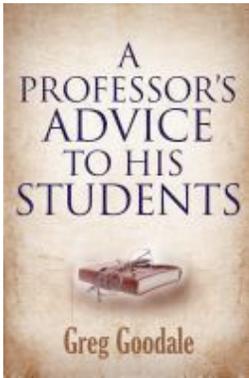


A
PROFESSOR'S
ADVICE
TO HIS
STUDENTS



Greg Goodale



For college students, navigating the complexities of school, independence, and life beyond the university is a daunting challenge. If only they had a guide. For parents and grandparents, it's hard letting go of children who are going off to college. This rite of passage requires a more profound expression than the usual "I love you." A Professor's Advice to his Students is the ideal guide for students and gift for parents.

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1.1 Remember Names

The first day's advice is to remember names. Why? Well, for lots of reasons. First, using other people's names is a sign of courtesy. It is a reminder that the person you are talking to or arguing with is a human being who deserves respect. Names are sacred. Using people's names is also a good way to keep tensions in check, particularly when a conversation becomes contentious.

I insist that my students use each others' names. Using names helps to create a positive atmosphere where everyone is confident that their opinions are respected and welcomed. It also encourages students to work with each other outside of class. Names forge stronger relationships. Those connections are important because students learn more from their classmates than they do from their teachers. If you put a bunch of smart people who respect each other to work on a task, they will immediately start teaching one another.

Remembering names does not come naturally to me. If I have a list of the people I am about to meet, I write their names down over and over until I memorize them. Some people use mnemonic devices, taking the first letter of each person's name to create a word or sentence that will stick in their minds. Others put names to a song and sing them until they are mastered. I also find myself in plenty of situations where I meet new people without having advance knowledge of names. This sometimes occurs in groups where people are expected to introduce themselves. In these situations, I draw a diagram that reflects where people are sitting or standing and write names down as people announce themselves. When meeting people one-on-one, the best strategy is to immediately use the person's name. You can ask about the name's origin, or inform your new acquaintance of other people you know with the same name, or ask how it's spelled. Don't ask how Bob is spelled though. Ask this last question if your new acquaintance is named Megan or Meghan or Meaghan. Because writing cements memory, jot these down on a piece of paper as soon as you get a spare moment. Finally, if you forget someone's name, it's always better to ask again.

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We have all forgotten names, so drawing a blank is nothing to be ashamed of. Asking for a little help is better than getting it wrong.

Using names has an additional advantage. Using someone's name a lot is a subtle way of saying to the listener that you like them. For students who are attracted to someone but don't want to embarrass themselves by saying "I like you," this advice can be very handy: Use that person's name a lot. You won't embarrass yourself, and the other person will subconsciously know that you like them. We are all more likely to engage with people who appear to like us than we are with people who seem indifferent to us. Keep in mind that if someone is using your name a lot, it could be a sign that they like you.

By the way, women are much better at remembering names than men. I've tested this theory over and over again in many of my classes.

1.2 Be a Good Audience

The most important piece of advice I can give about public speaking is: be a good audience member. That might sound counterintuitive so I'll explain. What does being a good audience member mean? Making eye contact with the speaker, smiling, laughing, yes even at bad jokes, and nodding in agreement. But why should audience members be attentive? Well, there are four reasons. First and foremost, it's the right thing to do. It's respectful.

Second, being a responsive listener serves you well if you are representing a company, or university, or organization. While being a good audience member is a sign of respect, being a distracted listener signals disrespect. I can remember a student who fell asleep (or, worse, pretended to) while I was delivering a guest lecture at the University of Maine. That student left me with a bad impression of students at that school. I know that not all University of Maine students are rude, but if I should ever be in a position to hire a job candidate, people who have a degree from that institution will suffer a little more scrutiny than candidates who have degrees from other universities. Why? Because one student represented the University of Maine poorly.

Additionally, as a good audience member you will get more out of a presentation if you are being attentive. Showing that you are engaged and attentive will help the speaker to be more confident, more organized, and more interesting. Being an expressive listener indicates to the speaker how she or he is doing and whether the presentation is successfully entertaining, or informing, or persuading the audience. Your support comes with its own reward: a better presentation for you.

Lastly, when you are a good audience member you turn the speaker into a friend. There is a good chance that the person who is speaking will someday be in the audience when you give a presentation. If you've made them your friend by being supportive, they are more likely to return the favor that you have done for them.

Unsurprisingly, most of the presentations we give are about what we do or what we are passionate about (job, volunteer work,

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politics). And most speeches are presented to at least a few people we already know. I have done a lot of public speaking and I have rarely presented a speech to an audience in which there was not at least one friend, co-worker, or colleague. I know that I can rely on them to make eye contact, nod appreciatively, smile and laugh at the appropriate times when I am speaking, because I was a good audience member when they gave presentations.

In essence, what comes around goes around, never more so than when alternating between the roles of speaker and audience member.

1.3 Get off to a Good Start

We are all victims of first impressions. Once these impressions are set, they are hard to change. But since we know this, we can take advantage of it. Getting off to a good start will help to cement a positive early impression with classmates, colleagues, professors, and bosses. As many students have discovered, once a grade is first assigned, some teachers give the same grade for the remainder of the semester regardless of how much better or worse the student does. And some bosses in the real world treat employees based always on first impressions.

By the way, here is related advice: let people prove you wrong. I've met many students who first came across as lazy or apathetic, only to find later in the semester how hard working and passionate they were. I suspect that their initial attitude has probably cost them better grades in some of their classes. Fortunately, I disregarded my first impressions. Dispelling initial impressions might help you get rid of "friends" who are really just parasites and pick up allies who you didn't like at first.

The second argument for getting off to a good start is even better than the first: nothing breeds success like success. Seeing good grades early in a class or getting praise when you start a new job is a great way to motivate yourself to get more good grades or praise. We all feel good when we impress others and we want to do more of this when we succeed. It's one of the few good addictions that I know of.

But what does "get off to a good start" mean? It means dressing well. It means sitting in a place where you are noticed and engaging in the class or workplace. It means having a positive attitude. It means being helpful. It means turning in your best work.

Making this suggestion to students is enough to encourage some of them to turn in excellent work right from the very beginning of class. Professors are often frustrated by the time it takes to correct grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, poor syntax, and lousy organization. Grading good papers helps professors do their jobs better because it allows them to focus on content, and big ideas.

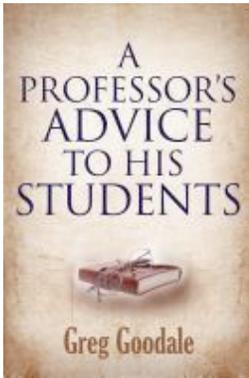
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It also helps professors to enjoy their jobs. And happy professors make for better grade-givers and recommendation-writers. In the same way, the best efforts of employees make bosses happy because it means less cleanup work and less oversight. And happy bosses make for bigger raises and promotions!

So get off to a good start. It will serve you well throughout school and your career.

Bonus: A Warning About Grading Practices

After the first papers or exams are returned to students, some teachers get into a bad habit. During subsequent grading sessions they first sort through all the papers and exams, pulling out the ones they expect to be excellent and poor. They read these first and then determine what excellent and poor is according to their assumptions rather than the students' work. As a result, students who get A's on their first assignments are much more likely to get A's on their second assignments. Conversely students who get C's are much more likely to get C's again. Turning in your best work right from the beginning of class will help you establish yourself at the top of the grading "curve."



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