

# How to Ask for Help at Work

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**We've all been there: you're doing your work, get stuck, and need help — but you're worried about bothering your coworkers or asking an obvious question.**

When I asked over 500 professionals across industries and job types what they struggle with most at work for my book *The Unspoken Rules*, I heard the same anxiety repeatedly: asking for help. At best, you make yourself vulnerable to others' judgments; at worst, you look incompetent or lazy. Luckily, as I also discovered from my research, there is a better way. Let's unpack what this looks like and sounds like.

### **Do your homework.**

The first step to asking for help isn't to ask — it's to confirm if your question is worth asking. This means doing your homework.

First, picture three concentric circles. The innermost circle represents what you currently know.

The middle circle represents what you don't currently know but can figure out yourself. Any question that sits within this middle circle is a “bad” question. These are the questions that make people think, *Oh, come on... I found the answer in 10 seconds online.*

The outermost circle represents what you don't know and can't learn by yourself, and therefore can only learn by asking. Any question that sits within this circle is a good question. These are the questions you want to ask.

If you are asking a question such as “what does X mean?” (where there is a right or wrong answer), try looking for the answer yourself by searching online and digging through your inbox, team folder, and company intranet. The idea isn't to open every last file or email or visit every website; it's to do what you can yourself so that you make the most of your precious time with others.

You will have generally done enough homework if you can be sure that the answer hasn't already been shared with you, can't be found in an obvious place, and isn't waiting for you on the first page of a Google search. If you can find an answer you are confident is correct during your digging, then no need to ask your question. If you can't, then it makes sense to ask.

If you are asking a question such as “what do I do next?” or “how do I do this?” (where there isn't always a “right” or “wrong” answer — only “better” or “worse” approaches), brainstorm multiple options and identify the one where the pros most outweigh the cons. Pretend as if you don't

have anyone to ask for help. What options would you consider — and which of the options would you choose? One option is to try and complete the following sentence for your situation: “I could try [option A], [option B], or [option C]. Given [these reasons], [option B] makes the most sense.” If you can identify an option that is clearly superior to the others and is a decision you can make without impacting other people, then no need to ask your question either — you just found the approach that others would have suggested anyways. If you can’t, then it makes sense to ask.

### **Find the best person at the best time.**

Once you have a question that makes sense to ask, the next step is to identify the least disruptive — and therefore most effective — way to approach other people. Here, it can be helpful to ask yourself three questions:

1. Who is the best person to ask?
2. When is the best time to ask?
3. Where is the best place to ask?

When it comes to the best person, begin with the most-junior coworker near or at your level or someone whose job it is to answer your specific question, such as HR or IT. Before you approach them, ask yourself, *Will I need their help again sometime soon?* If yes, and if your question isn’t time sensitive, consider writing down your question and waiting until you’ve either collected a bundle of questions or found yourself at the best time to ask your question. That way, you ask five questions in a single sitting rather than five questions five separate times. If this first person can’t help, then go to the next least-junior coworker.

When it comes to the best time and place, put yourself in the other person's shoes. When is the least disruptive time to approach this person? What is their preferred method of communication?

Often, the best time will be when you are already talking. So, if you will be at a meeting together, try asking, "Would you have a minute after this meeting to answer a few questions?" If you are in touch via email or instant messenger, consider adding on your questions to an existing conversation.

If you aren't already communicating with this person but have access to their calendar or online status, try pinging them when they appear online and available. Often, this will mean avoiding times when they are in meetings, over holidays, or right before the end of a workday in their time zone. If you notice a pattern of this person answering emails early in the morning, try sending your email at around that same time.

### **Show your homework (and your gratitude.)**

When it comes to asking your question, style can be as important as substance. How you frame your question can mean the difference between getting the help you need (and not) and building a good professional reputation (and not). To make the best impression possible, don't just ask your question; share all the hard work you've done to help yourself before involving other people.

If you are seeking an objective answer, resist the urge to dive straight into your question. Instead, try going with the structure of "Here's my question, and *here's why I'm asking this question.*" Often, it can as simple as turning a question like "How do I submit my timesheet?" to "Lisa mentioned that you're the go-to person for timesheets. Is this v2.4 that I found on the intranet the most current one?"

If you are seeking a subjective answer, make it easy for others to help you. This means giving others something to react to, rather than posing an

open-ended — and therefore strenuous — question such as “What do I do next?” Begin by sharing the context behind your question, followed by a closed-ended question such a multiple-choice question (“Which do you prefer: plan A, B, or C?”), a yes or no question (“Am I thinking about this the right way?”), or a default (“I was thinking of plan A or B. I suggest plan A because of X reasons; do you feel differently?”).

Try to not make others have to tell you the same thing twice. If others tell you something, repeat it back, repeat it to yourself, take notes — do whatever you need to remember what they said. If you have to ask again (or if you keep relying on the same person), consider approaching someone else. You could also offer an acknowledgment like, “Sorry, I know we talked about this, but I wanted to clarify.”

After you’ve gotten the help you need, don’t forget to also show your *gratitude*. It could be as simple as mentioning, “I really appreciate you taking the time to explain this concept to me, given how busy you are with \_\_\_\_\_.” Little gestures of appreciation can increase the odds of others being willing to help you again.

In the end, asking for help is only partly about getting help. It’s also about proving that you deserve the help. Though less instantly gratifying than pulling a coworker aside the instant a question comes up and disappearing immediately afterwards, a bit of extra legwork can make a big difference in your productivity, not to mention your reputation.



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