



Professors' Guide™



The

SECRETS

of

COLLEGE

SUCCESS

OVER 600 TIPS & TRICKS REVEALED

LYNN F. JACOBS JEREMY S. HYMAN



Professors'
Guide™



The Secrets of College Success

by Professors Lynn F Jacobs & Jeremy S Hyman

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Introduction

You might not know this, but you're going to college at the very best time in the last 500 years. New media, 21st century technologies, better professors, government funding for college – all of these go together to make this a wonderful time to be at college.

That is – if you know what to do.

You might have thought professors and advisers would tell you all you need to know. You wouldn't be right. Some professors think part of college is figuring out on your own what's expected. Others think it's a waste of class time to go over how to manage your time, study, prepare for tests, or write papers. Still others think that if they tell you what to do, you'll think it's a recipe for an A, which, if you don't get, will issue in a colossal grade dispute – something no professor wants.

And, at some colleges, the booming enrollments have simply made it impossible for professors, advisers, and staff to give you the advice and attention you need and deserve – no matter how much they'd like to.

And so we've written *Professors' Guide: The Secrets of College Success* – the first book to offer quick tips, all written by professors, that'll help you achieve your full potential at college. Whether you're a beginning or advanced student, whether you're at a four-year college, community college, or taking courses on the Web, whether you're already doing pretty well at college or maybe not as well as you'd like (and even if you're a high school student just beginning to think about college) – this book is for you.

The secrets we reveal and the tips we offer are the product of over thirty years of teaching experience at eight different colleges -- big and small, private colleges and state universities, good schools and not-all-that good schools. Over 10,000 students have tried the tips – and we can tell you they really work.

Most of all, this book is fun to read. You'll find yourself not only strategizing about college – figuring out how you can apply our tips to your own college experience – but making up tips of your own, and even wanting to share them with others. And you'll enjoy your success when you find that the tips (both yours and ours) have changed the way you approach college.

Congratulations. This is wonderful time to be at college. Make the most of it.

Lynn and Jeremy.

Top 10 Reasons to Read This Book

- 1. The tips are authoritative.** Written wholly by professors, the tips in this book give you high-value, insider information about what to do at college – and what not to do.
- 2. The information is not available elsewhere.** No professor, adviser, or college guide will tell you the insider secrets we do in this book.
- 3. The information is quick.** Top 10 lists, Do's and Don't's, How to's – all the advice is bite-sized and easy to digest. And our Professors' Guide icons will help you navigate your way through the book.
- 4. The tips are practical.** No abstract theories here, just concrete, easily-implementable things you can do to guarantee college success.
- 5. We tell you all – and only -- what you need to know.** From the summer before college, to the crucial first year of college, through picking a major, and finding a job – all the major moments of college are covered.
- 6. The tips are up-to-date.** E-resources, first-year experience courses, Facebook and Skype, netbooks and online courses, double- and triple-majors, closed courses, research on the Web, internships, and study abroad – all the new realities of college are included. And we give you links to useful Web sites, so you can find out more about special topics.
- 7. Each tip stands on its own.** You can do as many – or as few – of the tips as you want and still get excellent results. And you can do the tips in any order. Pick a tip that interests you and then move on to others, or just randomly flip to a page and start reading.
- 8. We tell you what to do.** Like a good undergraduate adviser (something sorely lacking at many colleges), we don't only tell you what you might do, but what you should do. In a friendly and supportive voice, of course.
- 9. The tips really work.** The advice in this book has worked for thousands of students. And it will work for you.
- 10. The tips are fun to read.** You'll enjoy thinking about different strategies for college as you read through our tips. And (in the best case) you'll LOL as you read some of our attempts at humor. (At least you won't be bored).

The *Professors' Guide*TM Icons

Here are the icons used in this book – and what they mean:

- **Extra Pointer.** An additional tip that fills out some other tip or applies to a special situation.
- **5-Star Tip.** A really high-value suggestion that you should be sure to use. One of the best tips in the book.
- **Best-Kept Secret.** One of the things that no one wants you to know (but that will help you do really well at college).
- **Reality Check.** Take a step back and assess what's really going on.
- **IOHO (In Our Humble Opinion).** We get on our soapbox to bloviate (that is, give our time-tested opinion) about controversial issues at college.
- **Visiting Professor.** A professor, or other expert, contributes tips about his or her own special field of expertise.



Professors'
Guide™

Tips for College

by Professors Lynn F Jacobs & Jeremy S Hyman

1 *The Best Secrets*

- 14 Habits of Top College Students
- 10 Questions to Ask Yourself the First Week of Classes
- 10 Secrets of Taking Excellent Lecture Notes
- 10 Tips for Taming the Math Requirement
- 10 Tips for the Perfect College Paper
- Etiquette for E-Mailing Your Professor
- How Not to Pick a Major

14 Habits of Top College Students

What makes some college students successful while others are not? Sometimes, it's a question of intelligence or insight. And sometimes, it's sheer good luck. But a lot of the time it's a question of good habits: things you do on a regular basis that set you aside from the hordes of other, more scattered, students. In the hopes of separating the sheep from the goats, here are what we've found to be the 14 habits of top-notch college students. You'll find that these folk:

- 1. Have a schedule.** Not only do they know when the tests and papers fall in the semester, but they have a good sense of what work needs to be done as the semester progresses. Nice and balanced: everything in gear, no worries come exam time.
- 2. Divide up the tasks.** Readings get broken up into manageable chunks (not 200 pages in one sitting). Quizzes and tests are studied for over the course of a week (not at 3 a.m. the night before). And paper ideas start gestating when the assignment is handed out (not the day before it's due when you can barely formulate an idea, much less think through an issue).
- 3. Are organized.** It's impossible to do any real work when you don't have the tools for the job: a working computer with the right software, a fast internet connection and, for some courses, a good printer, and a thorough knowledge of how to navigate the course web Page and the university and library portals. Not to mention the basic materials of the course: a full set of lecture notes, the textbooks and articles, and, of course, all the course handouts and assignments. Whenever you sit down to work, come fully equipped with what you need.
- 4. Hang out with smart friends.** Successful students know that spending lots of time with friends who don't even know what courses they're taking – or why they're in college at all – can create an atmosphere that any attempts to do well immediately wither and die. Pick your cohorts as carefully as you pick your courses.
- 5. Don't kid themselves.** For instance, when you think you're studying but you're really tweeting about how you barely survived your bonfire-jumping last

night. Or when you're alternating between reading the e-article and checking out your friend's Facebook page every eight seconds or so. You're the easiest person you know to deceive. Don't.

6. Manage their feelings. It's difficult to excel in a course if you're feeling inadequate, bummed out, or doomed to fail. Students who know how to focus on their own positive achievements – rather than on what they got on the quiz that counts for about 2 percent of the course grade – have a leg up on the rest.

7. Challenge themselves. Good students are intellectually energetic. When they read, they think actively about what they're reading. When they go to class, they don't just veg out or text. On tests, they pounce on the questions and answer them directly and fully (this distinguishes their work from their colleagues trying to BS their way through the question.) And, on papers, they look for deeper levels of meaning and more nuanced points (always a hit with the professor).

8. Are consistent – and persistent. Tired or hung over? -- "I'm still going to make it to that 9 a.m. lecture." Late-night review session? -- "Like the owl, I do my best work at night." Difficult problem set? -- "I'll get these right, if it kills me." Three-hour final? -- "I'll stay to the bitter end. Maybe I can touch up my essay and collect a few extra points."

9. Are open to feedback. While it's easy and more fun to toss away your graded papers and exams, or conveniently forget to pick them up, the best students carefully study the comments and go over any mistakes they've made. And when the next piece of work rolls around, they take another look at the previous set of comments to see if there are any mistakes that they can correct on the new piece of work. All without feeling wounded or defensive.

10. Ask when they don't understand. Look, you've got a mouth. So when you don't get something in the reading, in the lecture, or in the homework, ask someone who might know. Like the prof or TA, for example.

11. Aren't too shy. Sure, everyone feels intimidated about having to seek out the professor (or even the TA) to talk about their own work. But keep in mind that most professors enjoy talking with students, and, if asked, will offer loads of help on papers, preparing for tests, and even finding topics for future work (say, a junior project, senior thesis, or internship or collaboration). (See Partnering with Your Professor on p. 125, for our very best tips.)

12. Look out for No. 1. While some students are willing to blow off a week of school to satisfy the needs of others – for example, a demanding boss during busy season or an Uncle Dick who schedules his third wedding two days

before finals – successful students know that college is their job and make doing well their highest priority. Especially during the college busy season, the last month of the semester when those big-ticket items like the term paper and the final exam roll around and 2/3 of the grade is won or lost.

13. Keep themselves in tip-top shape. It's difficult to do well if you're sick as a dog, haven't slept in a week, or are loaded up on some "substance." Successful students manage their physical and emotional needs as carefully as they do their academic needs.

14. Have a goal – and a plan. The best students know why they're in college and what they need to do to achieve their goals. Can't do well if you don't know what you're doing – and why.

10 Questions to Ask Yourself the First Week of Classes

You might have thought that once you've picked your classes, you're over and done with it. The die is cast, now just settle in and enjoy your semester. But a far better idea is to size up the professor, yourself, by attending the first few lectures. After the very first class (or first couple of classes, if the first class is just an intro), ask yourself these 10 questions about what you've just witnessed:

- 1. Is the teacher good?** Even after the first class or two, you should be able to tell if the prof knows his or her stuff and can present the material in a clear, organized, and coherent manner -- and whether the lecture has a point. A good teacher will construct each class around one or two main topics, and make clear and logical transitions from point to point.
- 2. Is the teacher interesting?** Look, college isn't Second City, so don't expect your molecular biology professor to have you rolling in the aisles with laughter. Still, your teacher should run the class in a way that holds your attention (at least most of the time); that makes the material real (or at least sort of relevant); and that displays some enthusiasm. Bonuses here could be: an interesting use of media in the class, stimulating readings and assignments, and provocative discussion sessions.
- 3. Does the teacher care that the students learn?** Signs that the teacher cares include a willingness to take questions, an awareness of how the students are receiving the material, and a respect in addressing students.
- 4. Is the course too hard (or too easy)?** Sure, most college courses, especially first-year courses, are designed to introduce students to new subjects and new ways of thinking. But if you can't understand anything that's going on in the first few classes, this is a sign that you are in over your head -- something that's only going to get worse as the class gets deeper into the material. On the other hand, if you've already had the material -- or if the course is such a joke that even Bozo would be at the head of the class -- well, why waste your time?

5. **Does the course presuppose stuff you don't know?** Pay close attention should the professor or the course syllabus announce that you must have a particular skill (say, know differential calculus or be able to use AutoCAD) or have taken some prerequisite (for example, two semesters of university chemistry) before taking this course. Students who lack the skills or haven't taken the prereqs are likely to find themselves playing catch-up from Day 1, without ever really succeeding.
6. **Does the course have too much work?** The course syllabus should give you a pretty clear sense of how much reading, writing, and testing the course requires. There's nothing wrong with courses that are challenging; and learning to write well is one of the most important things you can accomplish in college. But you need to balance the requirements of this course against all your other commitments. If one course is so excessive it eats up all your waking hours, then, unless that course is super-important for your major or your lifelong dream, you should bail and look elsewhere.
7. **Would another course be a better choice for this requirement – or this major?** Colleges often give a wide variety of choices for the gen ed requirement. Don't feel obligated to take the most popular choices or only the courses you've heard of. So too for the requirements for your major. Often there is a different – and better -- professor teaching the same required course that same semester, or at least in the next semester.
8. **Do you really want to be learning this stuff?** Sometimes after looking over the syllabus and hearing the professor tell what he or she plans to do in the course, it's pretty clear to you that this isn't what you bargained for when you signed up. Like the student who signed up for Critical Reasoning thinking she'll finally stop falling for her boyfriend's lines and found herself doing truth tables and working to master modus tolendo ponens all semester long.
9. **Do you feel you can learn from this professor?** Every professor has a different teaching style, and some approaches may suit you better than others. Even if the professor has a great reputation and all your friends loved the course, it can still be taught in a way that doesn't match your learning style. Don't be a lemming.
10. **Do you like the class?** In a good class, you should have some feeling of intellectual excitement and, yes, some enjoyment from the very beginning. If this feeling is absent at the start, it'll only get worse by the 30th lecture. Don't disregard your initial impression. If you don't like what you're seeing, drop the class and add another.

10 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, but 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 10 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: 15 minutes of lecture = 1 page of notes. (Or, in other words, 3 to 4 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.



Extra Pointer. When taking notes, be sure to set off subordinate points (that is, points that somehow contribute to the lecture but are not on the main path). Also, indent, and clearly identify, any illustrations, examples, comparisons, and interesting (though not central) asides.



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.

5.

Don’t zone in and out. You’re used to rapid-fire content delivered in 20-second bursts. But the professor is used to dishing up his or her ideas in 15- to 20-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 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. 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.



5-Star Tip. Be especially on the lookout for 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).

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.



Extra Pointer. Take notes at all class activities -- discussion sections, 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.

10. **Always do it yourself.** Don't outsource your notetaking 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.

10 Tips for Taming the Math Requirement

For many college students, the math requirement is the single biggest obstacle standing between them and their cap and gown. Believe it or not, some students take the same math course two or three times and by the end of their ordeal have just barely passed. It doesn't have to be this way. College math is easily manageable and might even turn out to be fun if you follow our 10 step plan for acing the math requirement:

1. Get in – and stay in – the right level. Colleges often have several levels of calculus and up to five versions of algebra. Select carefully to avoid taking classes that are too hard (or too easy) for your level of ability and training. Double-check after the first test, and switch classes if necessary. Why torture yourself if you're never going to be able to master delta-epsilon proofs?

2. Take the credit. If you have AP math credits, use 'em. Your first-year adviser or a representative from the math department can tell you what college credit(s) you've earned and what course you should enroll in if you want to continue your study of math.



Best Kept Secret. Be sure to figure out if you've taken the Calculus AB or the Calculus BC course. And if you're lucky enough to have taken the new Statistics AP course, be sure to put in a claim for that, too.

3. Do every single homework problem. In other subjects homework may not be so critical: If you do it, that's great and, if you blow it off, well that's OK, too (you'll do some extra cramming come test time). But in math it's super critical to keep up with the homework. Doing the homework problems is the way you learn math. Not to mention the way you learn how to do the various kinds of problems that will be on the tests. And you'll understand the lecture better if you do the problems when they're assigned.

4. Always have a strategy. Never go at math problems with a sledgehammer. Start by figuring out what type of problem you're dealing with, and consider various strategies for solving this sort of problem. Then select the strategy you think most appropriate or promising. Never wildly lunge at a strategy

that's totally inappropriate for the task at hand. You can waste tremendous amounts of time going down blind alleys if you don't think before you do.

5. **Be ultra neat.** In all your math work – be it your class notes, homework, and tests – be obsessive about neatness. A 5 that looks like a 6, or an “x” that looks like a “z,” a “+” that looks like a “-,” will mess you up like you couldn't believe.

6. **Get down the intermediate steps.** Some instructors are careful to write down every step of a problem as they are doing it in class; other professors (like the ones who are teaching this course for the hundred and eighth time) aren't so fastidious. In either case, you should be sure to write down what the professor puts up, then, when you get home, fill in whatever steps have been omitted (if any).



IOHO. Many students complain that they can't understand what their non-native-English-speaking TA is saying. Many of these complaints are unfounded. But if you really can't understand your TA's or professor's English, we recommend you go to an office hour and engage him or her in basic conversation (not technical math talk). Often once you've had an ordinary conversation, you'll get used to your teacher's accent, which will make the classes go a whole lot easier. But if you still can't understand your TA's English, change to another section. Can't learn if you can't understand.

7. **Pinpoint your sticking points.** When you get stuck on a problem, don't just throw up your hands in disgust and announce you're clueless. Figure out exactly where you got stuck – and for what reason (Was there a theorem you didn't know? Were you missing a concept? Did you fail to consider an alternative?). Then go for help: The help will be much more effective, and the helper more motivated to give it, if you can locate your exact problem rather than just reporting your veil of confusion. (For some tips on going for help, see our 15 Secrets of Going to See the Professor, p. 129-133).

8. **Join a group.** Study groups (once or twice a week) are especially valuable in problem-solving courses like math. Even if you're a math whiz, you can benefit from teaching your less gifted friends how to do the problems or proofs: Making challenging material clear to others is one of the best ways of getting your mind around difficult concepts and strategies.



Extra Pointer. If your TA is holding a group office hour or review session before a test, be sure to go. When the TA has the test-questions in mind, he or she is most likely to drop hints about what's going to be asked.

9. **Test yourself.** In every math course, there inevitably comes the time when you're tested on how well you've taken in the stuff. By far the best way to study for math tests is to prepare a test for yourself and take it under test conditions: no looking at the book, no looking at the answers, under strict time limits. You'll see very quickly what you know – and what you don't.

★★★★★ **5-Star Tip.** Most textbooks have extra problems in the back, with answers provided for at least half of them, usually the odd-numbered ones. These would make great choices for your practice tests. Also, some professors give sample problems or copies of previous tests before the exam: Don't squander this important resource by "looking over" the problems before your self-test. And, if all else fails, make up your own problems: construct variants, preferably harder variants, of the ones you did in class or on the homework.

10. **Think about tutoring.** If you're really having difficulty in your math class, you might want to find a tutor. Sometimes a TA who has previously taught the course is available; sometimes an upperclassperson can help you out; and sometimes the on-campus learning center or math lab has trained people to help you. Just make sure the tutor is both good at math and familiar with the particular course (and, in the best case, instructor) you're taking. And be sure to bring the textbook, your class notes, the problems you've done, and, most important, any info about the tests, to each of the meetings with your tutor. That way, he or she can tailor the tutoring to your exact needs.

BONUS **Bonus Tip.** Adopt a "can-do" attitude. Don't let some label your third grade teacher put on you, rule your life today. If you tell yourself "I'm just not good at math," or "I'm intuitive, not logical," or "girls just can't do math as well as boys," you've defeated yourself even before you start. Why do that?

10 Tips for the Perfect College Paper

Like an architectural masterpiece or a well-crafted symphony, the perfect college paper is carefully constructed -- rather than barfed out onto the page at 3 in the morning. Each part is meticulously selected and polished up, then assembled with the others into a coherent and convincing whole. We should know. Between us, we've read tens of thousands of college papers -- some perfect, others not so perfect -- from which we've gleaned our 10 best tips:

- 1. Decide what kind of paper you're writing.** There's no one-size-fits-all in college. Some professors assign research papers, in which case you'll need to head to the library or resources on the Internet (see our 16 Techniques for Doing Research Like a Professor," p. 118-123). Other professors assign analytical papers (that is, papers in which you're asked to analyze or evaluate some object, phenomenon, or text); in this case, you'll have to turn to your head for the answer. Still others assign a hybrid of the two, in which case you'll have to divide your labors. Know what type of assignment you're being asked to do before you start working on the paper.
- 2. Answer exactly the question(s) asked.** Professors spend unbelievable amounts of time formulating the questions for the paper. Take the time to puzzle out precisely what's being asked. If there is more than one question or part asked, figure out how each question is different from the rest and what materials would be relevant to answering it.

★★★★★ 5-Star Tip. Pay special attention to any verbs used in the paper assignment. Compare, contrast, discuss, evaluate, explain, consider, formulate a hypothesis, raise an objection, argue for, trace, illustrate, defend, and summarize are all different tasks. Know which one(s) your professor is asking you to do -- and what it would take to do it (or them). If you're not 100 percent, positively, absolutely, no doubt about it, sure, ask.
- 3. Be sure to fill the space.** When a professor assigns a 4- to 6- page paper, he or she is usually expecting that the good papers will be more like six pages, while the students who don't know what to say will probably manage to fill only three or four pages. Worry more about writing too little than writing

too much. (Of course, you should never exceed the page limit. That'll never make the professor happy.)

- 4. Make sure your paper has a point.** Every paper should have a thesis – that is, a single point that is expressed in a single sentence. Without a thesis, a paper is just a report. And most college professors don't like reports. We think that this sentence should be the very first one in the paper, but some professors like you to write a brief introduction or “setup” paragraph (follow their instructions, if you get one of these). In any case, everyone would agree that the thesis sentence should come at least by the beginning of the second paragraph.



Best Kept Secret. It's not enough to just state a thesis, you have to structure the whole paper around your thesis. Make sure each point you make in your paper supports the thesis you have advanced at the beginning of your paper. If you can't remember your thesis, refer back to it as you write.

- 5. Give your paper direction.** A good paper moves through a series of steps that are arranged in some logical order. Make sure you have a reason for arranging your points in the order that you do – and that it is clear to the reader what that reason is. And make sure that each step does some work in advancing your argument. For each paragraph – then for each sentence within the paragraph – ask yourself: Why is this here? How does it advance the overall argument? And if your answer is “It doesn't,” then go back and take it out.



Extra Pointer. Use “logical indicator” words, such as: moreover, therefore, since, consequently, nevertheless, thus, then, Now, first (second, third), to mark turning points in your argument. Not only will such “hinges” help your reader understand where your argument “pivots,” but they will also help you think out how it's structured.

- 6. Write for a reasonably intelligent person – not a professor.** Many students make the mistake of picking the professor as their audience – the one who already knows the answer and for whom a code word here or there will be more than enough. Write instead for a smart enough person who has not already taken the course. Take the time to explain each of your points fully – so that one could understand what you mean just from what you write.



Extra Pointer. Be sure to explain any technical or unusual terms in ordinary language. Don't assume that the reader is a specialist in that field and will know what “etiological considerations” are.

7. **Avoid vagueness.** Many college papers suffer from being too general. They make many true claims but express them in so unspecific a way that one can't really form a firm conception of what is being claimed. Be as particular as possible. And use specific and detailed examples – often more than one -- to prove your points. Just like on the test.

8. **Have a quote quota.** In an analytical paper, it's usually not necessary to offer up elaborate quotes or, sometimes, even to quote at all. After all, it's your analysis that's being asked for. Even in a research paper, you should not use so many quotes that the paper becomes a mere summary or cataloguing of other people's work (see our 16 Techniques for Doing Research Like a Professor, p. 118-123, for more tips).



IOHO. Generally, it's better to incorporate brief quotes, or portions of quotes, into your own sentences than to set off long citations in their own paragraphs. And be sure to always explain the quotes in your own words after you've mentioned them. The professor wants to see what you're seeing in the quote, and understand what you take the quote to mean.

9. **Consolidate your argument.** As you read over the first drafts of your paper, consider taking out points that aren't central to the argument, and developing more fully points that are. Often a more compact, more forcefully argued paper is a better paper; and, in any case, you should view your first draft at your first stab at properly capturing your idea, not the final, best argued version.

10. **Deal the professor in.** There's nothing professors (or TAs) like more than helping good students construct excellent papers. Go to office hours with specific questions and problems, then follow up with e-mail as many times as is necessary or reasonable (for more on going to see the professor and on using e-mail, see our 15 Secrets of Going to See the Professor, p.129-133, and Etiquette for E-Mailing Your Professor, p. 134-136).

★★★★★ **5-Star Tip.** Review the product. Nothing upsets the professor more than spelling and grammar errors, and sentences with words left out or that don't make sense. Become the prof for 15 minutes. Read your paper as if you had never seen it before, making whatever changes are needed to make it more coherent and readable. You'll be amazed how much difference a few minutes of polishing up will make in the overall impression your paper gives. Not to mention the overall grade.

BONUS **Bonus Tip.** Know when to stop. At a certain point, endless revising serves no purpose (other than to get you upset). Indeed, it can

weaken your paper by disrupting the natural flow of the points that you first wrote. If you tend to be perfectionistic, learn when to put your pen down. Or to push the save and send keys.

Etiquette for E-Mailing Your Professor

Professors, like everyone else, are going 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 the "Send" button:

- **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 onto 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 you@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 Ph.D. 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 25 or 30 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, check to see that he or she is willing to accept such longer documents. If not, see if 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 copy you're sending?

★★★★★ **5-Star Tip.** Never e-mail your paper as an attachment in a bizarre format. You might think that .odt is really cool since you didn't have to pay for Open Office. But what when the professor discovers it takes him or her 20 minutes to find the plug-in that doesn't work, then another half-hour to download Open Office (which ties up all too much space on his computer). What was supposed to be a 15-minute grading job on your paper is now taking over an hour. And then the prof has to assign your grade? 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 they see you in class.
- **THIS IS NOT A SHOUTING MATCH.** Don't write in all uppercase letters (which is an e-mail convention for anger or other strong emotions). 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 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 IM-ing.** So pls dun wrte yor profeSR llk ur txtN. uz abbrz @ yor own rsk. coRec me f lm wrng. (Translation thanks to www.transl8it.com, which features a neat little Facebook widget.)
- **This is not CollegeHumor.** So resist the temptation to talk about the “bad ass” 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 spell check, and proofread your e-mail, too.
- **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.

How Not to Pick a Major

For many students, picking a major is the single biggest academic decision they'll have to make at college. It's also the one most fraught with mistakes, ranging from picking at the wrong time, to picking without good information, to picking for the wrong reasons. All of which can be easily avoided if you look over – and resolve not to make – the 14 most common (and most costly) mistakes students make in picking their major:

- 1. Picking too early.** At many schools, students are under considerable pressure to declare a major as part of their first-year orientation or sometime in the first year. But it's easy to get stuck on the wrong track. Resist the temptation to declare just because some adviser is pressuring you to do so – or offering you gifts or bribes to decide (like guaranteed places in hard-to-get-into classes, a real professor as your adviser, or quicker time to a degree).
 **Reality Check.** If there's some good academic reason to declare early – like that the music performance major requires five years of practice or the pre-med program has four years of two-semester sequences – then by all means make the plunge. Just make sure you're reasonably certain you want to study that field.
- 2. Picking before you've considered all the options.** At some schools, especially large state universities, there are literally hundreds of majors to choose from (at last glance, UCLA had 346 majors and programs). Don't put your quarter down before you've considered all the alternatives. And don't be put off just because you don't quite know what immunology, paleobiology, international development studies, ethnomusicology, or civil engineering are (these five from the UCLA list). Find out. Take a course, or at least stop by the departmental office or Web page and get a description of what they have to offer.
- 3. Picking before you've had at least two or three advanced courses in the field.** It's tempting to pick a major just because you liked the subject in high school – or aced an intro or two in that field at college. But it's important to take a sampling of advanced (at some schools called upper division) courses before committing to that major. The work at that level can be much more

challenging and could differ in approach, methodology, or complexity from the watered-down version they teach in intro.

- 4. Picking something you're not good at.** As surprising as it may seem, there is a regular cadre of students who major in fields they aren't doing well in, or don't have the skills for.

Rule of Thumb: Getting lots of A's in a field = good choice of major.

Some A's and some B's = not a bad choice.

All B's = there could be a better choice.

Lots of C's = fuhgeddaboutit.

- 5. Picking something you don't like.** You're going to have to take 10 or 12 courses in your major, so it'd be a nice touch if you actually liked the field. Of course, a burning passion for the discipline would be best, but, let's face it, only one in ten students has that. (Maybe it's you.)



Extra Pointer. Never pick a major just to please someone else. Just because your parent, older sibling, best friend, or guy you just met at the student union thinks it'd be a bang-up idea to major in something doesn't mean it's right for you.

- 6. Picking only because the school is strong in that field.** The fact that the university has a national reputation in nanotechnology won't help you if you don't like small things.

- 7. Picking in spite of the fact that the school is weak in that field.** Especially in this time of budget squeezes, not every college is strong in every major. And even otherwise good schools can have abysmally bad departments in fields that they don't support or they under-fund. Pick something on the upswing, not something dying.



Reality Check. If you find that a school has only one or two faculty members in the area; that very few courses are offered each semester; or that the faculty teaching in that field don't have advanced degrees (hint: look for the "Ph.D." sign after the teacher's name), look at another major. You're likely to be disappointed in this one as the courses roll on.

- 8. Picking because you're enthralled by one professor.** Any major is going to require you to study with a broad variety of professors, so don't let some cult professor lure you into a department full of bad teachers or mediocre scholars. You're going to be stuck with this field long after the idol is gone.

9. Picking because it's easy or has few requirements. What good is a major in which you learn nothing, or that lets you do whatever you want, whenever you want? 'Nuff said.

10. Settling for second (or third) best. Some students, especially those at small colleges, pick some major simply because the major they'd really like to take isn't offered at their college. If what you want to study isn't on the official list of majors and programs, consider constructing your own major; many colleges allow the possibility of interdisciplinary or self-directed programs of study.



Best Kept Secret. If you find there's just no way to make it work given the puny offerings at your school, you might consider consortiums of schools or other colleges in the same city for which your school allows cross-registration (for instance, the Five College Consortium in Amherst, MA or the exchange program between Columbia University and either the Juilliard or the Manhattan Schools of Music). And, if all else fails, consider transferring to a college that has what you want. Lack of a major is considered by admissions officers as one of the best reasons for trading your little college for their ginormous university.

11. Picking only because of its career prospects. Sure, in a tight economy it makes good sense to pick a major with an eye to what jobs you can get, but that shouldn't be the only reason for picking a major. For one thing, there's not always a one-to-one relation between majors and careers. You don't need a degree in marketing or business for a career in the corporate world, or a major in philosophy or political science to have the inside track to law school. Indeed, there are a slew of jobs – perhaps most jobs – for which a particular major is not required, but only skills in math, writing, communication, foreign languages, or analytical thinking that could be acquired in any number of different majors (for more on this, see our 13 Skills You'll Need for a Career – and How to Get Them, on p. 167-170).

★★★★★ **5-Star Tip.** Check out the Web sites of major business publications – for example, the Wall Street Journal, Business Week, Forbes, US News and World Report, CNN Money, Fortune, or the Economist -- for their gurus' best prognostications of what jobs will hot five years from now: think disease mapper, robot programmer, information engineer, radiosurgeon, and Second Life lawyer (list courtesy of CNN Money).

12. Picking the wrong major for the career you want. You'd be amazed how often this happens. We've recently seen a student wanting to teach on the college level but taking an education degree (intended for elementary school

teachers); and a would-be missionary planning to major in anthropology (a field in which missionizing is a complete no-no). If you're matching major to careers, make sure to ask an expert in the field -- for example, a favorite professor, the undergraduate adviser, or some professional actually practicing the field -- what careers go with what majors.

- 13. Piling 'em on.** Some college students think it's a special badge of honor to amass as many majors as they can: a double-, sometimes a triple-, major combined with a minor or two. If a double- major makes sense -- say, in Chinese and international relations, or economics and environmental science, or business and psychology -- then by all means go for it. Just keep in mind that each time you add on a major, you're signing on to ten courses in a field, many of which are required and might not be related to what you want to learn.



IOHO. There is no cachet in piling on minors, either. It's usually a better idea to pick the four or five courses that interest you or that support your major, rather than taking the "prepackaged" minors that many departments offer to attract additional students.

- 14. Obsessing every waking hour about which one to pick.** Don't tie yourself into knots by thinking that your choice of major is a bigger commitment than it is. Your major does not freeze your future or put you onto a career path from which there is no escape. Department of Labor statistics show that the average US worker changes careers three to five times in their lifetime. So relax. Make your best pick, and enjoy where life takes you.