

## Raise Your Hand if You Have Questions

In traditional face-to-face classes, it's easy to know when students have questions. Typically, we don't even need to wait for students to raise their hands because we see a sea of blank stares and bewildered faces.

In online classrooms, knowing when students are confused isn't so easy to recognize. We can't see their perplexed faces when they read directions. If they don't understand a concept when they watch an online lecture, replaying the video means they only see and hear the same explanation; there's no opportunity for further clarification.

The problem is this: when online students struggle, the only way they can get help is to ask for it. However, all too often, they don't seek the help they need.

### Why Online Students Don't Always Seek Help

- **Students don't realize they need help until it's too late.** If students procrastinate, they may not realize their confusion until it's too late. By then, they may not have enough time to ask a question and receive an answer before the assignment due date.
- **Students feel they know enough to complete the assignment.** Some students don't want to take the time to learn more because they feel they have enough knowledge about the subject to complete the assignment at hand. This is especially true of students in required general education courses. They prefer to devote their time to courses in their major instead of asking questions about a topic that may be of little interest to them.
- **Students don't know how to ask.** While students may have questions, they may not always know how to clearly and succinctly express their concerns in writing.
- **Students are afraid to look foolish.** Students often feel that contacting their professors reveals their lack of understanding or ignorance, and they simply don't want to appear like they aren't grasping the subject or aren't trying hard enough.
- **Students are afraid to bother the professor.** Because the professor has provided course materials, sometimes students feel that it is their job to figure the rest out on their own. They don't want to inconvenience the

professor by asking for any type of clarification or assistance.

If online students are reluctant to seek assistance, how do we encourage them to "raise their hands" and ask for help?

Our goal should not be to recreate the face-to-face classroom. As online professors, we aren't physically available to answer questions before or after class, and we can't pause in the middle of a pre-recorded lecture to answer students' specific questions. What we *can* do, however, is create safe spaces within the online classroom to encourage students to reach out to us when they require help.

### Creating Safe Spaces to Ask Questions

- **Establish rapport.** At times, establishing rapport in an online classroom can be difficult. However, we can help students feel more comfortable by including welcome emails or videos and informal, personal communications. If students are comfortable with their professors, they're more likely to seek help when they need it.
- **Remind students that their professor is still on the other side of the screen.** In traditional classrooms, students only need to look to the front of the room to find the professor. Yet, even in face-to-face courses, we remind the class how to find our office and encourage them to visit us during office hours. In an online course, our contact information is listed on the syllabus. However, by posting an announcement, a forum note, or an email, we can remind everyone that we are there to help them throughout the semester—and we didn't just disappear after sending welcome emails.
- **Distinguish between help and clarification.** Students who request *help* need assistance understanding course content. Students who request *clarification* need an explanation about directions or basic concepts. By distinguishing the difference early in the semester, we let students know that it's acceptable to contact us for help and for clarification. Students who feel embarrassed or fear feeling foolish may shy away from contacting their professors if they have a quick question, such as whether they should complete all of the problems in a chapter or only the problems at the end of the unit. If they understand the difference between help and clarification, students are more likely seek assistance.

- **Create Question-and-Answer discussion forum.** A forum designed specifically as a space to ask questions allows students to get help from their professor or from classmates. This open discussion helps students realize they aren't alone with their questions and, once they see that others are also posting questions, they may no longer feel as though they're "bothering" their professor. This strategy also offers an added benefit: it fosters engagement and builds community, enabling the class to work together to solve problems.
- **Require questions as part of a discussion.** There are usually students who have reservations about contacting their professors via email or through a discussion forum. However, if students are required to post questions as part of a low-stakes assignment, they will. Granted, there may be times when these exchanges become somewhat forced, but this type of forum provides students with another avenue to ask the questions they might not otherwise ask. They also become more comfortable formulating questions and seeking the help they need. This can encourage students to contact their professors outside of the required format.
- **Create an "Ask Your Questions Here" space on assignments.** Professors who use worksheets or other similar assignment formats can create a section at the end of the document designed specifically as a space to ask questions about the assignment. I create this space at the end of graphic organizers so students can inquire about any aspect of their essay. This allows students to easily contact me, without the added step of posting elsewhere online, and it allows me to quickly clarify any indicated confusion.

As teachers, we encourage participation and remind students to seek help and clarification throughout the course and, because we've established a welcoming environment, students may ask questions—and lots of them. Our goal, though, isn't simply to have students post any random course-related thought that pops into their minds at any given time. Over time, we want to teach students to work independently, become problem solvers and critical thinkers, and learn to answer many of their own questions.

### How to Help Students Learn to Answer Their Own Questions

- **Point students in the right direction.** Online students are faced with large chunks of content and, if they can't find information quickly, their first instinct might be to post basic questions such as "When are your office hours?" or "How long does our essay need to be?" Rather than answer these simple requests, we can point students to the syllabus, assignment guidelines, or other course material so they can locate the information themselves. Students will soon realize that they will receive guidance, not answers, and will

be more likely to look up information themselves if they have similar questions later in the semester.

- **Ask guided questions.** Struggling students who don't know where to begin may often ask questions such as "I don't know what to write about. Can you give me an idea?" Or, they may ask "What's a good subject for my project?" In some instances, they may hope for the easy way out and hope we'll give them a topic so they can proceed with their assignment. By asking guided questions to learn more about students' interests, current plans, and possible goals for their project, we force them to meet us halfway and to not merely depend on us to solve their problems. Again, this strategy helps students work through their own misunderstandings and it helps improve their critical-thinking skills.

Though students may initially ask a variety of questions we know they can find the answer to, with our guidance, students will learn to resolve these issues on their own, yet be encouraged to seek help when they truly need our assistance.

### The Benefits of Asking (and Answering) Questions

Through inquiries, not only do students ultimately submit improved assignments, they also learn how to identify their concerns, formulate questions, and get the help they need. These questions (and our responses) help students become self-directed learners and find answers on their own.

How can answering students' questions make us better teachers? First, it causes us to create connections with students and guide them in their learning. Additionally, receiving five emails about the same set of unclear directions helps us rework our ideas to improve clarity, and receiving a handful of posts asking for clarification about a concept in our online lecture lets us know that we should consider adding a more detailed explanation in our next video.

All of this, of course, ultimately benefits not only our current students, but our future students as well, because everyone benefits when students are willing to raise their hands and ask questions.

*What strategies do you have for making the online classroom a safe and welcoming space for students? Let us know in the comment section or on [Facebook](#)!*

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