

HOW TO GO TO COLLEGE

by

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Like many things in life, the rules of going to college are largely unstated. Your catalog and student handbook contain the official rules and regulations for college and many suggestions which are undoubtedly helpful. But these are mostly bureaucratic guidelines and tips on study habits that you should have learned in high school. One of the things not mentioned is how students make impressions on professors, both good and bad, and how this can affect your college career. After speaking with many colleagues and observing the behavior of students in the classroom, we have assembled some of these unstated rules for you. There is, of course, a tremendous amount of variation among different colleges and different professors at the same college. Not all of these rules will apply everywhere.

ACADEMIC LIFE

1. Read the syllabus. Do not lose it, ignore it, or stick it in your notebook and forget about it. Your professor has written a syllabus so that you will know what is expected of you. It should tell you when readings are due, when exams are scheduled, when papers are due, etc. If you say to your professor, "I didn't know we had a test today," and the test is listed on your syllabus, you are out of luck. And it makes you sound unobservant. So check the syllabus.
2. Do the reading. Professors can tell when you haven't done the reading. They have been known to throw out entire classes who are unprepared to discuss a reading assignment. Not only should you do the assigned reading, but you should try to make a comment which demonstrates that you have done so. Professors love this. There is a myth that if you do lots of highlighting in your books and then flash it in class the professor will be impressed. This is not true. We expect you won't go back and re-read what you have highlighted. Besides, half of you own used books in which someone else did the highlighting. Don't worry about what color your highlighting pens are. Just try to make some sense out of the reading and be ready to discuss it.
Tip: If you're under pressure, the minimum you must absorb of any reading is the title, author, headings, anything in bold print and italics.
3. The word processor and the web: Learn how. Keep in mind that you're the one with the brain, the computer is just a machine. Never, ever, complain about your lack of computer skills, just get the help you need. When a professor hears complaints about computers, e-mail, and web based assignments, he or she will begin to doubt your maturity. Most eight year olds know how to operate computers these days, you should too.
4. Excuses. There are many good excuses for your paper being late, missing class, missing exams, missing presentations. Although professors may sound sympathetic, they are not much interested in your excuse. When the financial aid office tells you that your money hasn't come through yet for one reason or another (this is almost certain to happen at least once) you won't really care what the reasons are. And it will irritate, if not enrage you. Professors feel the same way about your excuses. Don't give us a story, give us your work.
Tip: No excuse is very convincing for a paper that was assigned the first day of class. If you have fifteen weeks to write it, a late semester emergency only shows that you were unprepared.
5. The concept of "extra credit." Some professors actually offer such a thing, but not many. The practice of allowing students to recapture some missed educational opportunities with extra work mostly disappears in higher education. The logic is that students are expected to do the work for credit in a semester. If you don't do the credit bearing work, you don't get credit. If you want credit, do the work in the first place.
6. Plagiarism. The rules against plagiarism are spelled out in your catalog or student handbook. The official story is that it's against the rules, and everyone knows it. With the advent of the internet, plagiarism has gone from a small but persistent offence to a widespread and common occurrence. It's very tempting to download articles and papers, and it's easy, too. Many people do it, and here's what they find out: your professors have been surfing the Net since its inception. They not only know a great deal about their field (well, they're experts in it, actually) but they can find that article or paper faster than you can. Some even have plagiarism detecting programs, like "turnitin.com." So, not only is it wrong, cheating, disrespectful, and counter to the values of your education, it also doesn't work. You'll get caught.
7. Don't whine. There are a great many rules and regulations at college concerning class status, transfer credits, financial aide, major requirements, etc. Some of these will strike you as unfair. Some of them are. Deal with it. Professors find it unbelievable when they see a grown person whining about rules, tuition, and other things which were clearly spelled out when you started college. And for the record: there is no known campus in the world with enough parking.

CLASS LIFE

1. Show up. Attendance always counts even when it doesn't. That is, even if the professor doesn't take attendance or count it toward your grade, your being in class or not in class still makes a significant impression. Not all professors will admit this but just being in the room will often give you enough information to pass an exam. If you are just trying to get by, showing up is enough. If you want to learn something, showing up is essential.
Tip: When you do happen to miss a class, be sure and get the notes from another student. Do not ask the professor what he or she did in the class you missed. Never, ever, ask "did I miss anything?" Or worse, "did I miss anything important?" These questions will offend your professor deeply. Think about it.
2. Show up on time. Professors hate it when students are late. It may be the worst thing you can do. Don't even bother with an excuse. The professor may look sympathetic but isn't really.
3. Participation. We realize this is a touchy subject. Some people would rather die than raise their hands; others refuse to shut up. Try to be sensible about this. Like attendance, class participation always counts, but only when done with intelligence and taste.
Tip 1: Personal experiences should be revealed with discretion. Don't mistake class participation for therapy.
Tip 2: Don't save your bright ideas for after class. We want to hear them during class.
4. Choosing your seat. Professors have an invisible "A" zone, where they expect to find the students who will get "A"s. Roughly speaking, this zone extends 15 feet in front of the professor and 10 feet on either side (assuming an average size room and somewhere between 25 and 50 students in the class). Sitting far to the back when seats are available in front is not recommended. The professor will assume you are not interested and if you distinguish yourself at all, it will probably be for your lack of interest. If you just want to get through the course, then sit anywhere you like and never ask that professor for a letter of recommendation (it will be lukewarm at best). If you are trying to learn something, move forward.
Tip: Avoid the "dead zone." If you sit in either of the extreme rear corners the professor will assume you are a dud: a student who won't even pretend to be interested. The entire back row should be avoided if possible.
5. Refreshment demeanor. Coffee, other caffeine beverages, and soft drinks are usually acceptable and sometimes encouraged, especially in morning classes. It is important not to yawn or fall asleep in class. The professor will resent this for the entire semester and probably try to get some revenge. Learn to hide your yawns and adopt an interested face even when you are thinking of something entirely different. Food is generally not acceptable. If you missed breakfast, eat it later.
Tip 1: Eating potato chips or anything crunchy in class will lead the professor to question not only your social skills, but your sanity.
Tip 2: Some students think that if they close their eyes and nod out for a few minutes the professor won't notice. We do notice ... every time.
6. Modern communication devices. The cell phone is an important accessory in the enlightened media age. You are expected to turn them off during class, showing the same respect for the classroom as you would for any serious public event. If you find yourself faced with some impending emergency and desperately need to keep your phone on, ask your professor if that would be alright before class. We've never known a professor to refuse. By the way, you have the same right to expect this consideration of the professor.
7. Leaving class. It's a delicate subject, but let's just say that you are expected to have an adult level of bladder control and tolerance. It is possible that a situation will come up once which will force you to walk out of the class. Once. If it's a regular occurrence, you may need to see a doctor.
Tip: It can be difficult to remember; there may come a time you forget and your cell phone rings. The proper response is to look embarrassed and turn it off. A sheepish "sorry," will help the social situation. Do not answer the phone.

SOCIAL LIFE

You haven't told your parents, you shouldn't admit it to your professor, but this is the real reason you are going to college. We know this and we approve. We don't actually expect you to think about our courses day and night. Professors are generally supportive of students who are involved in sports, student government, the campus newspaper, the student productions, etc. Conflicts that result from these activities show us that you are interested in life and generally evoke a sympathetic response, but...

1. You are an adult. It is your responsibility to foresee extensive conflicts and plan your schedule accordingly. If your team has away games every Friday in the Fall, don't take a course that meets on Fridays. If you are involved in a production with weeks of rehearsals don't take an evening course that semester. This may screw up your

schedule because you need some course. Don't look to us for sympathy; these are the kinds of decisions adults have to make.

2. These extra-curricular activities are worth your time. Aside from the fun, some employers think they are as important as your transcript. Many students have good GPA's; interesting activities help you stand out.

FINALLY

There are three things to keep in mind which will help you remember all of the other rules.

1. Professors are human. Things which you would consider rude or offensive will also strike them as rude or offensive.
2. All of your professors were once students. It's entirely obvious, but most students don't think of it. A typical professor with a PhD has been through eight to ten years of higher education. There is not one trick, excuse, method of cheating or charming that they don't know about. Students who don't get this think that they're getting away with something. But the professor knows exactly what you're getting away with, even if he or she allows you to do so.
3. Professors talk to each other about you and are more loyal to each other than to you. The impression you make in one class makes its way to the other faculty in the same department, especially in your major where you'll have 10 or more courses in the same department. Among faculty in different departments, you never know who this professor eats lunch with. To be safe, it's not a good idea to complain to one professor about another. Serious problems with professors have to be addressed but remember that you are going to be around for a few years, the professors work with each other for decades.

Now, score yourself on how college will go. If all of the above makes sense to you, you're in pretty good shape. If you feel you will never have to refer back to these rules, you're in excellent shape. If you had already figured them out for yourself in high school, you're headed for a brilliant college career. Good luck.

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POLITICS OF ACADEMIA

- When you pay tuition, believe it or not, you're paying for the *privilege* to learn and for the *opportunity* to get a passing grade and credit for the course. Paying tuition does not *get* you these things. If it did, that would make your college a "diploma-mill" (look it up). Suggesting otherwise to your professor is probably one of the most insulting things you can do, and saying something like, "I pay to go to school here" pretty much guarantees you will forever after be on that teacher's list-of-disliked-students. Believe it or not, especially at our school, your tuition doesn't actually pay our salaries; we are not your employees ☺; we belong to the state, technically-speaking.
- As mentioned by Drs. Alexander and Petkanas, you are an adult. That means that involving your parents in your interactions with professors is not a good idea. First, it makes it look as though you can't function as an adult on your own. Also, negotiating with parents - on anything - probably won't happen; with the new FERPA laws, it's basically illegal for us to talk to your parents about anything involving you and your academics. Please don't put us in a position where we have to tell your parents we're not allowed to talk to them. ☺
- Communicating with your professors is an art form - one that if you master now will serve you extremely well in your career, when communicating with your boss. Every professor has a different style of interacting, but it should always be assumed that you start with a professional/formal tone *whenever* communicating electronically (e.g., email, chat, phone) with them. Always address them by their title (usually Dr. or at least Professor), unless they indicate you can call them something else. Even then, it never hurts to still use Dr. in an email. It shows that even though you may be comfortable speaking with them personally, you still respect them. Be professional. Never make demands. Never assume a sloppy, casual tone (e.g., slang, spelling or grammar mistakes).
- Your professors are *people* - just like you. If what you are about to say to them - whether in person in their office, in the classroom, or over the computer - could *in any way, shape, or form* be construed *by anyone* as offensive or rude or hurtful, then **WHY** are you sending it? Many of us have our feelings hurt constantly by students; we just hide it really well in front of you. ☺ If you wouldn't say it to your friend, your mother, a little child, your pastor/priest, your romantic partner, **AND** your boss, then why do you think you can speak that way to us? Don't do it. It will not only hurt our feelings, but will pretty seriously damage our opinion of you - and although this is not something that is concretely included in class grades, you can be certain it affects you indirectly in grades, recommendation letters, and overall interactions - not only with us, but with the other faculty (in any department!) at our school as well. We all talk, remember - to other faculty, the staff, the administration, and to other students. We know what gets said about us. We know who said it. And we do indeed talk about you (good and bad students) to others. Be smart! Be nice! Be courteous! Be gentle humans!

HELPING YOURSELF!

- If you'd like to take an online course (do so if you're good online! It's a great opportunity!), please research how it works on your own. The specifics of every course are different, and the professor can always send you a syllabus. However, if you don't know the basics of how to send emails, attachments, or log into accounts like Blackboard, that's probably something you want to find out *before* registering for the course. It is not the professor's job to instruct you in these things... we assume that if you sign up for a course online, that you will figure out the basics yourself.
- When you enroll in a course and continue to stay in it for the semester, you can view the syllabus as a legal obligation - both on the part of the professor and on your own part. For the professor, we should stick to everything (meaning, policies/rules) except for the exact schedule (schedules are always considered tentative, even if not labeled so explicitly). For the student, if you stay in the course, you are agreeing not only that you've read and understood the syllabus, but are also agreeing that you will be held responsible for any violations of policies therein. Professors have very little patience for students who are "unaware" of some policy/agenda because they haven't read it.
- Every professor has a different policy regarding late work, excuses, absences, etc. Telling us what someone else's policy is when you are trying to get around our own policy won't help you. If anything, it will make it worse. We expect you - as adults - to be able to read and comprehend the rules on the syllabus. If a particular policy isn't written on the syllabus, ask your professor about it specifically - it might give them incentive to spell it out more clearly on future syllabi.
- If you've been given a schedule in class (usually in your syllabus), and your professor sticks pretty closely to it, do **NOT** ask what you are doing or when things are due. Look at the schedule. One of the most annoying things for many professors is when students ask what is going on without first looking. We don't write the schedule for our own amusement (well, most of us don't). It's there for you to look at.
- If you're gone, as mentioned previously by Drs. Alexander and Petkanas, it's your responsibility to get the material covered (according to each professor's preference for doing so). One of the worst things you can say, however, is "did we do anything important while I was gone?" or "did I miss anything?" No, we decided to wait on covering anything important until you returned [that was sarcasm, in case you couldn't catch it ☺].