



## ARTICLE

# Taking Office Hours on the Road: How Pop-Up Help Desks Help Students

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Why are students reluctant to attend faculty office hours? For years, this issue has confounded me. Students' meeting with faculty outside of class has been shown to increase their comprehension and retention of material, satisfaction, engagement, and sense of belonging.<sup>1</sup> That is why I tell my students that I am almost always in my office, my door is always open, and they may drop by with any questions they have—no appointment needed. Despite this open-door policy, some students do not utilize office hours unless required to attend. At the undergraduate level, most students opt out of office hours altogether.<sup>2</sup> Why is this? In a recent study, fifteen percent of undergraduate students reported that they do not attend office hours because they have negative feelings about meeting with professors and have had prior negative experiences during office hours.<sup>3</sup> Those

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<sup>1</sup> Jennie M. Carr, *Two Tips to Increase Students' Use of Office Hours*, FACULTY FOCUS (July 10, 2019), <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/increase-office-hours>.

<sup>2</sup> Whitney Griffin et al., *Starting the Conversation: An Exploratory Study of Factors that Influence Student Office Hour Use*, 62 COLL. TEACHING 94, 97 (2014) (reporting on survey findings from one university that two-thirds of undergraduates indicated that they had not ever attended faculty office hours for the course in consideration).

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy L. Hsu et al., *Student Motivations and Barriers Toward Online and In-Person Office Hours in STEM Courses*, 21 CBE-LIFE SCIS. EDUC. 1, 5 (2022) (indicating that

undergraduates who did not attend office hours, for whatever reason, may be bringing their negative perceptions about office hours to law school, making them less likely to voluntarily meet with faculty. On top of those negative perceptions, law students may be intimidated by the “setting,” perceiving a power imbalance when meetings are held in the professor’s office.<sup>4</sup>

Distressed by the thought that some law students do not attend office hours out of fear, prior bad experiences, or intimidation, I started to brainstorm ways in which I could encourage students to engage in conversation with faculty. After all, students’ sitting face-to-face with a teacher enhances students’ learning and innovation.<sup>5</sup> At the university level, the “strongest motivation” to learn and to “work on basic skills comes from an emotionally based face-to-face relationship” with instructors.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, some scholars posit that students are more likely to meet with faculty if the location and time are convenient and if useful feedback is provided.<sup>7</sup> Based on this research, I determined that I should find *other* ways to meet face-to-face with my students *outside of* my office. My office should travel to a convenient location at a convenient time for students. At this new location and time, I should focus on providing feedback that students critically need.

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11% of students had negative feelings about office hours, such as being too nervous to attend, perceiving them as scary, or identifying a social stigma surrounding attending office hours and that 4% of students avoided office hours due to a prior bad interaction during an office visit).

<sup>4</sup> See Beckie Supiano, *The Missed Opportunity of Office Hours*, CHRON. OF HIGHER EDUC. (Aug. 21, 2023), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-missed-opportunity-of-office-hours> (discussing how holding office hours over Zoom “can reduce the power imbalance inherent in a student’s coming to a professor’s office”).

<sup>5</sup> In one psychology experiment, researchers found that test subjects performed better on solving puzzles when they could observe the instructor’s hands, eyes, gaze, and facial movement. They thus concluded that face-to-face interaction transmits valuable social information about goals and motivations and may facilitate creativity and innovation rather than strict mimicry of the teacher. Ashley Ransom et al., *Face-to-Face Learning Enhances the Social Transmission of Information*, 17(2) PLOS ONE 1, 14-15 (2022).

<sup>6</sup> DANIEL F. CHAMBLISS & CHRISTOPHER G. TAKACS, *HOW COLLEGE WORKS* 131-32 (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Griffin, *supra* note 2, at 96, 98.

To achieve these goals, I created a legal writing version of the IT “help desk.”<sup>8</sup> The legal writing help desk<sup>9</sup> would pop up in a central location in the law school and would be open for business when students had both the time and the need to ask questions. I would encourage students to attend by giving away food and prizes and invite all legal writing faculty to take turns staffing the help desk. The pop-up legal writing help desk would supplement office hours, and because the help desk offered a novel way for students to engage with faculty, I envisioned that students would benefit. Little did I realize that the faculty would benefit as well.

This article will explain first the nuts and bolts of how I set up my help desk and then will discuss the benefits I discovered from operating the help desk. Last, this article will explore some limitations of the help desk and offer suggestions for modifying its use to address those limitations.

## 1. Setting Up the Legal Writing Help Desk

### 1.1. *Choosing a Convenient Location*

Location matters when the goal is to bring people together. To illustrate, when designing the headquarters for Pixar Animation Studios, Steve Jobs placed an enormous atrium in the middle of the building. He put cafes, the mailroom, a gym, and even the restrooms there so that people would gather in the atrium and connect.<sup>10</sup> My law school has an atrium, too. It is a wide-open space on the first floor, with high ceilings that reach up to the second floor. It is lined on the west side with windows, with chairs and tables positioned in front of the windows. On the east side, the large-lecture classrooms open into the atrium. Because of the openness of the space and its central location, many law school receptions are held there. And, more important, it is a space where students gather frequently.

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<sup>8</sup> See Hannah Wren, *What Is a Help Desk? Definition, Benefits, and Functions* (Oct. 11, 2023), <https://www.zendesk.com/blog/help-desk/> (stating that the “core principle” of an IT help desk is to serve as a place where people can go to for help with technology).

<sup>9</sup> My help desk is limited to legal writing because research and writing are taught separately at my school. For programs that combine research and writing, the help desk could be a place to answer students’ questions related to both skills.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Cooper, *Steve Jobs: The Ideas Behind the Pixar Office Design* (Sept. 16, 2019), <https://woodhouseworkspace.com/steve-jobs-the-ideas-behind-the-pixar-office-design>.

I decided that the atrium was the perfect place for the help desk. Along the north wall of the atrium, I positioned two long tables, end to end. Behind the tables, I put chairs for the faculty members to sit in so that the faculty would be facing toward the open atrium and the sea of students. I placed signage (“Legal Writing Help Desk”) on the wall behind the tables and on the tables. Next to the signs, I set out citation manuals, style manuals, and grammar books for faculty to consult when interacting with students. With this arrangement, students could easily walk up to the help desk and engage in face-to-face conversation with faculty.

While I set up my help desk in an atrium, any space where large numbers of persons could gather would be a good location for a help desk. For example, the help desk could be set up in a classroom, an auditorium, or a conference room. Very few furnishings are needed—tables and chairs—and these spaces likely already have both. The faculty could sit along a wall in the room, or even scattered around the room, so that students have space to approach them. From their offices, faculty could bring any materials they need to help them answer students’ questions.

## 1.2. *Choosing a Convenient Time*

Timing has been described as “everything.”<sup>11</sup> I wanted the help desk to serve as many students as possible, so I knew I needed to operate it when students were in the building but were not in class. Moreover, I wanted the help desk to assist students in their hour of need, such as a few days before a graded assignment was due. At my law school, graded assignments such as memoranda and briefs are graded anonymously and are not discussed during class. Students do not write and submit drafts of them either. Understandably, then, students are stressed before these assignments are due and have many pressing questions about them. The help desk was perfect for troubleshooting students’ last-minute questions about these high-stakes assignments.<sup>12</sup>

## 1.3. *Providing Useful Feedback*

I wanted the help desk to have a different focus than office hours, so I decided to limit the feedback that would be provided at the help desk to feedback related

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<sup>11</sup> The idiom “timing is everything” can be explained as the “success of something is often related to when it happens.” *Timing is Everything*, THE FREE DICTIONARY, <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/timing+is+everything> (last visited Sept. 18, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> Our graded assignments are due on a Sunday, so the help desk is open for two hours on the Friday before the Sunday deadline.

to the basic skills of citation, grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure. This decision was prompted by how I use office hours and by how my students receive instruction on basic skills.

Traditional office hours work well for discussing complex skills,<sup>13</sup> such as how to closely read legal authority and understand how that authority could be applied to new sets of facts. When working on graded assignments, students often have questions related to legal authority and analysis, and my students are free to ask such questions during office hours. However, three days before a graded assignment is due, I close my office door and field no more questions about substance. This cut-off period is designed to encourage students to have their working drafts nearly complete several days before an assignment is due so that they can spend the final days working on small-scale edits related to citation and mechanical writing skills.<sup>14</sup>

Further, first-year students at my school receive mostly asynchronous instruction on skills related to citation and mechanical writing. For citation, students complete four “lessons” over the course of the fall semester. Each lesson consists of a pre-recorded lecture, an accompanying PowerPoint, and a quiz. During class, sample citations are workshoped, and students may ask questions about the citation lessons. For grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure, students are required to complete Core Grammar for Lawyers<sup>15</sup> by the end of fall semester. Students work through the lessons in the program outside of class and take a post-test when finished with the lessons. The face-to-face interaction at the help desk gave me an opportunity to clarify and reinforce concepts related to citation and writing skills that students learned on their own time.

#### 1.4. Encouraging Attendance

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<sup>13</sup> *E.g.*, Supiano, *supra*, note 4 (noting that office hours provide a time for a professor to review with a student concepts that were covered during class).

<sup>14</sup> *See generally* CHRISTINE COUGHLIN ET AL., A LAWYER WRITES 272-80 (3d ed. 2018) (describing the “polishing” stage of writing a document as being a time in which a writer strengthens sentence structure, proofreads for typographical errors, and checks citations); ROBIN WELLFORD SLOCUM & GINA NERGER, LEGAL REASONING, WRITING, AND OTHER LAWYERING SKILLS 249 (4th ed. 2022) (stating that when a writer is “fairly confident that the content and format of [the] analysis will not change,” the writer is “in a position to consider how” to “modify” sentence structure and “clarify” word choices).

<sup>15</sup> RUTH ANN MCKINNEY & KATIE ROSE GUEST PRYAL, CORE GRAMMAR FOR LAWYERS (5th ed. 2023).

I did not want to set up a help desk and have no students attend. I knew that I needed to market the help desk as being truly helpful and a fun way to interact with faculty. Thus, one week before the help desk opened for business, I advertised. Along with the law school's marketing team, I created a digital flyer to get the word out about the help desk. The flyer announced the day, time, and place of the help desk; indicated that it was hosted by the legal writing faculty; and noted that food, prizes, and answers to citation and writing skills questions would be available. The flyer flashed on screens throughout the law school, and the legal writing faculty shared it in their respective classrooms.

In addition to advertising, my director helped me secure funding for the food and prizes that the flyer promised would be available. Law students seem to always show up when food is offered, so I purchased and set out baskets of chips, granola bars, and candy at the help desk. As for prizes, I created "survival kits" — a canvas bag filled with caffeinated beverages, snacks, law school swag, and a gift card to the in-building café. (I envisioned these survival kits as fueling students through the final weekend working on their graded assignment.) Each student who visited the help desk could enter their name in a drawing to win a survival kit, and one student from each legal writing section would win one.

## 2. Benefits of Operating a Help Desk

**1. *Single Point of Contact.*** Students in the final stages of working on a memo or brief often have many specific questions. To find answers, they could spend time flipping through a citation or style manual. They could review lecture notes, study PowerPoint slides, and rewatch class recordings in the hopes that the answer to their question is buried in those materials. When assignments are due imminently, however, students may lack the patience and energy to sort through mounds of materials. The help desk thus serves as a one-stop shop for students' pressing questions.<sup>16</sup> By simply walking up to the help desk and asking a question, students receive an immediate answer from an expert who has assimilated all the materials for them.

**2. *Improved Customer Service.*** Students appreciate speedy answers, but they also appreciate on-point and well-explained answers. Faculty can provide both at the help desk. To give on-point answers, faculty can ask clarifying questions to ensure they understand a student's question. For instance, a student may ask about proper abbreviations in a case name. Faculty can inquire whether the student will use the case name in a textual sentence or in a citation clause or

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<sup>16</sup>Law schools that have a writing specialist or a writing lab or that use teaching assistants may have other "one-stop shops" for students to visit when they have questions.

sentence because the rule varies depending on where the case name is mentioned.<sup>17</sup> As for well-explained answers, faculty can use the materials at the help desk to illustrate their answers. For example, if a student asks a question about citing an electronically reported case, faculty can help the student locate the relevant rules in the citation manual, can read those rules with the student, and can model the correct citation format using another source.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, if a student asks how to punctuate a bullet-point list, faculty could open a style manual and show the student examples of properly punctuated lists.

**3. Better Customer Satisfaction.** The final days before a graded assignment is due can be a stressful time for students. Some students just want quick answers to their questions. Other students need some encouragement to keep working on revising and editing their document. At the help desk, faculty can give answers *and* pep talks. In addition, students get internal and external rewards for stopping by the help desk. Internally, they can be proud that they sought out answers to their questions. Externally, they can pick up a snack and may even win one of the coveted “survival kits.”

**4. Improved Employee Satisfaction.** The students are not the only ones who benefit from a pop-up legal writing help desk, as my colleagues and I can attest. At the help desk, we get a chance to interact with students outside of the classroom and faculty office. Yes, we functionally interact with the students by addressing their academic concerns,<sup>19</sup> but we also more informally interact with them. We may tell them a story about when we were in law school, or we may admit to them that we, too, find a particular citation rule confusing! These informal conversations, hopefully, help us seem more relatable and approachable and, hence, less intimidating.

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<sup>17</sup> Compare R. 10.2.1 (c), THE BLUEBOOK: A UNIFORM SYSTEM OF CITATION (Columbia L. Rev. Ass’n et al. eds., 21st ed. 2020) (abbreviations of case names in textual sentences), with R. 10.2.2, *id.* (abbreviations of case names in citations).

<sup>18</sup> I do not advocate that faculty provide the student with the exact citation to the source the student has asked about. Instead, I advocate that faculty have a copy of an alternative source and model the citation to that source. The student could then apply the model citation to their particular source. This type of modelling works well for student learning and is an appropriate approach when citation is included in a rubric for a graded assignment.

<sup>19</sup> See Bradley E. Cox & Elizabeth Orehovec, *Faculty-Student Interaction Outside the Classroom: A Typology from a Residential College*, 30(4) THE REV. OF HIGHER EDUC. 343, 353 (2007) (noting that functional interactions between faculty and students out of class are usually related to academic concerns and projects).



My colleagues and I also benefit from spending time together in a more casual way and in a more casual space. Because we are legal writing professors, after all, we have fun debating the interpretation of a particular citation or grammar rule (and students like to witness these debates), and we like to collaborate on answers to particularly difficult questions students ask. For two hours on a Friday afternoon, we leave our offices and sit in a brightly lit and large atrium. We dress casually, sometimes even wearing our “grammar police” t-shirts, and we always go to lunch after the help desk officially ends.

### 3. Limitations of the Help Desk and Suggestions for Modifications

After operating the help desk for several years now, I recognize some of its limitations, and I offer fixes that could address those limitations. First, because of my embargo on substance-related questions, some students are frustrated by being limited to asking questions related to citation and writing skills. If you openly discuss writing problems in class, you will need no such embargo. Further, if your students submit drafts of assignments, you could open the help desk while students are working on those drafts, giving them an opportunity to ask questions about substance.

Second, because students’ schedules vary, some students may not be in the building when the help desk is open and may not want to make a special trip to the law school to ask questions of faculty in person. To make the help desk accessible to all students, the help desk can be offered virtually. During periods of remote instruction, I operated the help desk over Zoom. I emailed students an invitation to join the help desk meeting, and when they entered the waiting room, I admitted them into the main meeting room. My colleagues staffed separate breakout rooms, and I moved students to those breakout rooms to ask their questions.

Third, due to their busy schedules, students may forget that the help desk will be open. Besides how I advertised—flyers, emails, in-class announcements—the help desk could be promoted over social media. If your legal writing faculty or law school have social media accounts, posts about the help desk could increase awareness and drive-up attendance.

Finally, money does not need to be spent to encourage attendance. Instead of buying food for students, I have created handouts for students to take when they visit the help desk. One handout was a one-page primer on constructing full and short-form citations to cases. Another handout was a two-page summary on using common punctuation marks, such as commas, semicolons, colons, and dashes.



Further, instead of raffling off goody bags, no-cost experiences with faculty could be raffled off. For instance, students could enter a drawing to win an afternoon walk with their legal writing professor.

## 4. Conclusion

Students benefit from interaction with faculty. Formal interactions that occur in the classroom and in the faculty office during office hours are valuable to students' learning and retention of classroom content. More informal interactions, such as those that occur outside the classroom and outside the faculty office, are also valuable to students' learning and retention of course material. One such informal interaction is a help desk where faculty are available to answer questions students may have while working on a writing assignment. The help desk pops up in a communal space in the law building at a time when students need its services the most: the final days before a graded assignment is due. Faculty staff the help desk and provide useful feedback to students on small-scale editing skills and citation skills. Students like that their questions are answered quickly, but carefully, and they—along with faculty—enjoy the more casual environment the pop-up help desk provides.