Halberstam, Joshua.  "Class in the Classroom." *Acing College*.  New York:  Penguin, 1991.

**2**"Class in the Classroom"

**Does attendance really count?  
What's the best place to sit in the classroom?  
Does class participation really matter?  
The do's and don'ts of classroom behavior**

Kid knocks on my office door.  He looks vaguely familiar.  "My name is Scott," he says.  "I'm in your logic class."  Yes, that's why I recognize him; he's the fellow who showed up a couple of times at the beginning of the semester.  Sat in the back, I think.

    "So where have you been all term?" I ask with genuine curiosity.  "Well," the student fumbles, "I'm taking this tough course in organic chemistry, and well, uh, like I got this lazy attitude, I admit.  Anyway, I'd like an extension on my term paper deadline.  And would you reconsider my midterm grade?"

    I listen, but I don't listen sympathetically.  I'm certainly not inclined to reward this student for his lack of interest in my class.  It's not a matter of an official policy -- I don't take attendance.  But I don't have to do favors either, and I rarely do for students who don't show up to class.

    "The most important thing in life is showing up," says Woody Allen.  That's true, too, with regard to your classes.

    In this chapter we'll discuss how to make the most of your time when you're in class.  But these guidelines are useful only if you're there to use them.

# **SHOWING UP**

    On any given school day, you could probably think of seven thousand more fun things to do than go to class.  One compelling alternative is to just stay in bed.  In fact, staying in bed will loom as one of the greatest temptations of college life.

    I take it for granted that if you aren't thoroughly dull or irrecoverably compulsive, you will miss class on occasion.  What does it take for you to decide "forget it, I'll skip class"?  A blah, rainy day?  A gorgeous, sunny day?  Students' cutting patterns get fixed pretty early in their college career.  The question is not whether you will miss class, but how often.

    Some professors include attendance as part of their course requirements.  These professors usually carry out their threat.  The more stringent ones will even fail the A student who has accrued too many absences.  Unfair?  I agree.  In fact, I find this outrageous.  With few exceptions (labs, for example), I favor abolishing all attendance requirements.  College students are adults and should decide for themselves whether or not they want to come to class.  If you never show up, you risk flunking your tests--but that's *your* problem.  On the other hand, if you never show up and get A's on your exams, you should receive an A for the course.

    Why do professors require attendance?  Many will tell you it's because students need to attend their lectures to understand the material.  And they quickly emphasize the need for an "attendance requirement" for those students who lack sufficient discipline to show up regularly without this externally imposed threat.

    Hogwash.  Professors require attendance, in most cases, because they are insecure.  They're afraid that if they don't take attendance, no one will show up -- and they're usually right.  Not surprisingly, it's most often the dull teachers who force their students to suffer through their dreary lectures.

    What can you do about these attendance requirements?  Nothing.  Maybe you can do something later when you become the college president, but until then, if you have an attendance requirement, show up.  You have no choice.

    But even if you don't have an attendance requirement, it's important to show up regularly.

    If you want to ace your classes, cut out cutting.  You might think your case is different.  But I can only assure you of what all my colleagues and I see:  A students show up to class regularly, and F students don't.  Here's why.

***Objectively***

**You'll learn more.**  Nothing beats being there.  When you study without having been to class, you're learning the material for the first time.  When you study after you've been to class, you're reviewing.  What a difference!

**You learn what the professor considers essential.**  Professors test you on what they consider important.  What did the professor put on the blackboard?  What did he emphasize?  What did he repeat?

    You can't get this information from another student's notes, or even a tape recording.  You need to observe firsthand your professor's delivery: you need to know not only *what* was said but *how* it was said.

***Subjectively***

**In the subjective realm of grading, attendance always counts.**  Professors respond positively toward students who come to class regularly.  Repeated absences will lose you the benefit of the doubt when it comes to grading -- and you might very well need that benefit.

    College teachers are as sensitive as anyone else.  Most people like to believe they are good at what they do, and college teachers like to think of themselves as good teachers.  Your consistent cutting tells your teacher that you consider him a failure:  he isn't sufficiently interesting to get you to come to class.  And your teacher -- at least on some level -- will take it personally.  He might take it out on you personally.

**Attendance is especially important in seminars, language, math, and science classes.** The smaller the class, the more your absences are noticed, so if you have to play hooky, cut a large lecture class.  The worst classes to skip are seminars where student participation is expected.  Cutting seminars undermines the whole class.

    It's also essential to show up regularly to math, science, and language classes.  If you are facile with words and know the tricks of extemporaneous writing, you might get by with absences in some of your humanities and social science classes.  Math, science, and language classes are different:  here, learning is cumulative, with each class building on the previous class.  If you fall behind, it becomes increasingly difficult to catch up.

***If You Do Cut***

    Don't make a big deal about it.  Professors who require attendance might require a doctor's note or some other justification for your absence.  Professors who don't take attendance don't care why you were out.

    I never could understand why students bother bringing me notes explaining why they missed a class.  I don't read them and I suspect few professors do.  (It's another matter if you miss an exam.)  Nor do I understand why students bother to tell me they will miss the next class.  Why call attention to an absence?

# **DO THE READINGS**

***Prepare for class***

    I know this sounds like more obvious professor talk but believe me, preparation is far from common.

    All students are "rah rah" the first week of class.  They do the assigned readings and come to class rearing to go.  Then the slack-off begins.  By the end of the first month a sizable contingent have stopped coming to class prepared.  By the end of the second month, you can count on one hand the number of students who read the material before coming to class.  By the middle of the third month, forget it; the student who still prepares is now a rarity.

**Read the assignments all through the semester and consider yourself an extraordinary phenomenon.**  College homework is a term-long affair.  In high school you did your homework only when it was assigned and when you expected it to get checked.  In college, you have to rely on your own schedule and discipline.

    Figure it this way:  you have to read the material eventually anyway, so you may as well read it before class.  It's much more effective that way:  Even boring classes are improved, and you can contribute to the class.

    The big hurdle is reading those stupefying assignments that seem to have been written as prescriptions for sleeping pills.  To get these assignments done, you've got to make class preparation part of your daily routine.

***But if You Don't Prepare***

    You won't always come to class prepared.  Perhaps you have a test in another class.  Or a heavy date the night before.  Or a heavy date coming up.  What then?

    Try not to walk into class totally oblivious of the assignment.  Cultivate the art of intelligent skimming; when you get good at it -- and like everything else it's a matter of practice -- you can pick up lots of information very quickly.

    Okay, it was a *very* heavy date.  Not only weren't you able to scan the assigned material, you can now barely keep your eyes open.  In this situation, it isn't your eyes that matter, it's your mouth.  Keep it shut.

    Few displays of student behavior are as annoying to teachers as students spouting about subjects they know nothing about -- but should, had they done the assigned reading.  Don't fool yourself and make a fool of yourself in the process.  If you haven't read the article, you don't know it.  And if you don't know the assignment, don't advertise that you don't.

# **WHERE TO SIT**

In some large lectures, your seating arrangement is alphabetically determined, so this isn't an issue.  But in most classes you have a choice.  Where should you sit?  Which seat is most conducive to getting the A?

**Sit where the action is.**

    Writers on power often talk about "power centers" in a room.  Every class has its corresponding power center.  It's the section that carries the weight of the class.

    Watch your teacher's movements.  (If your teacher is any good, you won't find her sitting behind her desk.)  Speakers respond to the section of the audience that responds to them.  If one side of the class reacts more vocally to the teacher than the other side, before long, the teacher will be addressing that part of the room more often.  Move to that side.

    Front or back?  You can get an A or an F from the front or the back of the room, but in general, front or toward the front is better.  (Students inform me that some of their professors look out above the first row into the class beyond, so a row or two up might be the best of all.)

    Sitting up toward the front has two main advantages:

* **Your professor notices you.**  Bad enough that you're a nameless name in the crowd; why be a faceless face in the crowd?  Also, teachers tend to think -- justifiably or not -- that students who sit up front are more conscientious.
* **You insure your participation.**  Sitting in the professor's eye-line forces you to behave.  Your absences are noticed, so you'll make sure to show up to class.  You are also less likely to read, talk, or sleep during even the most boring class.  If the class is especially important or particularly dreary, sit up front.  You'll need all the help you can get, and this helps.

    The worst seat?  It's the back corner seat near the door.  You seem uninvolved.  **If you are stuck in the back, make sure to speak up in class.**

# **A FEW NOTES ON TAKING NOTES**

Unless you have a photographic memory, you need to take some notes.  You certainly can't expect to remember during final exam week in May what your professor said back in March.

    But don't confuse taking notes with stenography.  A good lecture gets you to *reflect* during class.  You can't listen, think, and respond if you're busy playing secretary.

    Write down key phrases and ideas that will get you to remember what was discussed (in some classes that will mean a lot of writing, in others very little writing).

    Many study guides offer instruction on how to take notes effectively.  These guides are a waste of time.  You take notes to help *you* review when preparing for exams; what helps you might not help others.

    A few of the more compulsive of these study guides recommend that students rewrite their notes after each class.  They also suggest that you write a summary at the end of each class, restating the essential points of the lecture.  Sure, and I recommend that you do a triathlon every morning and read one play by Shakespeare with dinner every evening.  Who are we kidding?

***The Old Blackboard Reflex***

    When I feel mischievous in the middle of a lecture, I sometimes turn and write on the board a word such as "ineluctable," or the phrase "the cat's meow," or whatever comes to mind.  I look up at the class and, invariably, I see dozens of students earnestly copying my words into their notebooks.  The assumption:  if it's on the blackboard, it's important.

    Agreed, instructors do use the blackboard to highlight important points.  But not everything on the board merits special attention; professors will use the board gratuitously, as the whim strikes them.  Sometimes they use it just to show the correct spelling of some obscure word.

    Remember, too, that much that isn't on the board appears on the test.  Use your judgment, not your reflexes.

***Other People's Notes***

    If you missed class, it's a good idea to borrow someone's notes, especially in cumulative classes, the kind where each class builds on the previous one.

**Make sure, though, to borrow the notes immediately after the missed class.**  If you wait until exam time, two things will happen.  First, the notes lose their context, and you'll have an awful time trying to make sense of them.  Second, getting the notes will be a battle.  Your new friends won't eagerly part with them the night before the final.

    Remember, too, not to trust completely in your classmate's notes.  She may have gotten it down wrong.  She might have been lost in a sweet fantasy just when the important stuff was discussed.  She might have that photographic memory and not bother with careful notes.

***Private Ruminations***

    In a later chapter, I encourage you to keep a journal of your personal thoughts, a sort of intellectual diary.  You should also save a section in the back of your notebook for class-related meditations.  Something your professor or a classmate said might trigger an interesting idea.  Jot it down.  These notes can become extremely helpful when you review for an exam.

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# **CLASS PARTICIPATION**

    Want to get an A?  Participate.

    As I've said, showing up to class is essential, and not showing up will hurt your grade.  But coming to class isn't enough.  According to a recent survey, only 20 percent of the average class asks questions, and you should join this minority if you want to secure the A.

    Professors seek, need, and appreciate student involvement in their class.  We need applause, and the applause of the classroom is animated discussion.  Even the most thick-skinned professor knows when he's not setting his class on fire.  Students who make professors feel successful are rewarded with better grades.

***Too Shy?***

    Are you uncomfortable speaking up in a group?  What are you going to do about it?  Resign yourself to spending four years in silence, masquerading as part of the classroom furniture?

    Perhaps you are reluctant to speak up because you don't want to sound like those annoying classmates who blabber inanities in class.  You fear that you don't have anything of substance to add to the proceedings.

    I know it's difficult, but try not to worry about what your classmates think of you.  They won't judge you:  They're too busy thinking about their own brilliant comments.  Some people are too self-conscious to dance on a crowded floor in a discotheque.  There too, no one notices.

    A tinge of nervousness before speaking in a group is perfectly normal.  Just bear in mind that making a comment in class is not major undertaking -- your contribution counts as much as any of your classmate's.  And rest assured, it gets easier with practice.

    You will need to speak in public when you are out in the world.  The college classroom affords a wonderful opportunity to become good at it.

***Don't Lecture***

    About that blabbering classmate:  every class has one.  He thinks his classmates are paying money to hear him, not the professor, lecture.  He has opinions about everything and makes sure everyone knows them.  He considers himself provocative -- but the only thing he provokes is a conspiracy to lynch.

    Typically, this student loves to argue; he argues for the sake of arguing.  He's not about the courage of his convictions; he's about contrariness:  tell him it's raining and he'll say it's snowing and he'll call it a beach day.

    He believes belligerence is endearing, but everyone finds him immature, boring, and self-defeating.

    If you genuinely disagree with your professor -- and if you aren't catatonic, you'll disagree plenty of times -- by all means, voice your objection.  But challenging your professor's dominance for the sake of the challenge alone is a no-win strategy.  The classroom is the professor's turf, his territorial imperative.  **Attempts to undercut his authority bring you only one result:  a lower grade.**

    Another, milder class nerd is the student who insists on treating the class to private, boring anecdotes about his life.  This clod isn't interested in asserting his brilliance; he just considers his personal life endlessly fascinating to everyone.  So we have to listen to tales about how his mother tortured him as a child, how his uncle became a Bedouin in the Sahara, how he stopped a mugger on the subway, and how his roommate ripped off the telephone company.  Somebody should tell him that **nobody is interested.**

    These students don't just irritate their classmates by using the classroom for their personal forum, they deflect the class discussion away from the direction the professor intended.  Professors respond by lowering these students' grades.

***Questions are Better Than Comments***

    Teachers like comments that move the discussion along.  They like questions even better, and among the best questions are requests for clarification.

    "Could you explain that again?" is not an appropriate question if you didn't understand the discussion because you were busy doing the Sunday crossword puzzle.  It is an excellent question if you paid attention and need to have a point repeated.  This sort of question does your classmates a service.  If you didn't follow what was said, the chances are that many of your classmates didn't either.

    Requests for elucidation also help your grade.  It shows you care about the material and want to understand the class discussion.  But don't overdo it.  You don't want to seem obstructive or slow.

***Ask Questions about an Upcoming Exam***

    Has your professor told the class little or no information about the upcoming test?  Ask.  Wait till the end of class (some professors prefer questions at the end of the class period) and ask your professor what to expect:  an essay or short-answer test, or a cumulative, open book exam?  Sometimes your instructor doesn't tell the class because she simply forgets to, and your question is a welcome reminder.

***Dress***

    I'd rather not believe that professors factor in a student's appearance in the determination of his or her grade, but studies indicate otherwise.  Especially at the grade-school and high-school levels, good-looking students are graded more leniently than ugly students.

    I think you are pretty safe dressing as you like in college, and I think you should dress as you like in any case.  Don't be surprised, however, if you run into that professor who takes you -- and your work -- less seriously than you'd like because you wear outlandish clothing.

# **DEALING WITH BOREDOM**

    Fact one:  You will have to sit through boring classes.  Fact two:  If you are unlucky, you will sit through many boring classes.

    This is the fourth class in which you've discussed the symbolic role of birds in early Anglo-Saxon literature.  Moreover, you're a computer science major with less than zero interest in birds, real or symbolic, and you're only taking this class to meet a humanities requirement.  You've been good.  You've contributed your insights on the relationships between bird chirps and microchips.  And you're bored out of your wits.

    Don't read.  Don't talk.  Your professor can see your face, so look alive.  Bored or not, the grade counts.

    It's time for creativity.  Play mind games.  Count how many times your teacher uses the word *impact*.  Decide who are the three best-looking students in the class.  Check out the other students' accents.  Picture your professor as a five-year-old . . . as an eighty-year-old.

    If you're inventive, you can come up with dozens of mind games that keep you entertained and, at the same time, keep your attention focused on what's happening in class.  This has the advantage of making it appear as if you're interested in the class; how could your professor know that when you are looking at him, you're imagining him with a pacifier in his mouth?

# **THOU SHALT NOT**

    Here's a review of behavior you must avoid.  Etiquette is not the concern here (though that counts too).  The concern is how to avoid a lower grade than you deserve.

* **Never badmouth the subject matter.**  A quick and sure way to get a lousy grade in a class:  ridicule the subject you're studying.  You, a twenty-year-old undergraduate, have decided that economics is "bull," or that psychology is all smoke, or that Henry James can't write for beans.

    Your professor has devoted his life to the subject and will judge you to be an ignorant, impudent brat.  He will also welcome the opportunity to grade your work as severely as he can.

* **Never study for an exam in another class.**  This suggests to the professor that you worry more about the other class than her own.  It's insulting.
* **Avoid coming late or leaving early.**  In college, you are largely anonymous.  To get A's, you need to stand out.  But that doesn't include standing out like a sore thumb -- arriving late and leaving early are the wrong ways to call attention to yourself.

    Don't stare at your watch, pack your books, or put your coat on five minutes before the end of the class.  These maneuvers disrupt the class and offend your professor.  If you have to leave early, tell your professor before class starts and sit near an exit.

* **Never read in class.**  Textbooks from other classes are bad enough, but magazines and newspapers are particularly offensive.
* **Don't sit at your desk without a notebook.**  Bring paper and pen even if all you do is doodle.  Pretend you are a serious student.
* **Don't yack in class.**  It's rude and makes you seem adolescent.