

# A LINE ON LIFE

8/22/94

## How to Flunk \*

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With school beginning, students want to know how to get excellent grades in their classes. This topic is related to a convention I attended in Austin, Texas, which involved **Celebrating Teaching Excellence**. Several workshops dealt with motivating students. One discussed how students can "get an A." Another workshop on **Total Quality Management (TQM)** emphasized student participation in decisions that are being made. People are more motivated to use methods that they develop, rather than methods that are given to them by others. From these two workshops, I realized that few students can devise ways to get an A, but any student can tell you "*how to flunk*."

For this reason, let's use flunking as a starting point. To flunk, the number one rule is "*don't attend the class*." This assures flunking. On the other hand, the first thing to do to excel in the class is to attend every session you can.

Even if you do attend, to help you to flunk, the second rule is to sit as far away from the teacher as possible. This sends a clear, nonverbal message that you do not want to participate in the class. In contrast, sitting in the center or front of the class sends the message that you want to learn and be involved. Teachers respond to this by smiling at these students more, interacting with them more, and making more eye contact with them.

This leads us to a third rule to flunk: "*don't participate*." This means don't read the material, don't do the written assignments (If you do them, hand them in late.), don't ask questions, and if you are asked any questions, remain silent or say, "*I don't know*," even if you think you might know the answer. In contrast, to avoid flunking and to excel in school, students need to **PARTICIPATE**.

From the flunking suggestions given above, this means you need to read the material, but it is important to read the material carefully *before* it is covered in class. In this way, you will be at least familiar with what is being discussed in class. When the material is discussed in class, it will not sound like a meaningless babble. If there is still some confusion, you can recognize it and ask questions. (If you wait until after the class to read the same material, similar questions may arise, but the teacher will not be there to help you clear up your confusion. Students are also unlikely to remember to ask questions about these confusing points later in class.)

This brings us to the next point. Many students are afraid to ask questions in class, because they think it will make them seem stupid. However, if you really want to learn — so you can understand better — it is more effective to ask questions than to keep silent and remain ignorant. If it is too embarrassing to ask questions in class, you could write

down your questions and go to the teacher later to ask them. For students who make a sincere effort to complete their assignments, most teachers are eager to answer their questions or give them special help.

Another option is to form **student study groups**. Groups of students can get together periodically to go over the material. If one person in the group is confused by a point, another may be able to explain it. Not only do the confused students learn, but explaining the material will also make it clearer for those providing the information.

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## **Effective learning is a process of making fewer and fewer mistakes.**

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One of the biggest fears my students have is answering questions in class. If they think asking a question will make them appear stupid, they are even more hesitant to answer a question in class. What if they make a mistake? Many students (and some teachers) don't realize that making mistakes is part of the process of learning. The classroom is the place to make mistakes. (If you make mistakes in class, you are less likely to make these mistakes on your exams, where they count against you.)

However, if parents, friends or previous teachers have ridiculed you for making mistakes, it is very threatening to try at all. In addition, if you are afraid of others laughing at your mistakes, it is very difficult to concentrate on answering the question being asked. When teachers recognize this problem, they can give students more time to respond to their questions. Unfortunately, if this results in 20-30 seconds of silence, it can be uncomfortable for both the student and the teacher.

Another strategy the teacher can use is to break the inquiry down into smaller components, so the student can be guided in a step-by-step learning process. So students can feel more comfortable about answering questions in class, they need to complete assignments on time.

Teachers' questions in class are usually asked to find out if students understood the assignment. If you have done the assignment, this increases your probability of understanding what is going on. You are more likely to correctly answer the questions asked in class.

Of course, doing assignments takes time and effort. Many students do not like to take "*hard classes*" and try to take "*easy classes*." Classes are "*easy*" because they are only "*rehashing*" things you already know, rather than teaching you something new. Classes are "*hard*" because they are covering things that are new or unfamiliar to you. Any time you have to learn something new, it requires greater effort and is harder to complete. Because this added effort takes more time, you might miss out on enjoyable activities to get this work done.

Unfortunately, most of us emphasize immediate rewards rather than ones that pay off more in the long run — like education. However, if we can learn time management, we can make the time for the assignments and still have time for enjoyable activities. All teachers can do is provide situations for the most effective learning.

To be successful students, we have to supply the time and effort to do the learning. Nobody can learn for us — we have to do it ourselves. Are we willing to sacrifice some immediate pleasures, so we can gain skills that will make our later life more rewarding? The decision is ours. (I have made my decision, and I am now realizing the rewards of my earlier sacrifices.) You know how to flunk. Are you willing to spend the time and effort to succeed?

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