

# The 7 things new college students don't know that drive professors crazy

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By Shannon Reed May 3

Tell your kids: “You’re not in charge.”

That’s the first piece of advice I give when friends ask me for help with preparing their teenagers for college. I’ve been teaching for 16 years, first as a high school English teacher, then at the college level for the past four years. I know how tricky the move from high school to college is. While secondary schools pour their resources into helping students get into a good university, and adults rush to teach teens how to behave well socially, no one’s covering what kids need to know for, you know, the actual classes. I have a clear picture of what’s missing from their preparation. Here’s what to tell your college-bound students to help them succeed.

**You’re not in charge in the classroom.** Too many high school students are used to bossing their teachers around, bullying or whining their way to better grades, or keeping up a line of patter that amuses their classmates. Secondary teachers are often too busy or too powerless to protest. But at the college level, the professors are in charge and, for good or ill, have a great deal of latitude in grading, plus very little oversight. Failure to follow the guidelines, whether implicit or explicit, leads to lower grades. I see so many students arrive at college feeling cocky until the first tests or essays come back and they realize that the way they behave in the classroom matters.

Last semester, on the first day of class, I had a student who took out his phone as I went over the syllabus. I told him that he could put it away or leave, and his mouth dropped open in shock. Too bad, kid. Like it or not, college is a professor’s world; students just live in it. Which brings me to . . .

**Do not play on your phone or laptop while your professor is lecturing.** Yes, he sees you. No, he does not believe that you are “looking something up on Google.” No one is as good at multi-tasking as they believe.

**Never complain to a professor about how busy you are.** Yes, this is likely the busiest your 18-year-old self has ever felt, but it’s nothing compared with the average workload of an adult. Complain all you want to your

friends, but to a professor? Never.

**Learn how to attach a file.** At most schools in the United States, students will be asked to use an online system (such as CourseWeb) to check their campus email regularly and to mail files to professors. Other tasks, including downloading PDFs and posting on message boards, are typical as well. I am constantly amazed at the number of students who arrive at college without even basic computer skills. But do not ask your professor to teach them to you. Because, remember . . .

**A professor is not your administrative assistant.** It is not her job to show you how to see the comments on a document, remind you about a deadline or explain what you missed when you took a class off. Read your syllabus or ask a classmate.

**Make an extra effort.** If you are given a chance to do another draft or lab, take it. If your professor suggests attending an on-campus event, go if you can. And above all, visit your professor during office hours. (Yes, interacting with professors can be weird, but they're used to awkward conversations; they work in academia, the land of odd people, after all.) Do this particularly if you have any intention of asking this professor for a recommendation in the future. Every semester I am asked to recommend a student with whom I've had no interaction outside of class. It's nearly impossible to sound convincing. Making a bit of an extra effort is a great way to show the professor that you care about the class and are an interesting, industrious person. Your intellect will grow because of it, too.

**Become aware of your preconceived ideas about people and seek to eradicate them.** Or, another way to put this is: Don't treat your female professors like they're your mom. I'm sure every professor is tired of dealing with students who assume, based on their demographic characteristics, that they have qualities they don't actually possess. As a white woman in my early 40s, I can only point to the countless students I've had who've expected me to be "nice" or "understanding" despite a rather hard-driving teaching persona and a clear statement on my syllabus that I am not especially nice. Yet every semester, a clueless student will ask me to boost his grade, give her more time on an essay or let him miss an extra class. This tendency toward stereotyping is hard to see in yourself, but it's deeply hurtful and alienating for the professors who are its victims. Remember how you felt the last time someone made an assumption about you based on your age, gender or race, and try to keep from making anyone feel the same way, ever.

I hope these suggestions will help your freshmen-to-be. For younger teenagers, teaching independence and clarity of thinking during high school makes the transition to college easier. Most of my students get there eventually, but those who arrive already aware of these tips have a much happier start to their college careers.

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