



THE

UNDERGRAD JUNGLE BOOK

*A Top Secret Collection of
Startling Tips, Tricks and
Disclosures to Help You
Brave the Wild Terrain of
Undergraduate Academics*

**Nicole
Radziwill**

THE

UNDERGRAD JUNGLE BOOK

DISCLAIMER: All opinions expressed are TOTALLY those of the author (except quotes that come from unidentified real students, other peoples' Facebook statuses, or great philosophers). They do not represent opinions or sentiments of any other specific professor OR the author's academic institution. Use at your own risk! That said, the advice and insights will probably still be pretty useful. Also, please note that the author does not condone immature, reckless, irresponsible or illegal behavior, although she is sometimes inclined to make jokes about it.

Copyright ©2010 Nicole M. Radziwill

All rights reserved.

ISBN:1456483188

ISBN-13: 9781456483180

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT YOU... AND THE AUTHOR	1
CHAPTER 1: WE KNOW WHO YOU ARE	6
CHAPTER 2: YOU SHOULD KNOW WHO WE ARE TOO	18
CHAPTER 3: HOW WE FEEL ABOUT YOU	30
CHAPTER 4: GRADING SUCKS	40
CHAPTER 5: BE OPEN TO WHAT EMERGES	52
CHAPTER 6: BE AN ACTIVE VISIONARY	62
CHAPTER 7: GET INTO YOUR SPACE	80
CHAPTER 8: FIND YOUR FLOW	86
CHAPTER 9: IF YOU CAN'T FLOW, THEN SLICE	94
CHAPTER 10: ASK GOOD QUESTIONS	104
CHAPTER 11: TELL A GREAT STORY	124
CHAPTER 12: SOLVE PROBLEMS WITH EASE	140

ABOUT YOU... AND THE AUTHOR

You're an undergrad... and it's a jungle out there. You've got assignments, projects, and exams making your life miserable, and professors who just don't understand. You need to get decent grades and maintain your sanity so you can get your degree, get out, and start making money. **It's just all too much. Something's got to give.** You need some sort of magic elixir to make it all easier to deal with.

And that's where I can help. I just finished my third semester of teaching at a university. It's been an eye opening experience: **my eyes are now open to all the important bits of wisdom, practical techniques for success, and secrets from the professor's perspective** that – had I known while I was in college – would have made it a heck of a lot easier for me to do well. Now that I've been enlightened, it's my duty to hand all these arcane secrets to you guys. It's too late for me to go back and relive my undergraduate experience, but it's not too late for you to experience levels of success you might never have dreamed of.

Now, as far as these secrets go, I'm not talking about time management or study skills. Sure, that stuff is important, but face it: most of you just want to figure out an easy way to get through your classes, still have time to party and do your jobs so you can pay your rent, and get good grades so you don't have to take heat from your parents or lose your scholarships. **That's what I want to help you do.**

So what I'll offer you here is a secret look into the mind and daily life of a professor (me), and share some really useful strategies and

techniques for organizing your work, communicating your ideas, and making a good impression on whoever is grading you. This should translate into getting assignments done more easily, tapping into a better attitude, feeling more lighthearted about the whole process, getting better grades, **learning stuff**, and ultimately feeling more happiness. I am not doing this from the perspective of some no-name self-help guru for college students who hasn't set foot in a classroom since their last semester of straight A's. In fact, I set foot in a college classroom just this afternoon, like I do almost every day during fall and spring semesters. My tips and techniques come from a very practical place: this is actionable stuff you can do to be successful in my classroom. And if you can be successful with me in my classroom, there's a good chance you can be successful with a whole bunch of other professors (unless they are robots or aliens, which is also entirely possible).



I am not that much different than you guys. I use Facebook religiously. I send text messages way too much. I groan when I have a pile of work to do, or have to show up to teach rather than stay in bed and sleep. I like beer, I felt really accomplished when I learned how to play beer pong, and I like music you might not expect a professor to even know about. I (still) go to concerts where they have mosh pits. I might still have blue hair if I didn't think it would be distracting during lectures. I believe in UFOs and other crackpot ideas even though I realize they're not scientific. (They're fun and intriguing.) I enjoy reading the National Enquirer. OK, so maybe I'm not like you at all, but I am definitely not a ho-hum non-human robot-alien professor.

In fact, this is me. The picture was taken in 2005 in Spain when I was watching a total solar eclipse around midday (that's why the shadows are so long). It's also why I'm wearing eclipse glasses. See, I sort of look like a normal person:



But I'm brilliant, right? I already know all this stuff and I was a great straight-A student in school, so how can I understand you, the frustrated and confused undergrad, at all? Well, first, I do not spend all my time working problems from the backs of your books. Some are interesting, some are really dull – but all of them help demonstrate an important concept, and it's my job to help you get those concepts. Second, I wasn't really "good" in school. I got by. I got a 2.7 GPA as an undergrad because I skipped boring lectures (*and most of them were*) and I accidentally forgot to show up for a couple exams. It was bad news. My professors accused me of partying too much and not taking things seriously. After a couple months of frequent accusations, I got tired of listening to their shit (I guess I can use that strong language since this happened more than 15 years ago). I decided *if they already thought I was partying a lot* and ruining my education, I might as well start doing it. And I

did. And my grades stayed the same, but I must admit, I did have a lot more fun and met a ton of new people (many of whom are still my friends today).

I remember classes that were so boring I'd have to bring a giant thermos of coffee just to stay awake. I remember falling asleep in a few classes. I remember missing a couple exams because I couldn't keep my Tuesdays and Thursdays straight (simply due to a lack of attention to detail; not a result of hangovers or the like). I remember some lectures that had so many Greek letters in them that it was impossible to figure out what subject we were actually studying. I remember being so confused in some classes that I thought there was no way I'd ever pass. I even remember having panic attacks walking into some of my hardest classes. **Oh, if only I knew then what I know now.**

By some completely unexpected magic (that I might add, I *totally didn't deserve*), I passed all my courses and somehow jumped over enough hurdles to get that coveted B.S. degree. It didn't matter that I couldn't remember most of what we had covered. It didn't matter that I couldn't get a job in the field I'd just graduated from because I didn't know enough. I didn't care about my lackluster GPA. **I was OUT... forever!!!**

Or so I thought. A few years later, fully beaten into cynicism by that thing called a FULL TIME JOB, I got accepted into grad school (how, I don't know; someone must have been hung over in the admissions office that day). I promptly shaped up, did all the work even when it was boring, **tried to figure out at least one or two useful things I could get out of each class**, and enjoyed 4.0's until they graduated me with a poofy PhD hat. It was pretty amazing to

me that it was so much easier to get good grades in grad school than it was as an undergrad.

And then, armed with a PhD, I went back to undergraduate school as a professor – bringing with me almost 15 years in the “real world.” In the real world, over a period of years, I had morphed into a *manager*. So in addition to being your professor, I could also be your boss (and sometimes I act that way). I think this gives me a balanced perspective, and ensures that I don’t just give advice from the lecture podium. I *am* your future employer, and hopefully someone you’ll solve problems with as a peer in just a few years. (Hang in there... do well, and this sea change will come.)

These days, I enjoy teaching applied statistics, simulation and modeling, intelligent systems, and technology management. I study the concepts of **QUALITY and CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT** in my research time, meaning that what I really enjoy doing is figuring out how to do things faster, better, quicker, more efficiently, more effectively, and more happily. I’m also pretty moved by the notion of *continuous improvement*, which just means figuring out better ways to do things... and then when you find them, figuring out *even better* ways. Lather, rinse, repeat.

Consider this book “straight talk for undergrads”. I’ll tell you what goes on in the secret mind of the professor, and your job is to take it to heart, and adjust your attitude, perspective and behavior, and ultimately lead a more informed (and fun) life as an undergrad. Your future professors will be amazed that you seem to “get it.”

It will be a win-win for all of us.

CHAPTER 1

WE KNOW WHO YOU ARE

“Know thyself.”

- *Plato*



This past semester, I was responsible for shepherding two groups of 25 students through statistics (mostly sophomores), one group of 25 through a senior-level intelligent systems course, and a tiny group of 3 graduate students. That’s 78 new names, faces, dispositions and learning styles to discover in just over 16 weeks. (And the latter two are really hard to grasp when you’re still trying to get the *first two* when December or April roll around.) Bottom line is that by the end of the semester, I have a pretty good idea of who’s who, and I definitely have insight into the personalities of all the students in my classes. Professors get these insights from your behavior, the quality and mechanics of your assignments, and *how you answer* certain kinds of questions. We also know who never staples their reports together before turning them in. We know whose handwriting is insufferable and who answers their essay questions in indecipherable riddles to confuse us into extra points. **We may not always immediately match your face to your name, but we know who you are – sometimes down deep.**

Grad students are different than undergrads in a lot of important ways. First of all, they've all been undergrads before, and so they've had some time to own up to how they screwed up many of their classes (and vow to not do that again). Second, they're usually paying their own way in school, so they recognize that if they don't learn the stuff, they are literally wasting their own money. If they have to repeat the course, it's gonna cost them \$x-hundred per credit, and believe you me, they KNOW what that dollar value is. And they also know exactly how many months of rent or mortgage is equivalent to a 3-credit class. If their employer is paying for the program, they know that having to repeat the class means they'll have to pay for it out of pocket, and that's just not a pleasant thought. If a grad student doesn't like the class you're teaching, they will typically suck it up in instant recognition that the pain of your course will never last more than a semester (so long as they pass). They are resigned to their fate as students and content with going through the motions to get out and get that degree, because it's a very stark economic proposition.

Undergrads are an entirely different species of animal. And when I tell you we know who you are – we also know *your kind*, your special society, your secret culture. Shocking as it is, all your professors were undergrads once, and many of us were crazier than you guys are now. We just can't admit it. (Of course I can't admit it anyway, because I was never crazy... at least not that I remember. You can add a smirky little grin here if you want. It may or may not be factual.)

And by animal, sometimes I mean that literally. Undergraduate status brings with it a complexity of structure, feeling, and shifting character that you're not going to experience at any other time in

your life. You've only been away from home for a couple years now, you're adjusting to living on your own (or with wildly variable roommates), and you're thrilled by the independence that your new life has brought you. No curfew. Keg parties. Sex. Sometimes there would even be more sex if you could just get your roommate to leave. (Sometimes there's no sex and that can be pretty stressful too, cuz everyone else is getting it so what's the matter with you?) And if you're not dealing with any or all of the above, you're probably struggling with your developing value system and figuring out which new opportunities (previously unavailable to you) you should get crazy and take advantage of while you're young. What will inspire you, and what will leave you with a pervasive feeling of being kicked in the gut in the morning? You're on a big trip of figuring out your value system right now.

We, as your professors, can see a lot of these struggles and balancing acts going on inside you. It's like we have sensors taped to your head. We can see the battles between good and evil, the pull between spending time on things you WANT to do (e.g. intramural sports, video games, drink) versus things you feel you HAVE to do (e.g. study).

By the end of the semester, and often much earlier, we can pretty effectively characterize your personality based on a zillion things we have specifically (and accidentally) observed about your behavior in and out of class. We can tell if you have your iPod earphones plugged into your head during class, no matter how discreetly you hide the wires. We know who watches YouTube videos instead of listening to our dull lectures. We can tell by how many times you sigh if you're really interested in the subject or not, or whether that simply means that you're just exhausted from

studying or drinking. We can tell if you show up to class hung over. We can tell by the deer-in-the-headlights looks in your eyes if you understand what we're saying or if you're just totally lost. We know who's dating whom, who's interested in whom, and which guys are trying to get which girls into bed.

We have a pretty good sense of who thinks cheating is perfectly acceptable behavior, and who would never do it. In most cases, we can tell if you completely pull your data out of thin air, especially if the data doesn't have the same characteristics of other data that fellow students in your class have collected. I'll give you an example: one of my assignments this semester involved counting M&M candies from one bag. The students had to figure out how many M&Ms of each color were in their bag, count defects (chips, missing letters, breaks) and describe the data in bar charts and contingency tables.

Now, some background: I teach two different classes where we study M&Ms. As a result, I know a LOT more about M&Ms than you might think I do. For example, in each single serving package of milk chocolate M&Ms, there are (on average) 48.5 candies. There are 6 different colors: blue, brown, green, orange, red and yellow. And according to manufacturer's targets, there should be about 12 blues, 7 browns, 8 greens, 10 oranges, 6 reds, and 7 yellows. Most students turn in assignments that reflect these expectations to some degree or another. This indicates to me that they each opened REAL bags of M&Ms, did the counting, and reported their data. (If they didn't actually do the work, they must have Googled for someone else's assignment and run off with their data – not the best approach, but I can't figure it out whether they did it for sure, and at least they did the *data analysis* on their own.) This past

semester, however, I had one student who discovered 132 M&Ms in his bag. Now, this might not be a problem: maybe he lost his original data, and went to the store and bought one of those supersized bags of M&Ms (not what the assignment asked for, but I'll be open minded). However, this also means that he should have about 33 blue M&Ms in his bag. How many blues did this guy have in his bag? 13. Uh-huh. The chance of his bag having only 13 blue M&Ms in it is astronomically small. If it wasn't the end of the semester, I'd probably do the calculation myself to double check. My conclusion? He must have pulled his data out of thin air... in other words, *cheated*. This kinda gave *me* the blues.

It is uncommon for us to investigate, in detail, the work of one of those students whose behavior is consistently genuine... however, it is VERY common for us to double check the work of students who are sketchy and/or demonstrate the "used car salesman" personality. (As an expert pattern matcher, I also tend towards suspicion when a student who is routinely failing exams mysteriously and surprisingly gets a 100 on the next exam.)

We also know who comes to class high, and who did coke the night before. It's pretty obvious to us, college men and women... we just don't mention any of these things to you, because that would be pretty embarrassing, no? Now don't get me wrong... it's not like we're going to turn you in to the cops or anything. ** Most of us have too much to do already, between preparing lectures and

** At least not most of us. There's a professor in my department who moonlights as a city cop. HE would DEFINITELY turn you in, or maybe even get a warrant to search your apartment. He's arrested some parents on graduation weekend for public drunkenness. It's not that he's trying to be mean... he's just got justice in his blood.

grading your work and answering your emails. It's just that from observing you every day, and from observing many, MANY students over many semesters, we start to see patterns. We all become expert pattern recognizers over time. And if you fit a pattern, we'll make assumptions about you, and some of those will be *right on* (and others will not be).



Here are some patterns you DON'T want to be matched up with (using the case study of "I forgot to take my Blackboard exam over the weekend). This list is meant to be representative, and not exhaustive:

The Scatterbrain. "Oh my Gohhhhhhd, I totally forgot to take the online exam this weekend, can I PLEASE have until tonight to do it? I am SOOOO sorry but my mother came to visit and I had so much to do and I forgot it was due on Sunday..." Response (from the voice on the inside of my head): Please don't overwhelm me with all these details. I can tell that you're just totally scatterbrained. You really should slow down, take a deep breath, and write yourself reminders. What if you forget to show up for work one day? Your boss will not be happy about that.

The Drama Prone. "Oh my Gohhhhhhd, I totally forgot to take the online exam this weekend, can I PLEASE have until tonight to do it? I am SOOOO sorry but my mother came to visit and I had to spend a lot of time with her and then my brother broke his arm and had to go to the hospital and we had to drive back to pick him up from soccer practice and I lost my internet connection and couldn't send

you an email or look up your phone number to send you a text message...” Response (also from the voice on the inside of my head): Are you serious? How can all that stuff possibly have happened over one weekend? It might all be true... but it might be a story. Regardless, I’m sorry all this horrible stuff might have happened, but really, all I need you to do is get your exam done by the time it’s due.

The Used Car Salesman. Usually I’ll raise the issue first with this type of student that they missed an exam. “Yeah, I was meaning to call you or come to your office before class, but I just didn’t get to it. I know I missed my exam, but you know I’m really a good student and I take things seriously and this class is really important to me, and I have a [doctor’s note | receipt from where my car broke down | acknowledgement from another professor that I was working on their very, very important secret project].” OK, fine, whatever. But please, don’t paint that goofy smile on your face as if to say “I’m so cute and full of charisma, how could you possibly say no to letting me take my exam over?” It’s just overkill.

The Burnout. Usually, this student will not even bring up the issue that they missed their exam. They might not even know it happened until I approach them and ask. “Yeahhhh, I forgot to take the online exam this weekend. That’s pretty bad.” I’ll then ask if they can take it before midnight tonight. Usually they will do it; they just forgot because they’ve been smoking too much pot. (Please, put down the bong until AFTER you finish your exam next time.) Having to grade another exam out of sequence really adds stress to my to-do list, though, because I’ve already moved on to grading *other* assignments, and to grade another exam means I have to get back in the groove of the problems on that one.

Context-switching can be a challenge. (Some of the other professors I work with call this “being too nice.” I’m starting to see that being too nice only earns me more work and more stress. I’m going to start having to be less nice just to avoid so much unnecessary frustration.)

The Special Case. “I know I forgot to take the exam, but can I just write a 20-page essay instead explaining the concepts and working through some tough sample problems?” Answer: No. I can’t treat you like a special case for many, many reasons. First, it’s not equitable – I’d have to offer the opportunity to all the rest of the students. Second: I’ll have to figure out an entirely different grading rubric to evaluate you, which I don’t have time for. Third: I have to figure out how to make the grade on your 20-page essay somehow align with the grades the other students got on the exam. That’s one of those challenges that’s just un-doable most of the time. Oh wait, but you say you can demonstrate your knowledge more effectively this way? I totally agree with you. In fact, I confess: I was exactly like you when I was an undergrad. I was always making a case to my professors to be the “special case” and do an alternative assignment. So I do understand you, but as a professor now, I just *can’t help you*. (And if any former professors of *mine* are reading this, I want to offer you a heartfelt apology. I had no idea what I was asking for, and how much it must have irritated you.)

The Clueless Absentee. I don’t take attendance because I think you should get credit for *doing the work*, not necessarily just showing up. However, I do notice when people are missing, particularly when they’re missing on a regular basis. If you are such an absentee and you are also supposed to be working on a team project, you can BET I’ve heard one or more of your team members

complain about you. “We can’t get Scott to show up for any of our meetings.” “We keep trying to contact Scott but he never answers his phone.” “Scott hasn’t done anything we need him to do.” Interestingly enough, this is one of those situations you are GUARANTEED to have to deal with in the “real world” of the full time job you’ll have one day – so I’m actually happy that you get a test run in college. There are several things you can do. Even though it’s not *my* job to make Scott shape up, you can use me as leverage, and here’s how. Write an email to Scott and copy it to all your team members *and me, your professor*. Tell him that you are sorry he missed the last meeting, and you’d like for him to find a time that he is certain he can attend the next meeting as a priority. Tell him that if he cannot be a full participant on the team, his role is in jeopardy. And if he screws up, fire him. Vote him off the island. You’re going to have to do things like this in the workplace, so you might as well transcend all those fluffy things like “will he still be my friend?” right now. If he’s really your friend, he’ll still be your friend. If he’s just a freeloader hoping you’ll do all the work so he can pass, he might not be your friend any more. But is that really the kind of friend you *want*?

The Disappearing Act. Sometimes a student will miss an exam, and stop showing up for class, and stop responding to emails. If this is you, I have no idea what to do for you. If you don’t drop the class, I’m probably going to have to give you a D or an F (depending upon how much work you miss). I feel bad doing this, but there’s not much else I *can* do in the context of university policy. How to fix this: don’t disappear on me. If you feel yourself cracking, come talk to me as soon as you feel your sanity fading and the hopelessness setting in. It’s very likely that we can work something out, relieving

a huge burden on you, and preventing me from wondering whether it was me who chased you out of my class (do I smell bad?)

There is no correlation between the above examples (ALL of which actually happened) and my decision about whether or not I let them retake the exam. It's all at my discretion, and always is. And students, take this to heart: **YOU ARE AT THE MERCY OF MY DISCRETION**, and my discretion is based on my entire personality assessment of you and your attitudes and behaviors coupled with the core value of equitability. I've been watching you, and taking data, the whole time. And my discretion is going to factor heavily on the data I've collected.

The other thing you should know is that the MORE OFTEN we encounter and have to deal with these personality patterns, the less willing and likely we are to make accommodations for YOU when you have an issue. The longer a person has worked as a professor, the more likely it is that he or she will be "mean" and "not understanding" – because you, unfortunately, are coming at the end of a long line of errors, excuses, tall tales, tears, panic attacks, ass kissing, and fake smiles. It's not your fault. It's not a reflection on who you are, or how insane a professor is (most of the time). In many cases, a professor who acts like a [Drill Sergeant | Nazi | Asshole | insert your favorite derogatory term here] has been slowly and fastidiously sculpted into that state of mind over a period of years.

The best way to deal with it is to **SET EXPECTATIONS IN ADVANCE**.

Setting expectations in advance means you don't surprise your professor with anything unexpected. If you have to go to your

sister's wedding next month, and you'll miss a couple classes and maybe an assignment or two, *tell me now*. We can work something out. *Don't tell me after you get back...* after I've spent some time wondering where your missing assignments are and why you stopped coming to class all of a sudden.



You should also be aware that research has been done on the Dead Grandmother Problem, and many professors are aware of these studies. This Dead Grandmother syndrome, which has been observed globally (and not just in the U.S.), establishes that **student's grandmother is far more likely to die suddenly just before the student is scheduled to take an exam** than at any other time of year.

As professors, we are indebted to the work of Mike Adams, who has laboriously collected data on this effect for twenty years. ** Mike reports that there is almost no relationship between the mean number of family deaths per hundred students and current grade when no exam is imminent. However, at midterm and finals time, the likelihood of grandparently death significantly increases, and in fact *is inversely proportional to your current grade*. If you're failing a class, your grandparents are in grave danger right before midterms, and extreme danger immediately before finals. Adams recommends that 1) exams should not be given, to reduce the unnecessary impact on innocent families; 2) that only orphans

** <http://www.math.toronto.edu/mpugh/DeadGrandmother.pdf>

should be allowed to enroll at universities, or alternatively 3) that students should be encouraged to lie to their families, and deny their presence at the university entirely. It's just too dangerous for the families, he asserts.



Now here's the flip side. We ALSO know who really cares about actually learning something in class. We know who's *trying really hard to care*, even if they think the subject matter is the most excruciating thing they've ever been forced to spend time on. We can tell by the looks on your faces, by the kinds of questions you ask, and by *how often we see you* whether you're really making a concerted and dedicated effort to do your best.

We see you guys growing up, too. Seniors are, in most cases, entirely different academic personalities than freshmen and sophomores. They set expectations well, they talk to you proactively if they're having an issue (at school or at home), and they try to get something out of each class – even if it's a subject they're not really interested in. Freshmen and sophomores are total wild cards. Juniors often show traits from both groups.

But regardless of the personality patterns that you slip into when you're stressed and frustrated, there is one guarantee I can make you: you will leave undergraduate school as a different person than when you started. And you may not even realize how different you are until you get that first job, and you're actually taking it seriously, and no one is *forcing* you to.

CHAPTER 9

IF YOU CAN'T FLOW, THEN SLICE

“Right now, I’m as single as a slice of American cheese.”

- Nick Cannon



Sometimes, it’s pretty much impossible to get into your space. But you still have work to do, assignments to finish, and projects to sink some serious brain into. What do you do then? Answer: **Slice**.

The genius of the Slice Method is this: find the most microcosmic, incremental thing that you can accomplish en route to your goal, and then *do it*. The trick is to find the tiniest, thinnest little slice of activity that results in demonstrable progress. The thinner the slice, the less time it will take you to get it done, and the quicker you will feel a tiny little sense of accomplishment.

Slicing is particularly effective when you feel depressed, because when you’re feeling down, it’s almost impossible to get up and do anything – including simple things like roll out of bed in the morning, make coffee, or take a shower. Forget about complex things like getting dressed, walking a mile to class, listening to a lecture, or God forbid, *thinking*.

I cannot claim for myself the genius that is the Slice Method. This is completely attributable to Alistair Cockburn (“co-burn). He might have picked up method from somewhere else, but he’s the first person who introduced it to me. Alistair is a software development process expert who lives in Utah. He uses the slice method to help students (and even software development professionals) learn the process of breaking down a software engineering problem into component parts. In all of his years of working with software developers, he says that (and I’m paraphrasing it here, so I hope I’m getting it right) the biggest productivity block he’s seen comes from this fundamental issue: breaking down a problem into slices. The Slice Method helps programmers solve it.

Turns out the Slice Method also helps me dig myself out of the most prohibitive productivity blocks I experience, regularly.

Using the Slice Method, a programmer’s first job is to outline all of the steps of a problem in as tiny little pieces as possible – thin, transparent slices – each of which demonstrates some sort of progress or value or *immediate returns*. **The idea is that you bite off such a small part of the problem to be solved that you’re not overwhelmed by taking that step** – it’s *actionable*, meaning you have the ability and mental clarity to get there – and as a bonus, at the end of that step, you can prove to other people (e.g. your manager) that you’ve been doing useful work and have not been wasting your time.



Slicing My Car. Last summer, I discovered that you can slice *any* activity to help get over mental blocks or motivation blocks. (Well maybe not *any* activity, but I've now compiled a reasonable sample of successful attempts on which I can base my bold assertion).

My dilemma was my messy car. I usually let the clutter accumulate over several months, and last summer the stuff I was dragging around was pretty typical: papers on the floor, crumpled up receipts, old eyeglass pieces, manila folders with stuff that was really critical to bring home and think about at one time (see how important those ended up being), statistics books (you know, just in case I ever need them on the road), CD cases, plastic hangers (just in case), a couple pillows, an old car seat (gee, I really should move that to the basement), a wool sweater, a few matchbox cars, two coats, a Rand McNally Road Atlas from 1996 that's missing most of the M and N States, one Daniel Pink book on motivation, a (tiny) bag of laundry I forgot to bring inside after my last business trip, and a whole bunch of lost things that had not yet been found. I knew I needed to clean it, but I kept making the excuse that it just wasn't warm enough outside to spend so much time rooting through the archaeological dig in my backseat.

When I kept making the "too cold" excuse after temperatures had been in the 80's and 90's for two months, I knew I was avoiding the task. After all, it wasn't going to get much warmer, so what was I waiting for? I think what I was waiting for was "the right moment" to spontaneously occur – that special time when you look at your car and say "yeah! I'm going to clean you! It's the RIGHT TIME."

What a pipe dream that was. Every time I looked in my car it made me feel like there was a pile of giant river stones sitting on my chest, suffocating me. I couldn't bear to start such a giant job, because it was too overwhelming. And there was no way I could set aside the 12 hours I felt was needed to pull, sort, and reorganize all several hundred of those miscellaneous items in the car.

And then one day it hit me... if you can't get into flow and get the whole job done, **just slice it!** I started thinking about what might constitute "finishing one slice of cleaning the messy car" when I was looking at a crumpled up receipt on the passenger's seat. "I'll take that one crumpled up receipt into the house, and throw it in the trash," I committed to myself. For good measure, I picked up a second receipt, crumpled in, and brought it in with the first receipt.

As I tossed the little lump into the garbage, I felt awesome. Wow! I actually made a little slice of progress. I decided to spend a few moments *really appreciating myself* for getting off my butt and doing something mildly productive, even though it was such a tiny little step in the right direction. It felt great! I wanted more of that great feeling to come my way. I started slicing each of the items in the car one at a time, at least one little slice a day, with no expectations on myself and *no pressure* on myself to slice any more than just one item at one moment. And before I knew it, I'd sliced about half the car, and became free from the bondage that I created when I convinced myself I couldn't possibly start cleaning it until it got warm outside.



My Daily Slice. I'm even slicing today. I started out the day with a to-do list that was making me nauseous. There are 14 items on my list and most of them are things I've been putting off for months. There are 3 items on my list that are expense reports too... all overdue. You would think that I'd be motivated by the fact that if I just took the time to prepare the expense summaries and submit the receipts that I'd get \$1622. That's a lot of money! I could really use it right now, too, considering that one of the other items on my list is to write a check out to my tax woman to pay her for doing last year's taxes (I'm late with that one too).

But for whatever reason, the prospect of collecting \$1622 just hasn't been enough to motivate me to dig up receipts. As each day has gone by, I've felt more and more and more powerless in the face of my looming overdue expense reports.

And then today it hit me... since I can't get into flow and get the whole job done, why don't I just slice it? Out of my three expense reports, one only required me to calculate mileage and find one hotel receipt, then log the numbers onto an Excel spreadsheet and email it to someone. I figured if all I do is open the Excel spreadsheet and *find* the PDF file with the hotel receipt in it, I'll have accomplished a great feat *and* two slices. So I did it. Once the spreadsheet was open, I figured I'd write down the total from the hotel receipt in the spreadsheet since it would be so easy to do (another slice). And since the spreadsheet is still open, maybe I'll open up Google Maps and figure out how many miles I drove on that trip. And you know, now that I know how many miles I drove, it would be real easy to multiply that value by \$0.55 and write that in the spreadsheet. All of a sudden I have all the information in the Excel spreadsheet, so I'll take the next step and save it into a folder

where I'm likely to find it again. To top it off, now that I have the PDF with the receipt *and* the Excel spreadsheet with all the information in it, it wouldn't be that hard to just email it to the woman who's going to approve and mail the check to me.

Ta da! By taking just one little step – the slice of opening up that Excel spreadsheet with no expectations that I'd do anything more than look at it aimlessly – I unleashed a virtual slice avalanche and got one item knocked off my list. And it felt awesome! So I spent a few minutes sipping my coffee, appreciating myself for deciding to take a slice out of my to-do list this morning.

What happened next? Somehow I sliced through the remaining two expense reports and three other items on my to-do list, and it was virtually effortless. The slice avalanche continued, wiping out even more tasks on my list, and now I have a burden that I've been shouldering for two months off my back. It feels wonderful.



Professor Slicing. Slicing is not just limited to to-do lists, obviously – taking slices can help you solve problems in school too. Here are some of the ways I slice while doing my professor job:

- When there's a giant pile of papers for me to grade, I will accomplish the first slice of *sitting the pile in front of me and looking at it*. Usually, looking at it will inspire me to evaluate the first problem on the first page. Then, once I've done the first problem on the first page, I might be inspired to do the second problem (but if not, I don't worry about it). This tends to start a slice avalanche and I'll

get the first of many exams totally graded. Then I sit back and say “Yeah! One down!” and appreciate myself for taking the first step.

- After a quiz or exam is graded, I mentioned that I usually have a sizeable backlog of emails where students are begging for points. I really dread sorting through all these, partially because I have such distaste for the whole ritual of begging, and partially because it’s overwhelming to deal with gradebooks in general (there’s just so many numbers!) I’ll take the first slice of responding to the first student’s email, and then cheer myself on for taking the first step.
- When I have a new lecture to write, that can be pretty daunting and overwhelming as well. Think about it: my job often requires covering a whole chapter in one 75-minute class. That means I have to figure out which concepts are the most important, confusing or muddled, figure out a way to make them clear and interesting, and then choose some problems that will illuminate the learning objectives even more. That’s a big task. What’s the first slice? *Open my textbook and look at it.* (Yes, just staring at your book can sometimes start a slice avalanche!) Sometimes I’ll even take the next slice and choose a problem that I think would be really great to go over in class. Once I choose one problem, my slice is finished! I’ll spend a few minutes getting into the good vibe that I’m one problem closer to having a complete lecture, and appreciate my good fortune for identifying that singular problem.



Student Slicing. It wasn't too long ago that I was also a student in PhD school... and don't be fooled, PhD students have the same problems that you have as an undergrad starting and finishing assignments.

Here are some ideas regarding how to break up a problem into individual slices that can lead to more slices. Keep in mind that every slice must be associated with demonstrable progress – you have to be able to show someone that you've done something. Right now, you might just be proving to yourself that you made some incremental progress.

- Take out your book, turn to the chapter that you're supposed to read or review, and just look at it. That's right, just fix your eyes on the page. There is a pretty significant chance that you'll find yourself reading a sentence or two, and that's progress.
- If you're writing a paper, come up with ONE sentence that summarizes the story you want to tell in the paper. Or, outline your paper. Each element in the outline can be considered one slice. Rearranging the outline into a more logical order can be another slice.
- If you're preparing for an exam, get out a sheet of paper and start listing the topics you need to spend time with. Your first slice can be to identify the first one or two items on the list.

- For each of those topics, try to figure out a “so what?” for each of them. Who cares about this topic? Why does it matter, or why should it matter? (If it seems to be a totally useless topic, can you fabricate some reason that you might use to convince yourself that it’s important?) Each “so what” can be considered a slice of progress.
- If you’re trying to solve a math, physics or engineering problem, you can start by writing down all the variables and values you can read from the problem, including the variable you’re trying to solve for.
- If you’re trying to understand an equation, write it down as your first slice. Then, figure out what each variable means, one by one. Each variable can be a slice. Once you’ve sliced all the variable names, figure out the most common units for each variable. One slice for every time you figure out the right units for a variable.



One of the great things about slicing is that in order to do it, you’re *forced to detach from all outcomes*. While slicing my car, I had to completely forget that the ultimate goal was a perfectly clean car. It turns out that this was really helpful, because it was the pressure of having to achieve that goal that was impeding my ability to make progress in the beginning. Similarly, when I have a giant pile of papers to grade, the ultimate goal is to get all of them graded, and most of the time that goal is just so overwhelming that it prevents me from even getting started.

As another quick example, I have a really difficult time getting into exercise, but I've found that I really enjoy walking – once I get started. I can't plan on going for a walk, because the anticipation of having to traverse such a long distance (even if I'm just planning to walk down the street) is usually enough to stop me before I even get started. A successful walk, for me, starts with the first slice: getting my shoes on (and coat, if it's winter) and stepping outside the front door. Once I'm out there, I figure I might as well walk to the end of the driveway. Once I'm at the end of the driveway, there's no sense not going a little farther, because I already have my shoes and coat on. So I just keep walking until I'm done slicing, and by that point, I have some pretty serious motivation to get back home (because why walk all day?) Slicing a walk is a great way to *detach from the outcome of taking a whole walk, or walking a mile, or walking two miles*. Last summer, I walked over 100 miles just by slicing a little bit each day, and detaching myself from the outcome. I just got into a groove of slicing a little bit more each day, and what invariably happened was that I'd get into flow by walking at least a couple of times each week.

Anticipation is a killer. The fear of not getting into flow is a killer too. ** Breaking a problem into slices and doing only the first slice has the soothing side effect of reducing (and sometimes totally eliminating) anticipation. Consequently, the overwhelmingness also pleasantly vanishes, and you might find yourself drifting into flow and having an amazingly productive day.

** (Want to know a secret? I wrote this SLICE chapter before the FLOW chapter, because I just couldn't get into FLOW at the time. See, it works!)

I wanted to call this book **COLLEGE SUCKS: AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**. But college doesn't suck!

It's an exciting place full of opportunities and excitement and invigoration. I know, I know, sometimes that's hard to see and hard to feel because of all the deadlines, tough assignments, obtuse quizzes, impossible exams, and professors who act like heartless drill sergeants.



In this book, I want to introduce you to some unique approaches for managing your work and bringing joy to your academic life as a college student. To do this, I have to divulge some secrets about what some professors really think about their classes and about you. **Are you ready?**