Hello. I'm Professor Melissa Hale, and I want to talk to you about collegiality and professionalism. I'm going to talk about why these things matter and also give you concrete tips on how to execute them.

So, why is it important? Why do we care about collegiality and professionalism? Well, the legal community is shockingly small. And it is a field that lives off of referrals—for jobs, for clients, for everything. Networking is key, and networking really just means being friends with people in a professional capacity. This means that your reputation is important to success. At the end of the day, sometimes that means just being kind.

For example, in practice, if opposing counsel needs an extension, because they have a sick kid, unless it would be detrimental to your client, consider granting it. Because the attorney that is generally mean, rude, unwavering, won't get an extension when their kid is the one that is sick. Simply treat people the way you want to be treated and make sure that your reputation is one of professionalism versus difficulty.

When does it start? Well, now, really. Depending on when you're listening to this podcast, it might have already started. Your professionalism should start at orientation. Or sometimes even before, if you're speaking to admissions professionals or attending pre admission events. Law school is a professional school, so as soon as you interact with law school, that is when your reputation starts. Your classmates will be your colleagues, but so will your law school professors and administrators. Hit the ground running with a mind towards what you want your reputation to look like.

Also, keep in mind that you should extend professionalism to everyone in the building, from the security guard to the Dean. Everyone you interact with. It's generally good practice in life, but also, as I mentioned—professors, administrators, classmates—they're all going to remember you for referrals with jobs, clients, other opportunities, speaking engagements… And being disrespectful or rude is going to lead you to being remembered for the wrong reasons. In addition, your professors will be responsible for things like writing letters of recommendation which you will ultimately need for your first jobs.

So, now that we know why professionalism is important, let's talk about what it looks like in practice, some concrete tips. Careful reading and following instructions is my first piece of professionalism advice. We all make mistakes, and we all need to ask questions. But before you do, read the syllabus. Read emails carefully. Read instructions carefully. This doesn't mean that you never ask questions or that you have all the answers, but it does mean that you should be prepared. And maybe admit when you're unsure what something means. This can be in the context of a classroom in a relationship with your professor, or it can be an internship, or your first job.

First, check your emails. So if it's in the context of dealing with a professor, check your professor’s email. Is the question covered? Did you pay attention to deadlines or instructions given? Did you fully read the syllabus carefully?

If it's an email from a supervisor or something similar, are you paying attention to details? My first job, my supervisor told me that if I asked her a question, I'd have to let her know the three places I looked for an answer. Now, when most professors and bosses won't be that strict, it's still a good habit to get into. Can you find the answer in something you've already been given? Then ask the question.

And with professors, for example, I always tell my students please read the syllabus because most of their questions are covered in the syllabus. I even have an FAQ in my syllabus. I just spoke to another colleague who is a bit stricter than I. If you send that professor an email asking something that is covered in the syllabus, they will just not respond and they tell their students that silence means you should read the syllabus. Different professors, different administrators, different employers have different levels of strictness, but it's always a good idea to read all the documents carefully before you approach with questions.

And when you do approach with questions, be respectful. This is especially true with names and titles. In school, call your professors Professors, not by their first name. If they ask you to call them by their first name, that's fine, but don't assume. If you aren't sure what their title is, err on the side of respect. No one is going to get upset that you call them Professor. That should be the default. At the very least, put a Mr. or Miss in front of their name, though I much prefer Professor. It's just probably a better idea. Or if they're a Dean, to put Dean in front of their name.

Approaching people in general—attorneys you meet, professors, administrators—double check the spelling of their name, their title, all the information that could be on their business card or their email. For example, I sign emails to students as Professor Hale. And students will sometimes start a response to that email with dear Melissa. No, I don't mind a mistake, and this isn't about sort of being hierarchical. But it tells me that a student didn't read carefully. If I signed the email Professor Hale and they respond back with dear Melissa, that tells me they're not reading carefully at all and that's not the impression you want to leave on somebody. Also, mistakes happen so if someone addresses me with Melissa, especially if I've never emailed them before, I'm not going to be upset. But I will probably respond to that email signing Professor Hale, and then when they respond again with Melissa, it tells me that they're not reading. I've seen this happen with colleagues and the spelling of their names—my name is Melissa Hale, fairly straightforward in spelling—but I have plenty of colleagues whose name is less straightforward. Look at the spelling, look at the pronouns. Are they Sara with an A or Sarah with an AH? What is the spelling of their last name? Especially if it's in their email address, pay attention to that detail.

A lot of this is just down to respect at how someone wants to be addressed. And again, mistakes happen, this is not meant to stress you out. It's just that when the same student responds to my emails continually with Melissa instead of Professor Hale, after I’ve signed the email Professor Hale, it starts to feel less like an innocent mistake and more like an intentional sign of disrespect. And even if that's not what the student intends, that's not the feeling you want to leave with your colleagues.

Similarly, it's okay to expect the same respect from professors and administrators and your classmates, and your colleagues. How do you spell your name? How do you pronounce your name? What are your pronouns? It's okay to make these things clear and correct someone when they disregard that pronunciation or that spelling—that is absolutely something that you can and should do. And that goes along with advocating for yourself. You should advocate for yourself. You're in law school to learn to be an advocate for others. Often, that training starts with learning to advocate for yourself while in law school, and I want you to do that. Just do so politely and respectfully and that goes back to how you address people, how you spell their names, what their titles are… But it also means that if you need something, if you're advocating for something you need or something that's not working for you, be clear in the reasoning and don't demand, just make those requests and escalate if necessary.

Next is time management deadlines and commitments—all very important, especially in the legal field. If you need to ask for an extension, do so, but do so ahead of time. This is perfectly acceptable, I have no problem with my students asking me for extensions. When I do have a problem, it's when they didn't turn in an assignment and then ask for an extension a couple days after the assignment was due. Be proactive. Also, ask politely and don't assume. Don't assume that you're entitled to an extension. Ask nicely, give the reason, and most professors will probably be on board with this. However, that doesn't mean that you should be asking for extensions because you could not manage your time wisely, so keep that in mind, even at the beginning of the semester.

Also, stick to your commitments. That means extracurricular activities, internships, jobs, working for professors, or something you agreed to do with a professor. I always tell my students to manage your time carefully, in the sense that, I don't want you to bite off more commitments than you can handle. That means you don't have to be in ten different extracurricular activities. Make sure that you're honoring the time commitment you have to each thing that you're committed to.

And don't be afraid to ask for help. I know I said earlier that you have to read carefully and read the syllabus, and that's great. But if you don't understand something, ask for help. If you're struggling, if you're falling behind, if you just need help, ask for it. This is a big part of professionalism, and it often feels unprofessional to ask for help, but that's not true. Asking for help is a sign of professional growth and maturity. If you're not able to handle something, you're not able to get it done in time, you're struggling with your mental health or physical health, ask for help rather than letting something fall through the cracks. Especially in your practice, it can often be unprofessional and unethical to not ask for help. So it's good to get in the habit while you're in law school. In practice, not asking for help can lead to huge mistakes that impact clients, so again, something you want to practice right now in law school.

Emails. Emails are a huge part of law school, and the practice of law, so a special rule for emails: read every email twice before sending it. Does it say everything you need? Is it professional? And have you tried looking up the answer yourself first? That's just a little tidbit that a lot of supervisors, professors, administrators give to students. Don't be afraid to read that email twice before you send it.

This also applies to the practice of law. When I was practicing law, I worked in something called 93A, which was a Massachusetts consumer protection statute. And it involved sending what we called a 93A demand to a business that had somehow fraudulently misrepresented their items or their services, lied to consumers, or just otherwise violated consumer protection law. I made it a rule that I would never send the first draft of a 93A demand letter. I usually let it sit for at least 24 hours until I was maybe a little less angry or emotional on behalf of my client, and reread it. And I had a mentor say “everything you send, you should assume that it's going to be seen in court.” So read it out loud to yourself. Do you want that read out loud in front of a full court for the record? Are you happy with the way you've worded things? If so, send it along. But if not, it doesn't it doesn't hurt to sit on something for 24 hours, making sure your tone is correct.

Finally, social media. We can't leave that out. Absolutely use social media if you want, but be wary. I’m not going to tell you what to put or not put on your social media. Just note that this is also part of your professional reputation. Future clients, future employers, judges, and so forth might see the social media. I’m not telling you to censor yourself. And it's up to you what you want your professional image to be. I'm just hopefully gently reminding you that your social media accounts, even if private, are part of your professional reputation, so bear that in mind as you post. Just don't put anything you don't want future clients and employers to see. What you want them to see is up to you, so just be mindful of that.

And, on that note, this is a hard and fast rule, do not talk about your clients on social media ever. Ever. Better safe than sorry, even if you don't use a name or you think you've taken out relevant information, don't even chance talking about the case as that is an easy way to get in trouble with your bar’s rules of ethics.

And classmates, what about classmates? I mentioned that your classmates would be your colleagues and they'd be there for referrals—for jobs, for clients. One of my first jobs out of law school I got because of a referral of a classmate. Does this mean you have to be friends with everyone? No, you won't, there are too many, and some people just don't get along and that's fine. That doesn't mean that it's unprofessional if you just don't like somebody. What it does mean is that you want to treat everyone with respect. You're going to find your people, your group, so to speak, and that won't be everyone in your class—that's fine. Just be sure that you're treating everyone you encounter with respect. Treat them as professional colleagues. This doesn't mean not to be yourself, by the way, it just means to treat everyone with respect.

I hope that this helped give you insight into professionalism in law school. I want you to be yourself, like I said, I want you to carve your own professional identity. And I don't want you to think that this is censoring who you are. Absolutely be yourself. And you're going to be a better advocate for your clients if you are yourself. Just keep in mind that your career and your reputation start now. And treat everyone you encounter with an eye towards that. In addition, don't be afraid of mistakes. Everyone you encounter will know that you are learning. Professionalism doesn't mean perfection, or that you are always on your best behavior, so to speak. It just means that you're treating everyone with the respect that you would want to be treated with.

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