

The Best Approach

Methods and language for approaching in a formal situation

When you want to talk with someone in a formal situation (a student-teacher meeting is considered a formal situation), starting out right (your “approach”) is very important. A good approach will prejudice the person in your favor, and an improper approach will prejudice the person against you. Here are a couple examples of wrong ways to start.

“Are you busy?”

If you see that the person you want to talk with is doing something, “Are you busy?” is a meaningless question. The person will be tempted to answer, “Yes, I am.”

“I have a question.”

A simple and unwelcoming “Oh” is the answer that you might get in reply to the statement, “I have a question.” Simply stating that you have a question has the same effect as telling the person that he or she exists only to serve you. In effect, it’s an indirect command.

Before you approach a person in a formal setting, plan *what* you’re going to say and *how* you’re going to say it.

When you approach the person, first say, “I see you’re busy, but...” and then follow through with one of these expressions. (Memorize at least one of them.)

- ... I wonder if I could talk with you for a minute.
- ... could I have a couple minutes of your time?
- ... could I ask you a couple questions?
- ... I wonder if you could spare me some time.

(If the person looks *very* busy, you can add these expressions after any of the expressions above:

- ... Or I could come back later if you’d like.
- ... Or would you like me to come back later?)

At this point, the person should say, “Of course, how can I help you?”

When the person agrees to help, say “Thank you,” and then state the general reason for your visit. (Memorize at least one of these.)

- I was hoping I could get some help with X (e.g., tomorrow’s assignment).
- I wonder if you could give me some help with X. . .
- I’m having some difficulty with X (e.g., my homework), and was wondering if you could help me with it.
- You asked me to come and talk with you about X.

After you introduce what you want to talk about, provide *all of the details*.

- I’m having difficulty figuring out whether to use simple past tense or present perfect in certain situations. Like, when Bob asked David...
- In your homework handout it says that we’re supposed to read pages 4 through 6, but in the workbook the article ends on page 7. Did you really want us to stop at page 6?
- Well, you see, we were supposed to turn in this homework in class today, but I’m wondering if you would let me turn it in a little later. I did my homework last night, but I wasn’t able to submit it in class because my dog ate it for breakfast this morning, and I rewrote it, but then somebody stole my school bag on the bus, and when I got to school...

And when you’re finished...

- Thank you. You’ve been very helpful.
- Thanks a lot for your help. / I appreciate your help. (NOT “I appreciate you.”)

Getting Somebody to Do Something...the *right* way

SITUATION: A student comes to Mr. White's office with homework that is one day late. He wants Mr. White to accept the homework. What do you think Mr. White will say in each dialog (the last line in each dialog)? The answers are below.

A

Student: Mr. White, this is my homework.
Mr. White: So?
Student: It was due last class.
Mr. White: ...

B

Student: Mr. White, I see you're busy, but I wonder if I could have a minute of your time.
Mr. White: Certainly. How can I help you?
Student: Thank you. I did my homework on time, but I forgot to bring it to class. I was hoping that you wouldn't mind if I turned it in late.
Mr. White: ...

C

Student: Mr. White, I see you're busy, but I wonder if I could have a minute of your time.
Mr. White: Certainly. How can I help you?
Student: Thank you. This is the homework that was due yesterday.
Mr. White: ...

ANSWERS

A: He'll say "So?" again.

The student should have prefaced her business with 1) acknowledgement that Mr. White is busy and then 2) a request for his attention, and then tell Mr. White the point of your visit. Avoid hints (some students only show the paper!). Don't make the person ask and guess.

B: Mr. White will probably say, "All right, but be sure to turn it in on time in the future."

This is the best of the three dialogs, because the student

1) prefaced her business with the appropriate language,

2) said what should first be said (in this case, the fact that the homework was done on time, because it will help avoid a negative attitude on the part of Mr. White),

3) explained the situation ("forgot"), and then

4) presented her request in appropriate language.

C: He'll feel like saying, "So?"

Again, don't make Mr. White guess.