

How to Stop Sneering

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You heard about it happening to others. Perhaps the victim was a graduate student in a seminar, or an administrator at a high-stakes meeting. Maybe it was a young scholar at an academic conference where passions for a subject tend to run high and unbridled egos may roam. But you never really thought it would happen to you — until it does.

Blindsided. Maybe the full impact didn't sink in until after the fact: You'd been smacked by an academic sneer.

It happened to poet [William Stafford](#). He wrote about it in a poem called "Thinking About Being Called 'Simple' By a Critic." Many of us can relate to how the sneer replays itself in our heads. As Stafford writes: *"From the night again — those words: how stupid I was."*

There's a big difference of course between a substantive, valid critique of faculty work (which is part of the job) and a sneer (which is a visceral reaction, even a lapse of manners). The snide judgments of others, even when you can prove them unfounded, can reverberate.

Why do academics sneer? In the category of rudeness, shortsightedness, or microaggressions that can make academic life feel like your worst day in junior high, the sneer ranges from sheer ignorance to downright cruelty. It reflects the superiority of an in-group mentality. It may stem from not grasping the perspective or insight of someone else. It can come from the assumption that the other party is wrong. It can emanate from tunnel vision, narrow expectations, and what neuropsychiatrist [Abraham A. Low](#) called "intellectual blindness to the other side of the story." A sneer may accompany — deep down — fear, anger, or perhaps jealousy.

But disgust is [a primary emotion](#), after all. Perhaps each of us must use discernment to determine if our own sneering, or someone else's, is way out of control.

Can a sneerer stop? As with changing any habit, there needs to be a will to stop and, ideally, a desire to look within. Prosocial and antisocial behaviors are contagious. Burnout may be accompanied by cynicism. And sneering

functions well as a “Keep Out” sign. Some questions may help track the origins of this behavior:

- Was this mannerism cultivated in a family, workplace, or school where the environment was cutthroat or inhospitable?
- Is scorn or harsh judgment the modus operandi of colleagues?
- Have I been hurt by this myself? And am I passing it on?
- Am I thriving or burning out?
- Am I protecting myself from others?
- Is this necessary?
- Is this hurtful?

The CV sneer. Between the lines of everyone's CV or résumé is a private saga known only to a few. But that doesn't stop people from thinking they know your story, or rushing to judgment about it.

Here are some of the things academics have said to me in the past about my own CV, career path, and prospects for success: “You can't keep working as a secretary here when you finish your master's degree. That's demeaning.” Around the same time, I was told, “You mean you work up there with all those eccentric professors?” That sneerer was also a faculty member. “What do you mean you'll adjust your fees for someone's ability to pay ... what do you want to be, a social worker?” — I heard that from a local consultant whom I'd asked for advice on doing consulting work. Until that moment I hadn't realized that “social worker” could be a pejorative.

Beyond nursing temporary hurt feelings or choosing to shrug off such comments, I do strive to understand the root causes of such behavior and its potential damage. Perhaps it is simple vanity that leads us to believe that we know best what others should or should not do to advance their careers. The critical development of emotional intelligence does involve looking within at one's own motivations while sustaining empathy for others and — ultimately — creating stronger relationships. And some people are, frankly, rude.

Delete your own sneers? We've seen the damage, we've felt the sting, we may even have done it ourselves in a snarky moment. A student of mine excitedly explained to me his own definition of trolling: “It's important online to come up with something funnier and more insulting than the previous person wrote. That's how it works, Ms. Stewart. It's kind of like a game.”

You don't have to play that game just because so many other people do. Good-natured teasing is one thing; sneering is different. Solutions include deleting that sneering comment before you post it or send it. Or create a private “sneer” file for your eyes only. And find another outlet for this momentary anger.

Handling a sneering student. For me, this is a tough scenario to cope with as an instructor. Luckily I have few students who sneer to my face. Like many other seasoned faculty members, I allow students the privacy to say what they want about me (especially before class) out of earshot. A colleague of mine who has doubled as an athletic coach doesn't believe he's really doing his job unless students are griping.

One fall semester — I remember it vividly because it was when I caught the chickenpox — a student sitting front and center had fired away questions and challenges at me. He went on the offensive in every single class meeting, faster than I could even process his comments, and often punctuated by a sneer. Everything from the text to the course requirements was subject to question. He also came to my office for a private conference to complain about a B+ I'd given him on a writing assignment. That complaint was easier for me to handle than his classroom “show.”

Out of embarrassment, faculty do not always want to consult with colleagues about such situations in class, so I suffered in silence. Then one day, out of sheer exhaustion and after sharing a bit of chocolate, I reached out to a senior colleague, in humility and desperation. This was his advice: “Be direct. Take the student aside and say, ‘I'm

tired of this — and your fellow students are, too.”

Not long after that wise counsel, I was derailed for a week by about 1,000 itchy lesions. When I returned to class, the student had simmered down. In fact, he looked glad to see me. Even though I didn't end up using my colleague's advice that term, it came in handy many times down the road. Student behavior will startle you less as you gain more classroom experience. But don't hesitate to reach out for support and ideas when you are at the end of your rope.

Writer: Heal thyself. Please don't think I'm immune to the sneering instinct myself just because I am reflecting on it. We all indulge in this on occasion. And it can cause trouble even when we don't always mean for the recipient to hear. Once, when I was a student, a peer who had been absent from a recent class asked me if she had missed anything. “No, not really,” I replied. “She was her usual disorganized self.” I glanced around and saw the instructor smiling at me.

We do know better. “If they knew better, they would do better,” my sister likes to say whenever I tell a tale of some minor slight or complaint. She is an optimist, having worked in nursing and health positions where an unhelpful tone of voice can be picked up by a third party listening for “quality assurance.” She and I often compare the expectations of healers and teachers. We both wonder if — in a classroom, a hospital, or any high-stakes situation — the person apologizing for asking a “stupid” question isn't, at heart, afraid of a hostile response.

I think our own internal quality-assurance meter is a good place to start if we are given autonomy to choose our own pitch, tone, and tempo. Charles Darwin [has been credited](#) with being the first observer of this “universal expression of contempt,” complete with the flash of a canine tooth. Maybe this annoying habit *is* just human nature. But in my view, if our campus kindness and collegiality are to evolve to our highest potential, sneering is a good habit to lose.