Professors’ Pet Peeves

by Lisa Wade, PhD,

1. Don’t use unprofessional correspondence.

Your instructors are not your friends. Correspond with them as if you’re in a workplace, because you are. You don’t wear pajamas to a job interview, right? Same thing.

2. Don’t ask the professor if you “missed anything important” during an absence.

No, you didn’t miss anything important. We spent the whole hour watching “cats play the theremin” on youtube!

Of course you missed something important! You missed class.

If you’re concerned about what you missed, try this instead: Do the reading, get notes from a classmate (if you don’t have any friends in class, ask the professor if they’ll send an email to help you find a partner to swap notes with), read them over, and drop by office hours to discuss anything you didn’t understand.

3. Don’t pack up your things as the class is ending.

We get it. The minute hand is closing in on the end of class, there’s a shift in the instructor’s voice, and you hear something like “For next time…” That’s the cue for everyone to start putting their stuff away. Once one person does it, it’s like an avalanche of notebooks slapping closed, backpack zippers zipping, and cell phones coming out.

Don’t do it. Just wait 10 more seconds until the class is actually over.

4. Don’t ask a question about the readings or assignments until checking the syllabus first.

It’s easy to send off an email asking your instructor a quick question, but that person put a lot of effort into the syllabus for a reason. Remember, each professor has dozens or hundreds of students. What seems like a small thing on your end can add up to death-by-a-thousand-paper-cuts on our end. Make a good faith effort to figure out the answer before you ask.

5. Don’t get mad if you receive critical feedback.

If an instructor takes a red pen and massacres your writing, that’s a sign that they care. Giving negative feedback is hard work, so the red ink means that we’re taking an interest in you and your future. Moreover, we know it’s going to make some students angry at us. We do it anyway because we care enough about you to try to help you become a stronger thinker and writer.

6. Don’t grade grub.

Definitely go into office hours to find out how to study better or improve your performance, but don’t go in expecting to change your instructor’s mind about the grade. Put your energy into studying harder on the
next exam, bringing your paper idea to the professor in office hours, doing the reading, and raising your hand in class.

7. Don’t futz with paper formatting.

Paper isn’t long enough? Think you can make the font a teensy bit bigger or the margins a tad bit wider? Think we won’t notice if you use a 12-point font that’s just a little more widely spaced? Don’t do it. We’ve been staring at the printed page for thousands of hours. We have an eagle eye for these kinds of things. Whatever your motivation, here’s what they say to us: “Hi Prof!, I’m trying to trick you into thinking that I’m fulfilling the assignment requirements. I’m lazy and you’re stupid!” Work on the assignment, not the document settings.

9. Don’t be too cool for school.

You know those students that sit at the back of the class, hunch down in their chair, and make an art of looking bored? Don’t be that person. Professors are the top 3% of students. They likely spent more than a decade in college. They value education. To stay on their good side, you should show them that you care too. And, if you don’t, pretend like you do. It’s called etiquette, it’s a sign of respect.

---


ii Thanks to @triciasryan, @hormiga, @wadewitz, @ameenaGK, @holdsher, @joanneminaker, @k_seyrisman, @jessmetcalf87, @deeshaphilyaw, @currerbell, and @hist_enthusiast, and @gwensharpnv for their ideas! Originally posted in 2013.