

If I want to drop into college courses, should I ask the professor for permission or should I just sit in?

August 24, 2008 9:20 PM [Subscribe](#)

If I want to drop into college courses, should I ask the professor for permission or should I just sit in?

I'm trying to decide my path in life and have been spending the past 2 years a local community college. I've recently realized I want to take more courses than I would have time to complete. The way I've decided to try and fight this is simple, become a drop in. I go into any class that I'm somewhat interested in and act as any other student. I won't get credit, but that's not what I'm there for. I tried it out last year for a few classes with the teachers permission and all was well, except those were near the end of the semester and the teachers were part time. I've actually contacted 2 of my old professors to see if I can drop into their classes, no problem. I'm worried that if I just go into a class with a teacher I don't know there will be more of a problem.

posted by [Nighthawk3729](#) to [Education](#) (59 answers total) [5 users marked this as a favorite](#)

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Please don't sneak around campus going into and out of classes like this. For one this can cause problems with class unity, for two you maybe taking up space needed by students who are paying to be there. In some places you can even be charged with trespassing if caught...

Your college has a policy for auditing courses - look into it. Better, yet, contact the professors directly and tell them you'd like to sit in on their course. Unless the class is full or requires a lot of student participation they will probably be happy to have you for a few sessions.

posted by [wfrgms](#) at [9:27 PM](#) on August 24, 2008

By the way, for any people who don't believe that drop in work is helpful, check this out



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I saw this at least a year ago and it fascinates me. I begin again classes tomorrow and I'm very excited :).

posted by [Nighthawk3729](#) at **9:30 PM** on August 24, 2008 [[1 favorite](#)]

wfrgms gets it on the first answer. There will be people who tell you it is okay to "drop into" classes or that they have done so themselves without repercussions (especially in a larger class setting). But it really is a dick move. Be considerate and follow the audit procedures or contact the professors.

posted by [boubelium](#) at **9:30 PM** on August 24, 2008

It depends a lot on the school and the course. I attended every lecture of a film class my senior year that I never signed up for, because the class had hundreds of people in it and a lot of the course was spent sitting in the dark watching movies. On the other hand, if someone had started randomly dropping into one of my ten-person number theory classes we all would have been very weirded out.

I'm a part-time remote student at Stanford now and if I dropped into a class I was *enrolled* in, since I'm enrolled as a remote student, the professor would actually be well within his rights to ask me to leave. I doubt you'll find that kind of anal-retentive attitude at a community college, but you never know.

posted by [crinklebat](#) at **9:32 PM** on August 24, 2008

Please don't sneak around campus going into and out of classes like this. For one this can cause problems with class unity, for two you maybe taking up space needed by students who are paying to be there. In some places you can even be charged with trespassing if caught...

Class unity, thats a laugh, people in my college are much more likely to try and sneak out of the classes. And as for taking up seats, no, theres space :P.

By the way, these classes are about 30 seats in size.

posted by [Nighthawk3729](#) at **9:32 PM** on August 24, 2008

Speaking as an erstwhile lecturer, I agree vigorously with wfrgms. Speak to the professor *first*. If he/she is ok with it, you may even be able to circumvent the auditing process. The situation could otherwise get extremely awkward.

posted by [Bromius](#) at **9:34 PM** on August 24, 2008

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As far as the dick move is concerned, like I said, people are much more likely to dick around, stare off into space and generally not care. One professor I asked if I could sit in with was said he'd be happy to have me.

posted by [Nighthawk3729](#) at **9:35 PM** on August 24, 2008

Despite your lack of "class unity" worries, 30 is still a pretty small class size, and either way, you really should talk to (or at least email) the professor ahead of time. That way they'll know you're coming, and won't get weirded out by your presence... they may even recommend other books/classes if the subject matter interests you.

Ultimately, professors like people who *want* to learn, and you'll be doing yourself a favor by getting them on your side.

posted by [Zephyrial](#) at **9:35 PM** on August 24, 2008 [[1 favorite](#)]

In college I did this once or twice out of curiosity, but it was always in large auditorium classes with dozens and dozens of students--over a hundred, anyway. I don't see any harm dropping in on a really large class, but anything smaller is probably not a good idea. Unless you enjoy being potentially called out in the middle of class by the instructor with a "who the hell are *you*?"

posted by [zardo](#) at **9:36 PM** on August 24, 2008

I ask whether I should bother because I sat in a a few lectures with a friend whom he said would never notice, he didn't, I actually talked to him after class to, a few questions I had had about the class that day, he still didn't notice, he didn't bring it up once. It was a local government class btw for anyone that is curious.

posted by [Nighthawk3729](#) at **9:38 PM** on August 24, 2008

I've been told repeatedly by a dean at my school that the best course of action is to just go to the class for the first week or so and act like you're in it. Of course, that's advice that is designed more for someone who is trying to get into a class that it technically filled that you would want to take for real (ie. get credit for).

If you're not planning on doing any of the work (which I'm assuming you won't

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Yes, Steve Jobs pulled it off. But there is also a chance that the school will take further action against you. I wouldn't be surprised if the school went after you for the cost of classes for the semesters you "attended" if you tried to do that.

And as a fellow college student, you really need to give people who are actually in the class the first opportunity to utilize the class. By going in you'll be taking up a seat that someone else could use. Be it physically taking a seat that someone needs (one of the few left handed desks in an auditorium classroom), or taking a spot in the class from someone who is trying to get an override into the class because the professor is counting you in with the people in the class and thus not signing the papers.

Also, if you find out what you want to do you'll have essentially screwed yourself over. Because you don't have credit for the class, you'll need to take it over. And since you've already sat through the class once there is a good possibility that it won't be as interesting the second time around.

posted by [theichibun](#) at **9:42 PM** on August 24, 2008

If it is a large lecture class, nobody will notice or care. If it is a more intimate class, like say a writing class, everybody will notice and you will get some strange looks.

If your purpose is to learn, I would say that there is an obligation to pay for the class.

Also, taking a class is far more than sitting in a lecture. I find myself learning much of the material outside of class reading and researching the material.

Some drawbacks to sitting are that your participation may be looked down on somewhat, and also on top of not getting credit, you won't be able to say give a class presentation or receive a grade which is probably the best indication of whether or not you understand the material.

Since you are trying to determine a path in life, and possibly deciding on a possible major, sitting in on a class to get the feel for the atmosphere and material sounds like a fairly good way to go about it. Since classes build upon one another, you may find yourself in an introductory survey class that may not be the best representation of the field or major itself.

posted by [clearly](#) at **9:43 PM** on August 24, 2008

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sounds like you have made up your mind or you dont like the answer of no

posted by [captainsohler](#) at **9:45 PM** on August 24, 2008 [[10 favorites](#)]

Most profs won't mind. Some might and they have a right to bar you from their class. There are legitimate reasons for wanting to do so; maybe they really care about their students and want to give individual attention to each of them to lead them through the class, in which case it's not fair for you to take some of that attention without paying the tuition and while coming and going as you please. Notice also that this type of prof is more likely to notice you (because they pay attention to who's in their class) and say "who are you? are you in my class?" in front of everyone.

To summarize, here is a little decision matrix for you.

Prof doesn't care

Ask: Prof says "sure", you're in

Don't ask: Prof doesn't notice you, you're in

Prof does care:

Ask: Prof may or may not let you in (most will, if you ask nicely, you know)

Don't ask: Prof spots you and throws you out, possible repercussions

The outcome is always better if you ask first!

posted by [PercussivePaul](#) at **9:50 PM** on August 24, 2008

go five minutes early and ask the professor before the lecture begins.

posted by [foraneagle2](#) at **9:51 PM** on August 24, 2008

Try real audit channels and always ask the professor. This isn't just a "Can I get away with this?" sort of scenario but one of simple manners.

When it comes down to it, is it really so difficult just to ask with a 'please'? You don't have anything to lose--and **no**, if the professor says "no," you still didn't lose anything because college is a privilege, not a right (in that case, pay up or see if you can get the textbooks).

posted by [Ky](#) at **9:54 PM** on August 24, 2008
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Getting the instructor's permission ahead of time is key. Speaking as someone with experience teaching college classes, I'd welcome any interested student who wanted to sit in on a class, or audit. However, some random person sitting in my class, not on the roster, who I'd never heard of? I'd be incredibly irritated by their unofficial and unwelcome presence, and kick their butt out of there as soon as I knew they didn't belong (also, probably report you to the registrar and/or bursar). So talk to the prof... if they know you're curious, they'll probably welcome you (so long as you won't add to their workload, that is)...

And yes, it most certainly is a dick move to show up in a class you don't belong in. Regardless of whether the registered students are sleeping. Teaching is work, and an extra student is extra work, even if the students don't know enough to see it that way.

posted by [amelioration](#) at **9:56 PM** on August 24, 2008

Well guys and ladies, I've got to be up in 5 in a half hours, I will take what you've all given me into consideration and decide on it from there :). To give a bit of a summary, I will ask teachers that I've had in the past, I don't think it will be too much of a biggie in my school, I will definatly sneak into huge classes :P[I know they don't like their students, I have a friend going in to be a doctor, his teachers are paid grants and have to teach, they just talk and hate it he says].I like the idea of stepping in a few minutes ahead of time. As far as having nothing to lose, um yea I do, sitting in on that lecture, lol, duh :P. As far as taking from others students, I don't care that much about the people sleeping to staring, I'm there to learn and not them, morality can go shove it. As for the people who are trying to get into the class, I've been there and I can see that perspective, [funny story, that class I got into after three weeks of sitting in, we started with over 30 and ended with like 8.

Again, thanks for your responses.

posted by [Nighthawk3729](#) at **10:07 PM** on August 24, 2008

I know they don't like their students, I have a friend going in to be a doctor, his teachers are paid grants and have to teach, they just talk and hate it he says

It's clear you have absolutely no idea or respect for what teaching involves at the university level (yeah, even for those faculty members who are primarily

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focused on research and grants). Go ahead and alienate instructors -- it's not like you'll ever need recommendation letters anyway...

posted by [amelioration](#) at **10:20 PM** on August 24, 2008 [[9 favorites](#)]

It completely depends. There's a bit of etiquette that comes with scouting and crashing courses. I'd say this covers your bases.

* Is it a large lecture with hundreds of students or a course with very limited space and seating? Evaluate this before you come. Taking a seat that belongs to somebody who is actually enrolled and paying for course it, as stated many times before, a huge dick move. I would suggest hanging out in the back of the lecture hall until a minute before the lecture starts so that if you can find a place to sit that won't inconvenience another student or to leave if it's clear that you're probably taking the spot of somebody who deserves to be there. You mentioned that this was in reference to a class of about thirty-students. In this situation, I'd definitely email the professor or speak to a teaching assistant/associated faculty about dropping in.

* Is it an upper-division course or one that requires knowledge gathered from previous courses? Many classes like these will require some participation on behalf of the student and the professor would most likely be bothered by somebody who wasn't engaged in the material and ready and willing to jump into the discussion. And well, if you get called on, that's just awkward.

* What type of course of is it? If it's a lecture that's lead as more of a Socratic seminar and where a prepared student would bring assigned reading to class - it would be rude and disruptive to just sit in on this.

In all cases, it really can't hurt to fire off an email to the lecturer/professor the day before asking if they wouldn't mind an interested party sitting in on a lecture. Mention that you're very interested in the material and field of study and would like to evaluate it in a way that a course description cannot. If you don't get a reply, then I'd say try your luck and use your own judgment.

posted by [cgomez](#) at **10:21 PM** on August 24, 2008

However, some random person sitting in my class, not on the roster, who I'd never heard of? ... yes, it most certainly is a dick move to show up in a class you don't belong in.

I agree with amelioration. And the more you think about it, the more necessary it seems that you ask the professor. It is disrespectful to sit in a

class where "drop-ins" are unwelcome, and you can only know if they are

Also, I think you are giving short shrift to arguments against dropping in. Instructors may reasonably want only those students in the class who are fully invested in it, and being fully invested, in their view, may involve taking it for credit or at least going through formal registration as an auditor. They may consider it disruptive to have uncommitted browsers dropping in on the class. They may want everyone involved in the class to be an active participant, in activities, assignments, and grades.

posted by [jayder](#) at **10:37 PM** on August 24, 2008

You kind of contradict yourself in your original question - you say you don't have enough time to complete all the courses that you want to, but you want to drop in on classes and act as a "normal", fee-paying student? Would you be attending tutorials, completing assignments, taking the final exams? How do you plan to fit all that in if you already don't have time to complete all the courses you're interested in?

So yeah, ask. But stop calling out all these people who are calling you out on the moralities of attending classes without paying.

posted by [minus zero](#) at **10:38 PM** on August 24, 2008

You seem to be looking for affirmation here, not information. What you seem to want is for people to tell you that it's OK to do what you've clearly already decided to do.

Attending a class without signing up for it or paying to attend is theft of services. If you attend school, it is the learning that you're paying for, not the credits. What you seem to want is to get that learning without paying for it.

Irrespective of any other aspect of this, whether classes are big or small, whether other students are attentive or not, whether anyone would notice. what you're proposing to do is wrong.

posted by [Class Goat](#) at **10:58 PM** on August 24, 2008 [[4 favorites](#)]

It's really not hard to ask. Most instructors will probably say yes, and the few that say no will have good reasons. Respect that.

posted by [grouse](#) at **11:11 PM** on August 24, 2008

As a former lecturer/instructor thingy to classes of thirty (and more!)...

It's really a question of good manners (these will help you in the long run, Nighthawk). Plus it's a great chance to get to know some instructors and lecturers - you might become friends, or you may gain a mentor.

Besides, if I saw some moronic creep who obviously didn't give a shit about anyone but himself in my class unannounced, I would ask him to leave immediately, and, in lieu of a boot in the ass on the way out the door, call the campus cops.

It's actually a question of security and providing a safe environment for the other students.

Funny how a little courtesy helps, eh?

posted by [KokuRyu](#) at **11:49 PM** on August 24, 2008

Previously:

[Sneaking into university lectures for free?](#) [Unofficially auditing university classes?](#)

I posted an [answer](#) to the first of those. While I encouraged going ahead and crashing courses in large lecture halls there, I agree with people here that it wouldn't be cool to do it in a class as small as 30 without the instructor's blessing.

posted by [Zed_Lopez](#) at **12:30 AM** on August 25, 2008

I would suggest that class size and timely attendance are of importance as well.

if it's a class of less than thirty or any other number the professor would notice a new face in I'd suggest chatting with them beforehand, if only because it could otherwise lead to embarrassing situations. showing up late or leaving early also are especially inconsiderate if you are not really in the class.

if you are enrolled and paying tuition anyway though, I'd suggest it to be perfectly fine for you to take a peek at other classes. sit in the back, listen, let the actually enrolled students ask questions and hang back yourself (they get grades, they should get the attention). you should be the proverbial fly on the

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wall, if you can meet all those requirements, go for it. get the most out of your education.

posted by [krautland](#) at **2:43 AM** on August 25, 2008

Christ, what an asshole.

If you give the same *asshole* vibe in person as you do in writing, and you were sneaking in my class, I would decide that you needed to be taught a lesson and advise my director that he prosecute you for theft of service.

If you asked me in person, came across as a nice chap who will not give trouble, and seemed genuinely interested in the material, I would invite you to sit in front of the class and perhaps even offer you to correct your homework.

Don't be a jerk. Choose life.

posted by [gmarceau](#) at **3:56 AM** on August 25, 2008 [[1 favorite](#)]

Morning yall, Hah, seems while I've been sleeping you guys have been trying to come up with reasons to keep me out of class :P. Again, teachers at my college seem to be more then happy to have students that actually care about the material. One thing I just remembered I want to shoot off[as I have to leave for school in about 20 minutes, is when I told a counselour a semester or 2 ago, I went and sat in on a few classes when trying to find a good philo instructor and she freaked, said it was illegal. So that goes back to my original question, why would I want to risk getting completely blown out like that and have them watching for me as opposed to staying quite? And as far as taking someones seat who actually wanted to be there? no, thats different. I stepped in on a friends piano one class last year, stayed for a good 20 minutes and acted as a student until someone came in and there were no more seats, so I got up and left, told him to have my chair. So everyone who thinks this is a matter of stealing someones chair, RELAX, its not. anyway, SCHOOL!!!!

PS - I realised in the shower and minute ago, I have a new set of classes starting tommorow, so let the discussion and heckling continue!

posted by [Nighthawk3729](#) at **4:15 AM** on August 25, 2008

You kind of contradict yourself in your original question - you say you don't have enough time to complete all the courses that you want to, but you want to drop in on classes and act as a "normal", fee-paying student?

At my university there was a limit to how many courses you could register for - minimum/standard 120 units, maximum 150 units.

Furthermore, a student registered on a course has to complete assignments, study for final exams, and take final exams. At least at my university, all the assignments tended to be due in at once, and all the exams were within a few days of each other. So you might have time to attend extra lectures for most of the year, without having time for an extra assignment during assignment season, or an extra exam at finals time.

Of course, you could argue that the assignments and exam study are a key part of the education experience and just attending the lectures won't be as good. But that's a question for Nighthawk3729.

posted by [Mike1024](#) at [4:36 AM](#) on August 25, 2008

Again, teachers at my college seem to be more than happy to have students that actually care about the material.

[...]

why would I want to risk getting completely blown out like that and have them watching for me as opposed to staying quite?

Do you see the contradiction here?

posted by [Mike1024](#) at [4:42 AM](#) on August 25, 2008

Your school charges because their product is education and providing classes is very expensive. Coming & going during classes is disruptive, so check to see what the max and current enrollments are before even thinking of taking a seat. If you are an enrolled fulltime student, and have permission to audit classes for free, then fine. Otherwise, no.

posted by [theora55](#) at [4:44 AM](#) on August 25, 2008

And I do applaud your desire to investigate other fields of study, which is probably why a dean would allow this. You do learn more as an enrolled student, doing homework, labs and exams, for a grade.

posted by [theora55](#) at [4:46 AM](#) on August 25, 2008

seems while I've been sleeping you guys have been trying to come up with reasons to keep me out of class

It also seems to me that you've wasted a question because you're not listening to any of the advice that is given.

I've been in classes where people who weren't getting a grade were there, with varying degrees of success on their part.

In one class (large auditorium) the professor truly didn't care, as long as you weren't disruptive and let the people actually enrolled in the class have the first chance of participating.

I've been in another large auditorium class where the person was kicked out and told that campus security would be called if they sat in on a class again. The professor very publicly in front of the class told this student that if they had asked everything would have been OK. But since the student went behind the professor's back the student wasn't welcome anymore, and it would probably be a good idea not to officially take any classes with that professor either.

I've been in 2 smaller classes where it worked out fine because the people auditing the class let the professor know beforehand. 1 was around 25-30 people, and 1 was 3 people.

Seriously though, don't be an ass. Don't take spots that students who want to earn a grade in the class can have. Don't go behind people's back to get what you want.

If you were in one of my classes and did this, I would do everything I could to get you banned from the class. And part of that would be the attitude that you've presented throughout this post.

posted by [theichibun](#) at **5:18 AM** on August 25, 2008

To be honest I'm a little perplexed, because in my university students are encouraged to drop in on lectures for classes they're not taking, especially in the first few weeks of semester. In one of my classes last semester even, with a class of around 20, towards the end when we were doing class presentations on our projects we had someone own up to not being officially enrolled (presentations ran by order of seating, so she couldn't hide). And then our lecturer's only reaction was to offer to give her a presentation slot anyway if she wanted to talk about her experiences with the class and how it related to ... whatever reason she had for sitting in, I've forgotten.

I'm sure in some classes people have gotten away with it without ever being

found out... but that's just how it works here. It probably varies per uni and per lecturer. Ask. [Menu](#) [Search...](#)

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posted by [Xany](#) at **5:27 AM** on August 25, 2008

A lot of people have said this, but I *am* a college instructor and let me tell you something. If the class has under 50 people in it, we notice and kick out interlopers. And if someone tries to sneak in, we catch them, and then they ask for permission we refuse. They should have asked the first time.

If you're serious about doing this I can't understand why you wouldn't take the time to contact the instructors (who would presumably be your instructors in the future) and ask them, which would build a relationship between you starting NOW so when you're in their class they'll know you and remember your ambition shown through your research of their classes.

You seem pretty set on sneaking in, but no good can come of that at all.

posted by [arniec](#) at **6:23 AM** on August 25, 2008 [[1 favorite](#)]

Again, teachers at my college seem to be more than happy to have students that actually care about the material.

So, no problem, then---you can ask with the expectation of getting the answer you want.

posted by [leahwrenn](#) at **6:24 AM** on August 25, 2008

I'm there to learn and not them, morality can go shove it.

You need an education that you won't get from sitting in classes.

And as a professor, I can assure you that after the first week or two of class shopping, I would always notice a new face in a class of 30-odd students, and I would always ask you to leave if you hadn't asked my permission to attend. On the other hand, if you do ask my permission, I would never say no to an interested student or prospective student looking to sit in on one or two sessions (but certainly not more).

You're breaking the rules of any university or college in the US, at least, by sneaking in to classes. Do you want to take a risk where the worst case scenario is being escorted out by security, and possibly facing disciplinary action by the school? Why, when all you'd likely have to do is the morally right

(and legally right) thing of asking permission?

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As for "morality can go shove it," I hope you feel the same way when I show up at your house for dinner without an invitation or even knowing you.

"Dick move" doesn't even begin to summarize your attitude. Like I said, you need a more basic education than you'll be getting in college. Like lessons in manners.

posted by [fourcheesemac](#) at [7:27 AM](#) on August 25, 2008 [[7 favorites](#)]

Morning yall, Hah, seems while I've been sleeping you guys have been trying to come up with reasons to keep me out of class

No one's trying to keep you out of any class. Everyone is just trying to point out that the polite, reasonable thing to do would be simply to ask the instructor first. The vast majority of instructors will not mind. (Though I have to say if you participate heavily in the class discussion, and take time away from other students, given your manner here, they may start to mind.) Your question was literally "should I ask the professor for permission or should I just sit in?" The overwhelming consensus is the first choice, not the second, especially for smaller classes. And your response is what I quoted above?? You clearly didn't want real advice. (And it's not even as if the advice is difficult or complicated.)

I will add my voice to the consensus, by the way. I would always notice a new person in a smallish class (even in a largish class, probably), and I would prefer to know why they are there. Unless they are disruptive I would almost never tell them they couldn't sit in.

posted by [advil](#) at [8:17 AM](#) on August 25, 2008

Looks like the law and order folks are out in droves for this one.

As for "morality can go shove it," I hope you feel the same way when I show up at your house for dinner without an invitation or even knowing you.

C'mon, you know that's not the same thing at all. This is the equivalent of saying pirating an album is the same thing as stealing a car, and let's not have that debate here.

But I agree, asking is best, but doesn't always work. Seeing as I don't know a whole lot about your situation, whatever you do: **use your brain, use**

discretion, and be considerate of other students and the professor
(basically, don't be an asshole).

As for "morality can go shove it", you don't need to justify your decision with "morality" because you have a brain and you can use discretion. Morality is nothing but the decisions you make. You obviously are having doubts about whether or not you should be doing this and that to me says it's a situation in which you **shouldn't** be doing this. I'm just trusting your instincts.

Good luck.

posted by [symbollocks](#) at **9:23 AM** on August 25, 2008

I teach 30 person classes regularly and they often "cap out". That means there are people who missed out on the class because of course caps. I sometimes override the system to let in 2 or 3 extras. Usually I'm assigned a classroom that has 35 seats or so.

I'm telling you this because you should know: there are fee-paying students who wanted to get in to the classes and couldn't. for you to "jump the queue" so to speak is, well, inconsiderate. And 30-person classes are small enough that I absolutely will notice that you're there.

That being said -- if the class **wasn't** capped out, and you contacted me in advance, I'd consider it, if you were really interested in taking it and were just planning to sit in on the first couple of sessions to see if you wanted to register. If, on the other hand, you were just along for a free ride, well, I'm one of those "information wants to be free" kind of people, but not when it's at the expense of other people. If you really just want some free education, there are plenty of online offerings (for example, Harvard and MIT).

posted by [media_itoku](#) at **9:35 AM** on August 25, 2008

Morning yall, Hah, seems while I've been sleeping you guys have been trying to come up with reasons to keep me out of class :P.

I have to say, it really seems like you're taking advantage of the goodwill of Ask. You don't have to like or agree with our answers, but don't be so obtuse as to make fun of us for trying to give you the help and advice *you* asked for.

Anyway: seriously, how hard is it to send an e-mail? How long does it take? A few seconds? Maybe a professor will care, maybe not. Better safe than sorry.

posted by [Solon and Thanks](#) at **9:50 AM** on August 25, 2008 [[2 favorites](#)]

C'mon, you know that's not the same thing at all. This is the equivalent of saying pirating an album is the same thing as stealing a car, and let's not have that debate here.

Oh noes. Not this again. You can't say "let's not have that debate here" if you open up the debate.

It is indeed morally and legally exactly the same thing unless you think you're somehow better than everyone else who is honest and plays by the rules and pays for what they consume.

Visiting a class with permission, or auditing a class with permission, is "fair use." Sneaking in and trying to deceive the school or the professor is theft of services.

Just because someone else has a surplus doesn't mean you are entitled to take it from them without asking. To be more precise, the equivalence might be put thusly: suppose you've got lots of leftovers from dinner. I assume you won't mind if I show up at your house and pick them up without asking. So I have an extra chair in my class. Doesn't mean you can just take it. Suppose I have an "extra" car I'm not using this month. So anyone should be allowed to come into my garage and borrow it, right? Or, assuming I have only one car, hitch a ride with me on my way to work without asking me since I'm going there anyway and it's no skin off my back?

This is not a derail, because it addresses a key point of confusion on the original question. Indeed it seems the OP is confusing his own perspective (who's gonna know?) with the letter of the law and the moral standards of civilized communities (just because you can get away with something doesn't make it right).

And in smaller classes, students get to know each other. They form a community. They become comfortable enough to talk about difficult subjects or risk embarrassment over time. That is all infringed when there are strangers in the class, invited or not, whom the other students don't know. And who aren't accountable to their classmates or the instructor. So you are indeed stealing - at least at the margin -- from your fellow students when you do this. You may not like to see it that way, but you are.

I love how so many people are perfectly willing to argue for giving away *other* people's services, property, and rights. Consider whether you'd give away

your own services if you didn't have enough paying customers at any given time, or your own stuff if you had some extra stuff. To a stranger. An impolite, ill mannered stranger who can't be bothered even to ask and who thinks s/he's getting over on you by doing so.

If you do ask, I will give you what I can afford to give you and I will let you audit my class for a session or two. If you don't ask, you're a thief. And you're rude.

What is so hard about asking permission, whether it's to use a copyrighted image or audit a class? Why do so many people think that is an imposition on their "freedom" of action? It's so blatantly selfish.

posted by [fourcheesemac](#) at **11:29 AM** on August 25, 2008

Can't resist adding one more point. The OP says s/he's there "to learn," (so "to hell with morality") -- which is a contradiction in terms unless you think education consists of imparting facts a professor knows and a student doesn't. That's a very small part of education. You can look up facts you don't know online, take a free course online somewhere, read MIT's opencourseware, whatever. You don't attend classes to learn facts you could look up. You attend classes to interact with the instructor and your fellow students. That interaction is what is being bought by the students who pay tuition. The ecology of that interaction is altered by the presence of uncommitted, unregistered students who haven't secured the instructor's permission (it's altered when you have permission to, but the professor and the institution get to decide if the alteration is a bearable cost, or even a good thing, *not* the visitor; it's not the visitor's class).

This is emphatically **not** about money from an instructor's point of view. Most college level instructors are paid the same if 5 or 50 people register (though insufficient numbers can lead to problems keeping the gig, or having your adjunct class canceled when you were counting on the \$5K adjunct salary to feed your kids that semester). The university or college may care about the revenue implications, but as the instructor, I don't really care about that beyond knowing that people who pay for something are more committed to taking it seriously than people who don't, on balance. It's no financial skin off my back if you attend my class without paying or if you pay your tuition in cash on the barrelhead. So what you're stealing, while it has monetary value to the other students and the institution, is not defined solely by its monetary value, by the mere presence or absence of an available 2 square feet of space for your ass to sit down in.

The OP also says s/he is "trying to decide my path in life." Well, kiddo, here's a

moment of decision for you. Do you choose the path of being a decent and polite and sincere person, who considers the long term implications of her/his conduct and respects fellow human beings, or do you choose the path of being a sneak and a thief and "to hell with morality," as you say? Your answer will reflect how ready you are for the more detailed and specific kind of education you purportedly seek, and whether you deserve it. If you're gonna sit in on a class or two, make sure one them entails exercises in moral reasoning. Because at root, this is not about the economic value of anything. It's about treating other people the way you'd expect to be treated, and you don't need a fancy education to learn that truth.

posted by [fourcheesemac](#) at **12:02 PM** on August 25, 2008 [[2 favorites](#)]

Since the OP doesn't seem to have much respect for moral objections to his/her proposed course of action I hope to appeal to his/her self-interest. First of all, in a class of 30 a professor will absolutely notice a new face. In the first few days of classes he or she'll be trying to get a grip on everyone's names and it's very likely that you will be spotted. The chances of this happening are low, granted, but it only has to happen once for serious consequences to follow. You say that you're trying to find your path in life -- this is not going to happen without people on your side. Those despised professors? You'll need them some day if you want to transfer to another school, need a recommendation letter for a job or graduate school or simply to tap into their network of connections. Having the bad reputation of the person who drops into classes without paying or so much as a by your leave is not going to help you one bit. On the other hand, professors are often very sympathetic to young people trying to find their avocation -- by asking for the opportunity to sit in on a class that you're not getting any credits for you show yourself to be a student who is interested in learning for learning's sake -- that's a far better reputation to have. You have everything to gain by asking to be allowed to sit in on classes and everything to lose by sneaking in without permission. It's your choice.

posted by [peacheater](#) at **1:18 PM** on August 25, 2008

Also, I'll note that there are [bazillions of high-quality free on-line courses](#) and excellent [recorded courses](#) that are often available at public libraries.

posted by [Zed_Lopez](#) at **1:54 PM** on August 25, 2008 [[1 favorite](#)]

The advice about dropping in on courses the first couple of weeks is excellent advice if you want to add the course. I've never refused someone enrollment who was dedicated enough to do the work just hoping for an official seat.

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As for the OP, faculty get emails from the administration all the time asking us to make sure non-enrolled students aren't sitting in on classes. (Auditors or "hearers" are technically enrolled and usually pay for the course in some form or another.) Sure there is the money angle, but there is also a safety angle. I've had a student's stalker try to sit on one of my courses once. Letting someone sit in while someone else isn't allowed to enroll due to enrollment caps creates a really bad precedent.

If you ask the professor and he or she doesn't care, fine. If it were my class, I would ask that you didn't come. Group work and contributions are not made better by people who aren't officially doing the work for the course. At the very least, it's awkward.

If the professor is someone who doesn't notice a new face among 30, frankly that is not a terribly good professor. You'd probably learn much more devoting your time to reading textbooks or, as Zed_Lopez points out, looking at lectures online.

posted by [ontic](#) at **3:38 PM** on August 25, 2008 [[1 favorite](#)]

Go to the professor and tell them the truth. "I'm a student at a local community college and have been studying _____ there for the past two years. I've become uncertain about what I want to do. I can't really afford to enroll in many different classes to figure that out, or even audit them officially, but I'm really interested in your class. If you have extra room, I'm wondering if I could sit in on the class without registering to get some exposure to the subject."

I bet well over 90% of professors would gladly do it if they have room. Most professors have a lot of students who are uncertain about what they want to do and would probably admire your attempts to find a way to narrow down what you truly want to study and what field you would like to go in. Not only are you avoiding trouble, if you discover you want to study the subject, you've already started a good relationship with a professor, which can be very helpful.

I also think that a much smaller but still substantial group of professors would invite you to participate in the class in a more involved way, i.e. to complete certain assignments or take exams, just to gain the feedback. I have seen this happen in a small honors class I took.

The best way to contact the professor would most likely be email, a few days before the first class. That being said, as a biochemistry student, even in my

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junior year most of my classes are large lectures and nobody would notice or care if someone did this. Also, I would expect people to care about this a lot less if you were an enrolled student at the university offering the classes rather than a person with no formal connection to the university at all.

posted by [david06](#) at 5:06 PM on August 25, 2008 [[1 favorite](#)]

I keep on seeing this come up, taking seats is NOT an issue, I have already replied to this with my example of the piano class, I left, no hesitation. Will people read and stop bringing up the seating issue?

Again, teachers at my college seem to be more than happy to have students that actually care about the material.

[...]

why would I want to risk getting completely blown out like that and have them watching for me as opposed to staying quite?

Do you see the contradiction here?

You misunderstand, my old professors don't mind me coming back is what I'm saying, I feel my chances for success are slimmer if I confront a new teacher.

Anyway, I went into class today and here are the results. My first registered class I went to, about 1/3 of the seats were open. The next class, one I sat in on, was done by an old teacher, no problems. I have decided to take the approach to see the teacher face to face before class and ask. Well, that was the plan for my 4th class,[3rd class went well] where I had to drop something off in a building across campus and even after running nearly the whole way[a good few minutes] came in late. The teacher asked me for my name I was blown out, I lied and told him I had just registered. He agreed to let me stay. After the class when everyone was gone, I asked to speak with him and told him the truth. I told him it was a bit of a white lie, as I had registered for the class a few weeks before but had to pull it because I didn't have the money to pay for it. He commended me on my honesty, but politely explained that the dean would surely screw him if he found out. I had contributed more than other people in the class during the time I was there and he told me himself even. On top of that, there were at least 11 seats open that I counted. I swear to god, if another person brings up that I'm taking students seats..... He said he wishes there were more students like me and if it was his call he let me stay.

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I am very interested in the topic and was even thinking about dropping one of my remaining classes or scratching money from places that I don't have together. I have recently found that there may be a loophole since I'm full time. That is another response to the statement that I am "stealing". Apparently, once I have full time status at my school, I can take as many classes as I want. As I am full time right now, that means that if I choose to go to 4 or 7 classes, it makes no difference. My point here is, there is no theft going on, besides the fact that I get a vibe from many teachers that they would rather have student like me going around then the normal shits that stare at the ceiling.

Another point, If I had not sat in on this class, I don't think I would have been as drawn as I am, I was interested before, that interest has been doubled.

Another interesting point, I find that if I don't have the pressure of having to pass the class, follow exams and have it effect my grade, I am free to explore the material. When I was in high school, I took a physics class that halfway through the year, had finally decided I would drop in favor for the AP art and photo 3 course I was going to take up originally. I had a good month to sit in the class as I was interested in the material and would just be tossed in a study hall if I left. While others struggled to remember formulas and "you better remember this for the test" statements all the time that buried their minds, I was free flowing in my thinking, mastering the material I was learning at that point, totally unlike the rest of the material, which I had pretty much failed.

A major aspect of taking a class is learning a teachers style of grading, their leniency, how they set their tests up, etc. Without having to worry about stupid things like which the teacher value more, the length or how clear the essay questions are, how close a teacher sticks to the lecture or the textbook. ALL THIS STUPID SHIT JUST GETS IN THE WAY. Of course, this is to evalute and make sure you understand the material. Without worrying about the grade, learning is easier if you are earnest. I don't care about the credit.

So lets seem I do ask the for permission, but taking from unworthy students, I don't feel so bad about. Lol, I just realised, I'm one of those people that usually sits in front :P.

I did just go off on a bit of a rant, didn't I.... .hmm... Aw well, take from it what you will. I have to get up for school in a few hours :D.....where I begin semi anew.

posted by [Nighthawk3729](#) at **8:09 PM** on August 25, 2008

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Sorry about the spelling errors in the last one, I didn't bother to reread it as I've spent more time than I should have writing it and I have to go.

posted by **Nighthawk3729** at **8:10 PM** on August 25, 2008

Before a mod comes and shuts down the thread if they do, I WOULD like to thank all the people who have participated thus far and thank you for your contribution. We can tassel a little bit can't we ladies and gents ;)?

posted by **Nighthawk3729** at **8:36 PM** on August 25, 2008

Another interesting point, I find that if I don't have the pressure of having to pass the class, follow exams and have it effect my grade, I am free to explore the material.

As several have already said above, that's called "auditing." It's an accepted mode for taking courses, and your reasons are not newly discovered ones. It usually requires that you register as an auditor and pay the tuition, but not always -- especially if the prof is a softie, and accepts auditors at all, and you are a nice person and serious and interested in the subject. It still takes commitment. If you want to audit, you come to every class, you do at least some of the reading, and you strike a different attitude than the one you've copped here up until this last comment -- the one summarized by the jarring phrase "to hell with morality." I don't think you meant that to sound the way it did. You can never put morality aside in dealings with other people unless you want to be treated with similar disdain yourself.

In my case at least, I specifically put the "seats" issue aside. There could be 20 or 200 empty seats in the room, and one or 100 students already in the class. Whether or not you can occupy one of those "empty" seats as an occasional drop-in is not up to you. It's up to the instructor and the institution. All most of us are saying here is that the right thing to do is to ask, and acting like asking is some kind of over-the-top or moralistic expectation is copping a weird attitude, like you are somehow entitled to occupy any empty seat simply because it's empty, and as if learning meant simply showing up when you feel like it.

I think, from your last comment, that you sort of get it now. But you have some introspection to do with respect to how the world -- and not just academia -- really works. Just because something is not being used doesn't mean you can take it without paying or asking to take it for free, whether it's a

I think your concept of education needs expansion. Education is not a simple commodity. It's something you participate in jointly with teachers and fellow students. The quality of that participation, and the spirit of that participation, is essential to the educational value you get from the experience, and the value of your participation for the other participants. You get what you pay for, either with money or commitment -- or both, for most people.

Anyway, good luck to you. You sound intelligent and motivated, just young and in need of exactly what you want: a real learning experience. Most of what you learn in college does not come from the front of the room while you passively absorb what the teacher says. It comes from being a full participant in a social process of interaction.

posted by [fourcheesemac](#) at **8:43 PM** on August 25, 2008

I am coming to this thread late and it seems that you have already decided your course of action for this semester, Nighthawk, but I thought maybe I could shed a little light on how this might look from the instructors' perspective.

You've pointed out more than once that "teachers at my college seem to be more than happy to have students that actually care about the material." I am sure they are very happy to have engaged and actively-learning students in the classroom.

However . . .

I am more than happy to have my friends visit my home *on my invitation* and share a meal and some conversation with me. This doesn't mean that I would be equally happy to have them show up uninvited at any old time.

I am more than happy to go on a dinner date with someone who is a good conversationalist. This doesn't mean that I would be equally happy to have some random guy plunk himself down at my table when I'm at a restaurant alone and start talking to me.

As a college instructor, I am more than happy to have good students who want to learn attending my classes. This doesn't mean that I would be equally happy to have an enthusiastic but unenrolled student show up for class without checking the situation with me first or at least being honest when I asked them about it.

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Whether it's fair or unfair, right or wrong, teachers tend to regard their classrooms as their space, and most of us want to be treated respectfully within that space. To some teachers, stealth non-enrolled students might not seem like a big deal, but I think a lot of teachers would feel disrespected by unannounced and uninvited "drop-ins."

For whatever it's worth, I had a non-enrolled student try to attend one of my courses a few years ago. He didn't ask first, and told "white lies" to explain why he wasn't on the official roster. He *creeped me out*. And no, I did not let him stay.

posted by [Orinda](#) at **8:48 PM** on August 25, 2008

It sounds like you had a great experience sitting in on the classes, which is great. But you didn't ask "should I sit in on these classes", you asked "should I ask first"!

I feel my chances for success are slimmer if I confront a new teacher.

Everyone here has been telling you that this simply isn't true, if you only send a polite email in advance most profs would be happy to have you sit in. Prof number four today, (who, by the way, was letting you save face by blaming the dean instead of calling you out for being inconsiderate and irresponsible) said no way after you showed up unannounced. Perhaps if you'd asked first, he would have welcomed you?

And I hate to say I told you so but refer back to my decision tree:

Prof does care:

Ask: Prof may or may not let you in (most will, if you ask nicely, you know)

Don't ask: Prof spots you and throws you out, possible repercussions

Told you so!

turns out I actually like saying it

posted by [PercussivePaul](#) at **9:33 PM** on August 25, 2008

told him it was a bit of a white lie, as I had registered for the class a few weeks before but had to pull it because I didn't have the money to pay for it. He commended me on my honesty, but politely explained that the dean would surely screw him if he found out.

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If his dean is anything like the ones I've met, he would be way too busy dealing with real problems to cause extra trouble for a professor who allowed an unauthorized auditor.

Sounds like the prof might have told a little white lie of his own. Turnabout is fair play.

posted by [grouse](#) at **1:13 AM** on August 26, 2008

Alright guys, you got me. I've been thinking about it and I'm going to take out a loan and get the classes.

posted by [Nighthawk3729](#) at **4:11 AM** on August 26, 2008

I thought you said you could take as many classes as you wanted without paying additional tuition.

posted by [grouse](#) at **8:34 AM** on August 26, 2008

[grouse](#): He probably figured out that you can take as many classes as you want up to a certain number. I don't know of any (quality) all-you-can-eat universities other than the internet. (Which I'm pretty sure is where all the young Steve Jobs of the world are learning nowadays.)

OP: Keep in mind that your university probably offers grading on a pass/fail basis in addition to auditing (which is not graded). Frequently, the professor doesn't even know if you're being graded pass/fail. It's a great way to take courses that aren't in your degree.

Also, if you do find a professor that is willing to let you sit in unenrolled, you'll want to watch contributing more than the people actually enrolled in the course. Even if the professor allows your presence, the other students have a perfectly legitimate claim on the priority of the professor's attention.

posted by [ontic](#) at **11:34 AM** on August 26, 2008

Just a note to look into Pass/Fail. At my university, the professors did not even know who was pass/fail. If they put a D or better into the gradebook, P showed up on the grade report. Note that there may be a limit on how many units/credits can be used toward graduation that are pass/fail, and courses required for a degree probably have to be taken the traditional way. Your School May Vary.

posted by [ALongDecember](#) at **2:05 PM** on August 26, 2008

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