

getting good grades

The simplest, most practical thing you can do to improve your grade is to write a complete draft of your paper, give it to your professor and after she's had a chance to work through it, get her to tell you the most important things that are wrong with it, and the best way to go about improving it. Very few students ever think to do this, but it's the closest thing to a magic wand we've got available to us. Generally, the better you're doing, the harder it is to make an improvement, so a single consultation won't necessarily turn an A- paper into an A, but it is likely to turn a F into a C or even B. Gross errors are easy to spot, and easy to explain to a firsttime philosophy student. Since even the brightest student can fall into even the most elementary errors, it is not impossible for an F paper to turn into an A paper after a single consultation.

The great virtue of consulting your professor is that it enables you to get your paper looked at before it has to be graded, so the professor can tell you everything that's wrong with it without giving it a grade. However, getting the most out of your visits to your professor takes a little planning on your part, so here are the main things you should worry about.

1. Give the professor a real draft of your paper, not something you threw together in a hurry, and turn it in before your appointment if possible. DO NOT edit or polish this draft, but make sure it's as clear, as precise and as thorough as possible.
2. Tell the professor exactly what you want out of the interview. Tell her the paper's only a rough draft and that she's not to worry about spelling or grammar or anything else other than philosophical content.
3. Don't come without at least some of your own written work for the professor to look at. We're not clairvoyant, and we need to know what you're thinking in order to know what help you need. You have to do some work on your own before seeing the professor because you have to have some ideas for this process to work. Otherwise, it may not be any more than a rehash of the lectures. (And if you didn't get it then, why should you get it now?) It's always better to see the professor than not to, but visits where the student has done at least some work on his own are nearly always helpful, while visits where he hasn't are usually a waste of time.
4. Don't worry about being "ripped to shreds." It's not particularly fun to have your work criticized, but the whole point of visiting the professor is to find the flaws in a paper that's otherwise as good as you can make it. You can save yourself some unpleasantness by reminding the professor that you only want to know the most important problems, and that once you're set straight on those you'd like the opportunity to find the others for yourself. Remember that no professor can possibly find all the flaws in a paper on one consultation. Just because the professor didn't talk about it doesn't mean it's brilliant, or even that it's ok. When you've fixed the major errors, look through for others. It wouldn't be a bad idea to take your next draft in for another consultation.
5. Give the professor a real draft of your paper, not something you threw together in a hurry. Turn your draft in before your appointment if possible.
6. DO NOT edit or polish this draft.
7. Tell your professor to ignore problems in spelling or grammar. (It's a rough draft.)
8. Don't take the criticism personally.
9. Ask your professor what the most fundamental problem is, and fix that.
10. Look for other problems on your own.

The essence of consulting a professor is to show them everything you think about the assignment and get them to correct the most obvious problems with your view. A visit without written work in hand, or a specific question, is nearly always a waste of time.

What you show your professor should be your ideas about how to do the assignment, not your ideas of what has to be done. The only way to communicate this is for you to go out on a limb and say exactly what you intend to say in your paper. Often, the easiest way to do this is to write as good a draft of your paper as you can, and show it to your professor.

If you don't have a draft, but do have a thesis and an outline, you can show them to your professor. Problems are often easier to spot at this point and outlines are a lot easier to change than first drafts, so this might prevent you wasting time on false starts. However, there is a risk, if you have an outline, make sure it indicates more than just the topics you intend to cover. To be useful, it should also say what you think about each topic.

Don't say things like "define X." Instead, say "X: _____" and write in your own definition of X.

If you show your professor an outline that doesn't include the claims and arguments you're going to make all she can criticize is the structure of the paper. It's content NOT structure that earns you the good grades.