



# THE SECRETS OF COLLEGE SUCCESS

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## Secrets of Taking Excellent Lecture Notes

Taking really good lecture notes is one of the most important skills for college success. Not only will constant writing help you stay awake and focused on the main points of the lecture, your lecture notes can become quite important come midterm or final time. Most college students think they're pretty good at note taking. Only one in ten is. Wonder how you can become that one? Have a look at the ten secrets of excellent note taking, all from the professors' perspective:

1. **Write more, not less.** You should be writing for most of the lecture. Sure, it's a question of balance and emphasis—getting enough down so that you've captured most of the detail, while highlighting the main points so you can see how the lecture is structured. But in our experience, it's far more common for students to have written down not nearly enough than to have written down far too much. Rule of thumb: fifteen minutes of lecture should produce one page of notes (or, in other words, three to four pages of notes for a typical hour of lecture).
2. **Use any advance information.** If the professor has given a title to each lecture on the syllabus or has given out study questions in advance of each lecture, make sure you familiarize yourself with these before coming to class. The more you know about what the main points of the lecture are going to be, the easier it will be to take notes. You'll know what you're looking for.



**5-STAR TIP.** If the professor hasn't bothered to give each lecture a title, you should. That'll force you to locate the single most important point of that class.

- 3. Write down the professor's ideas, not yours.** Some students lard their notes with their own questions, reflections, opinions, and free associations. But the point of taking notes is to get a good rendition of what the professor is saying. That's what'll be on the test. Leave your own thoughts for afterward or for your personal journal.
- 4. Forget about complicated note-taking "systems."** Contrary to what they tell you, there's no need to use the Cornell Note-Taking System, Mind Mapping, or the "Five R's of Good Note Taking" (whatever they may be). It's more than enough to simply number the professor's points (and perhaps have a sub number or two). Worrying about systems will only slow you down and can distort the actual shape of the lecture. There's always time to go back later and structure your notes.



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**EXTRA POINTER.** When taking notes, be sure to set off subordinate points (that is, points that contribute to the lecture in some way, but are not on the main path). Also, indent and clearly identify any illustrations, examples, comparisons, and interesting (though not central) asides. Be sure to note their relation to the main points.

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**5-STAR TIP.** Whenever a professor uses a technical or unfamiliar term, be sure to write down—in the best case, word for word—the prof's definition of that term. These terms can play a critical role in later lectures and on the tests and papers.

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- 5. Don't zone in and out.** You're used to rapid-fire content delivered in twenty-second bursts. But the professor is used to dishing up his or her ideas in fifteen- to twenty-minute segments. Train yourself to focus—and to write—for longer intervals. Above all, don't be distracted by other activities that may be going on around you in the lecture hall—or on your iPhone, iPad, or Game Boy.

- 6. Pay special attention to the beginning and the end.** Often the most important parts of the lecture are the first two minutes and the last two minutes, right when many students are shuffling in their seats or packing their bags. Many professors start their lectures by reviewing the key points of the last lecture and listing the main points they're going to cover in this lecture. And they conclude the class with a summary of the main points they have covered and sometimes an indication of what they'll do next time. Be sure to take careful notes during these high-value moments.
- 7. Look for verbal clues.** Professors often try to flag the most important points in the lecture with phrases like "the key point is...," "it's especially important to note that...," and "one should keep in mind that..." Look for these indicators of the cornerstones of the lecture. And try to write down—word for word, if you can—the material that follows them.




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**5-STAR TIP.** Be especially alert to any questions the professor poses. Those often come at key turning points in the lecture and often introduce important issues that are going to be talked about at great length (and might appear later on a test or paper).

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- 8. Focus on the structure.** Every lecture has a plot: a central point with a series of steps that build up this point. Keep focused on the plot—and its subplots—and try to capture them in your notes. Continually ask yourself: *What is the overall point of the lecture? How does each individual point contribute to the overall plot? Why did the professor choose to make these points rather than others?*
- 9. Beware of PowerPoints.** PowerPoints (and things written on the board) are usually quite sketchy outlines—reminders to the professors of what to say. Make sure you write down the explanations of these outlines in your notes, not just the outlines themselves. Come test time, you'll be behind the eight ball if all you have in your notes are these prompts the professor uses.



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**EXTRA POINTER.** Take notes at all class activities—discussion sections, field trips, visits to the museum, review sessions, individual meetings in office hours—not just lectures. You never know what might come in handy when the test or paper comes around.

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- 10. Always do it yourself.** Don't outsource your note taking to your friend, to the professional "lecture notes" (sold at the campus store), or to your note-taking group. Taking notes for yourself is the single best way to engage in—and remember—the lecture. Not to mention it'll actually get you to go the lecture, which is an achievement in itself.



# 6 PARTNERING WITH THE PROFESSOR

**Y**ou might think that taking a college course is just about going to class and hitting the books. And you wouldn't be wholly wrong. But you'll be most successful in your classes if you add some social networking into the mix. With your professor, that is. Developing a relationship with the prof can pay off in all sorts of ways. Maybe the professor can clear up a misconception that's causing you to leave each lecture in a fog of confusion. Maybe he or she can help you get the thesis of your paper right or tip you off to what's going to be on the exam—thus averting disaster. Or maybe it's some special consideration you need—an extension, a makeup exam, or the review of a grade—or perhaps just a little encouragement to get you through the course.

Whatever the case, you're going to have to approach your professor and interact with him or her. But students generally don't have much of an idea how to manage their relations with the professor. Some students are simply not interested in engaging the professor, while others see the teacher as an enemy to be avoided at all costs. And lots of students are terrified of going to an office hour, lest they somehow seem stupid or lost, or encounter a professor who has no interest in seeing them.

But it's well worth the time and effort to overcome these obstacles. It's really not that hard to interface well with your professor once you know how to do it—and once you understand the professor's perspective. And in the end, it'll make your educational experience exponentially better and—a few incompetent professors and SOBs notwithstanding—more fun, too.

In this chapter you'll learn:

- ▶ 15 Ways to Make Your Professor Love You
- ▶ The 15 Secrets of Going to See the Professor
- ▶ Etiquette for E-mailing Your Professor
- ▶ 10 Surefire Ways to Piss Off Your Professor
- ▶ Top 10 Things Professors Never Want to Hear (and What They Think When They Do Hear Them)

# 15 Ways to Make Your Professor Love You

Hey, professors are human beings, too. With real human feelings. How your professor feels about you can influence how much time he or she is willing to put in to help you with the course and even how good a recommendation he or she will write for grad school or a job. Surprisingly enough, only one in a hundred students thinks about this. Assuming you're one of the other ninety-nine, we offer you our fifteen best tips on how to ingratiate yourself to your professor:

1. **Look interested.** Professors like nothing better than to see alert and engaged students seated front and center in their classes. Even if they're usually too polite to mention it, professors do notice students who sit there yawning or looking bummed out—or, worse yet, openly texting or reading e-mail. If you look as if you're following, actively taking notes, and showing an interest in the material, you'll stand out from the huddled masses.
2. **Say hi to the professor when he or she enters the room.** Seems obvious, but take a look around sometime to see how few students do it.
3. **Ask a question.** Most professors regularly interrupt their presentations to give students a chance to ask questions. And when professors do, they're hoping for some kind of response—not the apathetic silence that often greets them. Your question will light up your professor's day. Make sure it's a question about the material, not one of these much-hated questions like: "Will this be on the test?" "Could you repeat what you just said for the past fifteen minutes?" or "When is the paper due?"





**EXTRA POINTER.** Bonus points will be given if your question demonstrates an understanding of material presented in an earlier class. Your professor will think, "Wow—a student who came to class and actually remembers something from last week!" Also good is when your question shows an acquaintance with the reading. Your professor will think, "Wow—someone is actually poring over that dull-as-dishwater textbook I assigned!"

- 4. Put in your two cents' worth.** Another way professors break the monotony of the fifty-minute lecture is by themselves asking questions of the students. At times, running a class discussion can be like pulling teeth. So you're sure to win the professor's favor if you pipe up with an answer (or at least a stab at an answer) to the professor's query. And don't be afraid to be the first one in, either. Professors understand that it's sometimes hard to think on your feet.



**5-STAR TIP.** Do not take this as a green light to offer up whatever thought you have, no matter how dumb or unrelated to the question asked. If you just shoot your mouth off, without giving any thought at all to what you're saying, you're likely to become a major thorn in your professor's side and incur the wrath of your fellow students.

- 5. Volunteer first.** You have a golden opportunity to earn your prof's affections if you are the first to volunteer when your professor is dividing up tasks for later in the semester—for example, seminar presentations, debates, or discussion leaders. Some professors even give special breaks on the grading for those brave enough to step up to bat first.
- 6. Continue the conversation outside of class.** You will surely get on your professor's good side if you approach him or her outside of class to talk about issues raised in class. Usually the best venue is during office hours, but some professors have time to chat before or after class. Keep in mind that the more you can display your interest in the course material for its own sake (rather than for a good grade on the

paper or test), the better. If you are shy, an e-mail to the professor following up on some issue raised in class can also do the trick (for tips on this approach, see "Etiquette for E-mailing Your Professor" on pp. 134-136).

7. **Read the comments.** You can't imagine how many students come to office hours to go over a paper or test and haven't even read the professor's comments. Professors especially appreciate those students who have, because it shows that you actually want to learn from what the professor has to say. And it's a time-saver for the prof, too: Who wants to say again what they just finished writing down the night before? (Also see "The 15 Secrets of Going to See the Professor," coming up on pp. 129-133.)
8. **Join the team.** Some professors offer students the opportunity to work with them on a joint research project or do an internship. This can be one of the best ways to forge a great relationship with your professor and gain valuable training in your field. If no research or internship opportunities are available, at least see if you can take a small class or seminar with some professor you would like to work with.
9. **Ask the prof what he or she is working on.** Many professors spend lots of years working on a research project. And there's almost nothing professors like to talk about more than their research. But it's a rare student who thinks to ask the professor about it. This is something that'll surely set you off from the crowd, and, hey, you might even learn something about Siberian poetry of the late 1820s or the synthesis of amino acids.
10. **Participate in departmental activities.** Professors will take note of you when they see you at departmental events such as outside lectures, colloquia, or meetings of the departmental student club. Your participation shows you really care about the field. (Professors are suckers for that sort of thing.)
11. **Alert your professor to current events related to the class.** Bringing in a newspaper item or Web article that has relevance to the course is a surefire way to win approval from your professor. Not only does he or she see that you are engaged enough with the class

to recognize its relevance to real-world activities, but it gives the professor some valuable ammunition to prove to the rest of the class that—despite what they've been thinking—someone actually finds the course useful or interesting.

12. **Congratulate the professor on an achievement.** If you read on the college Web site or student newspaper that your professor just published a book, won an award, or has gotten tenure and/or promotion, it's a very nice thing to offer congratulations. Everyone likes his or her accomplishments recognized, even professors.
13. **Tell your prof you like the class.** Students rarely realize that professors worry about how a class is going, and would desperately like to hear that students are enjoying it. Look for an occasion when you can slip in, in a casual but sincere way, that you like the class. It would be a special touch if you could come up with some specific thing about the class that you are enjoying, but even a general expression of appreciation would surely be welcome.




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**EXTRA POINTER.** It's one thing to compliment a professor and another to lay it on too thick. Once you slip into sucking up mode, the professor realizes it's more about you trying to get a good grade than about him or her being a good professor. Never a good idea.

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14. **Thank the professor when he or she does you a favor.** You might not realize it, but professors aren't obligated to do a lot of the things they do for students. Like making special appointments, answering e-mails on evenings and weekends, giving extensions and makeups, and providing help with picking other courses in the department. Professors remember the students who thank them—in person or at least by e-mail—for any special considerations that the professor might have offered. Which will come in very handy when you need another favor or two.
15. **Always be positive.** Whenever you have any interaction with the professor—whether in the class, in the office, or even in the hall—always be upbeat and enthusiastic. No one likes a sourpuss.

# The 15 Secrets of Going to See the Professor

One of the best things you can do any time in the semester is go see the professor. So hoof on over to an office hour and have some one-on-one face time with someone who'll help you master the material and improve your grade, to boot. But how should you conduct this tête-à-tête with the prof? Here are fifteen insider tips about how to make that office hour really count:

1. **Have no fear.** No need to get all bent out of shape about going to see the professor. The prof would actually *like* to see you and answer your questions. Believe it or not, he or she is on your side and is eager to see you do well. And besides, he or she has seen many students stupider than you, so nothing you're going to ask will set the record for stupidity.




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**EXTRA POINTER.** Don't assume the professor will think, "I've taught this before, so why didn't this dumb-ass student get it?" Professors know that the material is difficult and sometimes goes by pretty quickly in lecture, so they'll be happy to explain it again. Just don't ask them to go over *all* of it.

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2. **Go it alone.** Even though you might feel more comfortable going with a friend or partner, the office hour will go better if it's just you and the professor. You'll get in more questions, the discussion will be tailored to what you need most help on, and two-party communication is almost always more productive than committee work. Your friend can wait outside for the postmortem.

3. **Go while there's still time.** It's best to go as early as a week or two before the test is to be held or the paper is due. That way you'll have plenty of time to apply the suggestions the professor might make. And you'll avoid the interminable line of students outside the office the day before the assignment comes due.
4. **Don't make 'em wait.** If you can't make the official office hours, most professors are willing to make individual appointments to help you out. If you're lucky enough to land such an accommodation, though, be sure you're 100 percent on time. There's nothing that ticks off a professor more than making him- or herself available for a custom office hour only to find that you don't care enough to come on time. And besides, the professor might leave after ten minutes, which would make your trip a total loss. (See our "10 Surefire Ways to Piss Off Your Professor" on pp. 137-140 for nine more ways to get on your prof's bad side.)
5. **Come ready to work.** If you're meeting with the professor to go over a paper or test, or to ask questions about a particular lecture or reading, make sure you bring that paper or test, or your lecture notes or a copy of the article. The prof doesn't remember the comments he or she wrote on your individual piece of work—though he or she will be able to recall them after just a brief glance at your work. And if you have your lecture notes or the article in hand, you and the prof will be able to examine specific points that are confusing to you, rather than just talking in a general way about the contents.
6. **Come in with something to say.** Office hours almost always go better if you bring a few specific questions to the meeting. It's almost never good to start a meeting with general comments such as: "I didn't understand what you said about [main topic of the course]" or "I couldn't understand any of your lectures last week." Much better is to come in with two or three conversation-starters about a specific concept, point, or problem you didn't understand. Keep in mind that in a fifteen-minute office hour (which is how long these things usually last), two or three questions are usually the most you'll have time to discuss.



**5-STAR TIP.** Go for the meat. It's usually best to ask questions about the main ideas, rather than about little facts or tiny details. Focusing on the central and most far-reaching issues will also help you on the test or paper, because professors usually ask about the most important points, not picayune details.

- 7. Start the conversation yourself...** You've come to have your concerns addressed. You should start the conversation by asking a question or raising an issue.  
**...But let the man (or woman) talk.** Be sure you also let the professor get a word in edgewise. Sometimes students come in prepared with so many things to say that the professor never gets a chance to get his or her two cents in. Net result? You don't get the benefit of the professor's suggestions and guidance, which is—when you think about it—what you came for. Key clue: when the professor starts talking, no matter how briefly and how tentatively, you stop talking. Always works.
- 8. Follow up with follow-ups.** Once you've gotten a good discussion going, it's good to probe issues more fully by asking directed questions about what the professor just said. The most productive office hours occur when new—and unexpected—ideas are generated during the conversation. Your follow-ups, even when you're not sure where the discussion is going, will help generate such ideas.
- 9. Don't be coy.** No point being shy or pretending. If the professor says something you don't understand (or directs your attention to something in the lecture or reading that you can't identify), it's always good to say, simply and forthrightly, that you haven't understood. Professors, who have often gone over the same material with different students, simply don't realize that you're not taking in what they just said. And they'll appreciate your honesty and real desire to learn.
- 10. Don't dispute balls and strikes.** It's perfectly all right to go to the professor and ask why you got the grade you did. It's not all right to mount a pitched battle with the professor about each point the

grader took off. A better idea would be to focus on the concepts you didn't understand—and on the (less-than-successful) strategies you used in writing the paper or taking the test—so that you can do better next time.



**BEST-KEPT SECRET.** Most professors, when they smell a grade dispute coming, do the best they can to shut down the discussion. Keep this in mind when you shift the discussion from the course material to why you got the grade you did (often not worth it).

11. **Get it down.** It's always a good idea to take notes. Points often go by very fast in conversation, and you'll be pleased to have a record of what the professor suggested when it comes time for writing the paper or studying for the test. And don't be embarrassed, either: professors themselves are very used to taking notes at meetings.



**EXTRA POINTER.** If the professor suggests additional readings or reference materials, make sure you get down as full and exact a citation as you can. You'd be amazed how often students can't find the article afterwards because they've written down only a few key words (or misspelled the author's name).

12. **Don't make it personal.** It's almost never a good use of office time to confess your personal troubles, problems with your life, your roommate, your family, and so on. The professor is not a confidant, and even if he or she were, airing your problems in this venue won't help you in the course.
13. **Ask and ye shall receive (maybe).** It's generally not such a great idea to ask for an extension or a makeup exam (either of which just puts off the pain). But sometimes such accommodations would really, really, really help you out (for example, when you've got two other exams on that day). Always ask. Politely, of course. Sometimes

professors have hidden course policies that allow them latitude for such special cases. And what's the worst that can happen? They'll turn you down.

14. **Be a mensch.** It's always nice—and prudent, too—to politely greet the professor with an upbeat “Hello, Professor So and So” at the beginning of the meeting and to thank him or her at the close for taking the time to meet with you. Professors respond to such niceties, especially when you mean them.
15. **Beg for more.** It's often good to try to set up an additional meeting if you still have questions and would like to continue the discussion. And don't forget about e-mail. Professors are often very happy to answer (specific and focused) questions by e-mail or even to read drafts or at least paragraphs of papers before you hand them in.



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**BEST-KEPT SECRET.** Many professors are starting to use Skype as a way of communicating with students outside of office hours. Ask if your professor is one of them.

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Bottom line? Office hours are one of the most high-value but underutilized resources at college. Take advantage of this unique opportunity.



# Etiquette for E-mailing Your Professor

Professors, like everyone else, have gone electronic, which means that in addition to the one-on-one office hour, they're increasingly willing to communicate by e-mail. Here are some things to consider before clicking "Send":

- ▶ **E-mail is forever.** Once you send it off, you can't get it back. Once your professor has it, he or she owns it and can save it, or, in the worst case, forward it on to colleagues for a good laugh. At your expense.
- ▶ **E-mail goes where it's told.** Check—and double check—to see that the right address appears in the "To" line. Just because your mom and your professor are both named Lynn is no reason to send all your love to Professor Lynn.
- ▶ **Professors might not be using the cruddy university e-mail system.** So send it to the address they actually use, not the one on the university directory. (Check the syllabus or assignment sheet for clues.)
- ▶ **Professors might not open mail sent from luckydogpig@thepound.com.** They prefer to open mail sent from more reputable addresses, like your.name@theCruddyUniversityE-mailSystem.edu.
- ▶ **Subject lines are for subjects.** Put a brief explanation of the nature of the e-mail (like "question about paper") in the subject line. Never include demands such as "Urgent request: immediate response needed." That's the surest way to get your request trashed.
- ▶ **Salutations matter.** The safest way to start is with "Dear Professor So and So" (using their last name). That way you won't be getting into the issue of whether the prof has a PhD or not, and you won't seem sexist when you address your female professor as Ms. or, worse yet, Mrs. This and That.

- ▶ **Clear and concise is best.** Your prof might get twenty-five to thirty e-mails a day. So it's best if you ask your questions in as focused and succinct a way as possible (hint: it's often good to number your questions). And if your question is very elaborate or multifaceted, it's best to go to an in-person office hour. You'll get better service that way.



**EXTRA POINTER.** Before sending a draft of a paper to a professor as an attachment, confirm that he or she is willing to accept such long documents. If not, find out whether he or she will look over a page or even a central paragraph of your work incorporated into the body of the e-mail. And be sure to cc yourself any time you send a piece of work—who knows the fate of the document you're sending?



**5-STAR TIP.** Never e-mail your paper as an attachment in a bizarre format. You might think that .odt is a really cool file extension, since you didn't have to pay for Open Office. But if it takes the professor twenty minutes to find the plug-in (which doesn't work), then another half-hour to download Open Office (which ties up way too much space on his or her computer), what was supposed to be a fifteen-minute grading job on your paper is now taking over an hour. And then the prof has to assign your grade. Recommendation: stick to Word.

- ▶ **Always acknowledge.** If your professor deigns to answer—or send you the handout or reference that you asked for—be sure to tell him or her that you got it. That way he or she will think kindly of you next time you need something.
- ▶ **THIS IS NOT A SHOUTING MATCH.** Don't write in all uppercase letters (which is an e-mail convention for anger or other strong emotion). No one likes being yelled at.
- ▶ **No one really likes emoticons and smileys.** Trust us on this one. 😊

- ▶ **This is not Facebook.** So don't write the professor in the same way you'd write on your friend's wall.



**5-STAR TIP.** It's never a good idea to "poke" your professor. No matter how funny it seems at the time.

- ▶ **This is not IMing.** So pls dun wrte yor PROFE SR llk ur txtN. uz abbrz @ yor own rsk. coRec me f lm wrng. (Translation thanks to [WWW.TRANSLBIT.COM](http://WWW.TRANSLBIT.COM), which features a neat little Facebook widget.)
- ▶ **This is not CollegeHumor.com.** So resist the temptation to talk about the "badass" paper you need help with, your "loser" TA who didn't teach you what you needed to know, or the "crappy" grade you just got on the midterm.
- ▶ **This is not RateMyProfessors.com.** The professor doesn't want your comments about his or her performance in the class. Save those for the end-of-semester evaluations, where you'll be able to spout off. Anonymously.
- ▶ **Spelling mistakes make you look like a doofus.** So always use the spel check and proofread yyour e-mail, two.
- ▶ **Sign-offs and signatures count.** Always end by thanking the professor for his or her time and closing with "Best wishes" or "Regards" (or some other relatively formal, but friendly closing). And always sign with your (entire) real name, not some wacky nickname like Ry-Ry or Biff.
- ▶ **Your prof doesn't want to hear your philosophy of life.** Skip the cute quotes or statements of your religious or political views at the bottom of your e-mail. You never know what offends.
- ▶ **Don't lay it on too thick.** It's one thing to be polite and friendly in your e-mail; it's another thing to wind up with a brown nose.

# 10

## Surefire Ways to Piss Off Your Professor

Like any other relation between two people, the student-professor interaction depends on goodwill from both sides. Things go wrong when one party—for example, the student—does something that offends the other party—for example, the professor. In some cases, the student isn't even aware that he or she has done something to irritate the prof. Lest you unwittingly make a misstep, here are ten of the most common ways students get on the wrong side of their professors—and how you can avoid these *faux pas*:

1. **Making excuses for missing class.** Many students feel guilty when, for whatever reason, they don't show up for class. But the last thing in the world the professor wants to know is that your family reunion was more important than his or her class, or that your cramming for your P-Chem exam took precedence over yet another boring lecture. Suggestion: carefully think out what excuses you're going to make for missing class or, better yet, don't make any excuses at all.



**EXTRA POINTER.** If you must make an excuse, either because the professor takes attendance or because he or she asks you why you weren't there, it's best to be as brief as possible. Simply saying that you weren't feeling well, that your kid was sick, or that there was an accident on the freeway will work well.

2. **Misbehaving in class.** It's very easy for students to think that the prof pays no attention to what they are doing in a lecture. The class is huge, so why should the teacher even care what the audience is doing? Surprisingly enough, though, the professor often notices—and sometimes remembers—the student who's busy IMing in class or whose cell phone goes off or, worst of all, who nods off during

class. And while few professors will dock your grade for such questionable behavior, it can come back to bite you when you need some help with a paper, an extension of a deadline, or when your score is on the borderline between two grades.

3. **Challenging your professor publicly.** It's one thing to ask a pointed question or propose a different interpretation; it's another thing to suggest (however implicitly) that the professor has no idea what he or she is talking about or that no one has understood anything he or she has said so far. Before asking a question in lecture, make sure you're not going to show the professor up or otherwise embarrass him or her. It's not worth it.
4. **Disputing a grade like a "mad dog."** Even though it's the least pleasant part of the job, all professors realize they're obligated to entertain student questions and disputes about their grades. But professors really hate it when some student comes in frothing at the mouth and complaining that the grade on their paper is unacceptable, unfair, wrong—or all of the above. One likely result of such behavior: the professor will reread your paper like a gymnastics judge at the Olympics, replaying everything in slo mo, looking for any possible deduction. And in many cases will come to the conclusion that the initial grade was way too high for such a lousy piece of work. Tip: consider the dispute from the side of the interaction that counts. The professor's.
5. **Seeming really stupid.** From time to time professors encounter stupidity the likes of which they've never seen. Students who can't remember who painted the Mona Lisa. Students who say they can't come to a 12:30 p.m. office hour because it's in the middle of the night. And students who don't know their "its" from their "it's," even though the third graders in town have it on their spelling lists this week. Seeing this kind of stupidity from college students can really tick off a professor. (On the positive side, it does make for some great cocktail party snickering with the professor's faculty friends.)
6. **Giving lame excuses for handing in a late paper or missing an exam.** Some excuses wear really thin with professors. Computer ate your paper (have you ever heard of backups?). Alarm clock didn't go off (as if I've never heard that one before). Grandmother died

(amazing how many grandmothers go to meet their maker the day of the midterm). But some excuses really go off the deep end. Like a student who vehemently argued that he was never told about a course rule because his syllabus was missing a page—all the while holding that very page in his hands. On the flip side, the best excuses we've heard include: "I couldn't get to the test because I was in jail" (how can you argue with that one?) and "I couldn't do the paper because Ozarks Electric hasn't restored the power to my house fifteen days after the ice storm" (it's true).

7. **Treating the professor like your servant.** You're guaranteed to offend the professor if you leave phone messages or send e-mail that say: ABSOLUTELY MUST SEE YOU TOMORROW TO DISCUSS MY EXAM. I HAVE CLASSES FROM 10:30 TO 12:30, LUNCH WITH MY FRAT 'TIL 2 AND HAVE TO WORK FROM 3 TO 5. SO I AM AVAILABLE BETWEEN 2 AND 3. PLEASE RESPOND IMMEDIATELY. Yeah, right.
8. **Plagiarizing in super-obvious ways.** No professor likes students who cheat. But worse even than plagiarism is copying in a way that's so transparent and obvious that anyone with half a brain could detect it. Like what happens when the professor enters the first few words of your paper into a Google search and finds, word for word, parts of your paper in the first entry. Look—professors think plagiarism is intellectual stealing and, as the antilittering signs in New York City say, "disgusting and filthy, so don't do it." But you add insult to injury when you copy in so obvious a way that your professor would have to be a moron not to be able to find your source.
9. **Comparing your prof to other profs.** No professor wants to hear how he or she stacks up against other professors you've had or against professors teaching other sections of the course. Even a casual comparison can offend, so think before you compare.
10. **Going over your prof's head.** No prof will be happy if you go to the department chair (or worse yet, the dean) with complaints about the course or about how the professor is treating you. But it's possible to wind up offending through no intention of your own. Say, you encounter the department chair, either in the hall or at

a departmental function, and he or she asks you, "So, how's that course X with Professor Y going?" You answer, "Not so great, given A, B, C, and D." After which, the next time the chair sees that prof, he or she says, "So I hear your course X is having some problems," and when asked, casually mentions your name as the source of the "observations." You wind up in the doghouse with the prof, when all you intended was to be friendly with the departmental chair. Moral? Be careful where you bad-mouth your professor—what you say can come back to bite you.

# Top 10 Things Professors Never Want to Hear (and What They Think When They Do Hear Them)

## #10. "I missed class yesterday. So did you do anything important?"

Of course not. I just stood up in front and ran my mouth about nothing, like I always do.

## #9. "I lost the syllabus. Oh, and the paper assignment, too. Would you mind e-mailing them to me?"

Sure, last time I checked my job description, it included research, teaching, and being at your beck and call.

## #8. "Can we go over my test?"

Don't you think reading the whole thing through once was more than enough for me?

## #7. "I'm terribly sorry my paper wasn't in on time; my dog ate my printer."

Time for obedience training. For you.

## #6. "My friend and I worked together on this paper. How come I got a B and he got an A?"

Hmm, in addition to being better looking than you, your friend is also smarter.

## #5. "I really need an A in this class."

Well, if I were parceling out A's on the basis on need, I'd be giving them to all those D students. They need 'em more than you.



**#4. "This C is totally unacceptable to me. I'm an A student."**

Not in my class.

**#3. "I'm leaving early for my ski vacation. So can I take the final early?"**

Now there's a deal I can't refuse: I do double-work making two finals, and you spend more quality time on the slopes.

**#2. "I'd do anything for an A."**

Anything?

And the number-one thing professors never want to hear:

**#1. "B-minus? You've got to be kidding. I paid good money for that paper."**