

Avoiding the CEUs: Career-Ending Mistakes

If you are a new teaching fellow or a novice professor, you are going to make mistakes. Some will be doozies. As with any job, there is a learning curve.

Remember, we often learn the best lessons from our mistakes, painful though the learning process may be.

But some mistakes are worse than others—and can end careers before they start. Here are some of the most common slip-ups, faux pas, bumbles, and errors and practical advice about how to avoid them.

AS A TEACHING FELLOW

As a discussion leader:

Students want classes that are substantive and clearly organized. Make sure you have clear learning objectives for each class, and activities that achieve those objectives.

1. *Not establishing clear rules from the start.*

Don't make rules on the fly. Anticipate problems before they occur.

2. *Interacting with only a "chosen few."*

Engage all your students.

3. *Failing to show relevance.*

4. *Showing favoritism*

Treat all students the same, no matter how much you like one more than another.

5. *Crossing the line from instructor to friend.*

Be friendly—but not a friend. Sure you want your students to like you. Instead, focus on earning your students' respect, admiration, and appreciation. Respect the boundaries that separate instructors and students. Don't make students your confidantes. Your relationships with students should be professional. (Sometimes it's the student who initiates; know in advance how you will respond.)

6. *Losing your cool.*

Students will sometimes try your patience. At times they will test your boundaries and see if you'll take the bait.

Don't respond emotionally. Don't engage in battles with your students. Never disparage a student (or a student's ideas) publicly. Elevate—don't humiliate. Harsh words, once spoken, can't be recalled. Be a pro.

7. *Don't fail to earn the reputation of being a caring teacher..*

Have high expectations for all your students. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Assume innocence until proven guilty. Model the behavior you expect from your students.



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AS A TEST WRITER:

1. Only test topics that you have taught

2. Avoid poorly worded questions

3. Giving tests that are too long

Make sure exams can be completed in the allotted time

AS A GRADER:

1. *Don't grade too leniently—or too harshly.*

2. *Be fair*

Be consistent. Make no exceptions. Don't bear grudges. And never use grades for punishment. Revenge isn't sweet—it's self-sabotage.

3. *Failing to keep accurate records.*

Keep copies of grade sheets.

DURING OFFICE HOURS

It's not easy to deal with students who are angry, nervous, or scared. Meetings—especially those dealing with grades—can be emotionally charged.

1. *Greet students warmly*

Put the student at ease. Maintain eye contact. Speak to the student by name. Don't do all the talking. Be a good listener.

2. *Be diplomatic*

Be focused.

3. *Be proactive*

Offer an action plan.

GENERAL ADVICE:

1. *Don't let students intrude upon your personal time.*

2. *Don't think that private remarks are private.*

Every note, every email message, every comment to a student can come back to bite you.

3. *Never treat staff members like dirt*

Be professional at all times.

4. *Be aware of the increasing attention on authorship, ownership, and credit related to courses material, i.e., syllabi, hand-outs, etc.*

TECHNOLOGY & TEACHING

Technology is no substitute for good teaching. Too much technology can be distracting. Make sure the technology adds to the student experience. Keep in mind that students are less likely to attend class (or pay attention) if all they get in class is you reading from your PowerPoint slides.

1. *Not having a backup plan.*

The best laid plans of mice and men.... Equipment fails. Power goes out. The network goes down. Be prepared for technology failures.

2. *Acting as if technology meant two things and two things only: PowerPoint and Web Searches.*

Don't turn your class into a PowerPoint show. Consider wikis and blogs and student created video.

3. *Letting students think that all knowledge is available through Google searches.*

JOB SEARCHES

Even the most talented graduate student can make fatal mistakes during a job search.

What are the dumbest mistakes that are commonly made? Some are obvious: Ordering the most expensive item on the menu. Ordering alcohol. Ordering any item that's hard to eat neatly. Don't lose your dream job due to a dumb mistake. Here is some practical advice about how to avoid crashing and burning.

Before you apply:

1. *Make sure you have a professional online presence.*

Remove anything that might cast you in an unflattering or controversial light. And consider creating a professional looking website that contains your c.v. and other teaching and research materials.

2. *Have someone look over your application materials.*

3. *Choose recommenders carefully*

Make sure you prep them: about your qualifications and deadlines.

When you apply:

1. *Cover letters that are too long. That contain typos. That have spelling and grammatical errors. Or that have gimmicks—fancy fonts, cute typefaces, or flashy paper.*

2. *Padded c.v.s*

3. *Exaggeration.*

4. *Not selecting your recommenders wisely.*

During the interview, don't:

1. *Appear desperate. Or uninterested.*

Be calm. Be patient (though not too patient).

2. *Ramble.*

Don't talk too much. Don't monopolize the conversation. Make sure to listen.

3. *Fail to do your homework.*

Know about the faculty, the department, and the institution. Make flattering references to their scholarship.

4. *Badmouth and whine.*

Don't disparage your adviser, Columbia, or colleagues. Resist the urge to gossip.

5. *Fail to convey a sense of energy.*

Even if you are shy, there are things you can do. Sit up straight. Look people in the eye.

6. *Fixate on senior faculty.*

Everyone has a vote. Pay attention to everyone in the room.

7. *Be unprepared to speak about your past.*

Is there a gap in your c.v.? Did it take you a long time to finish? Did you switch advisers? Be prepared to answer questions about these topics.

AS A JUNIOR PROFESSOR

The tenure track years will be the most intense and stressful of your professional life. You will be anxious, frantic, and exhausted. You will feel overwhelmed, frustrated, and resentful. Remember: The tenure clock is really 4 and a half years, not seven. The decision is made in year six. Materials are sent to evaluators at the end of the fifth year.

Mistake 1. Failure to negotiate properly

You can not only negotiate salary, but moving expenses, travel and professional development funds, your tenure clock, start date, course load, start-up funds

Mistake 2. Failure to manage time properly

Don't take on too many service responsibilities and be wary of joint appointments.

Mistake 3 . Problematic teaching

Mistake 4. Failing to keep your eye on the ball

Understand what it takes to get tenure. A huge mistake is failing to prioritize publication Without publishing, it is impossible to earn tenure. Your publications are your union card. If you ever want to move, you'd better publish. Don't become a permanent associate professor. Or worse, don't become an untenured non-professor.

Mistake 5. Letting yourself become over-involved with students

Mistake 6. Venting your frustration

Don't share weaknesses and problems

Mistake 7. Involving yourself in departmental and campus politics

Mistake 8. Refusing to be collegial and a good departmental citizen

How to Thrive:

1. Find mentors

Senior profs can help you publish, get grants, get on scholarly panels, get you involved in professional associations.

2. Keep your focus

Focus on those things that matter most to your professional success Track your time. Rethink your time expenditures. Limit class preparation time to two hours per lecture.

3. Be selfish

Your priority must be to earn tenure and promotion

4. Don't look for love in the wrong places

Your students will not provide you with lasting love. Remember, you are a professor, not a grad student.

5. Suppress your anger

Sure you know how to make your new institution better. Sure you are indignant about various wrongs. Don't become consumed in departmental dramas and campus conflict. This will come at the expense of your research and writing.

6. Be strategic

Limit your commitments. Write every day.

7. Get out there and shake it

Don't expect your new colleagues to welcome you with open arms. Don't expect them to invite you to life or offer to read your work or to become your mentor or to initiate stimulating conversations. Extend yourself. Initiate relationships. Reach out. Be proactive.

- Ask colleagues for advice
- Take them to lunch
- Talk to them about your research

8. Hedge your bets

The academy can be a cold hearted place. Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Be a pro. Extend your network. Maximize your productivity. Write every day. Go on the market.