

From Clueless Student to Professor: An Insider's Guide to University Academics

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When I began college, I had no idea what I was doing. But, being a typical 18 year old, I thought I knew everything. I took five writing-intensive classes each of my first two semesters, did hardly any of the assigned reading, began papers the night before they were due, and spent most of my time pursuing non-academic collegiate activities. I was one of the worst students in each of my classes.

By the middle of my sophomore year I decided that I wanted to become a philosophy professor and perhaps go to law school. And then I woke up, realizing that with my grades I had a better chance of playing for the Pittsburgh Steelers than I did getting into a good graduate school or law school and landing a job as a professor. In order to salvage my G.P.A. and try to actually learn something, I reformed. I tried everything, and I offer the following advice to those finding themselves in similar situations. For many of you, this advice will reinforce what you already know. Some of these suggestions are specific to excelling in my classes, but you may find them helpful in a variety of contexts.

1. Concentration

When writing papers and reading philosophy, concentration is the most important skill. Simply being able to sit down and apply yourself to the reading or writing assignment at hand without being distracted is the foundation for all academic success. I find this skill more important than IQ or other measures of "native intelligence." Consider how much time you spend complaining about or otherwise avoiding your work compared with the time that you spend on task. We all fritter away a good portion of our lives, but if you can just train yourself to concentrate on your work when it's time to get down to business you will be much more productive. If you concentrate on your work when you set out to do it, you will have much more time for other things. And you won't always feel guilty for being behind in your work.

2. Work Space

The easiest way to improve your concentration is to find a work space where you can study and write. Eliminate anything that will distract you. Disconnect from the internet. Turn off email, instant messaging, and your cell phone. We live in a culture that makes thousands of demands on our already fragile attention spans, and you need to find a peaceful place to work. I used to lock myself in a library carrel, and sometimes I would even stick my desk in a closet for privacy. My ideal workspace is like a cockpit: my laptop in front of me, no clutter on the desk so that there is nothing at all to distract my attention from the screen or book, and music in my headphones so that I don't hear any other noise. Some people find that music (usually through headphones) helps them concentrate. I like to listen to music in the afternoon and when I otherwise need a bit of upbeat tempo to keep my energy up. I may be extreme, but these habits help me focus. If you don't take measures to protect your time, someone or something will take it from you.

3. Prime Time

Once you find a place that you can concentrate, get into the habit of going there consistently at the same time each day. Find out when you can concentrate. I came to realize that I do my best work between 5:00 and 10:00 in the morning. So when my friends were sitting around playing videogames late at night or otherwise killing time, I would go to sleep and wake up early to a peaceful house. It is astounding how much work you can get done in a few concentrated hours when you are fully awake and free from interruptions. It may sound brutal to get up that early, but you need to find the time that works for you. Do not spend your most alert hours watching television or fiddling with things like email that you could do when half asleep. Determine your cognitive prime time, and make the most of it. And do not be afraid to nap if it helps you concentrate.

Another small suggestion: you will often have chunks of time between your classes. This can be an awkward time that you end up wasting at the MUB. Go to the library between classes and work. When you leave your house in the morning, be in the mindset that you are off to a full day of work.

4. Micro and Macro Self-Discipline

I use these terms as shorthand for my own work habits. Macro discipline means setting objectives and schedules, getting up early, and getting myself into work. Micro discipline means once I'm at work I concentrate on each task at hand rather than sitting at my desk messing around, checking Facebook, emailing, reading random articles online, etc. I often need to just disconnect from the internet altogether in order to get in a few hours of uninterrupted work.

5. Consider the Long Term Costs of Your Job

More than ever, students are working nearly full-time jobs while at UNH. If you have a full load of classes, you probably do not have enough time to also work for money. Your grades will suffer, and you will compromise your education. You only have one chance at college, and what you learn and the G.P.A. you earn will be with you for the rest of your life. I have seen many A students who do not have enough time for their class work reduced to C's because of their jobs and this can change the trajectory of their lives. Students working have a major disadvantage when competing with classmates who can devote more time to studying.

Frankly, working during college may seem fiscally responsible but it is actually bad financial planning. Over the long term, knowledge and a higher G.P.A. pay much higher dividends than the few thousand dollars you make waiting tables, etc. Student loan rates are reasonable, and you should take out the loans you need to survive, spend your time studying and learning, get the job you want, and pay off the loans.

It may be impossible for you to not work while in school. If this is the case, you have personal experience of how someone's financial situation can hinder their ability to be successful in other seemingly non-economic aspects of life. You might not think that how much money you have has anything to do with the grades you receive, but rich kids can spend all of their time studying while many others don't have this luxury. This is even more important for students considering professional or graduate school. Law school admissions officers, for example, only see your G.P.A. and your work schedule is no excuse to them.

6. Active Reading

Do the assigned reading. I admit that I occasionally assign reading that is intolerably boring on the first read. If you just can't get through it, skim it. Look for the thesis and the main points in the arguments. After we've discussed it in class it will come to life, and you should go back and try again. When you read, underline or otherwise mark the thesis, premises, conclusions, and whatever else strikes you. Write notes in the margins. Enter the most important notes into a word processing document along with your class notes. You may be able to occasionally participate in class discussions without reading, but you cannot write good papers without carefully reading the texts. It will be clear to me that you have not read. And please bring your books to class. This should be obvious, but it doesn't seem to be. I used to intentionally trash my books and carry them everywhere with me so that my professors would think that I never put them down. I don't recommend this, but the least you can do is bring the books to class. If you don't have the book in class, I am willing to bet that you have not done the reading.

7. Don't Miss Class

Once you've had a few sessions in my classes, you know that the heart and guts of the courses are the class discussions. Students often tell me that our class discussions really get under their skin and that they are preoccupied with the exchanges for the rest of the day. This is where the deepest learning occurs. If you miss a discussion, no one can reproduce it for you. You missed out. I don't stand in front of the room taking roll call, but I know every student and I know when you are not there. I am personally offended when you skip. If guilt doesn't reach you, then do the math: non-residents are paying about \$125 per class meeting. Don't waste it. And if you do miss class, please don't ask me if you "missed anything important."

8. Class Discussions

At first impression, philosophy class discussions can seem intimidating. I was scared silent in my first few philosophy classes, but you will see that you have nothing to fear in my classes.

As a rule, I try to speak less than fifty-percent of the words in any class, preferring to have as many of the ideas articulated by the students as is practical. Students should actively make the discoveries rather than watching me talk about the material base because you will learn it best when you openly discuss it. We will often engage in "debates" in class, but we are not competing with each other but rather are collaborating in the exploration of arguments and counter-arguments. I argue for both sides of every problem, and you should feel comfortable taking a chance trying on a minority position and know that I will help you to articulate your point. This isn't to say that I will coddle you or that I think everyone is equally right, but I have a pretty good sense of what's motivating even the strangest comments and I can usually dig out the underlying philosophical issues. And I always argue with the minority, so you will have at least one ally.

Exactly what makes for a good discussion is one of my areas of research and I could and hopefully will write a book on this topic. But for the purposes of conceiving your own role in class discussions, keep the following suggestions in mind. Your goal is not simply to talk a lot in class. Nor is it to dominate class discussion by winning all of the arguments. If you can make one thoughtful contribution per meeting you will be on the right track. A thoughtful contribution may be a question as well as an answer or comment. When you do the reading before class, there will probably be a few questions or issues that arise. Write up your most crucial concern as a question to be asked in class, and spring it on the class when it seems like we're on that topic. Your weekly response papers are meant to stimulate this process, and the core of your paper should be worth contributing to class discussion. When I was anxious about speaking in class, I began

writing out my question or comment before I raised my hand so that I was sure that I had all of the right words at my fingertips in case I froze. I still do that sometimes.

Class discussions will be heated, and you may be appalled by the position your classmate is advocating. More important than any individual opinion, however, is our shared commitment to democratic discussion. If we can't have these conversations successfully in our classroom, then imagine what they will be like outside of it. Treat your classmates with respect. Don't interrupt them. Don't whisper when they are speaking. I'm good at managing a discussion so that everyone will have a chance to contribute. If I skip over you for a few minutes, it's probably because I have a reason for looking to someone else at that moment. Be passionate, but be self-conscious of your demeanor, words, and body language. These are sensitive topics, and the person across from you may be speaking from painful personal experience.

9. Blackboard Discussions

I dislike many things about Blackboard, which is why I maintain my own webpages. Interactions between people through computers will be different than face to face encounters. I do, however, think that the Blackboard discussions boards can work wonders.

I expect my students to make at least one thoughtful contribution to the Blackboard discussion board each week. A thoughtful contribution can be a question, a comment or an elaboration on contribution during class, a response to someone else's post, or even a link to something relevant. Good Blackboard posts are not hit-and-run, but engage in a conversation. They also do not dig in their heels until everyone who disagrees gives up. Just as you would in a thoughtful conversation, you will listen to others on Blackboard. You should be there because you want to learn and share rather than evangelize. That "learning and sharing" part may sound cheesy, but it is essential to not only doing philosophy but also to building good relationships. As a lawyer and a philosopher I have lots of practice arguing. I can tell you that winning arguments won't make you any friends.

While Blackboard discussions lack the face-to-face spontaneity of class discussion, this has its advantages. While arguments may unfold so quickly in class that we cannot formulate our points, Blackboard allows us to take our time composing our ideas and saying them just how we'd like. We can process rather than react. This can be very helpful for people (like me not that long ago) who are a bit shy and have difficulty speaking up in class. Class time is limited, and we will often end class with several hands in the air and many stones unturned. Take it to Blackboard.

10. Listening

Listening deserves special attention as a component of discussions. Discussions are dialogues. Serial monologues are the norm in our culture, and philosophers can be particularly bad at listening. Take the following typical cocktail party exchange between philosophers. Person A lectures Person B for five minutes on Kant's metaphysics. While Person A is talking, Person B uses this time to prepare her lecture in response on Hegel's metaphysics. She doesn't really care about what Person A is saying, but does want to sound as smart as possible when it's her turn to lecture and therefore devotes her mental activity to composing her own oration rather than listening to Person A. Person A stops lecturing, and Person B begins her lecture. This can go on for some time. Please listen to your classmates when they speak. Process what

they are saying and respond to them. This is not mere courtesy. You will learn from your classmates when you are really engaging each other about these issues.

Practice listening not only for your academic success, but more importantly for your personal relationships. Again, many things in our culture compete for attention. The people across from us should get it.

11. The Office Hours Secret

There is a direct relationship between how frequently you visit your professor's office hours and the grade you will receive. Don't just go to chat. Bring a real question or issue. In all of your classes, introduce yourself to your professor and pop into office hours for a few minutes every other week. This works wonders.

12. Response Papers

Take the response papers very seriously for several reasons. As mentioned above, you will have well-formed thoughts to contribute to class discussion after writing the responses. Second, I can gauge what interests you and what you are struggling with from the responses and structure sessions accordingly. Third, through my comments on the papers I enter into a continuous written dialogue with you. I am paying close attention to your work and care about your progress. The responses also provide practice and fodder for longer papers, and if you play your cards right the responses can become sophisticated building blocks for your essays.

Although this is not true of all essays, I find that longer responses tend to be better. The response papers are graded primarily on effort, and in this case length tends to bespeak work. Also, response papers that dig into the reading or use an important portion of the reading as a starting point are usually the best ones. You should use the response papers to explain the reading with some degree of comprehensiveness and precision, and then forward your own arguments and criticisms. A good response paper on Kant, for example, might explain the differences between the categorical and hypothetical imperatives and provide some critical evaluation of the ideas. I give you freedom to write on whatever you like, but don't abuse this and use it as an excuse to b.s. your way through the paper when you haven't done the reading.

As a general rule, good response papers do the following:

- 1) Accurately explain the theories at issue and cite the relevant passages to support the exposition;
- 2) Evaluate the theory and explain what is right and wrong about it or otherwise offer the author's preferred theory;
- 3) Explain the major counterarguments to the author's positions;
- 4) Evaluate the counterarguments in the context of strengthening your argument.

Accomplishing all of this takes time and practice and 1000 words often is not enough.

13. Writing

Take your writing seriously, both in the papers you produce and the skills you develop. Writing well is hard work, but anyone can learn. Once you become a competent writer, all of your ideas will have halos around them. You really must give yourself enough time to write an outline, a draft, and a rewrite. Professors will tell you that you must start weeks ahead of time. That would be nice, but you really must give yourself a few days. Spitting out papers during all-nighters will leave even star students with Bs and Cs.

And please read my "Writing and Rewriting Philosophy Papers" found in the course materials.

