

# How to get to know your professors and live to tell all about it...

BY ALEXANDER LEGGATT  
Special to The Varsity

When you pay your fees to the University of Toronto you not only get access to libraries, labs, and machines; you also get to use the teaching staff.

It's equipment of a peculiar kind -- complex, sophisticated, delicate and temperamental -- but the equipment that matters most to you as a student.

At the University the most important action is what goes on between the ears of the people who work here. But you need to get the best out of this equipment: Herewith, a user's guide.

The most obvious way you will encounter professors is in formal lectures. A lecture has been defined as the process by which information is transferred from the instructor's notes to the student's notes without passing through the mind of either. The way to break up this process is to ask questions. Right out loud. Don't be afraid if you think the question is stupid, because the questions you think are stupid can be the most important ones: they get right to the basic issues. And don't be afraid that the professor will fix you with a steely eye and reduce you to jelly. In the great majority of the cases he (it usually is "he", but we're working on this problem) will be grateful to hear the sound of a human voice other than his own. He may be saying something he's said twenty-times before, and in giving him a chance to take a fresh angle on it, you may just have made his day. And if he's falling asleep he'll be grateful to you for waking him up. Really. (There's an old line around here: "I dreamed I was giving a lecture; then I woke up and discovered that I was.")

That's Step One. Step Two is to hunt him down in his office. We all keep office hours, we all have telephones, and if one time's inconvenient we can always find another one. Don't be afraid of interrupting; he may be reading a book, or writing a book, but he's just as likely to be staring into space wondering why nobody ever drops in during office hours.

The private interview is for when you're having any kind of trouble in the course, or you have questions you don't want to take up time with, or you just want to ask a few basic things like, what is research? what is criticism? what are either of us doing here? what is the answer to the Great Question of Life, the Universe and Everything? (He'll probably know that one: 42). Again, these are not stupid questions, and someone who has just spent three hours struggling with a maddening technical point will be only too glad of a chance to talk about the basics.

## Professor Leggatt's 6 Easy Steps to Using Your Professor

1. If in doubt, ask.
2. If you don't understand the answer, ask again.
3. Remember, your professor has also known failure and rejection, although he may not admit it.
4. Remember, you are allowed to get interested in the subject.
5. Don't forget, there's more to life than this.
6. Above all, don't panic.

Professors, believe it or not, do think a lot about what they're doing. Some get worried and depressed, some take to drink, but many find such questions quite interesting.

And don't ever ask yourself, how can I, as a mere student, approach this great mind? If you knew some of my colleagues you'd know what a laugh *that* is. Don't let the air of authority fool you. In a way it's real: some of us are more famous than we'd care to admit (and some of us, of course, are less). But if you think, this guy obviously has *King Lear* figured out, it's a safe bet that he hasn't, any more than you have and he'll be quite happy to pool his ignorance with you.

After all, the wisest professors (me, for example) are the ones who know how much they don't know. That's what being an expert means. This is because the University is at the growing edge of thought, where old certainties are always crumbling and where the discovery of a single document can make a whole shelf-full of books obsolete overnight. If some of us wear a slightly hunted look, that's why.

A Physics professor once pointed out to me that it's the experiments that don't work that are the most important. (It's the same in reading poetry, by the way: the lines that don't fit your interpretation are the ones you really need to look at.) He added that he had trouble getting students to see this; they wanted certainties. Up to a point professors are there to tell you what they know; but it's the exploration of shared uncertainties that keeps the University alive.

Are professors approachable? I had one colleague whose standard answer to the question, "Are you busy?" was "Yes, I'm busy seeing you." Not everybody would put it so neatly, but he was more typical than the minority who would say (or think) "Yes. Buzz off."

Your professor may be a bit shy or absent-minded, and he may not remember your name, but that's likely because (if he's a humanist) he finds it easier to remember what happened in 1512 than what happened last week, just as (if he's a scientist) he may find it easier to feed and clean a nuclear reactor (or whatever they do) than to tie his own shoelaces. Beneath the surface oddness professors are, for the most part, normal human beings. Most had mothers, and even fathers. The profession has its share of bores, curmudgeons and egomaniacs, but even from them there's something to be learned. (Often *especially* from them, talent and good manners don't always go together.) If you have the misfortune to encounter one of the small minority who regard students as beneath their notice and won't give you the time of day, just remember that's more his loss than yours.

Professors can be strange, exotic creatures. All human beings are unique, but we seem at times to take this to ridiculous extremes. Yet there are advantages. The person of whom you ask that question may be the only person in the world who could give you that particular answer, that particular way. But it's up to you to ask the question. And if you want to challenge or disagree, go right ahead. A few professors may get defensive or hostile (again, their loss) but most of us welcome a good debate, partly because we imagine we can win, but mostly because it's in debate that ideas get developed. We don't make intellectual progress by agreeing with each other.

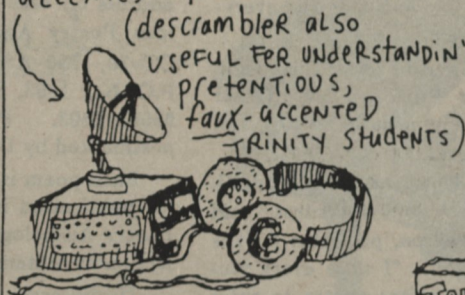
The University of Toronto is, as you've probably heard, enormous. But its size is an

## A User's Guide to yer professor

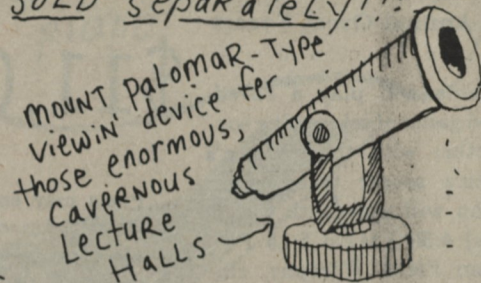
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illusion. Its most effective units often consist of two people, a student and a professor. It's up to you to get that unit working; you may be surprised at the results.

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Tuesday, September 5, 1989

The Varsity

## Music Society Start Up With A Splash!

Where did the summer go? Where did September go? Where-ever they disappeared to, UPEI students are back in full swing, along with the UPEI Music Society.

This year the society is headed-up by Kevin Ritter (Pres), Christie Beck & Eric Mathis (VP's) and Jacquiling Sorenson (Sec/Tre). These very active people are supported by about twenty-five members; very active members, I might add.

The society's first function of the year, a car-wash, was held

Saturday, Sept.30th at MacKinnon's Irving across from the Towers Mall. We raise approx. \$350.00 to go into our scholarship fund which will be divided among deserving students of the music dept.

CHTN was of great support to us. "The Crusier" stopped by with coupons for Burger King. Also they did 3 live report throughout the day. Q93 FM also stopped by with coke and chips.

Thanks to those of you who came out to support us. Keep watching, we will have many other functions coming up in the future.