times for direct contact, take advantage of those times for immediate feedback and answers.
- **Use any opportunity to interact with other students in the course.** If you can interact with other students online, do it. Ask questions of other students and monitor their communications. If you know another person taking the same course, try to synchronize your schedules so that you can study together and talk over assignments. Students who feel they are part of a learning community always do better than those who feel isolated and on their own.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Additional benefits of getting to know and networking with instructors include receiving references and academic advice.
- Interacting with college instructors contributes to the growth and intellectual maturity that are part of what it means to be “educated.”
- Prepare in advance before meeting with an instructor and communicate respectfully, honestly, and sincerely. Your efforts will be repaid.
- It is especially important for part-time and nontraditional students to make the effort to interact with instructors.
- Follow accepted guidelines for professional use of e-mail with instructors.
- It is worthwhile speaking with an instructor when you disagree about a grade because of what you will learn in this interaction.
- Finding a mentor can be one of the most fulfilling experiences in college. Getting to know your instructors may be the first step toward find a mentor.
- Online courses involve special issues for effective learning, but you must make the effort to interact with the instructor and other students in a way that encourages your success.

CHECKPOINT EXERCISES

1. Name three benefits you might gain from talking with an instructor weeks or months after the course has ended.

2. What should you do before going to see your instructor during office hours?

3. For each of the following statements, circle T for true or F for false:

T	F	The instructor of a large lecture course will recognize you even if you sit in the back and try not to be noticed.
T	F	Instructors appreciate it when you talk to them in the kind of language you use with your best friends.
T	F	Whining and complaining is the best way to convince an instructor to change your grade.
T	F	It is acceptable to ask an instructor if you can rewrite a paper or do extra-credit work to help make up for a poor grade.

4. Write an appropriate opening for an e-mail to an instructor.

5. Think for a few minutes about all the past instructors you have had. Would you like to get to know any one of them better, perhaps as a mentor? What personality traits does this person have that would make him or her your ideal mentor? (If no

instructor you have met so far is your idea of a perfect mentor, write down the traits you hope to find in an instructor in the future.)

7.4 Public Speaking and Class Presentations

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Know how to overcome nervousness and anxiety associated with public speaking and giving class presentations.
2. Effectively use the six-step process to prepare for and deliver a class presentation.
3. Create effective visual aids for use in class presentations.
4. Work with a group to successfully plan and deliver a class presentation.

Public speaking—giving an oral presentation before a class or another group of people—is a special form of interaction common in education. You will likely be asked to give a presentation in one of your classes at some point, and your future career may also involve public speaking. It's important to develop skills for this form of communication.

Public speaking is like participating in class—sharing your thoughts, ideas, and questions with others in the group. In other ways, however, public speaking is very different. You stand in front of the class to speak, rather than from your usual seat—and for most students, that changes the psychology of the situation. You also have time outside of class to prepare your presentation, allowing you to plan it carefully—and, for many, giving more time to worry about it and experience even more anxiety!

Overcoming Anxiety

Although a few people seem to be natural public speakers, most of us feel some stage fright or anxiety about having to speak to a group, at least at first. This is completely normal. We feel like everyone is staring at us and seeing our every flaw, and we're sure we'll forget what we want to say or mess up. Take comfort from knowing that almost everyone else is dreading giving class presentations the same as you are! But you can learn to overcome your anxiety and prepare in a way that not only safely gets you through the experience but also leads to success in your presentation. The following are proven strategies for overcoming anxiety when speaking in public:

- **Understand anxiety.** Since stage fright is normal, don't try to deny that you're feeling anxious. A little anxiety can help motivate you to

prepare and do your best. Accept this aspect of the process and work to overcome it. Anxiety is usually worst just before you begin and but eases up once you've begun.

- **Understand that your audience actually wants you to succeed.** They're not looking for faults or hoping you'll fail. Other students and your instructors are on your side, not your enemy. They likely won't even see your anxiety.
- **Reduce anxiety by preparing and practicing.** The next section discusses the preparation process in more detail. The more fully you prepare and the more often you have practice, the more your anxiety will go away.
- **Focus on what you're saying, not how you're saying it.** Keep in mind that you have ideas to share, and this is what your classmates and instructors are interested in. Don't obsess about speaking, but focus on the content of your presentation. Think, for example, of how easily you share your ideas with a friend or family member, as you naturally speak your mind. The same can work with public speaking if you focus on the ideas themselves.
- **Develop self-confidence.** As you prepare, you will make notes you can refer to during the presentation. You're not going to forget what you want to say. The more you practice, the more confident you'll become.

Guidelines for Presentations

Preparing and delivering a presentation in class (or in business or other settings) is a process very similar to the learning process discussed in [Chapter 4 "Listening, Taking Notes, and Remembering"](#), [Chapter 5 "Reading to Learn"](#), and [Chapter 6 "Preparing for and Taking Tests"](#) and the writing process discussed in [Chapter 8 "Writing for Classes"](#). The process breaks down into these six basic steps:

1. Analyze your audience and goals
2. Plan, research, and organize your content
3. Draft and revise the presentation
4. Prepare speaking notes
5. Practice the presentation
6. Deliver the presentation

Step 1: Analyze Your Audience and Goals

Who will see and hear your presentation—and why? Obviously, other students and the instructor. But you still need to think about what they already know, and don't know, about your topic. If your topic relates to subject matter in class lectures and readings, consider what background information they already have and be careful

not to give a boring recap of things they already know. It may be important, however, to show how your specific topic fits in with subjects that have been discussed already in class, especially in the beginning of your presentation, but be sure to focus on your new topic.

New terms and concepts may become familiar to you while doing your research and preparation, but remember to define and explain them to other students. Consider how much explanation or examples will be needed for your audience to grasp your points. If your topic involves anything controversial or may provoke emotion, consider your audience's attitudes and choose your words carefully. Thinking about your audience will help you find ways to get their attention and keep them interested.

Be sure you are clear about the goals for the presentation. Are you primarily presenting new information or arguing for a position? Are you giving an overview or a detailed report? Review the assignment and talk with the instructor if you're unsure. Your goals guide everything in the presentation: what you say, how much you say, what order you say it in, what visual aids you use, whether you use humor or personal examples, and so forth.

Step 2: Plan, Research, and Organize Your Content

Starting with the assignment and your goals, brainstorm your topic. Jot notes on specific topics that seem important. Often you'll do reading or research to gather more information. Take notes as you would with any reading. As you research the topic at this stage, don't worry at first about how much content you are gathering. It's better to know too much and then pick out the most important things to say than to rush ahead to drafting the presentation and then realize you don't have enough material.

Organizing a presentation is similar to organizing topics in a class paper and uses the same principles. Introduce your topic and state your main idea (thesis), go into more detail about specific ideas, and conclude your presentation. Look for a logical order for the specifics in the middle. Some topics work best in chronological (time) order or with a compare-and-contrast organization. If your goal is to persuade the audience, build up to the strongest reason. Put similar ideas together and add transitions between different ideas.

While researching your topic and outlining your main points, think about visual aids that may help the presentation.

Also start thinking about how much time you have for the presentation, but don't limit yourself yet in the outline stage.

Step 3: Draft and Revise the Presentation

Unless required by the assignment, you don't need to actually write out the presentation in full sentences and paragraphs. How much you write depends on your own learning and speaking style. Some students speak well from brief phrases written in an outline, while other students find it easier to write sentences out completely. There's nothing wrong with writing the presentation out fully like a script if that helps you be sure you will say what you intend to—just so you don't actually get up and read from the script.

You can't know for sure how long a presentation will last until you rehearse it later, but you can estimate the time while drafting it. On the average, it takes two to three minutes to speak what can be written on a standard double-spaced page—but with visual aids, pauses, and audience interaction, it may take longer. While this is only a rough guide, you can start out thinking of a ten-minute presentation as the equivalent of a three to four-page paper.

Never wait until the last minute to draft your presentation. Arrange your time to prepare the first draft and then come back to it a day or two later to ask these questions:

- Am I going on too long about minor points? Could the audience get bored?
- Do I have good explanations and reasons for my main points? Do I need more data or better examples? Where would visual aids be most effective?
- Am I using the best words for this topic and this audience? Should I be more or less informal in the way I talk?
- Does it all hold together and flow well from one point to the next? Do I need a better introduction or transition when I shift from one idea to another?

Visual Aids in Presentations

Except for very short informal presentations, most presentations gain from visuals—and visual aids are often expected. If encouraged or allowed to include visuals in your presentation, plan to do so. Consider all possible types:

- Charts or graphs
- Maps
- Photos or other images
- Video clips
- Handouts (only when necessary—they can be distracting)

Use the available technology, whether it's an overhead projector, **PowerPoint**⁸ slides, a flip chart, or posters. (Talk to your instructor about resources and software for designing your visuals.) Follow these guidelines:

- Design your visuals carefully. Here are some basic rules:
 - Use a simple, neutral background. A light-colored background with text in a dark color works best for words; a dark background used like matting works best for photos.
 - Minimize the amount of text in visuals—more than eight words per slide is usually too much. Avoid simply presenting word outlines of what you are saying. Make sure text is large enough for the audience to read.
 - Don't use more than two pictures in a slide, and use two only to make a direct comparison. Montages are hard to focus on and distract the viewer from what you're saying. Use images only when they support your presentation; don't use clip art just as decoration.
 - Don't put a table of numbers in a visual aid. If you need to illustrate numerical data, use a graph. (Microsoft Excel can make them for you easily.)
 - Don't use sound effects. Use a very brief recording only if directly related to your main points.
 - Don't use visual special effects such as dissolves, spins, box-outs, or other transitions. They are distracting. Use animation sparingly and only if it helps make a point.

8. The name of a specific software presentation program (within Microsoft Office) used in many educational and business settings to produce and deliver “slides” containing text and graphics to a group via a projected computer screen.

- Don't use so many visuals or move through them so quickly that the audience gives all its attention to them rather than to you.
- Practice your presentation using your visual aids, because they affect your timing.
- Explain visuals when needed but not when they're obvious.
- Keep your eyes on your audience, only briefly glancing at visuals to stay in synch with them.
- Don't hand out a printout of your visuals. Your audience should keep their eyes on you instead of fiddling around with paper.

Step 4: Prepare Speaking Notes

As mentioned earlier, it's not a good idea to read your presentation from a written page rather than *deliver* it. To keep your audience's attention, it's important to make eye contact with them and to use a normal speaking voice—and you can't do this if you keep your eyes on a written script.

Speaking notes are a brief outline for your presentation. You might write them on index cards or sheets of paper. Include important facts and data as well as keywords for your main ideas, but don't write too much. (If you forget things later when you start practicing, you can always add more to your outline then.) Be sure to number your cards or pages to prevent a last-minute mix-up.

Think especially about how to open and close your presentation, because these two moments have the most impact of the whole presentation. Use the opening to capture the audience's attention, but be sure it is appropriate for your audience and the goals. Here are some possibilities for your opening:

- A striking fact or example (illustrating an issue or a problem)
- A brief interesting or humorous anecdote (historical, personal, or current event)
- A question to the audience
- An interesting quotation

Then relate the opening to your topic and your main point and move into the body of the presentation.

Your closing mirrors the opening. Transition from your last point to a brief summary that pulls your ideas together. You might end with a challenge to the audience, a strong statement about your topic, or a personal reflection on what you have been saying. Just make sure you have a final sentence planned so that you don't end up uncomfortably fumbling around at the end (“Well, I guess that ends my presentation”).

Step 5: Practice the Presentation

Practice may be the most important step. It is also the best way to get over stage fright and gain confidence.

Practice first in an empty room where you imagine people sitting, so that you can move your eyes around the room to this “audience.” The first time through, focus on putting your outlined notes into full sentences in your natural speaking voice. Don't read your notes aloud. Glance down at your notes only briefly and then look up immediately around the room. Practice two or three times just to find the right words to explain your points and feel more comfortable working with your notes. Time yourself, but don't obsess over your presentation being the exact length required. If your presentation is much too long, however, adjust it now in your notes so that you don't start memorizing things that you might accidentally still say later on even though you cut them from your notes.

Once you feel good speaking from your notes, practice to add some more polish to your delivery. You might want to record or videotape your presentation or ask a friend or roommate to watch your presentation. Pay attention to these aspects of how you speak:

- Try to speak in your natural voice, not in a monotone as if you were just reading aloud. If you will be presenting in a large room without a microphone, you will need to speak louder than usual, but still try to use a natural voice.
- In usual conversation, we speed up and slow down and vary the intensity of our words to show how we feel about what we're saying. Practice changes in your delivery style to emphasize key points.
- Don't keep looking at your notes. It's fine if you use words that are different from those you wrote down—the more you rehearse without looking at your notes, the more natural sounding you will be.
- Be sure you can pronounce all new words and technical terms correctly. Practice saying them slowly and clearly to yourself until you can say them naturally.

- Don't forget transitions. Listeners need a cue when you're moving to a new idea. Practice phrases such as "Another important reason for this is..." or "Now let's move on to *why* this is so...."
- Watch out for all those little "filler" words people use so often, such as "like," "you know," "well," and "uh." They're very distracting to most audiences. Listen to or watch your tape to see if you are using these fillers or ask your friend to point it out.
- Pay attention to body language when practicing. Stand up straight and tall in every practice session so that you become used to it. Unless you have to stand at a podium to use a fixed microphone in your presentation, practice moving around while you speak; this helps keep the audience watching you. Use hand and arm gestures if they are natural for you, but don't try to make up gestures for the presentation because they will look phony. Most important, keep your eyes moving over the audience. Practice smiling and pausing at key points.
- Finally, it's a good idea to be ready in case of an accident. Most likely your presentation will go smoothly, you'll stay on track with your notes, and your PowerPoint slides will work fine, but sometimes a mishap happens. Be ready to joke about it, rather than becoming flustered. If the computer fails and you lose your visuals, say something like, "Well, that's a shame, I had some really great photos to show you!" If you drop your index cards or notes, or accidentally skip ahead in your presentation and then have to backtrack, make a joke: "Sorry about that, I was so excited to get to my next point that I'm afraid I lost control there for a moment!" Let your audience laugh with you—they'll still be on your side, and you can defuse the incident and move on without becoming more nervous.

Step 6: Deliver the Presentation

Be sure to get enough sleep and eat a healthy breakfast. Don't drink too much caffeine or else you'll become hyper and nervous. Wear your favorite—and appropriate—clothing and comfortable shoes.

Remember, your audience is on your side! If you're still nervous before your turn, take a few deep breaths. Rehearse your opening lines in your mind. Smile as you move to the front of the room, looking at your audience. You'll see some friendly faces smiling back encouragingly. As you start the presentation, move your eyes among those giving you a warm reception—and if you see some student looking bored or doing something else, just ignore them. But don't focus on any one person in the audience for too long, which could make them nervous or cause them to look away.

Don't keep looking at your watch or a clock: If your rehearsal times were close to your assigned time, your presentation will be also. If you do notice that you're running behind schedule, it may be that you're saying too much out of nervousness. Use your notes to get back on track and keep the pace moving. But it's better to deliver your presentation naturally and fluidly and be a bit long or short than to try to change your words and end up sounding unnatural.

At the closing, deliver your last line with confidence, sweeping your eyes over the audience. If appropriate, ask if there are any questions. When you're done, pause, smile, say "Thank you," and walk back to your seat.

Later on, ask other students and your instructor for comments. Be open minded—don't just ask for praise. If you hear a suggestion for improvement, file that in your memory for next time.

Group Presentations

You may be assigned to give a presentation in a small group. The six-step process discussed previously works for group presentations, too, although group dynamics often call for additional planning and shared responsibilities:

1. Schedule a group meeting as soon as possible to get started. Don't let another student put things off. Explain that you're too busy and won't have time at the last minute.
2. Begin by analyzing your audience and your goals together as a group to make sure everyone understands the assignment the same. Discuss who should do what. While everyone should talk about what content to include, from here onward, you will take on specialized roles. One or

Figure 7.7



You may use computerized visual aids when you give a presentation to a class.

© Thinkstock

more may begin research and gathering information. Others who are good writers may volunteer to draft the presentation, while one or more others may develop the visual aids. Those who have public speaking experience may volunteer to do all or most of the speaking (unless the assignment requires everyone to have a speaking role). You also need a team leader to keep everyone on schedule, organize meetings, and so on. The best team leader is an even-tempered student with good social skills, who can motivate everyone to cooperate.

3. Steps 2 and 3 can likely be carried out individually with assigned tasks, but group members should stay in touch. For example, the person developing the visuals should be talking to those doing the researching and drafting to see what visuals are needed and get started finding or creating them.
4. Before preparing notes in step 4, meet again to go over the content and plan for visuals. Everyone should be comfortable with the plan so far. Make final decisions about who will do each section of the presentation. Set the time for each segment. Then speakers should prepare their own speaking notes. Let someone with strong speaking skills open or close the presentation (or both), with others doing the other parts.
5. The whole group should be present for practice sessions in step 5, even if not everyone is speaking. Those not speaking should take notes and give feedback. If one student is doing most of the presenting, an alternate should be chosen in case the first choice is sick on the scheduled day. The alternate also needs to practice.
6. During the delivery, especially if using technology for visual aids, one student should manage the visuals while others do the presenting. If several students present different segments, plan the transition from one to another so that the presentation keeps flowing without pauses.

Additional Resources

For Class Presentations

Using PowerPoint. A step-by-step illustrated tutorial for learning how to create effective visual presentations with PowerPoint.

<http://www.education.umd.edu/blt/tcp/powerpoint.html>

“How to Give a Bad Talk.” A humorous look (with some very good advice) on what *not* to do when preparing for and giving a class presentation.

<http://pages.cs.wisc.edu/~markhill/conference-talk.html#badtalk>

Class presentations on YouTube. Search YouTube with the phrase “class presentation” and look for video examples of actual students giving class presentations. Observing and critiquing the presentations of other students are good ways to get started preparing your own and learning from others. Here’s a good example of a student group presentation on a topic we can all relate to (how body language works):

[\(click to see video\)](#)

In this presentation, take note of

- how students make good eye contact with the audience;
- the first student’s natural speaking voice and tone, and how she did not have to use her note cards very often (obviously she practiced well);
- some differences among these students;
- the use of PowerPoint slides within the presentation (some better than others);
- the appropriate occasional use of humor;
- the division of presentation responsibilities within the student group;
- each presenter’s interaction with the audience.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Public speaking skills are important because you will likely give presentations in class and perhaps in a future job.
- Overcome anxiety about public speaking by understanding your feelings, preparing well and practicing your delivery, and focusing on your subject.
 - Follow a six-step process to prepare and deliver a presentation:
 1. Analyze your audience and goals
 2. Plan, research, and organize your content
 3. Draft and revise the presentation
 4. Prepare speaking notes
 5. Practice the presentation
 6. Deliver the presentation and seek feedback
- Use visual aids to support a presentation, creating visuals that are relevant, attractive, and powerful.
- The success of a group presentation depends on effective group meetings, successful division of roles, and repeated group practices.

CHECKPOINT EXERCISES

1. If you have given a class presentation in the past, what worked best for you? (If you have not given a presentation yet as a student, what aspect do you think will be most difficult for you?)

2. Name the two most important things you can do to reduce anxiety about a class presentation you will have to give.

3. For each of the following statements about class presentations, circle T for true or F for false:

T	F	Although you are delivering the presentation to the class, your real audience is your instructor, so you don't need to waste time defining terms and concepts he or she already knows.
T	F	Organizing a presentation or speech is similar to organizing topics in a paper you write for class.
T	F	When creating visual aids, put as many photos as you can in each PowerPoint slide to have the strongest impact.
T	F	In case your memory goes blank while giving a presentation, write the full presentation out so that you can read it aloud.

4. Describe how best to use body language (facial expressions, eye movements, gestures, etc.) when giving a presentation.

-
5. If you were assigned along with three other students to give a group presentation in the class using this textbook, what would be your preferred role in the preparation stages? Your least preferred role? If you had to take your least preferred role, what single thing would you want to work hardest on to make the presentation successful?
-
-
-
-
-

7.5 Chapter Activities

Chapter Takeaways

- Actively engaging in your college education is essential for success, including attending classes, participating, and communicating with your instructors.
- Students benefit in several important ways when they participate in class and feel free to ask questions.
- Successful participation in class and interaction with your instructor begin with fully preparing for class and working on communication skills.
- Networking with instructors has additional benefits for your future and may lead to finding a helpful mentor.
- Both impromptu speaking in class and more formal class presentations help develop key skills.
- Learning to work well in a group is an element of college success.

CHAPTER REVIEW

1. List as many benefits of participating in class as you can think of.

2. Consider the instructors in your current classes. Which instructor have you spoken with the least (in or outside of class)?

Are you hesitant to speak up in this class—or to see the instructor outside of class? Why?

When you have a question for this instructor about an assignment or reading, which form of communication would be most appropriate?

3. List ways to be prepared if you have a question to ask in a large lecture class.

-
-
-
4. Think ahead through to the end of your college experience. If you were to develop a mentoring relationship with one of your present instructors, what sorts of things might you talk about in the future with that instructor after the current class has ended?

-
-
-
-
5. Review the six stages for preparing and giving a class presentation. Which stage(s) do you feel you personally need to pay special attention to next time you are assigned a presentation?

What specifically can you plan to do to ensure your success in those stages in your next presentation?

OUTSIDE THE BOOK

Choose your current class with the largest enrollment and decide to ask the instructor a question in the next class or during office hours. Prepare by carefully reviewing your class and reading notes and select a subject area that you do not feel confident you fully understand. Focus in on a specific topic and write down a question whose answer would help you better understand the topic. Go to class prepared to ask that question if it is relevant to the day's discussion or lecture; if it is not relevant, visit your instructor during office hours and ask the question. If this is your first time talking with this instructor, remember to introduce yourself and explain your interest in the topic as you ask the question. Remember that your second goal is to begin establishing a relationship with this instructor.

MAKE AN ACTION LIST

Attending Class

I sometimes don't go to class because

I'll keep myself motivated to go to every class by

Participating in Class

I tend to participate most in this class:

I need to make an effort to participate more in this class:

I need to participate more because

I will take the following steps to be ready to ask a question:

Attending Lecture Classes

I tend to do these nonproductive things if I feel bored in a lecture:

I will work on staying more actively engaged in lectures in these ways:

Talking with Instructors Outside of Class

I have not yet spoken to this instructor outside of class:

Within the next two weeks, I will stop by during office hours to talk about the following:

This instructor's office hours are

Using E-mail

The following are my worst e-mail habits:

The following current instructors prefer student questions through e-mail:

I will follow these professional e-mail practices:

Speaking Publicly

I am nervous about giving class presentations because

I realize that the best way to overcome my anxiety about public speaking and succeed in class presentations is to

