

Taking Time: quick tips for dealing with “time” in US university life

Time is money; Don't lose or waste your time; We don't have time to kill; Spend your time wisely; I'm so pressed for time; Where did the time go?

The US is an extremely time-conscious culture (note the many time idioms above), and most events in daily life are controlled “by the clock”. For example, appointments, meetings, and classes begin and end at the scheduled time, projects and papers have rigid deadlines, and people’s schedules are fully booked.

Many international students have trouble adjusting to this way of dealing with time, and need guidance on how to deal with the various time issues that typically occur in campus life: e.g., arriving for classes and appointments, dealing with scheduling conflicts, what to do if you are late, etc. Students who deal with time differently than expected in the US culture might be misperceived as irresponsible, lacking interest in academic issues, unprofessional or even rude.

As a basic rule, both classes and appointments are expected to start on time (and classes also end on time; students probably have to rush to another class). For appointments, you should arrive a few minutes early (and even earlier if this is a high-stakes appointment such as meeting with the dean, job interview, etc.)

Strategies to use when late

Individual appointments and meetings

- If you realize that you are going to be late (e.g., for an OIE advisor appointment), call or send email letting people know that you are running late and how soon you might be able to be there.
- If you arrive late, you need to first apologize and then give a brief reason why you were late. Not doing so would be seen as rude and disrespectful of the other person’s time.
- I’m so sorry for getting here late. The bus was stuck in traffic due to the construction on Fifth Avenue.
- If you have completely missed an appointment, send an email or call to apologize (and remember to give a reason)

Classes

- If you arrive late for classes, you need to use a completely different strategy than for appointments. First, *your arrival should not disturb the class*. Enter as quietly as possible (do not knock on the door) and quietly find a seat (if you are lucky, the door will be at the back of the room). If the teacher catches your eye, look apologetic, but don’t say anything unless asked. Note: use judgement. If you have missed more than a reasonable amount (e.g., 50% of an ICC seminar), don’t join the class.
- If you need to leave class early, mention this briefly to the instructor in advance (*Sorry, but I’ll need to leave 10 minutes early today*), and then, if possible, sit close to the door. When you leave, do so quietly (this is not the time to give a reason).

Culturally appropriate reasons for being late

International students sometimes have trouble knowing what are culturally appropriate reasons to give for being late. As a general rule, give some detail, but don't offer excessive or overly personal detail. For example, a student once sent us email to explain why she had missed her appointment: *I had a fight with my husband last night and then couldn't sleep all night because I was so upset* (much too detailed and personal!). She could simply have said that she didn't feel well or that she had overslept. On the other hand, *I was talking to friend* is not a reason to be late for an appointment.

Here are some examples of appropriate excuses:

- *My bus didn't come on time.*
- *I left the house late because of a family issue.*
- *I was stuck in the lab because my experiment took longer than expected.*

Dealing with schedule conflicts

Meeting with an advisor or professor is a common reason why students might be late for another appointment or class on campus. Students from some cultures feel that it would be disrespectful to tell a professor that they have a schedule conflict. However, in the US, schedules are honored, and people expect you to tell them about other time commitments (in fact, it would be disrespectful of "time" and unprofessional not to tell them).

Politely ending an appointment

This is a special challenge for many international students. For example, if a meeting with a professor goes longer than expected and conflicts with your next appointment or class, it is your responsibility to explain the situation and get to the next event on time.

- *I'm sorry, but I didn't realize we'd have so much to talk about today. Unfortunately, I have an OIE appointment at 3:00. I'll have to leave in about 5 minutes. Do you want to reschedule so that we can continue this discussion?*

Scheduling appointments

When scheduling appointments, it is your responsibility to tell people (even your advisor) the times you are free and the times you are not free.

- Advisor: *Let's meet next Tuesday at 1:30.*
Student: *Sorry, but I'm attending an ICC workshop at that time. I could meet you any time after 3:00, or during the morning on Wednesday. What works best for you?*