



Chapter 3

Instructors

You have relationships with your parents, siblings and friends that you have developed through communication, understanding and mutual respect. Now, as a new college student, you will also need to develop relationships with your instructors. And, much like your other relationships, these student/teacher relationships will be built on communication, understanding and respect.

Many students are intimidated by instructors and are afraid that their instructors will judge them, they will appear to other students to be a “teacher’s pet,” or become a bother to their instructors if they try to develop a relationship. This couldn’t be farther from the truth. In fact, if you fail to develop relationships

with your instructors you will miss out on opportunities to greatly aid your learning process and deepen your college experience. An instructor with whom you have a great relationship can serve as a mentor and offer you:

- ***Advice on how to do better in class*** – and in college in general.
- ***Their trust*** and, therefore, the benefit of the doubt when your answer on an exam or assignment is in question.
- ***Inside information and recommendations for employment opportunities*** – both during and after college.
- ***Valuable contacts in the industry*** or area of interest in which you wish to pursue a career.
- ***Help in determining career goals.***
- ***An invitation to be a teaching or research assistant.***
- ***Recommendation letters and references*** for graduate school admission or a post-graduation job.

While most instructors are very intelligent and busy people, they are working as instructors because they want to teach students and serve as a mentor while you learn. They expect their students to get to know them and use them as learning resources. It is, however, up to you to initiate your student/instructor relationship and take advantage of the resources your instructors can offer.

This chapter will help you develop positive and valuable relationships with your instructors by:

- Helping you understand the kinds of instructors you may have.
- Explaining ways you can develop effective relationships with instructors.
- Recommending strategies for dealing with difficult instructors.

Different Kinds of Instructors

All instructors are not the same. In fact, at most colleges there are a variety of types of instructors, all with varying levels of education and teaching experience. Here's a brief run-down of the kinds of instructors you are likely to encounter during your college years:

Professors – Professors are the instructor all-stars. They are the highest-ranking instructors because they have earned a doctoral degree and have fulfilled the requirements for tenure. Tenure means different things at different colleges, but usually it means that candidates have completed a regime of teaching, research, writing and college/community service on which they are evaluated and granted tenure for their success by a college committee.

Associate/Assistant Professors – These instructors are in the process of earning their doctoral degrees and tenure status. Some may have just begun the process, while others may be close to becoming full-fledged professors.

Adjunct Instructors – Also called lecturers, adjunct instructors are not full-time instructors and are not in consideration for tenure. They are hired by the college to teach various courses and usually have extensive experience in the subjects they teach. Some adjunct instructors may even be professionals in the field in which they teach. For example, an adjunct instructor of an introductory accounting course may actually work as an accountant in addition to his/her teaching duties. Adjuncts may or may

not have an advanced degree, and may or may not be considering a career as a professor.

Teaching Assistants – Also referred to as graduate teaching assistants or assistant instructors, they are typically students pursuing advanced degrees in the subject they teach. For example, if the instructor of your chemistry lab is a teaching assistant, he or she is most likely working toward earning a master’s or doctorate degree in chemistry or another related science subject. In many cases, these students are required to teach as part of their degree requirements and may receive in, exchange for their teaching work, a small stipend or a waiver of tuition fees or expenses.

Developing a Relationship in Class

Your instructor/student relationships start in the classroom. During class, instructors are able to identify the students who seem interested, enthusiastic, and committed to success. To make sure you are one of these students:

- ***Attend class and arrive on time.*** If you must miss class, let your instructor know when and why you missed class and ask how you can make up the information learned during that class.
- ***Participate.*** Class discussions are a great way to express your opinions and ideas, and to ask questions and clarify points. A great way to stand out during class discussions is to identify how course materials relate to current events or the real world.
- ***Ask questions.*** Your instructors gauge how well students are learning and which areas need to be given more emphasis by paying attention to what kinds of questions are being asked. Some students might think that asking questions might make them seem stupid, but asking questions actually has the opposite effect. A well-crafted question can actually demonstrate a student’s good grasp of the subject and show a deeper thought process that is impressive to instructors. Also, avoid questions like, “Will this be on the exam?” These kinds of questions make students look like they are more interested in the exam than in the subject.
- ***Prepare well for class*** by completing all assignments and reading. This includes turning in all assignments on time and showing up for all quizzes and exams.
- ***Don’t be disruptive or attract negative attention*** from your instructor by talking with other students, talking on a cell phone, eating or drinking, or leaving class early.
- ***Sit in the front of the class.***

- **Address your instructor correctly and with respect.** At the beginning of the term, your instructor will let you know how they would like to be addressed and how to pronounce their name correctly. Make sure you do!
- **Show respect for other students' – and your instructor's – opinions and views.** Don't interrupt during discussions or say anything demeaning or disrespectful.

Developing a Relationship Outside of Class

Class is a great place to develop a relationship with your instructor, but you also have other opportunities to get to know your instructors outside of class. Take advantage of these opportunities. Here's how:

- **Take advantage of office hours.** Most instructors maintain office hours or periods of time when they are available, in their office, to meet with students – with or without appointments.
- **Make an appointment.** Even if you are not required to, you should try to make an appointment to meet with your instructor during office hours. Making an appointment demonstrates to your instructor that the meeting is important to you and that you value their time.
- **Start early.** Schedule meetings with your instructors as early in the day as possible, before your instructor becomes tired or distracted by the day's work. The early rule also applies to early in the term – by the end of the term instructors are overrun with students wishing to talk about their grades. The earlier in the term you begin meeting with your instructor, the better off you will be.
- **Be punctual and prepared.** Always be on time to appointments with your instructor and arrive prepared with an agenda of information you would like to cover, topics you would like to discuss and questions you need to ask. Bring all relevant assignments, notes, books and materials. If you must be late, call and let your instructor know.
- **Avoid meeting with instructors right after class.** There will be other students vying for their attention and you won't be able to get the attention you need.
- **Get involved.** Many instructors also lead clubs or serve as mentors for clubs or student groups. Participating in these activities is a great way to develop relationships with instructors who you already have or might have in the future. For example, if you think you will choose English as your major, join the staff of the college literary magazine. Chances are some of the best and most committed English instructors serve as advisors for this publication.

- ***Pay attention to extracurricular events.*** Instructors don't spend all of their time teaching. In fact, much of a college instructor's time is spent writing, researching and pursuing other activities related to their field. If you make a habit of checking campus and community events and activities, you will probably find that many of your current, past and future professors regularly appear in public to give readings of books they have published, participate in talks, debates or panel discussions, present research findings, offer special tours of area museums or points of interest that fall under their subject area, and lead special classes, lectures and activities that relate to their role as an expert in their field. Even if one of your instructors is not leading one of these programs, they may attend and participate. Participating in activities like these can help you meet and get to know instructors in your major, as well as broaden your learning experience.

Dealing with Difficult Instructors

Unfortunately, it is highly unlikely that you will love every instructor that you have during your college career. Some you will find boring, others may be hard to learn from, and still others may be intimidating, eccentric or opinionated. There are as many kinds of people working as instructors as there are fish in the sea, and you won't like every one. Believe it or not, every one of your instructors may not be crazy about you either!

That doesn't mean, however, that you will fail to succeed when you don't "click" with your instructor. In fact, part of what you will learn in college is how to work with different kinds of people – even ones you don't like – and still succeed. It will be a skill that will serve you well in the real world.

When you find one of your instructors difficult to work with:

Do:

- ***Contact other students.*** Find other students who have taken courses taught by the instructor in question and ask for advice on how best to work with this instructor – and what pitfalls to avoid.
- ***Show interest.*** Instructors appreciate when students are interested and enthusiastic about their course. Showing interest will make your instructor more likely to offer help.
- ***Support your hard work with evidence.*** When meeting with an instructor that you find difficult, come prepared and bring evidence that shows you are committed to the class. Such evidence can include completed assignments or notes.
- ***Use instructor evaluation sheets effectively.*** Many colleges require instructors to distribute evaluation sheets to all students at the end of

the term. These evaluations are usually anonymous (*meaning you don't have to put your name on them*), and are used to help instructors identify their strengths and weaknesses and get better at their job. Sometimes these evaluations are even used during departmental reviews of the instructors' performance. Don't use evaluations as a way to vent negative feelings or punish instructors. Instead, honestly evaluate instructors and try to give feedback that can help them change for the better.

Don't:

- ***Take it personally.*** Instructors are only human. Sometimes they have a bad day, or are going through a tough time in their life. Some instructors are poor communicators, have unusual teaching styles, or just don't "click" with certain students. If you feel that your instructor is difficult, don't take it personally. It is highly unlikely that the instructor is targeting you or singling you out for bad treatment. Chances are other students find this instructor's style difficult as well. Keeping this in mind will help you deal with the instructor fairly and keep things in perspective.
- ***Be negative.*** You will accomplish nothing by adopting a negative attitude, reacting harshly or giving up. Instead of dwelling on what you don't like about an instructor or class, focus on what you can do to improve the situation and make the experience a good one.
- ***Be vague or general.*** When speaking with or meeting with your instructor, make sure you have specific questions, and stay on topic. Telling your instructor you "just don't understand" doesn't help him/her to understand where you are having problems, and can make a bad situation worse. Instead, identify specific areas and questions you would like to address and stick to them.
- ***Ignore the problem.*** If you truly believe that the relationship between you and your instructor is affecting your grade, make an appointment to meet with your academic advisor for advice.