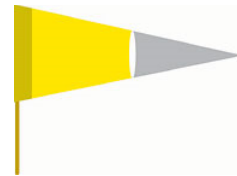


# College Advice, From People Who Have Been There Awhile

Educators give some helpful advice to young adults entering school this fall.

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## The Hunt for a Good Teacher



By STANLEY FISH

I would give entering freshmen two pieces of advice. First, find out who the good teachers are. Ask your adviser; poll older students; search the Internet; and consult the teacher-evaluation guides available at most colleges. (As a professor, I am against those guides; too often they are the vehicles of petty grievances put forward by people who have no long-term stake in the enterprise. But if I were a student, I would take advantage of them.)

To some extent your options will be limited by distribution requirements (in colleges that still have them) and scheduling. But within these limits you should do everything you can to get a seat in the class of a professor known for both his or her knowledge of the material and the ability to make it a window on the larger universe. Years later you may not be able to recall the details of lectures and discussions, but the benefits of being in the company of a challenging mind will be yours forever.

Second, I would advise students to take a composition course even if they have tested out of it. I have taught many students whose SAT scores exempted them from the writing requirement, but a disheartening number of them couldn't write and an equal number had never been asked to. They managed to get through high-school without learning how to write a clean English sentence, and if you can't do that you can't do anything.

I give this advice with some trepidation because too many writing courses today teach everything but the craft of writing and are instead the vehicles of the instructor's social and political obsessions. In the face of what I consider a dereliction of pedagogical duty, I can say only, "Buyer beware." If your writing instructor isn't teaching writing, get out of that class and find someone who is.

Stanley Fish is a professor of law at Florida International University and a contributing columnist to The Times, who has been teaching since 1962.



# An Argument Worth Having

By GERALD GRAFF

Freshmen are often overwhelmed by the intellectual challenge of college — so many subjects to be covered, so many facts, methods and philosophical isms to sort out, so many big words to assimilate. As if that weren't enough, what your different instructors tell you may be flatly contradictory.

Students understandably cope with this cognitive dissonance by giving each of their teachers in turn whatever he or she seems to want. Students learn to be free-market capitalists in one course and socialists in the next, universalists in the morning and relativists after lunch. This tactic has got many a student through college, but the trouble is that, even when each course is excellent in itself, jumping through a series of hoops doesn't add up to a real socialization into the ways of intellectual culture.

What the most successful college students do, in my experience, is cut through the clutter of jargons, methods and ideological differences to locate the common practices of argument and analysis hidden behind it all. Contrary to the cliché that no “one size fits all” educational recipe is possible, successful academics of all fields and intellectual persuasions make some key moves that you can emulate:

1. Recognize that knowing a lot of stuff won't do you much good unless you can do something with what you know by turning it into an argument.
2. Pay close attention to what others are saying and writing and then summarize their arguments and assumptions in a recognizable way. Work especially on summarizing the views that go most against your own.
3. As you summarize, look not only for the thesis of an argument, but for who or what provoked it — the points of controversy.
4. Use these summaries to motivate what you say and to indicate why it needs saying. Don't be afraid to give your own opinion, especially if you can back it up with reasons and evidence, but don't disagree with anything without carefully summarizing it first.

It's too often a secret that only a minority of high achievers figure out, but the better you get at entering the conversation by summarizing it and putting in your own oar, the more you'll get out of your college education.

Gerald Graff, the past president of the Modern Language Association and a professor of English and education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has been teaching since 1963.

# Get Lost. In Books.



By HAROLD BLOOM

More than ever in this time of economic troubles and societal change, entering upon an undergraduate education should be a voyage away from visual overstimulation into deep, sustained reading of what is most worth absorbing and understanding: the books that survive all ideological fashions.

There is general agreement on the indispensable canon: Homer, Plato, the Bible, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Milton. From the 19th century until now, keeping only to English and American authors, a slightly more arbitrary selection might include Blake, Wordsworth, Austen, Dickens, George Eliot, Hardy, Yeats and Joyce in England and Ireland. Among the Americans would certainly be Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Hawthorne; and in the 20th century, Faulkner and the major poets: Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane.

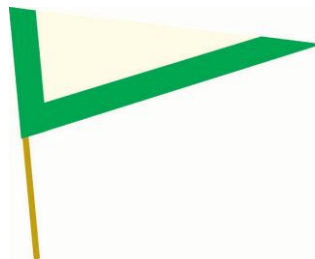
Many of these authors are difficult and demand rereading, but that doubles their value. A freshman may have read Shakespeare before, but the richest and most available of all writers is also the most profound and elliptical. Rereading “Hamlet” and “King Lear” should teach a student Shakespeare’s mastery of the art of leaving things out.

To think well you must rely, in part, upon memory, and possessing Shakespeare and Joyce, Montaigne and Whitman means that you can recall much of the best that has been written.

Whatever our current travails, we now have a literate president capable of coherent discourse, but too many other politicians are devoid of syntax and appear to have read nothing. Aggressive ignorance in aspirants to high office is another dismal consequence of the waning of authentic education.

Harold Bloom, a professor of English at Yale and the author of the forthcoming “Living Labyrinth: Literature and Influence,” has been teaching since 1955.

# Don’t Alienate Your Professor



By CAROL BERKIN

Having survived the teenage years of two children, I know how foolhardy it is to offer advice to 18-year-olds. But, after more than three decades of teaching, I do have a few tips for college freshmen everywhere:

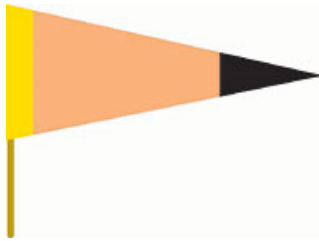
Make sure you are in the class you signed up to take. A week spent trying to figure out why the person you thought was your math teacher keeps talking about Renaissance art is a wasted week — for both of you.

During class, do not: a) beat out a cadence on your desk while the teacher is lecturing; b) sigh audibly more than three or four times during a class period; c) check your watch more than twice during the hour. Do: a) practice a look of genuine interest in the lecture or discussion; b) nod in agreement frequently; c) laugh at all (or at least most) of the professor's jokes.

Do ask questions if you don't understand the professor's point. Do not, however, ask any of the following: "Will this be on the test?" "Does grammar count?" "Do we have to read the whole chapter?" "Can I turn in my paper late?"

Finally, ignore the looks of scorn and amusement on the faces of the upperclassmen and - women; remember that next year you will be able to laugh at the mistakes and confusion of a new freshman class.

Carol Berkin, a professor of history at Baruch College and the author of the forthcoming "Civil War Wives," has been teaching since 1972.



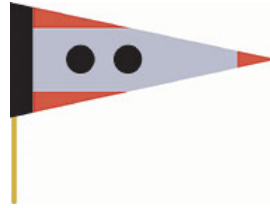
## Play Politics

By GARRY WILLS

1. Play to your strengths. Do not make random choices from a bewildering range of subjects for study. So far as you can, choose courses and write papers on topics where you already have (or think you will have) some interest, some knowledge, some enthusiasm. Do not fear that this will narrow you. The deeper you go into one thing, the more it connects you with other things.
2. Learn to write well. Most incoming college students, even the bright ones, do not do it and it hampers them in courses and in later life. Read what you write to a friend, and ask the friend to read it back to you. Lack of clarity, coherence or shape will leap out at you.
3. Read, read, read. Students ask me how to become a writer, and I ask them who is their favorite author. If they have none, they have no love of words.
4. Seek out the most intellectually adventurous of your fellow students. Some are shy around "brains," but you have proximity to young minds as they are developing. That is a great opportunity. Take it.
5. Do not fear political activism. I was once at an event where a student asked Jimmy Carter how he, formerly the guardian of American law, felt years earlier when his freshman daughter was arrested at a protest against apartheid. He answered: "I cannot tell you how proud I was. If you young people cannot express your conscience now, when will you? Later you will have duties, jobs, families that make that harder. You will never be freer than now." Also, among the

activists, you are more likely to meet the intellectually adventurous people mentioned in the last item.

Garry Wills, a professor emeritus of history at Northwestern University, has been teaching since 1962.



## Go the Wrong Way

By MARTHA NUSSBAUM

It's easy to think that college classes are mainly about preparing you for a job. But remember: this may be the one time in your life when you have a chance to think about the whole of your life, not just your job. Courses in the humanities, in particular, often seem impractical, but they are vital, because they stretch your imagination and challenge your mind to become more responsive, more critical, bigger. You need resources to prevent your mind from becoming narrower and more routinized in later life. This is your chance to get them.

Martha Nussbaum, a professor of philosophy, law and divinity at the University of Chicago, has been teaching since 1975.



## Off-Campus Life

By JAMES MacGREGOR BURNS

Try to read a good newspaper every day — at bedtime or at breakfast or when you take a break in the afternoon. If you are interested in art, literature or music, widen your horizons by poring over the science section. In the mood for spicy scandals? Read the business pages. Want to impress your poli sci prof? Read columnists.

The newspaper will be your path to the world at large. At Williams College, where I was a student in the 1930s, we read the alarming reports in *The Times* about Germany's brutal onslaught against peaceful nations. In the spring of 1938, we burned Hitler in effigy — and made Page 11 of *The Times*! In June 1940, as France fell to Nazi troops, hundreds of graduating seniors urged compulsory military training, and provided another Williams story to the paper.

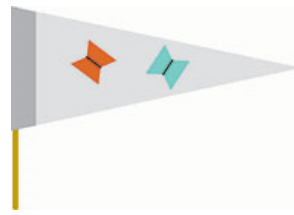
In addition, a great newspaper will teach you how to write: most articles are models of clarity and substance — with no academic jargon! Pay attention to the writer's vocabulary, see how many active verbs are used, file away striking new words for future use. Study how articles are structured — how the first paragraph tells the reader simply and clearly the subject and main

points. Take a look at the last paragraph; it will often show you how to conclude an essay with a pithy phrase or a telling quotation.

A great newspaper will help you in the classroom — and it will be your conduit to the real world outside the classroom. Become addicted.

Another way to stay connected with the real world: get to know your teachers outside of class. Chat and engage with them, perhaps on the walk away from class. Ask them not only about the coursework but also about their own intellectual interests and research. Equally important to maintaining that lifeline to the universe beyond college is getting to know the janitors and housekeepers in your dorm, the security staff on the campus, the people who work in the cafeteria. Talk to them, ask them questions and thank them.

James MacGregor Burns, a professor emeritus of government at Williams College and the author, most recently, of “Packing the Court,” has been teaching since 1947.



## My Crush on DNA

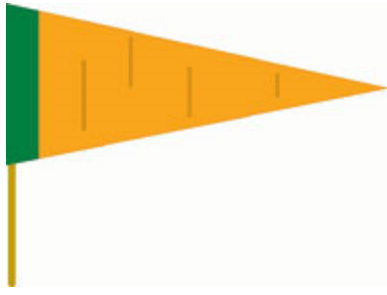
By NANCY HOPKINS

Fall in love! Not with that attractive person sitting three rows in front of you in calculus class, but with an intellectual vision of the future you probably can't even imagine at the moment. A millennium or so ago I entered Harvard wanting to major in math. But in my junior year I heard a biology lecture by James D. Watson, the scientist who co-discovered the double-helical structure of DNA, the molecule that genes are made of. By the end of that lecture I was a goner — in love with DNA. Until then I had not known that a new science, called molecular biology and based on DNA, had already begun to unravel the secret of life.

Listening to Dr. Watson's lecture I could even imagine that molecular biologists might one day answer all the important questions I had about humans: How do you make a hand? Why do I look like my mother? How does a cell become cancerous? What is memory? I staggered breathlessly out of that classroom and started down the long unpredictable path to becoming a professor of molecular biology at M.I.T. What I have learned is that passion, along with curiosity, drives science. Passion is the mysterious force behind nearly every scientific breakthrough. Perhaps it's because without it you might never be able to tolerate the huge amount of hard work and frustration that scientific discovery entails. But if you have it, you're in luck. Today, 45 years after Watson's lecture, new discoveries in biology still take my breath away.

For the next four years you will get to poke around the corridors of your college, listen to any lecture you choose, work in a lab. The field of science you fall in love with may be so new it doesn't even have a name yet. You may be the person who constructs a new biological species, or figures out how to stop global warming, or aging. Maybe you'll discover life on another planet. My advice to you is this: Don't settle for anything less.

Nancy Hopkins, a professor of biology at M.I.T., has been teaching since 1973.



# Change Course

By STEVEN WEINBERG

The first thing freshmen should know is that college is never what one expects. The summer of 1950, before I went to Cornell, I was working as a bellhop at a hotel in the Adirondacks. One day the mail brought me a Cornell course catalog. Reading it between carrying guests' bags was for me like reading the menu of a good restaurant would be for a starving man. The philosophy and humanities departments had classes that I was sure would make me wise. The physics department had courses given by famous physicists. The mathematics department offered a course on Hilbert space. Who knew that there were different kinds of space?

It didn't work out quite as I had anticipated. I didn't know enough to participate in the exciting physics research that was going on at Cornell. I took German, in which the main thing I learned was that I have no head for foreign languages. My courses in philosophy left me puzzled about how ideas of Plato and Descartes that seemed to me absurd could have been so influential. I did not become wise.

But I did graduate, and took away with me memories of several inspiring professors, of walks with friends under beautiful old elms, and of hours spent reading in the music room of the student union. I discovered that I loved chamber music and history and Shakespeare. I married my college sweetheart. And I did learn about Hilbert space.

Steven Weinberg, a professor of physics at the University of Texas at Austin, has been teaching since 1958.

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Credits:

Article from: New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/opinion/06collegeadvice.html>