

Classroom Etiquette

*A Handbook For Literature Majors
or
How Not to Please Literature Faculty
or
Avoiding Failure Because
You Didn't Know
or
Whose Cellphone Is Going Off Now?*

Laboriously Written by the Literature Faculty
-- Namely --

*Debby Gussman
Lisa Honaker
Tom Kinsella
Ken Tompkins*

3rd Edition

2002

Classroom Etiquette

Classroom Etiquette (klas' room et' i-ket') *n. phr.* **1.** *nearly archaic.* Accepted conventions for appropriate conduct within the classroom: "Tell us, whatever happened to classroom etiquette?" "You mean, like, raise your hand to go number two?" <Fr. *classe* < Lat. *classis*, class of citizens; ME *roum* < OE *rum*; OFr. *estiquet*, label. *Efforts to reinvigorate the concept are being made.*



We've noticed that in the last 10 years classroom etiquette has gone the way of disco. Attitudes toward learning and the classroom haven't just changed here at Stockton; there is good evidence that all educational institutions face problems of discipline, respect, work, tolerance and independence. We feel that enough is enough—the time has come for us to tell you what we expect in our classes and why. Besides, if bell-bottoms and Tom Jones can make comebacks, by gum, so can classroom etiquette.

In short, we think of classroom etiquette as similar to any form of social etiquette—that is, basic politeness. Yet, we are not prepared to leave it at that. We have decided to address specific situations and questions below. We do this in order to prepare you for situations you may be finding yourself in for the first time but with which we have had a great deal of experience—a share of it, sad to say, negative. What follows, then, is meant to make our mutual encounters as pleasant and productive as possible. After all, we're going to be spending a lot of time together in the

next few years; it will be to all of our benefits not to waste that time on rancor and ill-feeling.

Taking our cue from that doyenne of etiquette, Miss Manners, we have decided on a question-and-answer format within general topic headings, so you can quickly locate the sort of questions you might be likely to want answers to. So, take note, gentle reader. And, yes, there will be a quiz.

Our topic headings include:

Class Attendance
Being On-Time
Class Preparation
Meeting with the Professor
Meeting with the Professor (2)
The Workload
Precepting
Special Program Requests
Academic Honesty
Deadlines
The Big Lie
The Sacred Syllabus
Breaking Bread
End of the Term
Incompletes
Class Presence
Computers, Weblogs and Caucus

Class Attendance

Because of some personal problems, I've missed a number of classes early in the semester. Things are better and now I'm back, but when I asked Professor Honaker what I missed, she told me she has an absence policy and I'm already "over the limit." She said she put this in the syllabus, but I don't remember it. I promised not to miss any more classes but she doesn't seem to care. What's it to her anyway? After all, I'm paying for the class whether I'm there or not. Shouldn't attendance be my decision and not hers? If I can do the work, what difference does it make if I'm there or not?

You are an adult, and, yes, the decision to attend class is yours. We understand that emergencies crop up. They crop up for us as well, sometimes requiring us to cancel a class—or even two classes. Yet, the fact that courses cost money and someone has to pay does not give you the right to perform outside of the accepted classroom norms on a regular basis. (Just because you buy a plane ticket doesn't mean it's your right to jump out of a 747.)

Each of us establishes a policy on class attendance in our courses. Most of us would like not to have, for example, a three-cut policy; it creates time-consuming clerking and produces exactly what we don't want—excuses. But when we don't have an attendance policy, class attendance goes down. Clearly you can't learn if you are not in the class. An attendance policy forces you to come to class. Therefore, we have an attendance policy (sounds a bit like quantitative reasoning, doesn't it?).

“But I can get the class notes,” you suggest. “Why throw a snit over one less student at a lecture?” First, you are depending on a friend or acquaintance to have taken good notes (not always a smart idea), and no set of notes, no matter how exhaustive, can duplicate the classroom experience. The best learning takes place in the space between teacher and students. Second, most of our classes are not straight lecture. You and other students are necessary; you make the intellectual juices flow. If you don’t attend class you have missed something important, but your classmates have missed out, too. They have been robbed of your, potentially, good ideas and questions.

If you are not in class, we assume that you made that choice (again, we understand that there are times when you are forced not to come to class). We assume that somewhere in the early part of the morning, you—perhaps a bit stuffed up, sleepy, hung over, tired, depressed, or whatever—said to yourself or your roommate: “I am not going to go to class today.” We know this because we hear this sentence every day in the hallways and parking lots. (Kinsella claims he heard it 3 times one Thursday.)

If you are making that choice, well then, accept the repercussions. Do not offer a lie, a distorted fact or any other fabrication thinking that it will (1) lessen the penalty or (2) lessen our disappointment.

As far as we are concerned, almost no excuse is valid (excepting emergencies) for missing a class. You can make appointments at some other time, unless you have a serious illness, you can meet with friends or family at other times, you can shop at some other time, you can register at some

other time. All of this goes back to the implicit contract between us. We promise to be in class; so do you.

And you might also keep this little quotation in mind on those days when you're debating getting up and going to class or sleeping in: "Ninety-nine percent of success in life is just showing up."

Being On-Time

I'm just about fed up. I live off-campus and by the time I arrive for my 10:30 class, there are no parking spots left. Sometimes it takes me 20 minutes to just find a spot, so I'm late for class. Lately, Professor Gussman has been giving me the hairy eyeball when I come in. It's not my fault there isn't enough parking.

Yes, that parking situation is bedeviling, isn't it? We, too, have driven round and round looking for a place to park. It has sometimes taken us upwards of 20 minutes to find a space, too. It really can be a pain.

But we imagine that your professor is giving you the eyeball because she's wondering what we're wondering: if you know that

there's a good likelihood you'll have to circle the parking lot, why aren't you leaving earlier? Being late once, twice, occasionally—well, sometimes it can't be helped. Your best bet there is to slip in as quietly as possible and to apologize after class is over. This, however, will not be your best course of action if you're going to be late



regularly. Then, the apology takes on a whole different cast. It becomes smarmy and insincere. Being late regularly signals the professor that you don't take her class as seriously as you take whatever it is that you were doing that made you late, that whatever you were doing is worth regularly interrupting her class over.

“But wait!” you protest, “I’m not just watching *Regis and Kelly*, I’m coming from work. I can’t just leave 20 minutes earlier. I’d lose my job. That is a different case, assuredly.” But then we would ask: if you knew you couldn’t get to the class on time, why did you sign up for it? “I thought I could, you say, it’s the parking I didn’t figure on.” Then our question becomes: just how late are you? Depending on your answer, you may have options. If you’re regularly missing the first twenty minutes of class, we say that’s too much. You’ll have to take the class another time. If it’s less than that, say five minutes or so, talk to the professor, explain the dilemma and see if she will allow you a little leeway. If she agrees, then, make sure that you make your arrivals as quiet as possible. Remove your coat and have your class materials out before you enter. Make arrangements with other students in the class to leave a chair near the door vacant, so you don’t have to make your way across the room. Your goal is not to be disruptive. Don’t sit down and start putting a “regular” coffee together. Have everything ready to go. And if the professor is gracious enough to allow you to be regularly late, think twice before soliciting other favors. Remember, she doesn’t have to (and may not) agree to this one. Think of it this way: how would your boss look at (and deal with) this situation?

These rules also apply, by the way, to leaving class while it is in session. We understand that sometimes nature calls at inopportune times, that sometimes you are forced to leave class and answer that call. Sometimes, illness may even overtake you. But, again, we understand these to be unusual occurrences. (We do not accept cigarette emergencies, by the way.) Once or twice a semester, you may be brought up short and have to leave. Fair enough. We understand. And we appreciate your efforts not to disrupt class when you go. We notice your care. But remember, we notice. We notice you leave. We notice how you leave. We notice when you leave. We notice every time you leave. And we notice how long you're gone. We notice if you're carrying food. (Yes, we have had people leave and return with G-wing meals.) And we're not the only ones who notice. Other students have actually complained to us and/or made disparaging comments about those who regularly skip out.

Furthermore, if you're leaving during every class, whether we say anything or not, we are not happy about it. In fact, most of us probably don't say anything because to do so would be to disrupt things even more. But we ask you, how many times has your professor excused himself in the middle of class? Our longest classes are only an hour and fifty minutes. Some of us provide a break or factor in that break time at the end of class and release you a little early. Unless you have a medical condition that requires precisely timed medication, we suggest that one of your class preparations be taking care of your physical needs. Then, get as comfortable as you can in that little desk and tough it out. We may not actually thank you for it, but you can be assured you won't be subject to the hairy eyeball.

Cell phones ringing in class is another unacceptable interruption. Perhaps you feel you need an exception to this rule (your child is at home with a fever; you told the babysitter to call if it goes above 101°). If so, inform us, and ask if it would be alright to leave the phone on. Beyond that, there are next to no good reasons for taking calls during class time. Calls from your stockbroker, agent, or bookie don't count as emergencies.

Class Preparation

I'm not the smartest literature student who ever lived, but I work hard and I always try to be prepared for class. Sometimes I'm up in the middle of the night getting the reading done. Last week, when I was getting some coffee before my morning Shakespeare, another student in the class told me I looked worn out. When I told her I had been up until 3 a.m. working, she laughed. She told me that she just reads the books she knows we're going to write papers on and lets the rest slide. She always comes to class and takes notes, but she just doesn't say anything when she hasn't done the reading. She figures the professor will tell her what to make of the books she hasn't read and she's able to save herself a lot of time and stress that way. And I have to admit, she makes sense. Tell me why I shouldn't follow her lead.

We'll be taking the high ground here, thank you very much. For us, one of the most troublesome aspects of teaching is when students clearly have not prepared for the class. For one thing, it has a profound impact on our classes, as we

may have indicated above. Certainly you've sat through classes where every remark or question the professor makes is greeted with stony silence. If you think the silence makes you uncomfortable and makes the class boring, imagine what it's like to be asking questions to which no one responds. Disappointment is perhaps the mildest emotional reaction. Self-doubt, disgust, loathing are a few of the more serious ones.



Now we know that sometimes a little self-doubt, or self-examination anyway, is healthy.

We know that we are human and that sometimes we're on and sometimes we're a little off. (Heck, we've sat in classes ourselves where we thought the professor lucky he didn't have to face anything worse than silence.) We don't always blame bad classes on you. And even when we do realize that lack of preparation on your part has sunk a particular class, we're experienced enough to put reactions such as the ones above into perspective. But if you think we don't really care, that we're smug in the knowledge that we're getting paid anyway, you misjudge our commitment to you and to what we do.

So when your friend argues that we'll tell her what to think of the texts she doesn't have time for, we have to wonder if she understands what we're all trying to do. First of all, we envision working with texts as a sort of "wrestling"; what we mean by this is that extracting knowledge and understanding from a text is hard work requiring a flat-out effort. Many of you have told us it doesn't come easy for you; well, despite our experience, neither does it come easy for us. We struggle just as you do. Think of the number of

times you've seen us working out some interpretive angle we haven't prepared for or figured on in class. These moments, while exciting, often mean a lot of on the spot brainwork, which we then have to articulate—on the spot. We stumble, misspeak, start over. We don't always come up with the perfect comment or *bon mot*. Sometimes our observations and interpretations remain half-formed, unresolved when class is dismissed. We don't quite get to where we wanted to, say what needed to be said. Given our mutual struggles as well as the average time in a single class or a term, we are lucky to succeed at our interpretive wrestling at all.

So, working with texts is not easy. We don't have much time and, even then, we may not get the work done. This is why we require and insist that you prepare for class. It is also why many of you—those who don't prepare—don't really “make the work yours” and, not having achieved that will never really understand a work. You may, in some distant and general sense, understand it because we have described our struggle—our wrestling—but that isn't your struggle; it is ours. If it isn't yours, you won't get it. Letting us tell you about the text is like having someone else learn a foreign language for you. It can't compare with learning it yourself.

And whether you're really there to learn or not, we have to proceed on the assumption that you are. And you can't do it if you're not reading.

Meeting with the Professor

I'm having some trouble in Literary Methodologies and Professor Gussman told me she would meet with me to give me some help. But every time I go to her office, she's not there. I'm in class during her posted office hours. Surely she's in her office more often than that. I don't know what to do.

Our first and most obvious question must be: Have you told her you can't make her office hours and tried to set up a time that's agreeable to both of you? You're right. Most of us are in our offices working more than our office hours indicate. But often our work means being out of our offices—photocopying, research in the library, discussions with colleagues, meetings, etc. We post office hours so that you will be guaranteed a time to find us.

There are, of course, times when we say we will be in our offices and we aren't. There are usually legitimate reasons why we are absent. If you come by at those times you should (1) assume there is, indeed, a legitimate reason and (2) leave us a message that you were there and that you will return at a certain time, or that you will see us in class or that you will phone us or that you will e-mail us. None of us make a habit of skipping our office hours. Most of the time, for instance, we post notes on our doors when we have to run out, letting you know where we are, so you can gauge whether or not to wait for us—or find us, if for example, we're down in the Arts and Humanities office.

That being said, we are not, of course, in our offices when we are not on campus. Because the college has a three-

day—MWF—schedule and a two-day—TTh—schedule we are usually off campus on the days that we don't teach. It is a bit unfair—when we teach on MWF—to blame us for not being in our offices on TTh. It would be like blaming you for not being at home when you are at work. We are far more available to you than our teachers were to us. If you really can't find us outside of class, corner us in class and pin us down for a meeting. We'll be there.

Meeting with a Professor (2)

I was absent on Thursday and missed getting a writing assignment in Professor Honaker's Victorian Literature class. I like to get to work on these assignments immediately, so I called her office to find out what it was. I got her voicemail and left a message for her to call me back. She didn't. How am I supposed to know what to do if she won't tell me?

Gentle reader, have you been back to class since you missed the assignment? Has Professor Honaker said anything to you? Have you said anything to her? Are you still on friendly terms? Because we happen to know that this is one of Professor Honaker's pet peeves. (And just to stay on the safe side, do not call her Mrs. Honaker. That's her other one.) We will tell you right now that she will never call you back. On principle. Why not? Here's why not.

You are calling to ask a favor. She did not fail to show up and hand out the assignment. You failed to be there to get

it. She doesn't need anything from you. You need something from her. That means it is your responsibility to get in touch with her. She should not have to go out of her way to do you a favor. This applies not simply to missed assignments, of course, or simply to Professor Honaker. All of us have received notes and voicemail asking us to call students who wish to get into our closed classes, from students who need a deadline extended and want us to call them and arrange it, from students who need some information that only we can provide, but who think they should not have to go out of their way in the least to get it. We simply do not understand this logic, for reasons stated above. And frankly, we think it's pretty nervy.

We do understand, though, that sometimes your schedules and ours don't mesh, that despite your best efforts at contact, you can't seem to reach us. It happens. Honaker has a rule. If a student has made a good faith effort to reach her—she will even define this as three phone calls or a combo of phones and emails—she will, indeed, call back. Some of us even like to simply get some of this business out of the way and will call back without such prompting. But here's the rule. When you call, state what it is you need and indicate that you will try again to reach the professor, but that *if* (please note the emphasis on *if*) she would like to try to reach you, you can be reached at the following phone number. That's covering all of the bases, and being polite in the bargain.

We also think that e-mail should have made this a moot issue by now. All of us conduct a lot of business online. We set up meetings and resolve many issues that do not require face-to-face contact in this way. So our advice to

you, if you really need to reach us in a hurry, is to e-mail us. Just don't demand an immediate response. And if you've lost a photocopy or need to know what went on in class, we suggest that you go to your peers. Come to us only if you need clarification—and again, observe the rules stated above.

The Workload

I'm a second semester transfer student, with all of my ASD's done so I'm concentrating on completing the major. This semester, I'm taking the required Research course, and two 3000-level courses, Milton and Chaucer, and one G-course—and I'm dying. I can't believe how much work I have to do for my three litt classes. I constantly have a paper or project due, so I'm always in the library. If I'm not there, I'm at home reading. If I'm not reading, I'm writing. Between my workload for school and my job, I barely have time to sleep or eat. Don't you professors realize that your class is not the only class we're taking? How can you all require so much work and expect us to do it well?

You are taking a heavy load, we can see that. We would have tried to make you choose between Chaucer and Milton because we do know how much work is involved. We always advise students to limit the number of 3000-level courses they take. Our general rule of thumb is that two should be your limit. And if you've been given leave to take upper-level courses as you complete Literary Methodologies or the Research course (which are designed

as prerequisites), you should limit yourself to one. We know very few students we think can handle the work that goes into the schedule you describe. We can only imagine that you insisted on this schedule—which, of course, is your decision. But none of us would knowingly or willingly sign off on this without warning you about the work involved. So, we agree. You probably do have too much work to do.



We do, however, hear frequent complaints about the work our courses demand—even from those students who take what we consider to be manageable loads. Complaining about the workload is nothing new. We did it when we were students—though we rarely (or never) mentioned it to our professors. Our concerns now have to do with the constant, term-long complaining we hear.

Do we discuss the amount of work we ask you to do? Yes. Do we adjust the amount of work that we ask you to do as a result of these discussions? Sometimes. Are we flexible in setting due dates? Usually. Actually, if you must know, we have, over, say, the last decade, *reduced* the amount of work we ask you to do. A decade ago we assigned—and students complained about—10 to 12 page papers in our classes. Now we assign 6 to 10 page papers in our classes; students still complain.

We know that you have busy lives. How could you not? We know that most of you are juggling college and a job.

Twenty years ago we, too, had part-time jobs while we went to school. (Yes, we know full well that some of you work full-time; we are concerned about that fact.) But despite our common experience, we feel that the attitudes toward college and work have been turned on their heads. We considered ourselves college students: most of us lived at college, our lives centered on the college, others thought of us as college students, etc. We know that this has changed. Many of you don't live on campus, don't work on campus, don't center your lives on being here. Instead, you drive an hour to get here and as soon as your classes are over you leave to drive back where your job is. You work (hard) at that job until your next day of classes when you drive down again.

What we are trying to say goes something like this: we know that, usually, you are not lazy slackers; we know that many have heavy responsibilities in the outside world; we know that usually you make every effort to meet our assignments and deadlines. Yet, we hear a fairly constant litany of complaints about the workload. Our goals are incompatible: you want to get out of here with a respectable degree as soon as you can. We want you to graduate with a respectable degree as soon as you have finished the work.

We will continue to push you because that is our nature and our job and, to be honest, our delight. You will continue to resist, complain and avoid as long as possible. That may be your nature and your delight.

And, believe us, we'll all have to live with it.

Precepting

I had a precepting appointment with Professor Tompkins and I just totally forgot about it. When I saw him in class the next day, I asked him if he would meet with me after class, but he said he couldn't. I'm supposed to register tomorrow morning and I don't know what to do. I don't know what to take and I'm afraid the stuff I have to take will close if I don't get in now.

Geez, you managed to address two of our most basic complaints about precepting in one fell swoop. They are (1) students who do not show up for their appointments and (2) students who are not prepared for the precepting session.

The first goes without saying. We are bothered about any appointments that you make and don't keep. It is simply basic consideration to call and let us know that you are not going to make it or, afterwards, to send us a brief written apology. We do care if you keep appointments! Don't you?

The second complaint is more serious. While we are happy to say that many of you come in with well-planned schedules, knowing exactly what you need to take to graduate, and simply wish to double-check it with us and get our signatures, we are still surprised at the number of you who are completely unprepared for meeting with us as preceptors. Too many of you, in our opinion, are unaware of college requirements, Litt requirements and General Studies requirements. We are always a bit dumbfounded about this because a considerable amount of money is spent

for education (would you, for example, spend an equal amount on a car without checking various dealers, prices, factory options, etc.?). We suspect that some of you spend far more time on buying CDs or clothing than you do on “buying” courses.

The college requires a good deal of “clerking”—filling out forms, etc.—and precepting has more than its share of this onerous task. It is your responsibility to make sure that the forms are completed, that W and Q courses meet college requirements, that subscripts are fulfilled, that you have chosen a language to gain competence in, that your grades are correctly listed in the college’s records—in other words, you need to do most of the precepting yourself. We join the process to give advice, to offer alternatives, to smooth the way, to open doors, to negotiate with the administration or just to be there to let you vent. But we are not your clerks or your servants or your guarantee that you will graduate.

Special Program Requests

I'm trying to finish up my Litt degree and my Education requirements at the same time. I want to graduate next December. I just sent in my student teaching forms for next semester only to find out that my student teaching is going to conflict with taking Senior Seminar. When I e-mailed my preceptor for help—to arrange a senior project instead, she didn't seem too keen on making this happen. I don't want to put off my graduation until May. I don't think it's fair. Why didn't she warn me that this might happen?

First, let us say that we never involve ourselves in advising you about your EDUC requirements. Because those requirements involve fieldwork and the completion of courses to fulfill a variety of subject area requirements, because the EDUC route is far from the same for every student who takes it, even those with the same major, we just don't feel comfortable giving you advice about it. We're not experts and don't want to misdirect you.



Thus, we send you to EDUC when it comes to advice about fulfilling their requirements. We simply tell you what it's going to take to fulfill the Litt major. Now, if you have regularly met with your preceptor, you should know what those requirements are. If you've met with the folks in EDUC, you presumably know what their requirements are. Knowing both sets of requirements, you yourself should have been aware of this potential conflict. The fact that you have not been able to avoid it does not in any way release you from those requirements. Preceptors are not there to get you out of requirements; we're there to explain them—and to help to make sure you have fulfilled them. Notice that we say "help" here. Ultimately, you must shoulder this responsibility yourself.

If you have not met with your preceptor and this all comes as a surprise to you for that reason, well, what can we say about that?

As we read your question again, though, we'd like to add that a December graduation strikes us as a little precipitous

anyway. One thing we do know about EDUC is that fulfilling their requirements necessarily adds a year to the normal matriculation cycle. It looks to us like you want us to help you get out early. Unless you've got very compelling reasons to do so, we're unlikely to do that.

Academic Honesty

I was taking a mid-term last week—I had studied pretty hard for it—and as I took a break from writing an essay, I noticed that the person in front of me was getting answers from her next door neighbor. Cheating I thought; bad thing to do. But then I got thinking. We're taught to question authority, aren't we? Okay, authority figure, explain what's wrong with taking a quick peek during a test when you have temporary brain cramp? And while you're on the subject, tell me why faculty get in such a dither about plagiarism?

Cheating and plagiarism equal stealing. You first need to understand that. What's wrong with stealing in an academic setting? To begin to answer, let us suggest that there is a kind of contract in the relationship between teacher and student. The instructor's side of the contract reads: "When you enroll in this course, I promise to teach you the following things (a list of facts, ideas, etc. should be inserted here)." The student's side of the contract reads: "When I enroll in this course, I promise to complete all of the required work, to read what is assigned, to attend regularly, to participate in class, etc." Both sides of the agreement assume that what information you get in the

course will either be the teacher's own or will be identified as coming from someone else or will be the student's own or will be identified as someone else's.

Cheating on a test or plagiarizing in an essay breaks this agreement between us. Ken Tompkins would be as guilty of plagiarism if he taught a course in Shakespeare and gave brilliant lectures on each of the plays but took the ideas from Harold Bloom's new book and didn't identify them as such.

Certain questions and comments arise time and again when we discuss plagiarism:



“I understand I have to quote something an author said but do I have to quote an idea?”

“I found this on the Internet. Do I have to quote it?”

“I read a ton of books for this paper; I'm not sure now where I got the idea.”

“Kinsella makes us quote everything but Tompkins isn't concerned about it.”

Here's a quick answer: keep track of your sources and give proper citation for all direct quotations, indirect quotations, and borrowing of ideas. For the long answer, enroll in Litt 2123, *Introduction to Research in Literature*.

By the way, plagiarism suggests a strange and incorrect assumption about us as teachers. A plagiarized paper assumes that we don't read the books and articles available, that we don't have notes on them or remember them, or that we can't distinguish between a scholar's style and a student's style. It also assumes that we don't remember your previous papers to compare with the one we're grading now.

The other sorry aspect of all this is that students will spend hours finding and constructing a plagiarized paper rather than taking that same time to write it themselves. Some are so desperate that they spend money buying an Internet paper rather than working with us to write their own. Skillful writing can be a painful process, we know, but it's a worthwhile process and one that you will not master through stealing or other shortcuts. Work hard on your essays, and do not fail to properly cite any information taken from any source other than your head.

Let us assure you, we prosecute students who violate the contract.

Deadlines

I'm a little ticked! I work hard to make the money I spend on my courses. (It's true mom and dad kick in a good chunk of change, but it's my major, my courses, and it's gonna be my diploma.) As you know, on top of work stress, there's lots of stress involved in going to school. Sometimes with my busy schedule, and with necessary time off to live a

little life, it can be difficult to get assignments done the exact nanosecond my teachers want them done. I do my assignments, don't get me wrong, but sometimes I need extra time. Why do the teachers act like it's some favor when they accept late assignments?

Aha! So you have a life. Well, there's your problem right there.

Kidding aside, we understand that sometimes you can't get things in when they're due, despite your own diligence. We've said it before: Life can be unpredictable. Cars break down; hard drives crash; children grow ill; bosses demand overtime. We know these things happen. Believe us, we hear a fairly constant litany of excuses good and bad each and every semester. What can we say? Deadlines are a fact of life; all of us have them. What *do* we say? That depends on when and how you present your particular deadline dilemma. But before we get to that, a little about what the deadlines mean to us:

Faculty insist upon deadlines because papers and tests “mark-off” the term's work. Our responsibility is to see that students have achieved a certain level of knowledge and experience in the course. Papers and tests reveal that level. Students also use papers and tests as means of measuring how much they have learned and whether they need to increase their efforts.

Most of us set deadlines for the class but are willing—when the facts warrant it—to extend the deadline for individuals. (We often need “extensions” ourselves when it comes to grading that work. We get behind, too—

sometimes far behind.) The problems arise when students take advantage of our generosity. An extension of a deadline is not, contrary to popular student mythology, a right. Because you have had an extension before, because you have taken a particular teacher's course before or for any other assumed reason, does not mean that you can take an extension without having it granted. When that happens we feel used and taken advantage of.

The proper way to get an extension is to ask us in advance for extra time to complete the work. Asking for an extension on the day that an assignment is due is admitting that you haven't worked on it or perhaps even thought about it before. That does not make us supportive.



Without a doubt, the worst way is to slip a paper under our doors a day (or week) late. That is a dead giveaway that you don't have a legitimate reason for an extension or that you feel you have a right to it. This, also, does not make us supportive.

We want to be fair about all of this but we also owe fairness to the students who do get their work in on time. So ask politely the next time you have a reason for an extension. We will try to be understanding; don't assume, however, that you can have one automatically.

The Big Lie

I am so furious. I was waiting for American Lit I to start when I heard another student, who is also in Professor Honaker's British Lit II class with me, bragging about the fact that she'd "bought" some big lie he told her about why he hadn't turned in the last paper. She was handing them back and he went up to collect his, claiming he had turned it in when it was due. She said she'd look for it, but he'd better print out another copy. He said he'd bring the paper to the next class. He was really proud of having done this. It just burns me up that he could get away with this. I'm half tempted to rat him out.

Uh-oh, the impermissible big lie. We're not surprised you're angry. This one really sends us over the moon. We know that people lie to us all of the time. Why the sheer number of illnesses, dead relatives, and court appearances we hear about every semester would convince us we were all living in some corner of purgatory if we didn't believe at least some of these excuses were fabricated. Honaker tells her students that she knows they lie to her, in fact, and simply cautions them to make sure that if they do lie, she doesn't find out.

But the lie you cite is particularly galling because, unlike those suggested above, it puts the professor at fault. Not only that, but it may cause her to actually spend time looking for the missing paper. That is why it's impermissible.

That being said, however, we'd actually urge against ratting this guy out, because, interestingly, this impermissible lie is

the one most often found out. There are a couple of reasons: The offender, when showing up to collect his missing paper, does not seem overly bothered by the fact that it's missing. He accepts the news that we don't seem to have it with nary a frown or look of surprise. He also either misses the next class or attends and does not show up with the paper. Anyone who has already finished the work goes home, prints it out and makes sure it's in our hands as soon as possible. Someone who has the work done feels a sense of urgency in this situation. He wants us to have the paper and give him his grade. Why? Because he did the work and feels that he deserves the grade for it, just like everyone else who turned the paper in on time. Most of the folks who tell this lie are just all too casual about getting the work in. Our theory on this is simple: Lying is easy; writing is hard. The liar has bought some time, but not much time. In fact, that paper often isn't in *weeks* after the initial lie was told. This is pretty much a sure giveaway.

If you know anyone who's thinking this is a good "late paper" strategy, tell them to kill off a great uncle before resorting to this one. Or better yet, urge him not to lie at all. Tell him to make arrangements before the crisis comes. In the long run, that's undoubtedly the best course of action—for you, for him, for the great uncle, and for us.

The Sacred Syllabus

I'm so confused. Professor Tompkins handed out a syllabus at the beginning of the semester, but in the past couple of weeks, he keeps changing it. He took off one novel and

added another. He changed a couple of due dates, too. He is giving us notice and I hadn't actually started any of the work that got changed, but it still makes me nervous. Why do professors hand out syllabi if they're not going to follow them religiously?



The syllabus seems to have taken on almost divine status recently. Professor Tompkins once taught a course and decided—as an experiment—not to have a syllabus. After about three weeks, the students got quite upset that there was no syllabus and that they didn't know how to prepare for future assignments. When he questioned the class about whether or not they actually did read days ahead, like you, they finally admitted that they did not but that they just felt better having a syllabus.

No one doubts that they are helpful documents. The faculty, however, know full well that they are simply guidelines and there will be inevitable changes as the course progresses. There is nothing real or actual about a syllabus.

Students also have learned to use them against us when it suits them. If we don't mention x in the syllabus then we cannot add x in the middle of the term. Students will go to administrators, claiming that this is “unfair.” The insistence that every requirement be listed at the beginning of a course produces strange results.

What a syllabus is, then, is an inflexible flexible guideline. We clearly need to change a syllabus in the middle of a term when what we had planned is not working but, on the other hand, we must list every possible contingency before the term starts. See the problem?

Our preference would be for students to see the syllabus as a general class outline of what we will read and when, but an outline that we can change if necessary.

Breaking Bread

I have three classes in a row on MWF. I'm not hungry when I walk into my 9:55, but I'm starving by the time I get out of my third class at 2:00 pm. I get so hungry I can't concentrate, so between classes I often grab a quick hotdog and chips and bring them to class. What is the Literature program policy on eating in the classroom?

As a faculty we agree on lots of things, but not on everything. Professor Tompkins, who teaches a morning/early afternoon



schedule does not care for eating in the classroom; he feels any sort of eating distracts from the purpose for which you're there—to do serious work interpreting literary texts; if you need a good breakfast, have it before you get to his class. Professor Honaker, who starts in the afternoon and teaches into the evening doesn't mind if you bring a snack, knowing that busy days often mean missing meals, and that low blood sugar can wreak

havoc with one's attention span. She does, however, draw the line at full meals, food that requires much in the way of distracting preparation, and overly noisy food. Kinsella seconds her emotion here. Professor Gussman feels that bringing food is fine and sharing is even better. Once you know where we stand, you can tailor your behavior accordingly.

We agree, however, that you should clean up after yourself. We've all walked into classrooms that are littered with empty cups, soda cans, and food wrappers. We see absolutely no reason for such slovenly habits.

End of the Term

I didn't say too much in Professor Kinsella's Intro to Research class. I didn't do too well on the early papers in the course either, but I think I really figured out what to do with my final paper and Powerpoint project and I worked really hard on them. I was dying to know what my grade was, so I left Professor Kinsella a voicemail, but he didn't respond. I know he's doing his grades now, anyway, and I know he'll see a big difference between this work and my earlier efforts. I would think he would appreciate how much I learned and how much work I did and take the time to send me an e-mail, wouldn't you?

Frankly, no. It always comes as a surprise when students who have never said much in class demand grades, papers returned and rewrites graded as the last hours of the term pass. Tompkins once had a student call him about her

grades in a class the evening of the day of the final.

In general, it is not considerate to ask about grades at all. If you have to ask, ask about them after they have been submitted to the college. This is usually 5 – 7 days after the end of the term. It is also considerate to ask in person or by email; voicemail demanding grades is not considerate.

The other problem we experience at the end of the term is a flood of past work—incompletes, rewrites, make-up exams, etc.—all have to be graded in the last few days or hours. We are partly responsible in that if we don't set earlier deadlines than, say, the last day of the term, we have helped to bring on the problem ourselves. You could, however, understand the landslide we are trying to manage at the end of the term and get your work to us on time. At the very least, it is not considerate to demand that a rewrite from a month ago be graded and returned so you can calculate your GPA. Surely you have better and more enjoyable things to do with your time. After all, the semester's over. Your GPA isn't going anywhere.

Incompletes

I'm beginning to empathize with Job, Oedipus, and Homer Simpson. This semester has presented one problem after another. My car broke down the first week of the semester and I missed several classes because I couldn't get to school. Next my boss changed my work schedule so that I no longer had quality time for homework. Then near the end of the semester home-life got difficult and I couldn't

put in my best effort. Trouble is, when I went to Professor Kinsella and explained this, and asked for an incomplete for the course, he said no! I tried to explain that over the summer, when things settle down, I will surely do much better work. But he was adamant. What gives?

It is not surprising that Professor Kinsella was unyielding. We happen to know that he includes the following statement on his syllabi: "I will not give incompletes at the end of the semester unless you have warned me well in advance and have appropriate reasons." He has based this statement upon guidelines in the Stockton *Bulletin*, which state that "An 'I' may be recorded if a student is unable, due to illness or emergency, to complete the necessary coursework within the time provided" (*Bulletin* 2000-2001, 30). Clearly, the scenario depicted above, while unfortunate, is not due to illness or emergency.



Sometimes students disappear from a course part-way through the semester, miss several classes and quite a bit of work, only to reappear with a week or two to go; they attend the final classes and ask for an incomplete to finish the rest of the work. For reasons outlined in other areas of this guide, this request is completely unreasonable. If a student has

missed a substantial part of a course, he or she should officially withdraw from the course, following appropriate college procedures. If it is too late to withdraw, he should expect a disappointing grade. Incompletes are designed to give breathing room to students who have found them-

selves in exceptional circumstances: they need heart surgery and they need it now; they are 7 and one ½ months pregnant and the doctor has ordered bed rest; they have contracted mononucleosis. Incompletes are not granted because a student could not put forth a consistently good effort.

Class Presence

A friend and I were walking through C-wing the other day when she spotted Professor Tompkins. She's a Litt major, too, and needed to ask him some question about the green world. As their conversation progressed she remembered to introduce me to him. "Ho, ho," said Professor Tompkins, "So I finally meet a student who likes to read Boswell!" My question is how he knew that obscure tidbit about me? I have never had any of his courses. Up until that meeting I'm not even sure I knew what he looked like.

How did Professor Tompkins know about your well-deserved indulgence in Boswell? We suppose one of the other faculty told him, although it could have been another student. When you spend two to four years in and out of our classes, we get to know you—we get to know all of you. Over time, you each develop a “class presence,” a kind of public or class identity. This presence can be positive or negative. For example, suppose there is a Litt major who sleeps consistently in Tompkins’ class. Tompkins might ask Gussman if the same student is sleeping in her class. Suppose the answer is “yes.” That student is at risk of being known among the faculty as “Rip

Van Winkle” or “the sleeper.” Someone else’s class identity might be that he leaves each class for ten minutes or that she always has her hand raised to answer questions or that he won’t be seen without 24 ounces of coffee.

A class presence can be negative or positive (neutral as well, although in this context, neutral is probably closer to negative). Good students develop positive class identities by contributing their insights to discussions or by writing well (or both) or when they have perfect attendance records.

“Wait a minute,” you cry, “don’t hold my shyness or lack of experience against me: I don’t respond to in-class questions because I don’t want to look like a fool in front of everyone else.” All we can answer is that part of the “wrestling” with literature described earlier involves taking chances, trying out thoughts that have newly occurred, trusting that they are being tested among like-minded people, ultimately taking risks.

For the past several semesters the Literature program has averaged about 200 majors. You know how small the faculty is. Students and faculty together build and enjoy a working, intellectual community. It is a community with common interests and shared goals. Any major who has been on campus for more than a semester knows the faculty by reputation (whether you have had class with us or not). You should understand that we “know” you too. The implicit argument here is that such a community is good and that your reputation within the community is important.

Computers, Weblogs and Caucus

I like to read novels, compose poetry, watch plays, and talk about all things literary. I don't like techno-geek fad-of-the-week computer programs and the Internet. I believe the height of technological advancement (as far as writing is concerned) was achieved with the invention of the graphite pencil. Imagine my consternation when I perused the syllabus to Literary Methodologies and saw a MONTH's worth of computer work.

Yes, we've heard this complaint. (We get a similar one, with a different twist, from students who first bump into pre-twentieth-century literature: "I hate that old stuff.") We decided as a faculty to stress computers and humanities computing some years ago. We have many reasons for doing so. They include preparing for the new century, recognizing the powerful changes taking place in digital textual studies, increasing the possibilities of getting a job, and learning to access the web for class and research purposes.

A few Litt students resist this move fairly aggressively; others see it as a challenge and respond accordingly. Many actually enjoy it.

We have no intention of lessening the pressure on students to learn these skills. We are absolutely convinced that it is not a question of "if" our students should learn this but, rather, a question of "when."

Finally...

We want to insist that nothing in this document should be construed as attacks or real dissatisfaction with Litt students. To the contrary...

We are proud of your achievements, of your work, of your ideas and of the great variety of ways you have found for expressing yourselves. You are a special group and we will always be grateful that we are both here at the same time.

The changes in academic culture are not of your doing; what we see every day is seen by faculty all over America. But we would be derelict in our own self-respect and the respect that we offer you, gentle reader, if we remained silent. Whenever the possibilities for learning in our classrooms are lessened we will speak out. We feel that those possibilities are being lessened by the concerns that we have discussed here. We suspect that you will appreciate being told what is expected of you; we know that if we were in your positions, we would.

Debby Gussman
Lisa Honaker
Tom Kinsella
Ken Tompkins

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