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10 Tips for Proper Classroom Etiquette

Good manners and classroom etiquette should be common sense for most students. Being courteous and polite will predispose professors to like and respect you.

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As a college professor, I am often involved in discussions with other faculty at campuses all over the country about the strange happenings that occur in the classroom -- by students who seem unaware or oblivious to proper classroom etiquette.

Why should you care about classroom etiquette? Because professors take note of those students who are at both ends of the spectrum and then make subtle -- or not so subtle -- decisions and adjustments that can affect these students' academic performances. Professors love students who are thoughtful, polite, and courteous -- who follow good classroom etiquette.

What is etiquette? It's a code of conduct, a method for dealing with how people interact with each other -- based on respect and accepted norms of behavior.

Here are 10 tips for proper classroom etiquette.

1. Arrive to Class on Time.

There are always going to be days when a previous professor keeps you late, or you wake up late, or it takes you too long to find a parking space, but the point here is do not be habitually late to class. Regularly arriving late to class signals a level of disrespect -- whether you mean to send that signal or not. If you have problems getting to class on time, find a way to solve them. And on those rare days when you do arrive late, remember to enter the room quietly and not make a big scene.

2. Turn Off Your Cell Phone.

Unless you are expecting an important call or text, the proper thing to do is turn your cell phone completely off as soon as you enter class. Some students switch to vibrate mode, but sometimes this mode can be worse than a ring tone because of the intensity of the vibration. Certainly NEVER answer your cell phone in class, nor text. If your phone does ring, make a quick apology as you send the call to voicemail -- and then send a quick email to your professor after class apologizing for your gaffe.

3. Do Not Bring Food or Drink to Class.

In many classroom buildings, food is not even allowed, so you're not only displaying poor etiquette, but actually breaking a rule. Make time outside of class to have a meal or a snack -- not in class. Many professors do tolerate drinks, such as waters, coffees, sodas -- but make certain of the professor's policy before bringing your drink to class.

4. Contribute to the Class Discussion When Appropriate.

Just about all professors appreciate a strong dialogue in the classroom, but not when the comments are unwanted or inappropriate. Do respond when the professor seeks input or asks for questions or discussion. Don't interrupt the professor or another student, and don't dominate the discussion -- let other people have a chance to talk/contribute to the dialogue.

5. Avoid Side Conversations.

One of the biggest pet peeves of professors and students alike is when a few students have a "private" conversation loudly enough that it's distracting to the main discussion in the classroom. If you have big

news to share with your friends, do so before or after class -- but refrain from doing so during class. Besides being more respectful to the students and professor, you'll actually learn more information by being actively involved in the class rather than in your own side conversation.

6. Addressing the Professor Properly.

Many full-time university faculty members have a doctorate degree and have earned the right to be addressed as "Dr." Smith rather than "Mr." or "Ms." Smith. In fact, many faculty are insulted when students do not address them properly. If you're unsure of a faculty member's status, the best solution is to address him/her as "Professor" Smith until you know better. "Dude," "Dog," or other such casual names are inappropriate. Some professors prefer to be addressed by their first names -- but those professors will tell you when that's okay to do so.

7. Be Attentive in Class.

If you are going to make the effort to arrive on time and be in class, you should also make the effort to stay actively engaged in class. Some professors report observing students reading the student newspaper or even reading a textbook for a different class; some report seeing students completing homework for their next class. Flaunting your boredom or disinterest in the class is rude -- and very inappropriate. Finally, avoid falling asleep in class or staring out the window.

8. Stay for the Entire Class.

There may be times when you need to leave class early, but do not make a habit of doing so. If you do need to leave class early, the best solution is to alert the professor ahead of time and then discretely leave the classroom so as not to disturb the other students. If you do need to leave early and seating is not assigned, pick a seat close to the door to make a quick and quiet exit.

9. Avoid Signaling, Sending Signs That Class Time is Up.

One of my biggest pet peeves is when students attempt to signal that class is over by shutting their books loudly, unzipping and zipping their backpacks, and otherwise making noises that class time is complete. Some students actually get up and walk out of class. Of course, some professors make a habit of going over class time, but most of us know how to tell time -- and most of us have a watch or other way to tell time. It is presumptuous and rude for the student to tell the professor that class is over. If your professor does seem to have a problem with ending class on time, chat with him or her outside of class -- especially if it is making you late to your next class.

10. Contact the Professor When You Have to Miss Class.

When you have to miss class for legitimate reasons or when you miss class because of illness, try to contact the professor and inform him/her of your absence. You may even be able to obtain copies of lecture notes or schedule a meeting during office hours to discuss what you missed. Do not, however, ask the professor in class to go over material you missed (for whatever reasons). And when alerting the professor about having to miss a class, do not begin the conversation with the awful question, "are we doing anything important in the next class because I have to miss it." (If the professor was not planning to do anything, the class would probably be canceled, right?)

Final Thoughts

Proper classroom etiquette should be common sense for most students. Being courteous will predispose the professor to like/respect you -- and set an example for other less-informed students.