

ADVICE ON THE CARE AND FEEDING OF A PROFESSOR

A professor is a being who is in charge of a small part of your life. At some point, he will make a notation on a grade sheet that could affect your future or, at the very least, your motivation. The professor has what we in the trade call “fate control”.

But the professor is a human being. He is alternately happy, sad, uplifted, and depressed, and those with whom he comes in contact affect his disposition. His disposition, in turn, affects his behavior, which, in turn, influences the type of grade you receive. Like it or not, this is the educational process.

The professor is in a league with judges, IRS agents, and the highway patrol. When it comes to arguing your case, you realize you haven’t got one. Even so, there *are* three ways to manipulate professors toward predetermined ends.

Your Attitude About the Course

Most professors constantly seek a balance between those students who talk too much in class discussions and those who never speak. If you are noticeably reticent, the professor can interpret this as a lack of interest, so talk—at least some. But don’t talk too much. A glib, articulate student can easily become a brash chatterbox, who can then become an obnoxious and distracting boor. Make sure that every comment you make is pertinent and to the point.

Students’ comments carry messages, too. Never say, “I was absent yesterday. Did I miss anything important?” or “Would you tell me what I missed?”. If you expect a good grade, everything should seem important. Besides, the professor will think, “Sure, I’m paid to repeat my lectures.” He expects you to have what he had in school—a student underground with all that information.

Never say to a professor, “Would I miss anything if I skipped class today? I feel pretty secure in this course, but I really need to study accounting” (an actual recorded comment). This disastrous remark could easily trigger professorial wrath.

Finally, avoid detailing your assorted troubles and reasons for your absences to the professor unless you have experienced a protracted problem. Write him a note instead. Spoken accounts of your woes take time, but a discreet note can be quickly filed way with grading records.

Your Attitude Toward Grades

The grading guidelines discussed at the beginning of the course are frequently just that—guidelines, nothing more. The professor can give you any grade he feels is justified or use any grading system he wants, ranging from a toss down the stairs to sophisticated computerized calculations. Either way, the grade sticks.

Take extreme care when questioning the professor about your grade. Most professors want you to concern yourself with learning—not grades. Don’t ask about your grade before you’ve done enough work to be judged. You don’t want to seem to be forcing the professor’s hand. And never, but never, bid adieu to the professor at the end of the course and say, jokingly or otherwise, “Remember, I need at least an A out of this course.”

If you receive a grade that’s much lower than you expected, you might muster the courage to see the professor about the matter. Your approach is extremely important and definitely affects the outcome of your visit. Don’t say, “I’d like to talk to you about the low grade you gave me last quarter” or, worse than that, “I’d like to talk to you about how you knocked me out of graduate school.” Instead, try saying something like, “I was a little surprised about the grade I received last quarter. I wonder if you could tell me where my performance fell short. Also, maybe you will show me how my grade was calculated.” You’d be amazed at how far courtesy and respect go. Just be aware that suddenly becoming interested in your grade at the end of the course is frequently a lost cause.

Your Attitude Toward Your Professor

Most professors actually like to be warm, congenial, and humorous. However, some students take advantage of this. These students have trouble adhering to strict course guidelines if the professor is occasionally loose and unstructured in his demeanor. To be cold and ruthless is the easy way out, but that cuts professor and student off from each other.

Some students like to chat with the professor after class. This is nice: it indicates a healthy tendency to be absorbed in the topic. Then there's the other type of student whom we might read about in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*. These students just *have* to talk about anything with the professor at great length after every class.

Also, it can be most disconcerting when a student runs up to the lectern with a question or comment at the beginning of class. The professor is probably thinking about something else—the day's lecture perhaps. An early distraction can derail his train of thought.

Although you shouldn't hesitate to drop by the professor's office when you need help, don't make it an old home week sitin. Be sensitive to feedback, and when the conversation reaches a natural conclusion, leave. You both probably have demands on your time.

Just a final note: Getting along with your professors provides excellent training for the future. You see, there will probably be little difference between your relationship with your college professor and your relationship with your boss.

—Dr. Edward B. Wycoff