



11 Skills You'll Need for a Career

Here's how to master these necessary abilities while still in college.

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With today's economy, college students are more worried than ever about what kind of career awaits them. The best way to increase the odds that the job you'll get won't involve waiting tables or flipping burgers is to get the skills you need while you're still in college. Here are our 11 critical job skills that every college student should master, regardless of his or her ultimate career path:

1. Writing clearly and forcefully. Students often don't recognize how important writing skills are in many professions: Many students, without a trace of shame, proclaim "I can't write" and consistently avoid courses that require them to write papers. But the "I can't write" excuse won't stand you in good stead later when you have to write a strategic plan for your business, create clinic notes in your medical practice, write briefs for your legal case, or pitch your advertising plan in a report to the client. Actively seek out college courses that give you lots of opportunities to write. And use the feedback you get on one writing assignment to improve on the next.

2. Systematizing and organizing data. Many jobs require employees to do quite a bit of number-crunching and to create numerous spreadsheets and tables. Be sure you take courses that teach you the skills to do this kind of work—math, statistics and the like. Even students in liberal arts majors should come out of college being able to handle a reasonable range of quantitative tasks in the real world.

3. Doing research. In this Internet age, no one seems to be reading books in a library much. But there's more information out there, so being able to conduct research is even more important than before. Courses that include research assignments—usually upper-level classes in the humanities and social sciences—will give you experience with a number of research tools, many of them electronic, that you can utilize when given research assignments at work.

4. Presenting material orally. In many jobs, you will spend more time than you can possibly imagine attending meetings or giving presentations—or giving presentations at meetings. Needless to say, when your boss asks you to comment at a meeting or give a presentation, it's not wise to plead shyness or fear of public speaking (as many college students do when asked to present material in class). College offers you many possibilities for training in public speaking. Yes, there's the speech class or the debate team, but smaller classes and seminars often require presentations, too. And, hey, you could always just answer a question a professor poses in a big class. It happens.

Extra Pointer. Make sure you get proficient in a presentation software, such as PowerPoint, and learn to use all its features, including video and multimedia.

5. Taking notes. Maybe you like to sit back in lecture and enjoy the passing show without bothering to write a single note. Or maybe you write from time to time, as you focus in on what the prof is saying. This isn't a good idea for college, and it's even less of a good idea when your boss asks you to remind him or her in detail of what plans for the big campaign were developed at last week's three-day retreat. Every college class gives you an opportunity to become an ace note taker, so don't blow the chance.

6. Meeting deadlines. At college, many professors will offer extensions, makeups, and incompletes for a wide variety of justified and often-unjustified reasons. One of the most common shocks experienced by students once they hit the real world is that most clients and bosses expect them to meet their deadlines, no matter how many grandparents passed away that week, dogs got hit by cars, or friends broke up with

their girl/boyfriends and needed consolation. Get ready for this now by taking your college deadlines seriously and meeting them, without exception.

7. Working on a team. Teamwork is often a key factor in job success: What worker is a one-man band? Group projects at college or work with study groups can give you valuable experience in working with a team. Doing an internship or participating in a research project with your professors also gives you ways to practice working well with others.

8. Getting along with a boss. In college, the professor (or TA) is your boss, much like how in after-college life you'll have a real boss. Learn to get along with your prof, whether what he or she is saying is what you'd like to hear or not. Think of each meeting in an office hour, each Skype session or each informal encounter after class as an occasion for practicing your interpersonal skills with a higher-up. Collegiality is a key business skill.

9. Multitasking and time management. A college schedule of four or five classes, each with different sorts of assignments and schedules, is the perfect training ground for developing your prowess at doing lots of things at once and balancing the time needed for each. If you hone your abilities for handling the end of the semester—you know, that time when you need to turn in three papers and take five finals—you'll be in a great position to handle the crunch season at work, which, in some jobs, can involve juggling many projects and commitments.

10. Seeing a big project through to completion. You'll be in a position to easily handle jobs that involve large, complex, long-term projects if you've worked on, and completed, a major term paper, a junior or senior thesis, or a sustained science experiment while you're at college. Keeping up interest and motivation over the long haul is a special skill that lots of students have trouble with (to which most colleges' records of incompletes can attest). Now's a good time to know thy enemy—at least in regards to big projects—and learn how to conquer it.

11. Creative thinking. You may not know it, but what really characterizes A-level work at college and distinguishes it from B-level work is some creative spark that allows select students to see the issue under consideration in a deeper and more insightful way. You can develop your creative skills in almost any course, not just in courses in the arts or in creative writing (which are also fine ways to stimulate your creativity). Try to always go beyond the most obvious points, striving for deeper levels of meaning and more imaginative ways of expressing them. Creativity shines through at any job interview, and beyond, once you get your once-in-a-lifetime job.

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