Introduction

Just as you appreciate it when a professor organizes the material you learn in class, this introduction is organized with the same structure you’ll find throughout the book: The real story, then the back story. Don’t worry, I’ll also explain how to use this book before getting into the chapters. But first, here goes: Wonderful student, meet the reason this book is in your hands.

The Real Story

Nicole, a student advisee, sat in my office, firing off complaints about her professor.

(Quick disclaimer: Throughout this book, you’ll read many examples like this one. I’ll tell you when the student has a valid point—and when the student doesn’t.)

In this case, Nicole was pissed because she couldn’t follow what was happening in class.
I said, “So what have you told the professor about this?”
Nicole replied, “Nothing. I don’t know what to say.”
I said, “Well, how can the professor help you if she doesn’t know you’re struggling?”
Nicole shot back, “I’m just going to fail. I know it.”
“Well, you don’t have to fail. You could go talk to the prof.”
“But I don’t get what’s going on. She doesn’t really care, anyway. If she did, she’d know I’m struggling. It’s not like my grades have been good.”

“Do you want her to come to you?” I asked, sincerely, but firmly.

Nicole didn’t answer.

“Seriously, Nicole,” I said, looking right into her eyes. “What’s your role in getting your needs met here? Isn’t this your education?”

Nicole still didn’t say anything.

Just reading our exchange, you may think I was being confrontational, but Nicole and I had an excellent relationship. She’d taken classes with me before, and I knew I could speak to her straight. But my words weren’t making an impact.

I realized Nicole just didn’t know what to say. I made a mistake by not coaching her with the right words. What’s sad is that I knew with every fiber of my being that if Nicole said nothing at all, she could easily slip through the cracks and fail the class—all because she couldn’t or wouldn’t communicate with that professor.

After our meeting, I started keeping a little list in my desk drawer. A “What Your Professor Wishes You Knew” list. I didn’t have any plans for the list. I didn’t even know why I was keeping it.

As time passed, I noticed changes in the way students were communicating. I saw students all over campus staring at their phones and texting, rather than engaging in conversation while hanging out or waiting for class to begin.

Then, my own students had other issues that required discussion: A late paper, an absence, a failing grade. And I found myself going, “What, what, wha?” in my head over crazy things students would say. Sometimes, I’d want to slap my forehead (that’s right, I’d want to slap myself!) in frustration because students were doing nothing to help their academic issues (remember Nicole?). Instead, they were sabotaging their education when a simple early conversation and a continued connection with me could have salvaged their grade and made them feel a heck of a lot better about their classes and their college experience. Bottom line: Students’ communication was changing, and not necessarily for the better.

The bigger problem? Most professors, including myself, won’t usually sit the student down and say, “Hey, do you realize you aren’t handling this well?” So the disconnect and poor communication continues.
The Back Story

So, now you have it. That’s how this book started.

I realized there are tons of college success guides available, but not a single one deals solely with the relationship between the two people who interact in college every single day: You and your professor.

Most students don’t even think about that when they envision their time in college, right? You’re probably worried about how you’ll survive Organic Chem and Calculus in one semester, how you’ll afford $500 for textbooks, or how you’ll fit into the campus social scene.

I mean, have you really thought about what you’ll say when…

…you’re going to be absent?

…you turn in a late paper?

…you find a class boring?

…you don’t understand why you got a C instead of an A, and you think it’s unfair?

Probably not. And you aren’t alone. Students who ace classes and those who struggle aren’t sure what to say either. Then, they pop out the wrong thing.

Professors become frustrated and wonder why students can’t speak in a professional, appropriate way. In the meantime, you’re pissed! You feel misunderstood, and most of all, worried about how this confusion will affect your standing in the class and your grades.

Even worse, your professor may help solve your problem, but rarely, if ever, will she point out your communication errors. Why? A college term has only so many weeks, so we profs see a problem and move to solve it. As I said before, we don’t go back and debrief the student on how the communication should have gone down.

Now I know why I started that list: Like I said above, you are going to deal with your professors nearly every day. I’m ready to start talking! I hope you are, too.

College is the ideal place for you to practice excellent communication. Professors are among the first people in your life you’ll interact with as an adult. And guess what? You don’t text with your profs. You don’t usually Facebook with them about class issues … even if you Facebook about them. You need to deal with most issues face-to-face and sometimes via e-mail.

I want you to have inside tips on how to interact so your professors will respond in a positive manner.
I want you to learn what goes on behind the scenes of your classes so you can create opportunities, rather than fumble over excuses.

I want you to confidently and properly stand up for yourself when you’re concerned about your classes or grades.

I want you to have improved relationships with your profs, an incredible learning experience, and most of all, better grades.

How to Use This Guide

Say This, NOT That to Your Professor is meant to stay with you at all times, either in your backpack or on a digital device. You’ll want to have this information accessible so you have the right words to deal with an immediate class-related crisis.

Before you start your classes (or as soon as you have this book), take a quick look at topics in the Table of Contents, such as Absences, Grades, Late Work, etc. When one of these situations hits home (or, better yet, even before you have that problem), skip to that section and learn…

The Real Story: Examples of actual students who’ve faced this situation (whose names and identifying information have been changed for anonymity) and how they handled it—or more likely, mishandled it, and…

The Back Story: A rare glimpse inside a professor’s mind. You’ll learn what a professor really thinks about the way students speak or behave in that situation. Better yet, The Back Story takes you behind the scenes of college policies and class procedures that may hurt you if you don’t know how to navigate them. But the right words can empower you, which is exactly what we want to happen.

Once you’ve gained background on your situation, the next sections will move you into positive verbal action.

Ask Yourself This and Think This, Not That will help you evaluate current communication patterns and encourage you to change unproductive thoughts you may have about your situation, then…

Say This (the brass ring!) gives you an actual script to practice—or a guide to use and then substitute with your own words—before meeting with your prof to resolve an issue.

The words I’m giving you here are professional, proactive, and effective. They are the words that a prof wants you to say, rather than some of those other, less productive things you might say. Use these phrases
and you’ll earn respect from your professors. You’ll have a far greater chance of achieving the outcomes you want. You’ll even have early practice dealing with similar issues when you replace your professor’s title with that of a supervisor or boss. Isn’t that awesome?

**Not That** shows the ineffective, clueless statements many students use when dealing with a particular class-related problem—things you may be tempted to say yourself.

Are you ready to give yourself an amazing class and college experience?
Are you ready to find your voice? Let’s begin the conversation!

P.S. Just so you know, the term *professor* interchangeably refers to pretty much all educators: instructors, facilitators, lecturers, adjuncts, teachers, etc. If someone is teaching you, regardless of their title, the advice I’m offering will probably fit.

P.P.S. Let’s get social while you’re reading! Jump on Twitter and tweet comments about the book or questions to @ChattyProf with the hashtag #STNT (Say This, NOT That). You can also “Like” The Chatty Professor on Facebook and start dialogue or ask questions there.