

2010/08: Get A Grip

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I'm going to be honest... I'm not the best student. I am, however, a woman who has spent six years to complete an interior design program that usually takes three. Yes, you read that right. Six years. (A few things — like getting married, having two children, and transferring programs — happened along the way.) Through this time I've been instructed under an array of different teaching methods, some of which I understood, some of which I didn't understand but accepted, and some of which I felt were just plain crazy. But here's the deal. I'm going to tell it to you straight. School is about to be back in session, and if you want to succeed as an interior design student, then first things first: GET A GRIP.

Set The Stage

So it's the beginning of the semester (or quarter, as the case may be), and every teacher hands out the syllabus for his/her class. You sit there and listen to the instructor as they go through everything that is due, and your mind starts to wander. At this point you start to think, "Are they really going to read this whole thing?" I'm just going to go ahead and tell you that, yes, they are. And here is what else I'm going to tell you. They aren't doing that because they are interested to know what is due every week. (FYI...they wrote it...they know what's in it!) They are doing it because it's important and you need to pay attention. On this first day of class might I suggest taking a day planner and making a note of each assignment that is due and on what day?

At the end of the first week, after each class has met at least once, you will have a pyramid of syllabi, handouts, floor plans and whatever else the instructors needed to bombard you with. (If your heart starts to beat quickly and sweat appears on your forehead, then I would suggest learning some deep breathing techniques because class hasn't even started yet.) You most likely will not even want to look at them for a while, but here is where I am going to advise you against your gut instinct to walk away from that stack of papers. Instead, go through them and organize them by class, day, and when things are due. This will help keep you motivated, ahead of the game and, ultimately, sane.

Learned Behaviors

At the beginning of each class term, one thing that is key is to dissect each teacher's grading habits. Some instructors grade on a point system. Some grade on completion. And then there are those teachers that make you wonder if they grade your work at all. Here are some "learned behaviors" I have picked up over the years:

The Point System Grader – This teacher has a strict syllabus and has each assignment broken down into categories. Each category is worth a certain amount of points. All points added together equal the total points of the assignment due. This teacher is a no nonsense teacher who is objective in his/her grading.

- Good thing about this – You know what is due and when. You can come to class feeling prepared because you have read the syllabus and did your homework accordingly.

- Bad thing about this – You know what is due and when. Some students feel overwhelmed when they read the syllabus and see a list of what is due. If you are this type of person, then take it step by step. Just go down the list of what is due and check it off as you complete each component of the assignment.

The Completion Grader – This instructor will look at the effort you put into the work and grade it on completion. They will red line your work and expect you to make the corrections as necessary.

- Good thing about this – You get positive feedback for trying. You are given guidance through suggestion but are not “punished” for mistakes.

- Bad thing about this – There will always be the people in the class who just throw something together to get through. Don’t worry though; teachers are teachers for a reason. They know who those people are. Trust them.

The “Are they even looking at my work?” Grader – This teacher takes everything that is due and never gives it back. Maybe they do, but it’s way after you would need it back for the corrections, so you just have to kind of guess what to do. Until – BAM! – you get everything you ever turned in to them back to in one swift move, and there are a lot of red lines on those pages.

- Good thing about this system – You get all the points for turning everything in (as long as you do). You feel good about your work because you haven’t gotten any negative or positive feedback about it.

- Bad thing about this system – That overwhelming feeling you get when you get a stack of plans back that you could have sworn you printed out on white paper... Why is the paper red now? Oh, wait. Those are my red lines. Those deep breathing exercises may come in handy at this point.

Here's the point: Do your work. Always.

“Does Not Work Well With Others” Doesn’t Work Anymore

As designer wannabes we all think that our ideas are the best. We all size up any space we walk into and think, “I wouldn’t have done that” or “I can’t believe they used that over there!” We all want to do things our way, which is the right way, of course.

Well, throw that idea out of your head before you walk into your first class. To succeed you have to be realistic about your individual strengths and weaknesses. Your classmates and teachers are there to help you. Ask questions – there is no harm in that. All you gain is knowledge. Plus, you could make a friend along the way.

Know that in the real world, people work together. Some people walk into school looking at everyone around them as their competition. Don't do that. There may be a day that you need advice on a project. Who could you turn to?

Find a work buddy. If both of you share your ideas and meet at the school to work on schoolwork, then you are both held accountable to each other. Don't fitness magazines tell you the same thing about keeping a successful workout routine?

Bottom line: Become a team player. You will need to know how in the real world.

Get Involved

You will hear this from so many people around you. LISTEN.

I had the opportunity to be the president of my school's ASID student chapter in 2005. It was an amazing experience. It was an opportunity to give back to the community and meet professionals. You never know where or when you might meet a mentor, future employer, or friend. To this day I keep in touch with people I met in five years ago.

Oh, and when it comes to meeting professionals, just remember, they are people too! No matter who you are, it's always a little nerve racking to strike up a conversation with someone you don't know.

I Think I Can. No, I KNOW I Can.

I should be the poster woman for this phrase. During my six years of education there have been times I wanted to throw it all up in the air and walk away. When my son was born I took time off from school to stay home with him. Did I want to go back? Yes and no. Yes, because I knew what I wanted to do with my life. No, because I didn't want to leave my child. My focus had shifted. Yet, here I am. Five weeks until my graduation. Now I think of my children, and I hope that I have set a positive example for them.

If at anytime you feel that you can't get through, just think of this article and the woman who took six years to finish her degree. I got married, had two children, moved cities, bought a house, transferred programs, lost credits, but kept on going. I know it can be hard sometimes, but just KNOW that you can.