



7 deadly mistakes new professors make **...and how to avoid them**

By Hillary Hutchinson, The Academic Strategist



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Welcome!

I am delighted you decided to download this special white paper on the **7 deadly mistakes new professors make...and a strategic roadmap to avoid them.** Whether you are already a new professor, graduate student aspiring to be one, or even someone already well along time line to obtaining tenure, I believe this simple set of strategies can help you live a fuller and ultimately more successful academic life.

But first, would you like a little background about why you should pay attention to me?



I have a passion for the world of academia. I believe in education as opportunity, and in the ideal of contributing to the production of knowledge for the betterment of humanity.

My story: After financing my husband's graduate degree and moving across the country for his first tenure-track job, I sadly became sole support of our two girls when my young husband was tragically killed in a car accident that almost claimed my life as well. I needed to use everything I knew about the world of academia to support my small family by working in administration at the University of Texas in Austin. Part of my work there involved helping young faculty adjust to their new positions and responsibilities, both by aiding them in finding the resources they needed within and outside of the university, and helping them learn the skills in order to pull this new life (with all its competing and heavily weighted demands) together in a way that would allow them to keep their sanity.

In 2007, after 35 year immersed in the world of academia, I decided to follow my own dream of helping others negotiate their unique career paths in higher education by founding Transitioning Your Life, designed to help higher education professionals at any level move into their next career stage.

Professors, administrators and graduate students have all benefited from my expertise, learning how to end their feelings of being overwhelmed and return to an enjoyment of their work. Few people outside of this environment truly understand the highly structured nature of this career path. I do, and I can help you find your own way with less stress and more success.

Clients say I have an amazing capacity to illuminate the options and focus a light on the way ahead with compassion, empathy, and humor. I can help your cut through the mental clutter of negative self-talk and learn to recognize and

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celebrate your own amazing contributions to the world. I also hold a Master of Arts in Cultural Anthropology (1984), and a Master of Higher Education Administration (2006), both from The University of Texas at Austin. In addition, my certifications as a professional organizer allow her to teach systems for setting priorities and staying on top of deadlines.

Which of these mistakes are you making?

1

Mistake #1: Failing to find time to do your own research and writing

Schedule it—then do it!

One of the things I say over and over to my clients is, “What gets scheduled is what gets done.” Until you actually have the doctor’s appointment on your calendar with a date and time, it’s always floating around in the fog of intention called, “I’ll get around to it.” But once it’s on your calendar, you’re committed to following through.



Hand in hand with this mistake is thinking you have to have large chunks of time to write. This is simply not true. If you keep a writing journal, and know exactly what the next thing is that you want to say when you sit down to write, you can write in the interstices between classes, meetings, and research. Just 15 minutes every single day will help keep you from losing momentum. Many people whose jobs are dependent on writing, like professors, say they spend more time worrying about it than actually doing it. Whole books can actually be written in 15-minute increments.

For that time period, focus exclusively on writing: be mindful and concentrate on what you are trying to say. Keep your statement of purpose for your piece close to hand so you can see whether you are going off on a tangent that will not ultimately serve you. Turn off all your weapons of mass distraction: phones,

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email, television and the Internet during this time period. Don't worry about how fast the writing is going. Just do it.

If you have large chunks of time on a non-teaching day, schedule those large blocks of time in the lab or library for research. 4-6 hours is the maximum most people can actually concentrate effectively on intellectual work. After that, you are becoming less productive and efficient with every passing minute. Ultimately, it is your own research and writing that will determine whether you stay or go in the job you have now, so this is actually the MOST important thing you have to do. Unfortunately, many new teachers find this gets pushed to the bottom of the priority pile. You *must* make time to do this.

2

Mistake #2: Spending too much time on class preparation

Make your mantra “Good enough.”

You are going to be doing a lot of course preparation the first couple of years. It's OK to spend a lot of time on it at first—but don't spend all your time on it.

The average workweek for new faculty is:

- 6 hrs/wk minimum in classroom;
- 4 hrs/wk interacting with students;
- 10-30 hrs/wk spent on class preparation;
- 2 hrs/wk grading papers;
- 6 hrs/week office hours.
 - **Total, at a minimum: 48 hours.**



If your teaching load is 9-12 hours, expect your workweek to be 50-60 hrs during the first two years. And we are not even talking about other areas of responsibility here!

Work on your class until it's good enough. Nothing is ever perfect. Each time you teach a course, you'll adjust and it'll get better over the years. Robert Boice's book, *Advice for New Faculty*, emphasizes the concept of *nihil nimis* or “nothing in excess.” Or, “all things in moderation.” Recognize that content and knowledge in a subject area does not constitute good teaching. Good teaching allows space for student interaction in the classroom, and time to actually absorb and use the material being taught. Look for ways to learn the process of teaching.

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You are already an expert in your field, and know the content. Now go back to a time when you were a novice, and think about what would have been the most important concepts for you to take away from a class you are currently teaching. For example, a history professor of mine used to say, “The Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire.” That’s a simple, humorous way to get a complex concept across. The simple truth is that most of the students you are teaching are not going to major in your field, and really are not interested in your subject area. But that doesn’t mean you should try to teach them something of value to take away with them. Enthusiasm, pacing, and clarity of organization will serve better in the long run than over-preparation.

3

Mistake #3: Failing to moderate student incivilities

Define tomorrow by standing up today.

Classroom incivility is a real pitfall for new professors, and one that older faculty may be reluctant to address. Novice professors are transitioning from graduate student to faculty member. It’s a new role. You need to be careful not to identify too much with students, whether they are undergraduate or graduates. As a teacher and a role model, you are no longer in a position to be a friend. This is challenging for most people, who have often grown comfortable in their own peer group by the time they finish their dissertation.

Incivility in the classroom can take many forms, including late arrival, overt signs of boredom such as yawning, loud side conversations or outright confrontational statements to a teacher such as “you must be joking.” It’s important to note that the pattern of incivility is usually set within the first couple of classes of the semester. Students generally begin the school year with respect for the instructor and optimism about the learning process.



Novice professors must learn to take control of the classroom situation on Day 1. There are two ways to address this, first on paper and then in person.

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1. *Written method:* Create a syllabus that is essentially a contract between you and your students.
 - Spell out all your negative policies, whether it is that late papers will automatically be given a zero, or that emails requesting information that appears on the syllabus (for instance, “What is the assignment for this week?”) will not be answered. Decide when and how often you will return student emails (within 24 to 48 hours) so you do not feel pressure to answer immediately. Email can be insidious and eat up all available time, with some professors beginning to refer to it as “the third shift”—the time they have to spend after the work day, and family time in the evening, just to stay on top of the communications they receive.
 - Spell out the ways in which you *are* available to the students. Make it clear that they can reach you both during your regular office hours, or by appointment if you are willing to do that.
 - Include the ethical code of conduct for your school as a reference.
 - If you have a framework for how you will weight examinations and classroom participation, include that.

A note about social media and email—you should anticipate that whatever you communicate via these outlets is essentially “out there” for all time. Think about the items you are posting, and whether or not it would be appropriate for students to know the personal information you are posting.

2. *In person method:* Deal immediately with classroom incivility



Learn two extraordinarily simple skills to disarm students, and create a more joyous teaching experience, as well as a more effective classroom environment. When a student exhibits disruptive behavior:

- Lean forward and smile directly at the student, then
- Find a way to take make the negative behavior positive.

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For instance, in the case of a student who makes the sarcastic comment, “you’re kidding,” lean forward, smile, and ask directly, “Why do you say that? Oh, that’s a good point, you might just be right. Do you have any source material you could share? I love to find new resources for my students. Maybe you could come my office and share yours with me.”

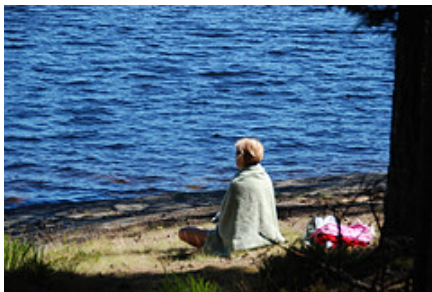
Addressing incivilities immediately will have the effect of calming down the rest of the students who recognize you as a teacher in control, and will also help you feel more comfortable in your own classroom. It is truly up to you to set the tone. Your success as a professor can be made or broken by the way in which you handle this type of personal interaction in the classroom. While it is true that your tenure may depend on publishing enough, many promising careers have been terminated early by an inability to control the classroom.

4

Mistake #4 Failing to take care of your own health

Keep your EYES on the prize.

Take good care of your health. As a scholar, you are going to be sitting. A lot. As you get older, taking care of your physical body gets more important. If you are a good teacher, well along the typical six-year tenure path, but are sedentary, overweight, and stressed, you are statistically more likely to suffer a heart attack, whether you are male or female. There is no point to tenure if you cannot live long enough to enjoy it.



A great acronym for remembering to take care of yourself is **EYES**: **E** is for **Eat right**; **Y** is for **Yoga or other spiritual practice**; **E** is for **Exercise**; and **S** is for **Sleep**.

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Eating: Most of us know what it means to eat right, but if you don't, get a dietician to help. Every body is different, and the right diet for you may not be in the latest diet fad book. Professors must recognize that the brain needs energy to think. So pay attention to feeding yourself the right things at the right time. The body makes extra ghrelin, the appetite-boosting hormone, in response to anxiety. That may cause you to crave food high in carbohydrates and fat. Eat low fat foods that are rich in protein to help suppress ghrelin production.

Yoga: Practicing yoga, or another spiritual discipline, is good for your health, too. Drs. Mehmet Oz and Michael Roizen say attending weekly services or other meditative practice can protect against age-related memory loss and thinking problems, lower your blood pressure, help you stay connected to the wider world and enhance your sense of well-being. MRIs have shown

that "mindful meditators" have more activity in their right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, which seems to have a calming effect in the amygdala. Naming negative emotions can help you let them go: this is why meditation can help lower stress.

Exercise: Aerobic exercise also decreases the hunger hormone ghrelin, and lowers stress. It reduces depression, by setting off pleasure chemicals such as serotonin and dopamine, making you feel calm, happy and euphoric. It reduces anxiety, and the effects last for hours. It keeps the brain chemicals in balance, and helps allow the brain to keep learning. Plus, you can decide to bring it on at a chosen time. It makes your brain work better, too. Not only is exercise smart for your heart and weight, but it can also make you smarter and better at what you do. "If you can control your physiology, you can relax, focus, and remember," says John J. Ratey, MD, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and author of *A User's Guide to the Brain*.

Sleeping: Most people need eight hours of sleep for 16 hours of "awake" time. Give your body as much sleep as it needs. It's counterproductive to sleep too little and spin your wheels at night working. In the August 2004 issue of the journal *Sleep*, Dr. Timothy Roehrs, the Director of Research at the Sleep Disorders and Research Center at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, published one of the first studies to measure the effect of sleepiness on decision-making and risk taking. He found that sleepiness does take a toll on effective decision-making: alert people were very sensitive to the amount of work they needed to do to finish assigned tasks to collect a certain amount of money,

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and understood the risk of losing their money if they didn't. But the sleepy subjects chose to quit the tasks prematurely and often risked losing everything by trying to finish the task for more money even when it was 100 percent likely that they would be unable to finish, said Dr. Roehrs.

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Mistake #5: Not taking time for personal and familial life

Make time away from work a priority.

You are not a graduate student any more. You have a job and a life you want to enjoy. You may have a spouse and young children who are also transitioning to

a new place and a new routine with you. Many of today's families are very busy. Most households need two incomes to survive. You may feel out of balance when it comes to working and family time, leading to additional stress and anxiety, which in turn can lead to other health problems, such as headaches, irritability, depression, high blood pressure, and many other ailments. But spending time with your family can actually provide you with physical benefits: research has shown that increases the levels of oxytocin, a hormone needed for stress protection.

The time your children spend with you gives them many benefits that will stand them in good stead over a lifetime, such as love, support, security and safety. With this as a foundation, children will learn from you how to handle new situations gracefully, master new skills and behaviors, help them ward off peer pressure as they enter the stage of taking greater and greater responsibility for their own actions. You may find that family time also benefits and strengthens your marriage, an important consideration when both spouses work.



It's also important to take some down time for yourself, even if it's a just a cup of tea out on the back porch in good weather. A little time for reflection can help you focus on yourself in a positive way, and sometimes by not doing, and just being, you find a way to let your creative juices flow again. Let your problems

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work themselves out at the back of your mind while enjoying the fact of being alive in this amazing world.

In the long run, family time and self-care will also make you a better teacher, researcher and administrator.

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Mistake #6: Not watching the tenure clock

Keep those cards and letters coming.

Six years sounds like a long time when you are just starting out—but you may be surprised at how quickly this will pass. The first couple of years are spent settling in and gearing up your courses, and it's easy in the midst of day-to-day demands to let the tenure process take a back seat to more immediate demands. In addition to knowing the tenure requirements at your institution and starting early

to fulfill them, you need to be prepared to have people write glowing letters about you when the time comes to submit your file. As Margie Piercy wrote:

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.
You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.
More than half the tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.



Young faculty must build a network of senior faculty outside home and present institutions who will write letters of recommendation when needed, and otherwise advance your career. The best way to do this is to send paper copies of your publications (not pdfs unless the person requests it) to scholars who might be interested in your work. Enclose a brief note and your calling card. Every time you have a publication, send copies out to a list of people.

Other strategies include talking to departmental visitors, schmoozing at conferences, and inviting people with interests similar to yours in other departments to have coffee or lunch with you. You may want to consider finding

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a mentor outside your own department, or better yet, outside your university, to help you figure out your best networking strategy.

Older faculty often say that they were not aware of how important it was to cultivate contacts outside their own department for the tenure decision to be favorable. Be proactive in cultivating the people who can recommend you for promotion from the earliest days in your new position.

7

Mistake #7: Taking on too much administrative work

Just say no! and mean it.

If you are lucky, you may have a department chair or a dean that says, “Use me as your excuse to say no.” The truth is that you are a new faculty, with a lot of new responsibilities, and you do need to find the time to write and do your own research. At the end of the day, providing administrative service at the expense of your other responsibilities can actually hurt your career advancement. Although much is made in faculty handbooks about service, it is probably in reality the least valued of your contributions to the community when it comes to promotion.

Know the difference between assignments that are optional and those that are mandatory. Accept committee or service assignments that have a big bang for the buck, such as undergraduate advising in the dean’s office because student contact is usually highly valued by the administration, or on the academic conduct committee that examines plagiarism and cheating because most faculty dislike being on a committee that regularly sees students cry. Do just one major service activity for the university at a time.



Be really careful about over-committing yourself, and stay away from assignments with high time demands like search committees.

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In sum, here are the

7 deadly mistakes new professors make ...and a strategic roadmap to avoid them

Mistake #1: Failing to find time to do your own research and writing

Schedule it—then do it!

Mistake #2: Spending too much time on class preparation

Make your mantra “Good enough.”

Mistake #3: Failing to moderate student incivilities

Define tomorrow by standing up today.

Mistake #4: Failing to take care of your own health

Keep your EYES on the prize.

Mistake #5: Not taking time for personal and familial life

Make time away from work a priority.

Mistake #6: Not watching the tenure clock

Keep those cards and letters coming.

Mistake #7: Taking on too much administrative work

Just say no! and mean it.

Wishing you well in your new academic career!

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