

Self-Advocacy

through Professional Communication

Resources and Guidelines

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WHAT IS THIS?

A set of resources and guidelines for defining, reflecting on, and practicing self-advocacy & professional communication more effectively in college, at work, or in community

WHAT'S IN IT?

- What is **self-advocacy**? What is **professional communication**? (p. 2)
- **Self-reflect**: Strengths, challenges. (p. 3)
- General **guidelines** for self-advocacy (p. 4)
- How to write an **email** (p. 5)
- How to make the most of **meetings** (p. 6)
- How to ask for **recommendations** (p. 7)
- How to ask for **support** (p. 8)
- **Self-reflect**: Final thoughts, questions (p. 9)

HOW DO I USE IT?

Take ownership.

Take notes, cross out + change things, add your own words + ideas. Make these materials work for you!

Keep this guide handy.

Dissemble the pages + post them up on the wall by your desk. Or save this file to your desktop so it's always easy to find.

Spread the word.

Share these resources with friends+ classmates. Support each other. Self-advocacy is a community endeavor!

Use what applies.

These resources build progressively.

The general guidelines apply to pretty much all self-advocacy situations.

The "How to" resources show how to apply the general guidelines to increasingly more specific contexts and situations.

Internalize and practice the general guidelines first -- then refer to the more specific "How to" guides as necessary!

ACADEMICS

DISABILITY & NEURODIVERGENCE

LANGUAGE

HEALTH & WELLNESS

CULTURE & FAITH

FINANCIAL

CRISIS & EMERGENCY

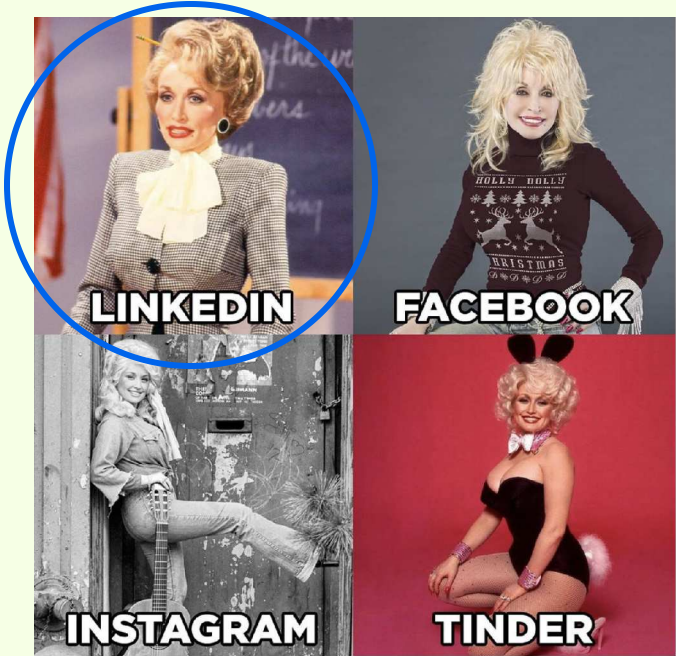
TRAUMA & PTSD

CONFLICT & HARM

EDUCATION & CAREER PATH

Self-Advocacy is...

the ability to understand and communicate your **needs, concerns, and interests** to the people with the power and responsibility to support you.



"Professional Communication" is...

a **genre** of writing and speaking defined by these conventions:

- **concise**
- **purpose-driven**
- **clear and direct**
- a **friendly tone**: personable but not overly intimate
- a **medium-formal register**: not as formal as academic writing & speaking, but more formal than you'd use with friends & family

GENRE

A type of expression with defined conventions and characteristics

REGISTER

How we adapt our language to context: genre, purpose, audience

VOICE

An individual's unique way of expressing themselves

IMPORTANT:

Professional communication is just one **genre** of communication. It is not inherently "better" than any other way of speaking and writing. You can and should adapt your **register** without losing your **voice**. Communicating professionally does not mean being a different person!

LOOK AT DOLLY.

For each different **genre** of social media, she adapts the **register** of her clothing and hairstyle. But the key elements of her stylistic **voice** remain the same. She's herself in every genre and no matter how formal or informal the register. Dolly is the goal!

Journaling Space

Strengths and Challenges

Strengths

When it comes to self-advocacy -- understanding your needs, knowing what might help, and communicating with others to express yourself -- what are some of your strengths? What do you know you are already good at?

Challenges + concerns

What are you concerned about related to self-advocacy at college or in the workplace? What do you know or anticipate might be challenges for you?

Affirmations

What's something you could tell yourself to help you feel ready to take on these challenges?

How to Self-Advocate

General Guidelines for Communication

1 Always connect on a human level first

Begin every interaction by connecting as human beings. Express interest in the other's well-being in a way that's authentic for you:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

2 Express a clear purpose

- "I'm writing to ask...."
- "I wanted to meet with you because...."
- "I came in today because...."
- "I'm hoping that I'll be able to do _____ with you today."
- "I am wondering if you can help me _____."

These "golden rules" apply

- no matter the topic or occasion; positive or negative; formal or informal; urgent or not
- via email, Zoom, or FTF
- regardless of how well you know the person or how often you've communicated

3 The sooner, the better!

- **Earlier in the semester or quarter** (people have more time + are less tired)
- **Earlier in the problem** (as soon as you know or suspect you might need support)
- **Earlier in the interaction** (connect as humans, then get right to your purpose!)

4 Identify specific goals + action items

What do *you* need to do and what does the *other* person need to do? In what time frame (e.g. "by tomorrow" "by next week" "towards the end of the year" etc)? **Make sure to close out the message or meeting knowing what should happen next** -- with a plan for following up (e.g. "I'll send a reminder a few days before the deadline" or "I'll come back next week if I haven't heard anything yet").

5 Gratitude, not groveling

Express sincere thanks. Acknowledge the other person's time and labor, especially when you know they're going beyond their regular job duties. But remember that **you are worth their time and efforts**. No need for self-denigration, excessive apologizing, begging, revealing the intimate details of trauma, or over-the-top displays of gratitude in order to earn the right to get support.

6 Follow up and adjust course as needed

Reach back out to follow through on your action items, send friendly reminders for their action items, give relevant updates on progress, express thanks, and set up more meetings. If one individual is unresponsive or difficult to work with, find another person who can help. Keep trying. You are worth it.

How to Write an Email

1 Specific, purposeful subject line

This really helps the recipient a) know what priority to assign to it and b) search for it later.

2 Greet the recipient by name

- "Dear __," "Hi __," "Good morning __," etc.
- Triple-check the spelling!
- Make sure you're addressing them with the correct title (e.g. "Dr.")
- Don't assume gender OR marital status (leave off Mr., Mrs., Mx., etc)
- When in doubt, go more formal (don't use a first name unless they've expressly invited you to!)

3 Connect on a human level

Go-to opener: _____

4 Establish purpose fast

- "I'm writing because...."
- "I'm reaching out to...."
- "I'm wondering if...."

5 Make a specific request + make it easy for them

- If you're asking for a meeting -- When? For how long? What's your availability?
- If you're asking for an answer, some advice, a resource, a contact, or a deliverable (something they need to create for you) -- By when? How do you need it delivered? Why are you asking this person?

6 Be honest about the stakes (when relevant)

If there is a valid Plan B for what you are asking for, let them know and give them an out. But do not say, "If not, no worries" if this is not actually true! If this particular individual's support is essential or they are the ONLY person who can provide what you're asking for, be real about that.

7 Express gratitude + acknowledgment

- "I know this is a very busy time of year, and I'm so grateful for all you've done already."
- "Thanks very much in advance for any help you can provide."
- "I appreciate so much any time you are able to spend on this."

8 Close out

- Reiterate action items (e.g. "Please let me know by early next week if possible")
- Include closing well-wishes. Go-to: _____
- Include your own name, written as you'd like to be called (e.g. first name; nickname; title + last name, etc...even if you use a standardized email signature)

How to Make the Most of Meetings

Common One-on-One Occasions:

- Office hours with an instructor or TA
- Meeting with a supervisor or team leader
- Meeting for networking purposes with a stranger
- Meeting with a mentor for guidance, feedback
- Meeting with a support professional (e.g. FinAid)

Prepare beforehand

- Set up a meeting via email whenever possible. Even if you are just planning to drop by for 10 minutes during a time you know they'll be there, let the person know you plan on coming by and when.
- Jot down some notes: What do you hope to accomplish during the meeting? What are your priorities (that is, what is the most important thing to make sure to cover first, second, third)? How much time do you think each goal might take? What are you looking for from the other person?
- If possible and relevant, share these notes with the other person ahead of the meeting.
- Think about what materials you'll want to have on hand (note-taking stuff? Your laptop?). Pack them.
- If you are nervous about expressing what you need to say during the meeting, write out a script for yourself and practice it. Have it on hand during the meeting.

Arrive on time

- Make sure you research where the meeting is + how to get there + how long it will take.
- Give yourself extra time to find it.
- Send a quick email or text if you will be late. Apologize.

Greet the person by name + connect on a human level

- Go-to conversation starters: _____

State your agenda

- State how much time you expect or hope to spend. Verify that they are available for this.
- Let them know what you hope to accomplish during the meeting.
- Be as specific as possible about what you're looking for from them.

Stick to your agenda

- Gently steer the other person back on track if they get distracted/go off on a tangent.
- Have your prepared notes out and refer to them so that *you* don't get distracted/go off on a tangent.
- Make sure your top priority/main goal gets fully covered, even if it takes longer than expected.

Close out with thanks + action items

- Start wrapping up a few minutes before the scheduled end time so you finish on time.
- If there were items on your list you didn't get to, or additional items came up during the meeting, schedule a follow-up meeting then and there.
- Write down any follow-up action items and make sure both people understand them + agree.
- Thank the person for their time and efforts, and leave on a note of well-wishes!

Follow up + keep connecting

Don't be shy about reaching out again to meet, ask for more resources, or continue the conversation. They will say no if they don't have time or don't feel they can help you. Don't "say no for them" by not even asking!

How to Ask for Recommendations

Letters or Forms

- **Understand what is needed:** **When** is the recommendation due? **How long** does it need to be? **What** does it specifically need to **cover** in terms of your skills, qualities, and/or experience related to this opportunity? To whom should it be **addressed**? How should it be **submitted**? If you need multiple letters, **how many**? From whom? If any of this is unclear, **whom can you ask to find out?**
- **Identify your recommender(s):** Sometimes it has to be a certain person (e.g. adviser). Sometimes you need to choose someone who a) is appropriate for the opportunity and b) would be able and willing to give you a positive endorsement. If you're not sure who the best person to ask is, **ask for advice** from a mentor, adviser, counselor, etc. Have back-up recommenders in mind in case your top choice falls through!
- **4 weeks out from the deadline:** **Contact** your desired recommender(s)

 1. Follow the "How to Write an Email" guidelines: Put "*Recommendation request*" in the **subject line**. In the body of the email, **greet, connect, then get to it**. "*I'm writing to ask if you would be willing to write a letter of recommendation on my behalf for ____ [the opportunity].*" Don't go into tons of detail at this point about what the opportunity is, but do make sure to **name** what you're applying to!
 2. Explain, briefly, **why** you are asking them in particular + the basics of **what** would be required of them: **length, content, due date**. ("*The letter would need to be 1-2 pages long and include your assessment of my abilities to work cooperatively with others. It needs to be submitted by December 15th.*") This section should be just 2-3 sentences long.
 3. If they are the **only** person who can write this, make this clear (e.g. "*The application requires a letter from my direct supervisor*"). If you do have other options, **give them an out**: "*If you're unable to provide a recommendation for whatever reason, I understand.*"
 4. Include a sentence previewing what **you will provide** to make their task as easy as possible for them, if they agree to write it. This includes sharing more **information** about the opportunity (like the official job description); your application **materials** (resume + cover letter or statement of purpose); any specific prompts or **guidelines** for the recommendation letter; and all the submission **instructions**. "*If you are able to write a letter, I will share X, Y, and Z with you by no later than 2 weeks before the due date.*"
 5. Request their **prompt response**: "*Please let me know by this Thursday, if possible.*"
 6. Close with **thanks** and well wishes. "*Thank you for considering this. All the best, [your name]*"
- **Follow up and confirm:**

 - **If they don't respond** within your requested time frame: Write a **polite, brief, and direct** note. "Reply" to your initial email so that this follow-up will be attached to the **same thread**, with the original request readily available to refer to. "*Hi Dr. X, Hope you are well. I am checking back in on this recommendation request. Please let me know when you can if you're able to do it. Thank you so much. [Your name]*"
 - **If they say no:** Contact the next person on your list. Repeat the previous set of steps.
 - **Once they say yes:** Write back promptly with thanks. Repeat your promise to share additional information + materials by X date (2 weeks out from the deadline, ideally). Note that you will also send reminders at 1 week out and at 2 days out from the deadline.
- **2 weeks out from the deadline:** Send all relevant **information + materials + guidelines + instructions**. Make sure it's very clear **when** the recommendation is due + **how/where/to whom** it should be submitted.
- **1 week out from the deadline:** Send a **reminder** + repeat the how/where/to whom **submission details**. "*Dear X, Hope you are well. This is just a friendly reminder that the recommendation for [opportunity] is due next Friday, May 7. Below are the submission guidelines again. Please let me know if you need anything from me. Thank you so much! [Name]*" Keep ALL emails in the **same thread** so that all info + materials remain together!
- **2 days out from the deadline:**

 - **If you know** the recommendation has not been submitted yet, send a final **reminder**. Maintain a friendly, appreciative tone. Repeat the due date and submission details. Repeat your thanks.
 - **If you're not sure** whether it's been sent or not, send a **reminder** repeating the submission details + ask your recommender to **confirm** with you when they have submitted. Repeat your thanks.
- **After the recommendation has been submitted:**

 - Send **thanks!** Promise to keep your recommender updated with what happens with the opportunity.
 - Once you've heard back: send an email to **update** your recommender. Regardless of the outcome, repeat your **thanks** once more and emphasize the value of their support.

How to Ask for Support

Accommodations, Extensions, Exemptions

ACCOMMODATIONS

What this is: An **accommodation** is an adjustment to the classroom or work environment that removes or helps reduce a challenge to learning or getting work done. It does not alter **what or how much** work you need to do, it just alters **how** you access or perform it.

What to know: If you have a diagnosed disability or learning challenge that has been registered with student services (at college) or human resources (at work), certain accommodations may be required by law. The guidelines below are for accommodations that aren't already in place, required, and enforceable.

What to do:

- **Approach the person with the most direct power to help.** Send an email to your instructor or supervisor. Follow the How to Write an Email guidelines. Let them know you would like to talk about a challenge you're facing. If you'd rather discuss it FTF, set up a meeting, but take notes of what was said and send them in an email afterwards so that there is a record of the conversation in writing.
- **Express the issue:** *"I struggle with focusing."* *"I have a health condition where I need to use the bathroom a lot."* *"I take medication that makes me drowsy at this time of day."* *"I have trouble following very fast conversation."* *"I have intense anxiety about speaking up in class."* (etc)
- **Explain what might help:** *"Knitting really helps me focus."* *"If I didn't have to ask to leave the room and I could sit by the door, that would help."* *"Being able to stand up and move around the room would help."* *"Turning on captions for the videos you show and sharing your slideshows would help, as would speaking more slowly."* *"Having the chance to prepare my response beforehand would help."*
- **Ask if they are open to making this change.**
- **If they say no:** Ask if there's another solution they would suggest or be willing to support to help you with this challenge.

General Tips

Create a paper trail. Make support requests via email. This way, there is a record of you expressing your needs + trying to get support.

Express good faith. Approach pleasantly, with the attitude that what you're asking is reasonable and that the person wants to help you. This increases the chance that they will! Defensiveness or begging makes it look like you know you're asking for more than you deserve. You're probably not.

EXTENSIONS

What this is: When you know or fear that you won't be able to complete an assigned task by the due date -- or you know it won't be your best work -- you may ask for an **extension**, or permission to push the deadline back.

What to know: Ask for an extension *before* the due date has passed whenever possible. If you ask *on* or *after* the due date, the chance of approval plummets.

What to do:

- **Send an email.** Keep this interaction in writing.
- **Express the issue.** Directly, simply, specifically: *"Something came up"* is too vague. But don't over-share, over-apologize, or over-defend. *"I had a health issue flare up over the weekend and spent 2 days in bed"* is specific enough. *"I under-estimated the time this would take and realize that I will not be ready by our meeting tomorrow"* is also just fine.
- **Make a specific request.** Do you need one extra day? Three? A week? Commit to a defined date.
- **Name the steps you'll take to prevent this happening again** if you're asking due to time management or over-scheduling issues. (If it is clearly a one-time emergency, no need.)
- **Thank them for their understanding.**
- **If they say no:** do what work you can and express regret that it is not your best work. Ask about the possibility of revising and resubmitting.

EXEMPTIONS

What this is: An **exemption** is permission to opt out of a requirement (attendance on a certain day, an assigned task, a certain text, a mandated outing).

What to know: Common reasons for exemptions include **religion, trauma, or physical limitations.**

What to do:

- **Send an email.** Keep the exchange in writing.
- **Express the issue.** Directly, simply, specifically. No need to grovel, apologize, or be defensive.
- **Request permission or state your need to opt out, in part or in full.**
- **Suggest, explain, or ask how you'll make it up.**

Consult outside support when needed. If you are getting nowhere, take your paper trail to an adviser, mentor, or support person and ask for their guidance. They can help you think through other approaches and solutions + perhaps advocate on your behalf.

Journaling Space

Final Thoughts

Processing

Take a moment to jot down any reactions or feelings related to the ideas and practices we've just gone over. How do you feel in your body? What's on your mind?

Questions

What questions do you still have? What are you worried or wondering about?

Takeaways

What are you taking away from today's workshop? What are some things you want to remember and put into practice? What is next for you on your self-advocacy journey?
