Handling Office Hours

Resource Packet

Engineering GSI/IA
Teaching Orientations
Opinions of Office Hours 3
Logistics and Policies for Office Hours 4
Things to Consider When Setting Up Office Hours 5
Formats of Office Hours 6
Common Issues Affecting Office Hours 7
E-mail Expectations 8
Opinions of Office Hours

What is the Purpose of Office Hours?
- Follow-up on course materials.
- Answer questions about the homework or other course material.
- Teach the students good study habits.
- Help the students with exam preparation.
- Clarify information from lecture and elaborate on specific points.
- Provide additional mentoring aside from course issues; on life, graduate school, potential jobs, etc.
- For individualized learning.
- To act as a resource for students.

Why Would a Student Attend Office Hours?
- A student needs help completing the homework or answering homework questions.
- The GSI/IA runs effective office hours by providing assistance to everyone who comes.
- The GSI/IA can explain material covered in class better than the professor can.
- The student cannot work with the professor.
- The GSI/IA provides answers to the homework problem.
- Students go to office hours to talk to other students in the class to get their perspective or help; office hours act as a community meeting place.
- The GSI/IA encourages students to go to office hours.
- The one-on-one interaction during office hours may help students clarify their questions and learn better.

Why Would a Student NOT Attend Office Hours?
- The student likes to study independently and do homework on his or her own.
- There is a stigma about asking for help.
- The office hours are often too crowded.
- Students are uncomfortable with the GSI/IA (the GSI/IA can be condescending, intimidating, etc).
- Confusion about the time and place, students do not know where the office is and/or the GSI/IA has not made it explicitly clear what time they hold office hours.
- Inconvenient times for the student (early Monday morning).
- The GSI/IA does not use the time efficiently (e.g. the GSI/IA spends a lot of time on trivial points; the GSI/IA only answers one student’s questions at a time).
Logistics and Policies for Office Hours

_Suggestion: talk to your teaching faculty member._

1. How many office hours per week will you hold? Will you have in-person vs. virtual office hours? Will they all be in one day or spread out across multiple days?

2. When will you hold your office hours? Will they be on the night before the homework is due? Will you hold additional hours before exams?

3. Where will you hold your office hours? Will you find a classroom with blackboard, be in a computer lab, or your personal office? Is there an official GSI office for holding office hours?

4. What is your e-mail policy? Will you provide your phone number to students? Will you accept Facebook friendship requests from your students? _Suggestion: let the students know of these boundaries early._

5. What expectations do you have for students who come to your office hours? What happens if a student just wants you to give out homework answers? Will you ask them to prepare questions ahead of time?

6. How will you fairly and efficiently handle a large group of students during office hours? What happens if at the end of your office hours, there are students who still have not been helped?

7. Will you hold extra office hours at students’ requests?

8. How responsive will you be via email? _Suggestion: establish an email response policy. For example, set email format for students, e.g., include course title in email subject, and have them number their questions. In turn, you will respond within 24 hours._

In addition to your own policies above, familiarize yourself with your instructor’s policies such that yours do not conflict with or compromise his/her policies. Also familiarize yourself with university policies (e.g., email policy, academic integrity, GEO contract, course policy, confidentiality requirements, prerequisite policy, etc.).

Finally, what would you do if you started to spend more than your appointment fraction per week?
Things to Consider When Setting Up Office Hours

- Coordination with other GSI(s)/IA(s) and professor – if possible, stagger office hours so that you don’t have your office hours on the same day or at the same time.

- Holding separate office hours for review or conceptual questions and homework questions—this can help students who are struggling with the material not get drowned out by a myriad of homework questions.

- Check with the primary instructor how much help you are allowed to give students—can you discuss the actual homework problems or just problems similar to the homework problems? Are you allowed to tell them when they’re on the right track or when they’ve made a mistake? If multiple GSIs/IAS, discuss how they conduct office hours, how they guide students in problem solving, and how much information and help you provide (in the interest of consistency and fairness).

- If you have a class with projects, consider breaking some of your office hours up into small appointments so that one group cannot dominate or take a majority of your time while others are neglected.
Formats of Office Hours

One-on-One/Small Groups
Pros
- Individual attention
- Less intimidating to students who don’t want to ask questions in front of their peers
- Gain insights into the class that might not be gained by addressing them in a large group
- More comfortable for GSIs/IAs who do not like to formally lecture
Cons
- Less efficient than meeting with large number of students.
- Less consistent information delivery.
- Repetitive when same questions are asked
- Sometimes difficult to resist simply giving answers

Discussion/Review Session
Pros
- Service many students simultaneously in a time efficient manner
- Students are reassured that they are not the only one that did not understand “that” concept in class
- Stimulate students to learn from each other
Cons
- Students can get answers simply by coming to office hours, without trying the problems themselves
- Must manage excess collaboration depending on course guidelines (e.g. must all work be done independently)

Impromptu Face-to-Face or Email/CTools Chat
Pros
- Students appreciate availability
- Email allows for written explanation which can be good if there is a language barrier for either the GSI/IA or student
Cons
- Possibly intrusive
- Can pose a time management issue
- Number of student emails can be overwhelming.
- Difficult to express mathematical terms.
Common Issues Affecting Office Hours

Common Office Hours Problems
- Room is too crowded.
- Some students are intimidated by the GSI/IA.
- Students want easy answers to the homework problems.
- Layout of the room creates difficulties for the GSI/IA to manage the students.
- Limited resources such as time and space which degrade the experience of the student.
- E-mail office hours, students constantly emailing their questions to the GSI/IA.
- Students expect GSIs/IAs to redeliver entire lecture.
- Unprepared students not starting homework assignments before coming in, not attending lectures, etc.
- Students trying to get on the good side of the GSI/IA to get a good grade.

Ways to Address Issues:

GSI Office is Too Crowded
- Change rooms if possible.
- Create problem teams (groups of students with the same question).
- Set up specific rules and stick to them.
- Students put names on a board for help and a time limit can be imposed to ask a question, then when their time is up they have to submit to the next person in line and put their name back on the board.
- Encourage use of email for simple questions.

Student is intimidated by the GSI/IA
- Smile.
- Use the students’ names. Every GSI/IA will have access to a photo roster of their students on Wolverine Access that can be used to look up students’ names.
- Acknowledgement of the material’s difficulties, relate to the students that you had a similar problem when taking this subject.
- Use a variety of examples that students can directly relate to.
- Encourage people to ask questions.

Students Who Want the Answer Only
- Be firm and tell students to work out questions prior to meeting with you.
- Ask them questions about lectures, etc.
- Reiterate the purpose of office hours.
- Communicate that you are on their side but don’t provide the answers (remind them that you are not part of their open book exam policy).
Email Expectations

Email is an efficient way to answer many students’ questions. However, as a GSI/IA it is important to establish “ground rules” for student e-mails so that your students know what they can expect from you in regards to answering e-mails. Think about the following issues when creating your e-mail policy.

When will you answer email?
Think about when and how often you will check and respond to e-mails. Will you check them on the weekend? Will you answer them the day homework is due? Also if you will only check your course e-mail once each day around 7:00 PM, you may want to let your students know so they can have their questions to you and they won’t be stuck waiting until the next day for a response if they e-mail you around 8:00 PM.

Which questions are appropriate to handle by e-mail?
While e-mail can be an easy way to respond to “quick” questions, complicated conceptual questions can often be explained much better in person. Also, it is very difficult to write mathematical formulas and expressions via e-mail. Think about which questions you will handle by e-mail and which would be better handled by having a student talk to you during office hours or a few minutes before or after class.

How quickly will you respond to e-mail?
Let students know that you will answer their e-mails within some target time, and let them know what to do if they don’t get an answer within that time frame. This can help avoid the redundant “I’m not sure if you got my last e-mail” e-mails, but can also help ensure that students receive timely answers to their e-mails.

Should you filter your GSI/IA e-mail?
Asking students to add your course name to the subject of their e-mail can allow you to have their e-mail filtered to a separate folder (for instance, instead of having the subject “Quick Homework Questions”, have students instead write “IOE 310: Quick Homework Questions”). This provides some separation between your personal and research related e-mail and that you are answering for your GSI/IA responsibilities.