

Survivor 1101: Practical Suggestions for College Success

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As college professors, we sometimes find ourselves frustrated by the actions of a few of our students. We complain about assignments thoughtlessly scrawled on torn notepaper and written in “alternative” or “retro” hieroglyphs. We lament the students who engage in intimate discussions during our well-planned lessons, and the longer we remain in the classroom, the more we are astonished at the innovative ways our students devise to distract us as well as their classmates: the student who sits in class and knits, the student who stands in the back of the classroom with a periscope (but that was in Florida), the student who cannot find his ringing cell phone, and the student who levitates (well, perhaps the last one is a slight exaggeration, but some of us have had some close approximations).

We faculty members are not the only ones who are troubled and annoyed by these behaviors. The majority of our students are also frustrated by fellow classmates who hamper their concentration, waste valuable class time, and interrupt the learning process.

Not all of our troubling students are deliberately inconsiderate, however. Some are simply inexperienced first-generation college students without a background for surviving in academia. Some students simply do not know that their behaviors are disruptive and alienating. Many of them do not realize that they are working against themselves by what they do or fail to do.

The student survival guide that follows emerged from discussions and concerns of faculty members at a number of campuses and includes suggestions from students, faculty, and research on study skills. This guide can function in a number of ways. As a whole, it could serve as a handout to students on the first day of classes or as a part of an orientation packet. However, it need not be used as a whole. Interested faculty could incorporate their personal pet peeves from this list into their course outlines or as a part of their course introductions when expectations and preferences are spelled out.

In distributing these suggestions to students, it is important to point out that faculty members do try to be both fair and unbiased in their dealings with

students. However, teachers, like most people, react to the ways they are treated. Inconsiderate and inappropriate behavior (no matter how unintentional) may have subtle and negative influences on the student’s final course grade. Students need to understand that behavior and attitude are important to college success, for they determine whether instructors will react favorably or unfavorably to students as individuals.

The survival guide that follows highlights classroom expectations, discussion and lecture etiquette, group work and presentation guidelines, class and assignment preparation suggestions, and study tips.

Student Survival Guide

Classroom Expectations

- 1. Attend class, even if the instructor allows for unexcused absences.** Through regular attendance, you demonstrate your commitment to the course. Students who miss class do so at their own risk. Reading someone else’s notes and checking with the instructor or other students in the class are not substitutes for all of the information given out by the instructor and provided by other students.
- 2. Arrive on time.** Coming into class late once or twice a semester is understandable. However, coming late regularly is disrespectful to your fellow classmates and your instructor and demonstrates an uncaring, irresponsible attitude.
- 3. Come prepared for note taking, discussions, and tests with paper, pens, textbooks, and pencils.** Do not waste your time on an assignment or your classmates’ time waiting for you to borrow what you need.
- 4. Pay attention to the instructor and to class discussions, not to other distractions.** If you are not in class mentally, you really have not attended class and have not been exposed to the material the class is intended to teach.
- 5. Focus on instructional activities during each class.** Never read newspapers, magazines, or other textbooks; do not browse the Internet; do not study

for other tests, revise papers, or do homework; and do not sleep.

6. **Show interest in lectures and discussions through facial expressions such as a nod or smile or by body language such as facing the instructor.**
7. **Avoid negative nonverbal signs of boredom or disbelief (yawning, frowning, sighing, rolling eyes, gazing out of windows and doors).**
8. **Participate in class discussions.** Ask questions or make *relevant* observations about the topic under discussion. Not only will you get more out of the class and be able to remember more if you engage it actively, but it will be more interesting and time will go by much more quickly.
9. **Ask for help when you need it.** Do not wait. You may not get another opportunity to ask and forever miss information that you need. You might even be penalized on a test or an assignment if you are not aware of this information.
10. **Make sure that you understand all of the requirements of an assignment so that you may perform well on it.**
11. **Take notes in class.** Studies have shown a direct connection between writing and learning. Furthermore, making yourself pay attention through note taking will facilitate your understanding and mastery of the subject.
12. **Never pack up your books and put away class notes before the class period has ended.**
13. **Leave cell phones and beepers at home or turn them off.**
14. **Do not ask classmates about their grades.** Grades are private. According to the Buckley Amendment, grades are personal. Keep yours to yourself and do not ask others what grades they made.
15. **Keep your part of the teaching contract.** Teaching is a contractual relationship. The instructor agrees to perform his or her duties as spelled out in the syllabus within the bounds of accepted cultural manners and civility; the student agrees to abide by the conditions of the syllabus and perform his or her duties as well, within the bounds of accepted cultural manners and civility. For the relationship to work, both parties must fulfill their parts of the contract.

Discussion and Lecture Etiquette

1. **Look at your instructor and classmates when they talk.** Eye contact is an effective component of communication.
2. **Do not talk or whisper during discussions or lectures.** Good lectures and discussions are easily ruined by personal conversations (no matter how quiet) and social chitchat.
3. **Avoid distracting the speaker and other class participants.** Students are sometimes unaware that they are annoying others when they fiddle with pens or notebooks; doodle or tap on their desks; smack gum or groom themselves.
4. **Do not monopolize a discussion.** Be direct and to the point. Your instructor and classmates alike are bored by rude comments; long-winded, irrelevant, or rambling personal stories; or questions whose answers have already been given.
5. **Do not show your disapproval with sarcasm or snide comments that offend and alienate others.**
6. **Do not argue.** State your point, make your argument, and briefly present your evidence. Avoid direct confrontations with individuals and make your points to the class as a whole.
7. **Try to keep or develop an open mind and avoid sweeping and unsupported generalizations.**

Group Work

1. **Participate actively and professionally.**
2. **Show up for all group work sessions with materials that you need.**
3. **Do your share.**
4. **Show up especially if there is an oral report or project to present as a result of the group's work.**

Oral Presentations

1. **Show up with all of your materials ready to give your presentation on the day and time scheduled.**
2. **If you cannot make class at this time, let the instructor know at least a day in advance.** Such notice will allow your instructor time to make alternate plans to fill the time spot for which your presentation was assigned.

Preparation for Class and Assignments

1. **Read *all* assigned materials before the class they are due.** Such preparation will make it easier for you to follow the instructor's lecture or to participate in class discussions.
2. **Complete all assignments before the classes they are due.** In this way, you will be ready to ask questions about those ideas that you did not understand. You should complete *all* homework assignments—even if they will not be graded—for practice is a necessary part of the learning process. If you have questions about homework assignments that are not graded, you should seek assistance from your instructor.
3. **Follow all guidelines and directions given for every assignment.** Write down instructions as they are given; you might not remember them later.
4. **Pay attention to the form, appearance, and quality of your work.** Sloppy and careless work will affect your instructor's assessment of its content and your effort.
5. **Do your own work.** Instructors make assignments because they want you to learn something from doing the assignment. If you copy someone else's homework or let someone else do an assignment for you, you will not have had the experience your instructor wants you to have.
6. **Take a proactive, as opposed to a reactive, approach to learning.** Do not just wait for your instructor to “unpack” the material for you. Try to do it for yourself. Put yourself in the instructor's role. What would you want your students to know about the material if you were the instructor? You will be amazed at how quickly you will begin thinking like an instructor.

If You Miss a Class

1. **If you must miss a class, let your instructor know beforehand.** This is the same courtesy that you would extend to an employer who expected you to show up and perform your duties.
2. **If you must miss class, make arrangements to make up work ahead of time.** Do not wait until after, if it can be helped. Many instructors willingly let students make up work before the fact. Many do not allow make-up work after the fact, or they penalize late work.
3. **Never ask, “Did I miss anything important?”**

Instructors believe that what they do in class is always important.

Study Tips

1. **Exchange phone numbers with one or two classmates for each class so that you can call them with questions about assignments or study for tests with them.**
2. **Plan study time into your schedule of classes when you register for classes.** Avoid scheduling your classes back to back. Instead, block off time each day for study or extra assistance from your instructor, the Math Lab, or the Writing Lab.
3. **Keep a calendar with study time scheduled at specific times on the calendar.**
4. **Exchange class notes with one or two other students.** These students may get something down that you didn't. By comparing notes, you get a more complete set of notes.
5. **Review your notes at least twice a week.** While such a review might seem like a tedious process, this spaced review will help you remember the material better when it comes time for tests, and you will already have put in lots of study time, making final review easier.
6. **Use the two-hour rule-of-thumb.** Study at least two hours outside of class for each hour in class.
7. **If the instructor holds office hours or conferences in his or her office, take advantage of them.** Even if you feel a bit shy, go and ask questions, perhaps about an upcoming assignment, perhaps to get his or her view of your progress. These visits will help you will feel more at ease with the course material and the instructor.
8. **Go to General Computer Labs, Library, Math Lab, or Writing Lab for help, especially if the instructor recommends going for extra help.** There are people specially trained to help you in each of these environments, and the help is free. Use it to your advantage.

Some Concluding Comments

1. **Remember that your instructors are human, too.** If you do not attend class, are disruptive or rude, do not turn in assignments, act as if you are extremely bored in class, or just have an uncaring attitude about the class, you will make an impression on your instructor. Unfortunately, it will

not be a good one. Remember that grading often contains a subjective side, and if you make a bad impression, you stand likely not to be given any benefit of any doubt. Most instructors take their classes very seriously, just as you will take very seriously any career for which you are preparing. When you finally become the nurse, the CEO, the interior designer, or whatever you are planning to become, how would you react to someone who is hostile, rude, or uncaring about your career? Be polite, be interested, and play the game. You will benefit in the long run.

2. **Keep a sense of humor.** Not everything is deadly serious.
3. **Have fun.** Compel yourself to be motivated and to study by promising yourself some kind of small reward that is fun when you are done.