



## Uncle Wuffle's Advice to the Assistant Professor

A Wuffle

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## Uncle Wuffle's Advice to the Assistant Professor\*

A Wuffle, *University of California, Irvine*

### 1. *At faculty meetings and elsewhere, assistant professors should be seen but not heard.*

Wuffle says: "Assistant professor like turtle, what not stuck out can't be chopped off." The reason that assistant professors should not make waves and should defer to their senior colleagues is not that the latter are necessarily wiser and more knowledgeable than they. The reason is that these senior faculty have tenure and the assistant professor doesn't; even more importantly, they vote on the assistant professor's tenure case, and not conversely. You don't have to be a rocket scientist (or a rational choice modeler) to recognize that opposing the pet projects and favorite job candidates of one's colleagues is not likely to improve one's tenure prospects.

### 2. *Never volunteer.*

Altruistic behavior with respect to departmental service should be reserved as the last resort of someone unlikely to get tenure under any circumstances. Seeking to endear oneself to departmental colleagues by service (rather than by excellence in research or teaching) is a road well characterized by P. T. Barnum: "This way to the egress."<sup>1</sup>

But, I can hear some young readers mutter to themselves, how can I tolerate the awful way that my department is run? If only I served on the committees to review (a) the graduate program, (b) secretarial services, (c) computer services, (d) university library services, (e) campus parking, etc., think how much better things could be made! Wrong! Indeed, the worse run a department is, the less desirable it is for any assistant professor to intervene to "improve" things. The simple fact is that assistant professors are unlikely to be efficacious, in part because they don't realize how difficult it is to change standard operating procedures; in part because, after all, they are still only assistant professors.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, one of the plausible reasons that things are as they are is that somebody with power actually likes them that way.

### 3. *Publish or perish.*

Yes, Virginia, they really weren't kidding. There is no Santa Claus.

Now that you have bowed to the inevitable, what do you do about it? I have five specific pieces of advice:

First, learn to type.<sup>3</sup> Few schools have adequate secretarial resources for junior faculty.<sup>4</sup>

Second, publish your dissertation or, at least, publish articles based on your dissertation, *my pronto*.<sup>5</sup> I know that newly minted Ph.D.'s never want to see their dissertations again, but the farther away you get from it the harder it gets for you to go back, the more outdated its data gets, the more critical recent research it omits reference to, and the more difficult it will be to make any changes required by reviewers in order for it to be published.

Third, now that your dissertation research is out of the way, look for other problems that are important. There are two ways to success in academia—finding something new to say about a much studied topic, and finding something interesting to say about a much neglected topic. But if you haven't got a question that anybody wants to hear the answer to, it won't matter that yours is the definitive answer.<sup>6</sup>

Fourth, try to publish in the best journals that you can.<sup>7</sup> If you believe in a paper, don't give up.<sup>8</sup>

Fifth, steer a careful course between the Scylla of never thinking a paper is quite ready to be submitted and the Charybdis of submitting stuff that hasn't been thought through. If you must err in one direction, let it be by completing and sending out your work. There is a very simple rule in academia: "Papers which haven't been submitted can't get published."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, when it comes time for a tenure deci-

sion, papers that haven't yet been accepted count for very little.<sup>10</sup>

### 4. In the words of the late Joe Tanenhaus to a young A Wuffle: "*Don't overteach.*"

Teaching is a noble calling, and an assistant professor might even be at a university that takes it very seriously; nonetheless, too much of even a good thing can be too much. Allocating time between teaching and research is not entirely a zero-sum game, since the two can mutually reinforce one another, but it is still a fact of life that a mediocre teacher with a superb publication record is going to have a more successful academic career than a superb teacher with a mediocre publication record. Moreover, under pressure, assistant professors have been known to improve their teaching almost overnight; improving one's research record simply cannot be done in short order.

### 5. *Make some friends.*

Perhaps the single most important resource any assistant professor can hope to have is someone who will provide careful reading and dispassionate criticism. The reader need not be a specialist in your area. Indeed, sometimes a nonspecialist can provide new insights; also a nonspecialist may find it easier to read with a focus on organization and clarity. It is very rare that senior faculty have the time (or will make the time) to read and critique drafts of work of their junior colleagues (even if an assistant professor were willing to show a half-baked version of a draft to someone who'll eventually be voting on tenure). Thus, reciprocating arrangements with other junior faculty are the likeliest way to get such feedback. But, in many departments, junior faculty view each other as rivals, competing for scarce tenure slots, rather than as allies and colleagues. This is doubly unfortunate. The perception of other junior fac-

ulty as rivals is apt to be wrong,<sup>11</sup> and the opportunity to form a mutual support group is lost.<sup>12</sup>

6. *Try to find a mentor.*

It is often very hard for an assistant professor to get tenure unless there is at least one senior member of the faculty who cares about the junior faculty member as a human being, and who will provide honest advice and go to bat for him at tenure time. Ideally, such a mentor should be where you teach; but there is no reason for assistant professors to lose touch with the faculty at the institutions where they got their Ph.D.s who knew their work best.

7. *If at first you don't succeed, be willing to try again.*

A number of distinguished faculty in political science didn't get tenure at their first institution. The assistant professor's lot is not an easy one, but it still has more job security and more freedom than all but a handful of jobs. Tenure is worth struggling for. As I once put it: "Tenure is never having to say you're sorry."<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

\*This is a companion piece to "Uncle Wuffle's Advice to the Advanced Graduate Student," *PS* (December, 1989), 838-39. A Wuffle is Assistant to Professor, School of Social Sciences, University of California, Irvine. He is best known for such seminal articles as "The Pure Theory of Elevators," *Mathematics Magazine* 55 (January 1982): 30-37; "Should You Brush Your Teeth on November 6, 1984," *PS* (Summer 1984), 577-80; and "Pig and Proletariat," *San Jose Studies* (1990): 5-39 (written under a pseudonym). He is currently at work on a series of essays on empirically insightful tautologies.

1. Of course, this does not mean that an assistant professor ought not to do a "fair share," or for that matter, a bit more—since one's notion of a fair share and that of one's senior colleagues may differ.

2. Moreover, even in the unlikely event that change for the better occurs, its likely pace is so glacial that unless assistant professors have tenure they won't be around long enough to benefit from the change.

3. Get a MacIntosh. Even a moron can learn to do word-processing on a Mac. I did.

4. Alternatively, be prepared to spend a substantial portion of your salary getting your papers professionally typed. That's what I did when first starting out.

5. Preferably do both, since books and journal articles are read by somewhat different audiences and serve different purposes.

6. There are two fundamental problems in research: not having enough ideas, and having too many ideas. The former problem is curable by reading and thinking; curing the latter problem requires either incredible self-discipline or a lobotomy.

7. Of course, minor papers belong in minor journals, and specialized papers in specialized journals, but at least occasionally aim high. It's a very tricky tradeoff between sufficiently padding one's vita and doing work that matters.

8. If you want to succeed, you must be willing to fail; rejected papers don't matter, only your successes count.

9. Wuffle says: "Life like bowling alley. The more balls you throw the more pins you are likely to knock down." Or, as Oscar Wilde might have said had he lived longer: "You can never be too rich, you can never publish too much." (Warning: This advice is not meant to apply to scholars who insist on publishing the same article in numerous guises in different journals, or to those who have dedicated their lives to the search for ever more obscure journals in which to publish.)

10. Moreover, everything takes longer to finish than one expects, almost certainly requires one or more rounds of revision/submission to a different journal before being accepted, and takes longer to see print after being accepted than one might think imaginable.

11. At many schools (e.g., those in the University of California system) tenure is based on individual performance, not relative performance; while at some universities (e.g., a number of Ivy League schools) tenure is impossible unless there is a credible offer of a full professorship elsewhere—and even that usually will not be enough.

12. If you're lucky (as I was), your cohort of junior faculty can become lifelong friends and not just colleagues.

13. A Wuffle, "Reflections on Academia," *PS* (Winter 1986): 57-61.

## Congress Passes Law to Clarify Fair Use of Unpublished Copyrighted Material

Page Putnam Miller, *National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History*

Just prior to adjourning, the Senate passed H.R. 4412, a bill to clarify the "fair use" of unpublished copyrighted material, which had been passed by the House in August. The Senate had passed a similar bill almost a year ago; but in the interest of getting something passed before the end of the 102nd Congress, the Senate agreed to the House version. H.R. 4412 states: "Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that section 107 of title 17, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the

following: 'The fact that a work is unpublished shall not itself bar a finding of fair use if such finding is made upon consideration of all the factors set forth in paragraphs (1) through (4).' " Paragraphs 1 through 4 provide four statutory factors that the courts are instructed to consider in making "fair use" judgments. These are: purpose and character of use; nature of copyrighted material (whether published or unpublished); the amount and substantiality of the portion used; and effect of the use on the market value of copyrighted work. House Report 102-836 which

accompanied H.R. 4412, however, concerned scholars for it seemed to approve only very limited use of copyrighted unpublished material. While the House and Senate bills contain similar language, the way the sponsors of these bills interpret them has been quite different. Representative William Hughes (D-NJ) advocates a narrow interpretation and Senator Paul Simon (D-IL) a broad view.

Since the House Report seemed to endorse a narrow view of fair use, Senators Paul Simon (D-IL), Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Edward Kennedy