



THE DATING COLLEGE

— ◆ —

THE
FIELD GUIDE
FOR DATING

— ◆ —

*A Hilarious, Genuinely Useful Course in Profiles,
First Dates and Finding Out What You Are*

FIRST EDITION

THIRTY LECTURES · NINETY EXAM QUESTIONS
ONE DEGREE IN COURTSHIP (HONS)

THE DATING COLLEGE

The Field Guide for Dating

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FIRST EDITION

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The Field Guide for Dating

A Hilarious, Genuinely Useful Course in Profiles, First Dates and Finding Out What You Are

First edition, 2026.

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This is a work of humour. The case studies and characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, living, single or recently left on read, is coincidental. The book offers general, light-hearted guidance. It is not a substitute for professional counselling or for medical, legal or financial advice. Telephone numbers and web addresses for support services were correct at the time of publication and may change. The Dating College is not an accredited institution, and its degrees, though heartfelt, are not recognised by any government.

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Questions and feedback: hello@thedatingcollege.com

Typeset in Lora and Source Sans 3.

For the hopeful.

*To everyone who has typed “hey”, deleted it, typed “hi”,
deleted that, and sent “hey”.*

The Faculty has seen the drafts.

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Orientation: A Word from the Registrar

Welcome to the Dating College.

Dating is the only important activity in adult life for which nobody receives any instruction. You are taught to drive. You are taught, at some length, about oxbow lakes. Then one day you are expected to sit opposite a stranger, be charming for ninety minutes and work out what to do about the bill, on the strength of some films and whatever your friends think.

This book fills the gap. It is a complete course in thirty short lectures, from the first photograph on your profile to the first argument over a tent. Along the way there are case studies, scripts you may borrow and small examinations that can be passed on a bus. It is meant to make you laugh. It is also meant to make you better at this, and the Faculty has never seen why the two should be kept apart. People will take advice from a joke that they would not take from a leaflet.

WHO THE COURSE IS FOR

Anyone who dates, or is about to start, or is starting again after a long time away. It makes no assumption about your age beyond adulthood, or about whom you date. Throughout, the person across the table is “your date” or “they”. The students in the case studies are of every sort, and what they have in common is that each has recently done something the Faculty can use.

HOW THE COURSE WORKS

Each chapter is one lecture, with a course code, because the Registrar enjoys issuing them. Every lecture has the same parts:

- **A case study**, featuring one of our students. All are fictional. Any resemblance to you is a coincidence, and the Faculty would be interested to hear about it.
- **The lecture itself**, in short sections.
- **A ruling from the Registrar**: one line worth remembering.
- **Boxes**: scripts to try, errors to avoid, kit to assemble and the occasional report from the staff room.
- **A cheat sheet** of three things, for those who remember nothing else.
- **The examination**: three questions, each with one right answer, one tempting wrong one and one that nobody has ever chosen sober. The Registrar's notes give the answers.
- **A field assignment**: one small thing to do this week. This is the part that changes anything.

Read it in order, as a degree, or open it at the lecture that matches this week's difficulty. The Examinations Board recognises both methods.

THREE RULES OF THE INSTITUTION

First, the jokes are on us. The comic target of this book is the person holding it: your photographs, your fourteen drafts, your new shoes. It is never the people you date. Nobody in these pages is mocked for their gender, their body, their age or whom they fancy. The students are laughed at for what they did, and most of us have done the same.

Second, there are no tricks. You will find no techniques here for making anyone like you, because there are none that work on a person you would want. The advice is the kind a good counsellor would recognise: be honest about who you are, pay attention to the other person, say what you mean and take no for an answer. Where a lecture touches on consent or safety, the jokes stay on the student and the advice is given straight. You will be able to tell.

Third, one idea at a time. Please do not attempt all thirty lectures by Friday. Choose one thing, try it on one date and come back for another.

IF THIS BOOK WAS A GIFT

If someone gave you this book, try not to take it personally. It may have been a hint. It may equally have been a friend who has watched you redraft one message for an hour and wanted to help. In either case they were thinking of you. Say thank you, and consider yourself enrolled.

One last thing. However well you do, never begin a sentence on a date with the words “According to Lecture Nine...”

With academic affection,

The Registrar

The Dating College

The Entrance Examination

Before enrolment, every student completes a short diagnostic paper. There is no pass mark. There is a result, and you may recognise yourself in it. Circle what you would actually do, not what you would do if the Faculty were watching.

1. You have matched with someone you like the look of. You:

- a. Write a first message, delete it, rewrite it, show it to two friends and send it on Thursday.
- b. Send four messages at once, then a fifth apologising for the four.
- c. Do nothing. They will message if they are interested.

2. It is the day after a very good first date. You:

- a. Draft a follow-up, consult the group chat and schedule it for the optimum hour.
- b. Have already sent a voice note from the bus, a photograph of your breakfast and a link.
- c. Wait. It is on them to get in touch.

3. The bill arrives. You:

- a. Have been quietly dreading this moment since the starters and have three strategies.
- b. Announce that you will get it, tell the waiter a story and leave your card behind.
- c. Look at your phone until the matter has resolved itself.

4. Someone you have seen twice is not right for you. You:

- a. Compose a considerate message, rewrite it nine times and send it in March.
- b. Explain why, in full, with examples, and offer to stay in touch.
- c. Stop replying. They will work it out.

5. Three months in, you would like to know what you are. You:

- a. Analyse their last forty messages for indications.

- b. Ask at a party, in front of their friends, in a loud and friendly voice.
- c. Wait for them to bring it up. It has been three months; it can be four.

RESULTS

Mostly a: The Overthinker. You are careful, considerate and slightly paralysed. Nothing leaves your phone without an editorial process. The people you date think you are not interested, because by the time your message arrives they have moved house. Begin with DC 112 (The Goodbye and the Follow-Up) and DC 124 (“So... What Are We?”).

Mostly b: The Broadcaster. You are warm, open and a great deal all at once. Nobody is ever in doubt about how you feel, or what you had for lunch. Your enthusiasm is an asset. It needs a volume control. Report to DC 113 (Texting Between Dates) and DC 109 (Conversation, Not Interrogation).

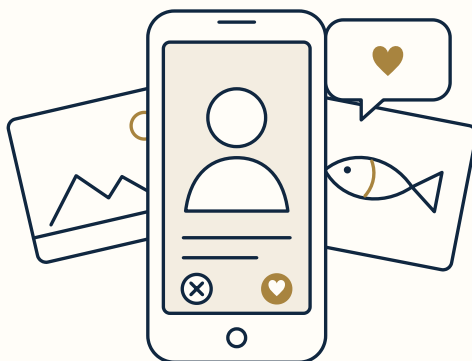
Mostly c: The Waiter. You are calm and undemanding, and you have been standing near the hummus for some time. You believe that things which are meant to happen will happen without your taking part. Proceed directly to DC 120 (Romance Without the Script: “Wait”) and DC 117 (Turning Someone Down, Kindly).

A mixture: The Ordinary Human. Congratulations. You display all three behaviours, in rotation, depending on how much you like the person. This book was written for you. Begin at Lecture One.

PART ONE

Enrolment

*The profile, the first message and
the suitcase you are bringing.*



DC 101 The Profile, Honestly

DC 102 A Bio, Not a Hostage Note

DC 103 The Opening Line

DC 104 From Chat to Date

DC 105 Emotional Baggage, Carry-On Only

*“Entry requirements: one recent photograph, one
true sentence and a willingness to press send.”*

The Profile, Honestly

Six photographs and the radical idea of looking like yourself



CASE STUDY

Bridget's profile contained six photographs, and she could be identified with confidence in none of them.

The first was her dog, Kevin, a lurcher, sitting in a wheelbarrow and looking into the lens with total composure. The second was from her cousin's wedding in 2016, under a hat with the diameter of a patio table. The third showed five women in matching sashes outside a bar in Newcastle. Bridget was second from the left, or possibly the right. In the fourth she was on a chairlift in goggles, a helmet and a scarf, and could have been any adult in Europe. The fifth was a sunset over Crete. The sixth was a concert, photographed from row Z.

Tomasz arrived at the café on Saturday with all six committed to memory. He looked for the hat. He looked for a sash. He smiled hopefully at a woman by the window, who moved her bag onto the spare chair. Then he noticed, tied to the bicycle rack outside, a lurcher he would have known anywhere.

"Kevin?" he said.

Of the two of them, only Kevin had been accurately advertised.

Photo one has one job

The first photograph is there so that a stranger can tell what you look like. Everything else it might do (suggest that you travel, prove that you have friends, document a hat) is a bonus, and none of it counts until that job is done.

So lead with a clear, recent picture of you on your own, in decent light, with your whole face in it. Smiling helps, because it shows people what they would be sitting opposite. No sunglasses, no helmet, nothing held in front of your chin like a shield.

This is duller advice than you were hoping for. The Faculty knows. But the person looking at your profile is making a small decision quickly, often on a bus, and will not do detective work. If photo one is a group, they have to guess. If it is a sunset, they learn that you have been outdoors in the evening. People who have to guess generally move on, and they are not being shallow. You have set them a puzzle and their stop is coming.

What the other five are for

Once your face is on the record, the remaining photographs can show what you are like. One full-length, so that nobody is startled to discover you have legs. One of you doing something you really do on an ordinary weekend: cooking, cycling, standing beside an allotment looking pleased. One with friends is fine, fourth or later, provided you are easy to find in it.

Then some retirements. The picture with an arm around your shoulder and its owner cropped out tells everyone exactly whose arm it was. The gym mirror shows mainly the phone. The borrowed baby needs a caption explaining that it is not yours, and a photograph that needs a disclaimer has stopped being useful.

And the fish. The Faculty has nothing against fish. It simply notes that the fish is the only one in that picture who did not choose to be there, and that your fourth photograph does not need to be a fish.

Kevin may stay. A dog you really own is fair information about your life, your sofa and your Sunday mornings. He goes at number five, not number one.

Field Kit

- Photo one: you, alone, face clear, taken this year or last.
- One full-length picture, standing up, in clothes you still own.
- One of you doing something you would happily do again this weekend.
- One with friends, fourth or later, in which you can be found without a diagram.
- Nothing that needs a caption beginning “Not my...”.

Recent means recent

A good photograph of you from 2016 is a good photograph of someone you used to be. You may feel it captures your essence. Your date is not meeting your essence. They are meeting whoever comes through the door on Saturday, and they would like to recognise them.

A workable rule: nothing older than two years, and nothing from before your last big change of hair, beard, glasses or general outline. If you have had to scroll a long way back to find a picture you like, that is information too. It means the next job is taking a new one, which costs nothing and needs one friend and a window.

The truth, slightly ironed

You are allowed to present yourself well. Choose the good light, the shirt that fits and the day you had slept. That is ironing, and everybody is entitled to it.

Alteration is a different trade. Adding two inches, removing five years, smoothing your face until it has the texture of a boiled egg, describing a job you left in the spring: each of these is a lie with a deadline, and you set the deadline yourself when you

agreed to coffee. Your date will meet the real version across a small table, in daylight, and will spend the first ten minutes doing arithmetic instead of listening to you.

There is a better reason than getting caught, though. The point of all this is to be liked by someone who has seen you. If they liked a taller, younger, smoother person, you have won a prize on somebody else's behalf, and sooner or later you will have to tell them. Being chosen at your actual size is a relief that is hard to describe until you have had it.

THE REGISTRAR RULES

*Look like yourself on a good day. It is
the only version of you that can attend.*

Get a second opinion

Nobody is a good judge of their own photographs. You favour the one in which you look least like yourself, which is precisely why you like it. Your friends see your face the way a date will: moving, talking, from the front.

So ask one of them. Choose the kind friend, not the funny one, and ask a specific question: "Which of these looks most like me on a good day?" Do not ask "Which is the hottest?", which starts a different conversation and occasionally ends a friendship. Whichever they pick goes first.

Bridget, for the record, now opens with a photograph her sister took in the garden in May. There is no hat. Tomasz says he would have found her in under a minute. Kevin has been moved to number five and is said to be taking it well.

Overheard in the Staff Room

Registrar: How many applications this morning?

Professor of First Impressions: Forty. Thirty-one included a fish.

Registrar: The same fish?

Professor of First Impressions: Different fish. Same expression.

Registrar: On the fish, or on the applicant?

Professor of First Impressions: Both.

CHEAT SHEET

- ☒ Lead with a clear, recent photograph of you on your own.
- ☒ Iron the truth. Do not alter it.
- ☒ Let a kind friend choose photo one.

The Examination

1. Bridget's strongest first photograph would be:

- a. The wedding in 2016, because it was a very good hat.
- b. Kevin, who tests well with all age groups.
- c. A clear picture of her from this year, on her own, smiling.

2. You are 5 ft 8 in. Your profile should say:

- a. 5 ft 10 in, the difference being mostly posture.
- b. 6 ft 3 in, and you will arrive on a box.
- c. 5 ft 8 in.

3. Who should choose your first photograph?

- a. A kind friend who knows what you look like.
- b. You, at midnight, after forty minutes of zooming in.
- c. The office, by secret ballot.

REGISTRAR'S NOTES

1 (c). The hat was magnificent and is no longer evidence. Kevin has his own admirers and should not be asked to carry yours. 2 (c). Two inches is a short lie with a long walk to the table. The Faculty does not supply boxes. 3 (a). Left alone at midnight, you will choose the chairlift.

FIELD ASSIGNMENT

Send your photographs to one kind friend with a single question: "Which of these looks most like me on a good day?" Put that one first. If they choose the one you like least, the Faculty is sorry, and the friend is right.