Teaching at UIC: a practical manual for instructors and teaching assistants
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Introduction: I’m a TA, now what?

Congratulations! You are a teaching assistant!! What does that mean? Being a teaching assistant is one of the most important and meaningful jobs you can have. Your job is to support your professor in ensuring the students are grasping the concepts of the class, taking the time to explore some subjects in more depth, and making your professor aware of any potential issues that the students are facing. Usually teaching assistants are employed in larger classes. This also means that in your individual sections, you have the opportunity to get to know these students, their abilities, and have the opportunity to push them to really know the material.

Following the guidelines in this resource should provide you with at least one syllabus for your teaching portfolio, many example lesson plans for your writing portfolio, at least one class that you can be ready to teach at a moment’s notice, and you will have finished all of your teaching related work (except for reading and grading) in the time that the university expects you to have dedicated to your teaching. The sections in this workbook have been broken down into the smallest sections possible so that you can easily work in small pieces during office hours down time, and so that you can choose to work on each element of your class as different needs and issues arise. We have listed a reading time and implementation time for each section to help you plan how to use this resource. Some sections provide direct instructions that you can use to do the work of teaching. In these sections we have provided an estimate of the time such activities will take when you are first starting out. Other sections help you to reflect on and reinforce your skills. These are the sections that will say “ongoing” in the implementation time section.

The first step in your journey is to reach out to your professor. Generally, professors will set a meeting with you to share the syllabus, the objectives for the class, and their expectations for either discussion or labs, depending on the class. However, feel free to send your professor an email, or stop by their office, to introduce yourself and let them know you are looking forward to working with and learning from them.

We wrote this book after serving as TAs and/or Instructors at UIC for more than 6 years as we completed our graduate work. Sarah came to the classroom with previous experience teaching English in Nepal. Kim came to the classroom with zero classroom experience, but has worked hard to learn how to manage the classroom, and connect with her students. Through the years we have worked together to nurture our desire to bring an educational experience to the classroom that engages, challenges, and encourages our students. Our aim in any class is to make learning fun, develop a need to look at the world from a different aspect, and to help our students become better students, better scholars, and ultimately better thinkers. We realized that we have challenged each other to find new ways to address situations in our classroom, finding new ways to share material, and also work current events into our classroom. We are now sharing this support with you. Our aim in this book is to provide you with the tools, tips, and resources to allow you to focus on not just being a good teacher – but being a great teacher and maybe even a mentor.

One of the steps we took in our teaching journey was taking the series of classes offered by the Graduate College for teaching assistants. We took these classes with Dr. John Coumbe-Lilley, and he has been a supporter and cheerleader of our efforts in the classroom. He, like us, has a passion for teaching and
learning that is contagious. But it was in this class that we found that as TAs we have few resources to turn to in our teaching efforts. We have both benefitted from the sharing of syllabi from more advanced graduate students and have in turn shared syllabi with new TAs/Instructors. But the experience of the classroom is difficult to share within a syllabus. We hope that our sharing of our experience and our arsenal of resources will help you in your experience as a leader in the classroom. By providing some basic guidelines, you will be able to focus on the actual phenomenal job of teaching rather than figuring out the paperwork and details.

Those things being said use this manual as a tool book, a guide, a resource, a reference, and as written proof that this job of teaching is an important part of your graduate student journey. We have written this from the point of view of a TA and/or Instructor. We have included for you references to outside and inside resources that are key to your success as an instructor. In addition, we have included a series of books that we keep on our shelf. These are fantastic resources for you to use to dig deeper, and grow in your teaching journey. Most of what we have included in this has come from diving deep into these resources and integrating this into our own practice.

There is no right or wrong way to use this manual. Read it from cover to cover, pick and choose the chapters most applicable to what you need, or use it as a bookmark of online resources. This is for you – use it as it best supports you.

We hope you find the love and joy of teaching that we have found. And we hope that the journey is a bit lighter because of the resources we have provided.
Making Things Easier for Yourself

Objectives:
After reading this section, you will:

- Have resources to help you plan your time efficiently
- Understand strategies for balancing multiple graduate student expectations

TIME COMMITMENT
First reading time: 10 minutes
Implementation time: Ongoing

While teaching is important, so is your personal research. Both aspects of your job are important and will have a major impact on your career trajectory, so being both a good student researcher and a good educator is enormously important. Fortunately, the two aspects of your job work in very different ways and have different priorities. As a student researcher, you will not be in control of your deadlines or workloads, and you will need to respond to deadlines as they arise. But as an educator, you will have more control over the deadlines your students have and you will be able to plan well in advance. You can use these differences in your two roles to your advantage. The most important thing for maintaining a good balance is to do as much of your teaching related planning at the beginning of the semester, before your own studies and research start adding additional pressure and work.

Planning ahead (even before you receive your class)
Before you know if or what you will be teaching, you can:

1. Prepare your class policies section of your syllabus.
2. Keep track of readings that you think will be useful for teaching later.
3. Save presentations you give on key topics within your field to be converted to lectures later or to be used as guest lectures.
4. Keep copies of all the syllabi you are given and circle policies, activities, etc. that you liked in each one.
5. Make a calendar of your semester that notes dates for grants, conferences, and other dates that are important in your role as a student researcher. By preparing this calendar in advance, your syllabus planning will be much easier as you will already know when your responsibilities as a student will be the most stressful and you will be able to arrange due dates for your class assessments around these dates.

AS SOON AS YOU GET YOUR COURSE ASSIGNMENT

As soon as you know what you will be teaching, start working on the following:

1. Complete your syllabus (class or discussion).
2. Block out grading time in your calendar (you may need to grade things well in advance to give yourself time to focus on a grant or big writing project).
3. Make arrangements for any conference travel you will have to do during the semester.
4. Plan as many individual lessons as possible. Even if you only finish 2 or 3 lessons, you will have a jumpstart that will allow you to use your office hours to plan the rest of your classes.

Planning each class period on the day that you are teaching may seem like a good idea, but it will feel like a constant distraction from your own work for the whole semester. Instead, do as much planning as you can at the beginning of the semester, so that the only teaching duties you have each week are to actually teach your lesson plans and hold office hours.

USING OFFICE HOURS

Use your office hours wisely! Though there will be times where you have students visiting you in office hours, much of your office hours will still be down time. Throughout this resource, we suggest ways that you can complete the majority of your teaching work during this downtime.

Office hours are set aside for your class – this is for student visits as well as class planning. It is very tempting to use this time to work on other projects or to complete different tasks needed for outside your class. But this is protected time to prepare, plan, and recap. The more jealously you guard your prep time, the smoother your semester will be. Remember that by focusing on your teaching at the appropriate time, you will also prevent yourself from being distracted by teaching worries while you are working on your own coursework and research. Also, by approaching your office hours this way, you will be building habits that will benefit you as you enter academics and have the responsibilities of a new faculty member. By building your office hours on students’ needs, reflection, and then planning, you are also putting students first.

We suggest completing the following tasks during each of your office hours:

**Priority 1: Student Meetings and Concerns**

Are there students who are struggling with a specific area of the class? This may be something that you can only address in smaller classes or discussion sections, but it is important because engaging in your students’ learning makes a richer class and learning experience for all. When you see that a student’s performance is lagging, it does not take long to reach out to
them to see if they are struggling in class struggling with a life challenge, or just struggling. Ask them to come in if they need assistance, or guidance.

Likewise, if a student is a challenge for you or your TAs, contact them to come in to see you during your office hours or during an arranged office appointment. Addressing these issues early will help you and them resolve any issues while they can still achieve the course objectives.

**Important to note:** You need to document these meetings. Document name, date, time, location, and the details of the meeting. After every student meeting send an email to the student, copying yourself, and your TA/instructor if necessary, to summarize the meeting with your student and also to note any follow up items that you have agreed upon. This short follow up will be of assistance in the future if there are any disagreements about what you discussed.

**Priority 2: Class Reflections**

Every day you need to take time to reflect on the previous class and answer the following questions:

a. Did my lesson plan work?
b. What worked well?
c. What didn’t work?
d. Was it too long or too short?
e. What was the student response to the lesson?
f. What should be added the next time I teach this lesson?

Make these notations on your lesson plan. If you do not write it here, you will not have a record for future classes and as much as you think you will remember all the details, you will forget (take this from experience!). These notations will only take about 10 minutes of your day, but will save you much more time later. Going back to complete these notes later gets more difficult to do as the semester moves forward and schedules become busy and you become tired.

As the semester moves toward midterm and toward finals, your students will change as well. This will necessitate changes in the way you plan. Students become busier, overwhelmed, tired, and may not focus as well or will have challenges with completing coursework. It is important to make these notations in your lesson plans, so that you can look for alternate ways to engage them. When planning future classes, it will also be helpful to know where your students started showing signs of fatigue so that you can re-evaluate whether their workload, course schedules, and your teaching materials are as effective as you believe them to be.

**Priority 3: Upcoming Class Planning**

Take this time to review your next class session. Are there items that need to be altered based on the previous session’s outcome? Do you need to make time to revisit any topics you feel students need additional help with?
Priority 4: Grading

Take the remaining time to grade assignments and papers. This will allow you to spread your grading time throughout the week – which will make your grading much less stressful!

Priority 5: Future Classes

Once you have completed these immediate concerns, shift your attention to preparing for future classes, and working on your teaching portfolio. This will help you in the long run, but spending dedicated time thinking about your teaching skills and strengths in any form will also help you to be even more confident and effective in the current semester.

Your office hours are imperative to your success. You have to be there – make use of the time to make your semester, and your life, much easier!

Unfair Workloads

Despite our emphasis on balancing your responsibilities, you should also be aware that, very rarely, your lead instructor may ask you to do more than can fairly be expected of you, or more than what your contract stipulates. If you feel that you are being taken advantage of, you have options and the university is committed to protecting your rights. If you feel you are being expected to do work that exceeds your appointment, you have the following options:

1. Speak with your lead instructor (supervisor) about your concerns.
2. Speak with your GEO representative for support and guidance. You can find the appropriate contact information here.

In addition to unfair assignments coming from within the university, sometimes students can make requests, such as additional office hours, extra study support, that you provide lecture notes, etc., which add to your teaching load. In general, you should get guidance from your lead instructor about how much support is reasonable and helpful to students. If a particular student makes repeated requests for help beyond what you provide to other students, you should refer the student to the writing center, library or peer tutoring groups for additional support. In these situations, it is important to be aware of the fine line between support and dependency. Contact these resources to help determine the best approach.
Inclusion and accessibility tip:
Writing anxiety is a common issue that often prompts requests for additional help, but can also be tricky to manage. One way to help students in this situation is through a "present, but hands off approach." Either individually, or in conjunction with others in your department, set aside time where students can come and work on writing assignments. The ground rules for this writing time should be that you will be available to answer questions, but you will mostly be focused on your own work. When students do ask, "Is this ok?" "Can I say "x, y, z"?”, etc., tell them, "That sounds good for a first draft. Write it out and we can look at it later if you don’t think it works." In the beginning of the semester you may have many questions, but as students gain confidence, they will attend writing hours mainly for the accountability it affords them, and you will be able to devote most of this time to your own work. Depending on how popular these writing hours become and how much help your students really need, you may even be able to transition the time to being entirely student run.

Summing It Up

The key to being successful in graduate school, as a TA and as a student, is making good use of your time. You will always be busy, but use any lull, no matter how small, wisely. Focus on prioritizing your time and get as many things done ahead of time as possible. That said, remember that pre-planning is meant to make things easier for you, so it is totally ineffective if you spend time worrying about what you were not able to finish or what is not as organized as you would like. Making your life easier can also mean accepting the time constraints you have and congratulating yourself on your best effort. There will be plenty of sources of stress in the coming semester, making yourself one of them just does not help.
Instructor/TA Collaboration

Objectives:
After reading this section, you will:

- Be able to differentiate the responsibilities of TAs versus Instructors
- Describe the coordination needed between TAs and Instructors for successful semesters
- Plan for an initial TA/Instructor meeting (whether you are the TA or the Instructor)
- Plan for short, effective weekly TA meetings

The best classes are ones in which there is clear communication and collaboration between the instructor and the TA. Here are some tips to build this collaboration.

TA/Instructor First Meeting

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 5 minutes
Implementation time: 30-45 minutes

Your meeting with the instructor/professor is an important one for you. Information you learn during this meeting will enable you to plan your semester. While the professor will likely provide this information for you, here are some questions you may want to be sure to ask:

- Is there a textbook? Will I be provided a copy? When will it arrive?
- What is your attendance policy for lectures? What about for discussions and/or labs?
- Do you want me to attend lectures? What are your expectations of me during lectures? (e.g. help quiet talking students, just be there to listen, turn on the equipment before lecture, etc.)
- How will exams/quizzes be handled? Will you ask TAs for questions to be included in the exams? How far out from the exams/quizzes do you need these?
- If there are projects due, what date do you want the graded project returned to the students?
- What is your grading policy? Will we be using rubrics or other grading tools?
- Will I be given Blackboard access? Will I be inputting grades on blackboard? What are my responsibilities in terms of Blackboard management?
Who do I contact/how do I contact you, if I am sick or going to be late?
I have a conference/meeting/vacation/other obligation scheduled for a particular date, can we work together to cover this section?
Will TAs be asked to cover lecture/guest lecture? When will these be scheduled? Will topics be assigned or will we be expected to present our own work?
Will we be meeting during the semester to discuss the class? How often, what time, where will that take place?
Are you responsible for reporting midterm grades to the university (usually via a university specific website)? By what date do you want these grades and in what format (e.g. via Blackboard, excel spreadsheet, etc.)? In addition to midterm grades, is there other information (such as last attendance date) needed for students who are doing poorly?
By what date would you like to have final grades and in what format? In addition to midterm grades, is there other information (such as last attendance date) needed for students who are doing poorly?
Which student issues are my responsibility, and which, if any should be immediately referred to you? What should I do if I feel I need support dealing with a student in my section?
Will you be traveling during the semester? Are there any canceled classes beyond what is already on the university holiday schedule?

By asking these questions, you will be able to block time out for planning, grading, and calculating grades. This seems like a very easy task, but especially as the semester becomes busier, you will want to have planned for these responsibilities. Also, knowing the days and times for recurring meetings, lectures, and other responsibilities will provide you a better idea of when to schedule your office hours.

Managing TAs

**TIME COMMITMENT**

First reading time: 10 minutes
Implementation time: 45 minutes to an hour weekly

Large class sizes can be intimidating. Not only due to the large number of students but the additional management and coordination with Teaching Assistants (TAs) who will be your support staff. TAs can be your strongest allies and provide you with a much more intimate understanding of how the students are learning overall. How you choose to manage your TAs may vary based on the type of class you are teaching. If you are teaching a science class in which laboratory experiments are involved, you may have a much stricter set of guidelines for your TAs.

If you are in the social sciences, however, you may provide TAs with more leeway and freedom in their responsibilities. However, the ways in which you interact with your TAs will not only affect your students' overall experience in the course, it will also affect the way in which these TAs teach their own classes in the future by giving them confidence in their role as an educator. Within the role of instructor, you may have TAs who are younger or older than you. They may be part of your cohort who may question your position as instructor. To
address these concerns, you need to be prepared and ready to manage not only your class material, but your TAs and their needs and performance, your students, and your own life. However, once you have the tools necessary to manage your support staff, you will find them indispensable to meeting the learning objectives you have set for your students. To best work with your TAs, we recommend five important steps in not only making your TAs feel valued, but to work with them to ensure you are meeting your teaching objectives.

Planning for your TAs

After you plan for your courses, planning for TAs as a lead instructor is the best way to ensure you are successful and to make your life as an instructor easier.

- **Planning.** Planning is the first step in creating a successful instruction team. Once you have your course structure in place, you will be able to define what you are looking for from your TAs. Much like you, your TAs are also graduate students who have varying levels of experience in the classroom. As you plan your workload, make sure you are accounting for what you are asking from them as well. You will also find it helpful to check in with them and make sure that they are planning their grading around their own assignments and schedules. Making sure that your TAs have time set aside to grade when assignments are submitted will prevent you from having to deal with students frustrated by late returned assignments.

- **Assignments.** Once your assignments are in place, ask your TAs to review and comment on them. They may have suggestions to improve the assignment, and being open to their input will greatly improve your working relationship. Often, they will be the ones who catch the inconsistencies or missing details that students will need to successfully complete the assignment. As the semester progresses, you will also find that TAs have a much more intimate knowledge of how students are reacting to the workload and difficulty level of the class, regardless of the section size. TAs will often be able to suggest small changes to better accommodate your students’ needs in any given semester.

- **Exams.** Allow for your TAs to contribute to the exam questions. They are in the classroom on the front lines. They know what the students know and in what areas students are struggling. This also makes your exam writing much less intensive. Finally, it allows them to practice and think about making assessments of their own.

- **Discussion sections.** This is where you may be able to give your TAs more freedom to plan and explore their abilities as instructors. Establish key learning objectives for each discussion section and explain to your TAs that these are the objectives that you will hold them accountable to. You can then let the TAs plan their own class. Expecting TAs to plan their own classes is an important introduction to teaching for many of them, so the more freedom you can allow them, the more likely they will benefit from the TA experience. During your initial TA meeting you will be laying out the expectations for the semester and the objectives you would like for your TAs to meet each week. Ideally, you should suggest TAs lay out their lesson plans for the semester within the first few weeks of the class. However, this may be a struggle, especially if your TAs are new. Based on the experience of your TAs, plan on meeting with them to review their lesson plans weekly in the beginning until they, and you, are confident they are meeting these objectives and you are both confident with their abilities.
**Lab sections.** Labs are more restrictive in terms of freedom for the TAs. There is equipment, details, and procedures that must be followed. However, TAs may also have suggestions about how to improve current lab sections. One way to empower your TAs in a more restrictive setting is by providing each TA an opportunity to plan a lab section. These plans can be presented during your weekly TA meetings. Use these meetings to collaborate to improve the original plan. This will provide TAs with an opportunity to offer suggestions for improvement, provide experience in planning lab sections, and allow them to see your own methods for lesson planning.

**Lectures.** Providing your TAs an opportunity to guest lecture during the semester not only validates your value of their knowledge but also reiterates to your students that you value and respect your TAs abilities and insights. Plan guest lecture spots for your TAs throughout the semester. This can include weeks when you know you will be away, or when you are covering a topic in which your TA is an expert but you are not! After their guest lecture, provide feedback on their lecture in terms of planning, content, and delivery. Also, remind them to keep their lecture slides and notes, so that they can draw on them again the next time they need to teach this topic.

**Weekly TA Meetings**

Staying in touch with your TAs is important. Arrange for a meeting prior to the first week of class in which you provide your TAs with the tools they need to succeed to give them the plan for the semester. A list of materials you should plan to discuss with them is below. Even if you do not have all of these materials prepared before this meeting, share drafts with your TAs so that they can get a sense of the direction you are taking and the responsibilities you expect them to share.

- **Syllabus**
- **Textbook**
- **Blackboard Access**
- **Excel Gradebook Sheet**
- **Assignments**
- **Course schedule**
- List of TA responsibilities and expectations (including sick days)
- Contact List with Names, Phone Numbers, and Email addresses for all TAs and you
- Sign up sheets for anything needed such as lab planning meetings, guest lecture topics, exam monitoring, etc.

This first meeting will set the tone for the semester. It is important to be supportive and clear and provide opportunities for feedback and collaboration. It is important that at this meeting you provide a clear understanding of your expectations to your TAs. If you expect them to attend lecture, make it clear. If you want to meet and walk to class together, or if you want (or need) them to arrive at lecture early to turn on equipment, make it clear. If you are using Blackboard to monitor grades, you may want a backup to that gradebook. You can do that by assigning each TA an excel gradebook sheet on which they mirror their students grades from Blackboard. This will ensure that they have notes as to when students were
sick/absent/not participating and in case something was to happen to Blackboard, you would have a back
up. But make the policy of maintaining a backup gradebook clear at this meeting.

During the semester, schedule set weekly TA meetings. These are some of the most important
meetings of the semester. You must find 30-60 minutes a week to discuss the progress of the class with
your TAs. This becomes more important as large projects are being assigned and they are facing grading
challenges. Each week discuss what went right or wrong in class and how it could be improved next time.
Also discuss and plan for the next week's activities. Do not miss these meetings. Not only is this the
opportunity for you to support your TAs, this is where you find how students (and TAs) are succeeding, or
not, in your class. After each meeting, send your TAs an email that recaps your meeting and the items that
need to be completed, by whom, and by what date. This will serve as a reminder to your TAs of things that
need to be done and also provide you with a record of your meeting.

Grade Reporting

**TIME COMMITMENT**

- First reading time: 1 min
- Implementation time: 10 minutes at the beginning of the semester, 2 hours at midterms,
  2 hours at finals

Midterm and Final Grades

This is something that we generally forget to plan for until it occurs. For general education and
some other classes, you are required to submit mid-term grades. Make sure your TAs have entered their
grades into Blackboard, that they have confirmed the grades that are posted before the date Midterm
grades or Final Grades are complete. At some institutions, you will also need the date of the last class
attended for students who are doing poorly in your class. Plan on having your TAs have this information on
hand as well.

For final grades, you may want to hold a meeting to go through the grade sheets, discuss grades that
may need to be adjusted, or address any major issues. This can be a time to say thank you for a job well
done, as well as to gain feedback on the semester.

Wrapping up the Semester

**TIME COMMITMENT**

- First reading time: 1 minute
- Implementation time: 30 minutes twice a semester

While we are well aware of student evaluations, we often forget about TA evaluations. Ask your TAs
for an evaluation of the class and your style. They will be forthcoming in their suggestions and you may find
ways to improve your class and your future TAs workload for the next semester.

The most important thing to remember about TAs is to ask, and then most importantly, listen to
what your TAs tell you about the students, about the lecture and course material, about the labs, discussion
sections and exams. They can be your most valuable asset in the classroom.
Summing It Up

A collaborative and open relationship between an instructor and their TAs has the ultimate effect of delivering the best possible educational experience to students. A strong instructional relationship means the focus stays on learning and providing students with clear, effective instruction and away from conflict and power plays. A collaborative relationship also makes the TA experience more rewarding, both in the short term and looking forward to future career goals. These relationships take commitment, compromise and much of work, but they are easier when you remember that whatever difficulties or differences of opinion arise, you are all on the same team. You are both working towards the same goal of student success.
Class Design

Objectives:
After reading this section, you will:

- Have a confident grasp of your most important teaching goals for the semester
- Be able to implement class design decisions that support your goals
- Create a coherent and comprehensive plan for your semester
- Have additional materials to include in your teaching portfolio

Developing Your Class Outline and Syllabus

The most important and the most difficult step of preparing for your semester is putting together your syllabus. As a TA supporting an instructor, you will put together a, perhaps, less complicated discussion or lab syllabus with your instructor for your students. If you are a TA with lead instructor responsibilities, this syllabus is much more complex. This section approaches the syllabus from the instructor perspective. For supporting syllabi, please take the elements you need from each section. For some courses, there may already be a syllabus that you can begin from, but for most classes you will have a substantial amount of work ahead of you. With careful preparation however you can save yourself an enormous amount of time by creating a personal syllabus template that you can use to begin class planning. Not sure how to format? Head over to http://salsa.usu.edu/ where this program will do your formatting!!

Planning Your Discussion

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 5 minutes
Implementation time: Ongoing

Your semester should be approached as if you are the lead instructor for the discussion section or lab for which you are responsible, because technically, you are! Once you have the expectations and the schedule from your instructor, you can design a discussion section syllabus that will help you and your students navigate your expectations and due dates for them.

You may see that your job as a TA is “just” running a discussion section or a lab, and you would be right. But what you need to realize is it is your discussion section and/or lab in which students will be
putting the concepts that were taught in lecture to work and that they have the opportunity to work with
you to ask questions or clarify topics they did not understand during lecture. This makes discussion and lab
extremely important, and therefore, creates the need for you to plan your section to make sure you are
supporting the learning objectives of the overall course.

The other thing to remember is that as TAs we often are asked to serve as a TA for the same course
multiple times. If you take the time now to create a solid set of lesson plans, you will find yourself returning
to them in the future, saving yourself time in planning because you only need to revise your plans, not
create from scratch. Also, by being well prepared for your class you will not only make your semester
easier and free up time to really work and adapt discussion to your students’ needs, but you will also be a
role model for your students as to how you wish them to come to class. Every move you make from
entering the classroom, to communicating with the class, to wrapping up your class, is reflective of how
students will behave. If they are treated with respect and you interact with them, most of the time, they will
do the same to you.

There are several aspects of planning your discussions for you to address:
1. Your discussion policies and syllabus
2. Your learning goals
3. Your teaching strengths and preferences
4. Lesson planning to support your learning goals
5. Your policies for dealing with foreseeable student issues

The Discussion Syllabus

The most important and the most difficult step of preparing for your semester is putting together
your syllabus. For some courses, there may already be a syllabus that you can begin from, but for most
classes you will have a substantial amount of work ahead of you. With careful preparation however you can
save yourself an enormous amount of time by creating a personal syllabus template that you can use to
begin class planning.

The syllabus should include the standard contact information for you. This should include email
address, office location, office hours, and your class policies. Your syllabus should also have a plan for the
semester. Build in due dates for projects and other materials you may ask students complete. The more
tools you provide to your students to plan their work, the easier your semester will be.

University Policies

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 1 minute
Implementation time: 15 minutes

For the entire time that you are teaching at any given university, you should be able to use the same
general policies sections (e.g. electronic usage, attendance policies, etc.), because these policies do not
usually change from year to year. You should, however, make changes to your template if you there are
policy changes at your university or if you move to a different institution. Because this program is designed
specifically for UIC, the template has policy descriptions that UIC instructors are welcome to use as written.
Determining Your Class Policies

**TIME COMMITMENT**

First reading time: 8 minutes

Implementation time: 1 hour

Once the university policies are in place, you should move on to creating a course outline and your personal classroom policies. There are a couple ways of doing this.

- Determine your class policies according to the level of your students. Using this approach, you would create separate policies for first and second year students, advanced students, and graduate students. The learning goals that you would associate with each student group would be related to the time management, responsibility, and learning skills goals that you have for each group.

- Determine your class policies according to the content of each class, and with an eye towards the major projects you will be assigning. In this situation, you will focus on learning skills more tied to the specifics of your class, and you will put less emphasis on general learning skills in crafting your policies.

- Determine your class policies according to discipline specific standards. This may mean that your class policies reflect the expectations of other courses in your department, or that the class policies are meant to prepare students for industry-wide workplace expectations and responsibilities. The learning goals for these policies will revolve around allowing students to master workplace skills or discipline standard practices well in advance of their job searches.

In all cases, the most effective classroom policies will always be those that are aimed at teaching students skills, rather than just providing classroom rules. You may find that you have different priorities for different student groups, so don’t be afraid to have different policies that reflect your learning goals for different classes. Here are several important possible learning goals to consider when making your class policies:

- Do you want to teach students effective ways to manage their time by providing them structure they practice throughout the semester?
- Are you more concerned that students practice selecting and implementing their own time management techniques, in which case your policies will reflect strict final deadlines with minimal supervision on your part?
- For each individual lesson or assignment, are you more committed to teaching students the class material at hand or to teaching them time management skills and personal responsibility?
- Is it more important to you that students are present, regardless of how well they are prepared, or that every student who attends is prepared to contribute meaningfully to classroom discussions?
- To what extent do you feel that your class should prepare students for higher-level classes, general workforce participation, expertise in a given field, and/or a particular career path? Remember that it is not simply your responsibility to prepare students; you must make decisions about what you are preparing them for.
Attendance Policies

Write this policy in conjunction with your professor. This will save you a tremendous amount of headache when it comes to calculating participation and attendance. Remember, as a general rule, having stricter syllabus policies that you adjust to accommodate reasonable student issues is much easier than having to try to be stricter after students have become accustomed to more relaxed policies.

A common attendance policy is:
"You are expected to be in discussion on time, seated and ready to work. If you are 10 minutes late to class, you may not receive participation points for that day. If quizzes or other assignments are given during those first 10 minutes, you may receive a zero for that assignment. Excused absences will be granted for illness with a doctor’s note, or other documented absence. Please talk with me as soon as you know that you will be absent from class. If you have three unexcused absences, you will fail the section."

Technology Policies

With time, electronics policies have gotten progressively trickier. Some students use technology as an efficient learning aid, and some students require technology as disability accommodations, while others allow themselves to be distracted by it. You may choose to remind students that they should consider anything that they open on their computers or phones during class to be public knowledge, as both instructors and other students will often have clear views of whatever is on their screen. This reminder that distractions are easily visible to all can help to curb technology misuse. Another option is to inform students that classroom technology use is dependent on how well they use it, and that students found to be viewing Facebook or other unrelated material on their computers will not be allowed to use technology in the classroom for the rest of the semester.

Here is an example policy you may want to use:
"This is a discussion section and so the focus will be on having active conversations with each other. Therefore, there will be no technology allowed in this class. Cellphones and computers must be put away, unless the computers are being used to access readings for this week. If you are expecting a phone call during class, please let me know, and step outside to take your call."

UIC does not have a formal technology use policy for the classroom. It is up to you to determine your class policy.
Email Policies

Students tend to expect you to be working on the same schedule as they do, meaning late hours, early mornings and constant email access. This can result in frustrated students and harried TAs if the policies are not clear. You can set this policy to be whatever you are comfortable with.

An example is:

"I check my email once a day at 8pm, Monday – Thursday. I also check email by 5pm Friday. If you send me an email after 8pm (or 5pm on Friday) there is a good chance that I may not respond to it until the next evening (or Monday). This means that you need to plan your work and not expect a response to a question submitted at midnight for an assignment due the next morning."

You may also want to consider having a separate, stricter policy for important assignments. For example, "Absolutely no emails regarding an assignment that are sent after 5pm the day before the assignment is due will be read or responded to." This way you can have a more lenient general email policy, while ensuring that students plan ahead for important projects.

To make managing email easier, instruct students that they should include the meeting time, day, or class number in the subject line of all emails that they send to you. This will help you to answer emails in the order you will interact with students, instead of the order in which they are received.

Also, consider setting a policy in which you will not reply to anyone responding to a mass email. Often students will just hit reply to an email that you have sent to the entire class rather than opening a new email and sending to you. This can cause a problem in trying to track who you have responded to and which emails are new and which are old.

Setting Learning Goals

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 2 minutes
Implementation time: 30 minutes

The most important task that you will undertake for the semester is choosing your learning goals for your students, but despite its importance this is a step that many educators skip when they feel themselves running short on time. There are several reasons why you should avoid this trap. First, setting learning goals sets your commitment to your students for the semester and gives you concrete goals that you can use to measure the success of your students and your own teaching. Second, having clear learning goals allows you to create student evaluation measures (like tests and assignments) that fairly reflect the most important information your students must learn in your class. Finally, instructors who clearly communicate their learning expectations to their students generally receive better teaching evaluations because students understand and can meet the expectations placed on them.

Setting learning goals is generally a backwards process. The first step is to review the overall objectives for the course and make a short list of the absolute most important things that students should be able to remember from this class when they think back to this class in the future. What is the lasting impression you expect students to have of your class? For some classes, this will require making two lists;
one for students who pursue the subject further, and one for students who are unlikely to take another
class in your discipline.

Next, you should make a separate list of the most important information students should be able to
remember by the end of the semester. Unlike the first list, which will likely contain general themes or big
ideas, this list will generally consist of a list of specific facts or perspectives. This is also a great time to
make sure that your own personal bias is not affecting your teaching. Everything on this list should be
objectively true, even if you hope (and you can hope) that students will use these objective truths to come
to conclusions that are oriented towards social justice.

Once you have these two lists, you now need to place this information in a logical order, and decide
which specific days will be used to teach each of your learning objectives. This should provide you a rough
outline of your class which you can then use to begin creating lesson plans and to finalize your syllabus.
The amount of learning goals that you incorporate into each class period will depend on the level of detail
of the class and the skills and needs of your students. Juniors and Seniors who are taking an advanced
course may be able to address many learning goals in one class period, whereas newer students with little
discipline specific background may only realistically be able to achieve one or two learning goals in a class.
Think carefully about how you can accommodate both your expectations and student needs as you plan
your semester.

Developing a Semester Course Outline

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 5 minutes
Implementation time: 45 minutes

Once your classroom policies are managed, you can move on to setting your semester outline and
your assignment (evaluation and assessment) plans. Working on both of these components together is an
easy way to make sure that your teaching policies and assessments support each other and will provide
you with the feedback you need to track students’ progress. This will also provide you plenty of time to
respond and adjust if they are not progressing as you expected.

Because assessments are such an important and complicated part of teaching, we have created a separate
section for assessments. Most TAs will only occasionally plan their own assessments for courses, as the lead
instructor will design most of these. If you will only be implementing a few smaller assessments to give you
feedback on how well students are understanding what you have taught them, we recommend that you
visit the Introduction to Assessments after you have set your learning goals. If, however, you will be
responsible for planning all class assessments, we recommend that you peruse the entire Assessments
section before finalizing your semester outline.

The fastest way to put together your outline and assessments is by using a simple outline with each
week and each class within the week listed. For example:

Week 1: Dates, note holidays
   Monday
   Wednesday

Week 2: Dates, note holidays
   Monday
   Wednesday
Having made a list of your learning goals for students, write each learning goal in a separate circle of a mind map or concept drawing. Viewing the learning goals this way will help you to see that there are multiple, compelling orders in which information can be presented to your students. Experiment with orders until you find one that feels the most consistent with the overall learning goals you have put forward for the semester. Then decide how much time each section will need and schedule it in your semester outline.

Now, schedule in your roughly planned assessments. You may find that time will not allow you to cover everything you originally hoped to, so you will need to go back to your learning goal priorities and decide which topics could be omitted with the smallest effect on your first and second priority goals.

Now add in wiggle room. If this is your first time designing a class or first time teaching a particular topic, leaving one entire class period "TBD" will allow you to be responsive to student progress and to add anything which you may have omitted. If you have taught the class before or feel familiar with how students will respond to the material, giving yourself a "30 minute review session" will allow you to make smaller adjustments as necessary. On your syllabus, you can account for this time somewhere near the middle of the semester, but feel free to make use of that time whenever you see a disconnect between your expectations for students and their actual achievement of your learning goals.

Once you have scheduled all of your classes, add in the assessments that you selected. When deciding when to schedule assessments; consider when students will have deadlines in other classes (primarily midterms and finals), how much time students will need to complete each assessment, how much time you will need to grade it, any big deadlines of your own which you know might affect how much time you have to grade or deal with extra meetings with students, and of course, which material it needs to correspond with in the syllabus.

After your course outline and assessment due dates are settled, you can begin working on individual lesson plans!

**Creating individual class lesson plans**

**TIME COMMITMENT**

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<td>Implementation time:</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
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Creating lesson plans is a time-consuming task, but it makes each class easier, and once you have enough of them prepared, gives you a useful collection of lesson plans you can quickly turn to in the future. Even though students rarely complain that an instructor did not have lesson plans in their year-end evaluations, not having a lesson plan is it is usually what they are referring to when they complain that a professor is boring, un-engaged, or disorganized. If you expect students to invest energy and time in your course, you need to match that investment with quality lesson plans.

Fortunately, making lesson plans does not have to take much time, and it gets faster the more you practice. After your first couple of lesson plans, you will find that it will take about 30 minutes to write a lesson plan (making it a quick office hours project).

The next page is a rough lesson plan template that will help you make sure you've covered the basics. When you feel confident, feel free to modify it to better suit your teaching needs and style.
To fill out the template, you will need to have your syllabus handy, and you may find it useful to turn back to our discussion of summative and formative assessments to get you thinking about what kind of learning you are trying to foster in this lesson. Coming up with activities can be challenging at first, and most of us start by consulting with more experienced instructors, lab workbooks, and published collections of Student Engagement Techniques (SETs). All of these can be excellent sources for activities which you can tailor to the needs of your students, and before long, you’ll find yourself inspired to start creating your own. A particularly useful resource for SETs can be found in Elizabeth Barkley’s handbook. This should make it to your bookshelf – whether electronically or in physical form!


To make this even easier, here are a few additional tips:

1. Divide your class time into even increments. Plan lessons based upon those increments. This will help make sure that you use classroom time well. Remember that you don’t need to fill every minute; leave yourself some breathing room.
2. Don’t simply add “discussion” into your lesson plan and hope that it will just organically occur. Whenever you plan on having discussions in class, make a list with three types of questions: questions you must ask in order to cover the essential material, questions you can ask to tie in real life examples if students are confused or uninterested, and questions you could ask if students seem open to or interested in more advanced discussion than you initially planned for. This will make sure that your discussions are always productive.
3. Keep your lesson plans focused on what your students are doing, more than on what you are doing. This will help you keep their learning experiences at the center of your planning and it will alert you to potential problems in the lesson plan that might not be immediately apparent from the instructor’s viewpoint. Always ask yourself how the lesson plan draws on the assigned reading and assessments students are currently working on. Students will be less invested if they feel that classroom time isn’t a coherent part of the goals and requirements you’ve set up.

Choosing Texts

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 5 minutes
Implementation time: 1 hour

For each topic you list, jot down the first one or two readings that come to mind. Even though these readings might not be the right difficulty level for the class you are currently teaching, they will give you a starting point and help you to develop your ideas and thinking about each topic.

Helpful hint: as you keep track of your own reading in citation management software, consider adding a tag indicating the reading level; intro level, undergraduate, graduate, to make searching for readings in the future much faster for yourself. Also, keep copies of every syllabus you ever receive. They will be a great database of possible readings for you to use in the future!
If you do not feel that you are familiar enough to judge what is an appropriate reading level of your students, try these three steps to help you:

- **Step 1**: use `readable.io` to test a section of the reading.
- **Step 2**: determine the reading skills listed in question 1 below you expect students to use.
- **Step 3**: Make a decision (the library can also be a great source of help if you are still unsure. Most university’s now have options to immediately speak with a librarian on the library home page, so it won’t take more than a few minutes online to get help with this if you need it). If you are checking the reading level of a textbook you can also contact the textbook supplier for additional information.

Before looking for the readings that you will use, first answer these questions:

1) **What are the reading skills you expect this class to have?** (These estimates are based on our experiences and are intended to reflect the reality of college teaching – not the skill levels we hope to have in students. If these skill level distributions are lower than what you would like to see, considering taking action to change them by intentionally incorporating reading skill building lessons in to your course!)
   
a. Able to read and identify main ideas (generally all first year students and above)
   
b. Able to read, identify main ideas, take detailed notes, and recognize important quotes (generally all students who have completed at least one full semester)
   
c. All of b plus the ability to apply or recognize what they have read in real life examples (most students with one completed semester, but should be all second year students)
   
d. All of c plus the ability to critically consider the text (generally all second year students)
   
e. All of d plus the ability to identify problems/concerns within the text and build on the text (generally all third year students and above)

2) **How much reading will you expect from students for each class period?** (This is a great way to get a sense of reading times for your students is to time yourself reading one of their written assignments. The amount of time, focus and concentration it requires you to correct one student’s work is nearly the equivalent of how long it would take a first year student to read through the denser, more complicated readings they first experience in college.)
   
a. One hour, 15 pages in an article, half a chapter in a textbook (about 4 minutes per page for articles, textbook reading is faster because of students’ familiarity with textbook reading from high school) (recommended for general introductory classes)
   
b. Hour and a half, 23 pages in an article, a full chapter in a textbook (students in their second semester and beyond)
   
c. 2 hours, (avoid assigning two hours to students with reading skills lower than option d in the question above, they may do the reading, but it will be inefficient and you will see decreased comprehension) when students are ready for 2 hours of reading or more, you can assume they can also read more quickly (roughly 2 minutes per page in an article)) 60 pages in articles or books, textbook efficiency begins decreasing here
   
d. One book a week is generally considered the maximum reading assignment that can be reasonably expected of students enrolled in other classes. Remember that if you chose to
assign more, you may still see good results from your students, but it is likely that their other classes are suffering, and you are making things more difficult for your colleagues.

3) **If you plan on using a textbook, rather than selecting individual readings, look for a book that has chapters that line up with the schedule you have created.** You may not find the perfect textbook, but you can use step 4 to choose additional readings for the other topics you planned to cover (hint: we strongly recommend against simply following a textbook’s chapter layout to plan your syllabi, especially as a young graduate student. This is because textbooks cannot take into consideration all the special characteristics of the students at your school, they are not tailored to your teaching strengths, and coming up with your own syllabus that is not simply a reflection of a textbook or pre-existing syllabus helps you to create your teaching portfolio as you go, so that you do not need to create a large amount of new teaching material when you begin applying for jobs.)

To select individual readings for classes, look at readings you have already done according to the topic and your answers to the questions above. If you are unfamiliar with readings for a particular topic, doing an Internet search for bibliographies and syllabi on the topic can be extremely helpful. Also, considering contacting colleagues who have taught similar topics before for recommendations. Finally, remember that your university’s librarians will be able to help you create a list of possible readings very quickly if you still need help.

### Using Blackboard

#### TIME COMMITMENT

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<th>Implementation time: 1 hour</th>
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Blackboard can be a very useful tool in communicating with your students, managing lecture and reading material, administering surveys and exams, submitting grades, and creating activities. But do not allow yourself to be fooled. Blackboard can also be challenging and frustrating. The key to a successful class with Blackboard is planning and organization. Your Blackboard site should only be set up once you have completely developed your class syllabus and designed your assignments for the year. This will save you a tremendous amount of frustration in the set-up of your class site.

Making your blackboard site easy to navigate and less frustrating for your students requires a bit of thought and foresight. Use the tips below to make your blackboard page as user friendly as possible.

### Syllabus, Course Outline, General Course Information

Create a content area for your syllabus, course outline, and/or any other general course information. A very useful document is a general guideline to writing papers for your class. This can provide examples of citations, quotations, and formatting guidelines for papers in your class and you can refer students to particular sections while grading their work.
Readings and Lectures
Having a content area for weekly readings will keep the main page of your blackboard site clean and easy to navigate. Within this area you can create content folders for each week and place your readings and lecture slides (if you share with your students), in this folder. Use the descriptions of the folders to communicate reminders of due dates for the week, guest lecturers, or other events students may need to be reminded. You can also set these folders to appear for a period of time and then become unavailable for students. One strategy is to only make these folders available the week or two prior to the class date. This keeps students focused on current material, and provides you with some room to make changes.

Assignments and Exams
Keeping assignments and exams separate from weekly material is helpful. Setting up separate folders and only making them available close to the assignment date will keep your course well organized.

Journals, Blogs, Discussion Boards
You have the option to assign journals, blogs, and discussion boards to your students. Journals are a private 1 on 1 conversation between you and your student. This is convenient for conversations about topics that may be challenging to explore, or in which students may not be comfortable discussing with others. Blogs and discussion boards are open for the class to also read. These are useful to stimulate classroom discussion and interaction while still maintaining authorship. Use these in conjunction with your lesson plans for best results.

Making Movies Available Online
Making a movie available on the Blackboard site can be used in two ways. One, it is a way to creatively incorporate video into the course for the students to use/watch and critique as a part of your course assessments. But this is also useful if you are planning on showing movies in the classroom. You can view the film directly from the Blackboard site without having to worry about remembering the CD, finding a DVD player and getting all the equipment to work on the day you are showing the film. You can hide the film from the students so that they do not have access to it to view from home, but you can still use it in your classroom.

The UIC library is very helpful in making UIC owned movies available online through Blackboard. Contact the Reserve Librarian for details. This option does take some time (anywhere from 2 days – 2 weeks) to happen, so plan accordingly!

HELP?! ACCC to the Rescue!
The UIC ACCC site offers personal one-on-one training classes in Blackboard as well as in person training sessions to walk you through the classroom technology, advise you in how to meet your technology goals, borrow equipment, and much more, throughout the semester. We strongly recommend that you visit their website at http://accc.uic.edu/service/blackboard/resources. The University has already invested heavily in Blackboard support services so it is to your advantage to make liberal use of them.
Summing It Up

As graduate students, our research experience has taught all of us all importance that planning and preparation plays in a project’s success. The same holds true for student learning. Carefully planning the semester requires a significant initial investment, but the rewards are enormous. Equally important, class planning is a skill that improves with practice, so the effort you put in now will pay off for years to come, both in a treasure trove of classes you can teach on a moment’s notice, and in the time you save as this planning becomes more familiar to you. A well-planned class is less stressful, more effective and more fun to teach with the added benefit that it prepares you for the rest of your career. What could be a better investment of your time then that?
Assessments

Objectives:
After reading this section, you will:

- Understand different methods for assessing student learning
- Be able to make strategic decisions about what assignments you will require of your students
- Have assessment options to address some common classroom problems
- Be able to implement grading techniques and student assessment support techniques to make your grading go as fast as possible

Planning Your Grading for the Semester

TIME COMMITMENT

| First reading time: 1 minute | Implementation time: 10 minutes |

If you have not graded student work before, here are some rough estimates to help you plan your semester. As you go, you will get faster at grading, but this is usually about where new educators start out.

- Short Answer Responses (10 min per page)
- 1-2 page paper – no rubric (15 minutes)
- 3-5 page paper – no rubric (30 minutes)
- Science Labs, Handouts, Assessments with straightforward answers (5 minutes per page)

This means that if you have 3 sections of 30 students each, each turning in a 3-page paper, you should expect to spend approximately 45 hours grading at the end of the semester. Let your instructor know at the beginning of the semester if you are aware of your own projects/commitments that may keep you from finishing grading on time per their schedule. Generally, instructors will check with TAs before publishing these dates. Discuss earlier due dates, later assignment return dates, or help with grading if that is what is needed for you to complete grading on time.
Grading Rubrics

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 2 minutes  
Implementation time: 10 minutes

One of the quickest ways to improve students' success on assessments and to make grading quicker and smoother is by using grading rubrics. Especially for new educators, rubrics offer the following advantages:

- They reflect the assessments' learning goals which can help you predict how effective the assessment will be and on what skills and knowledge it will rely.
- They take the guess work out of grading; streamlining the process and helping you to judge more quickly whether a student has or has not accomplished what was expected of them.
- They provide higher levels of grading consistency between multiple graders.
- They are excellent additions to your teaching portfolio.
- They will help you to explain to students why they received the grade they did, and help you to remember why the student missed points in the assessment when they come to discuss their grade with you.
- If shared with your students before the assessment is due, the rubric communicates your expectations clearly and creates a connection for the students between the assignment, your assessment and the learning goals.
- They can usually be put together very quickly and they can be used across many different courses.

Many examples of rubrics can be found online, in written teaching resources, within your department, and often times, your lead instructor may even already have one prepared for the class. If, however, you find that you need to create a new rubric for a specific assessment, bear in mind the following considerations:

- The amount of points assigned to each assessment achievement should reflect how important that achievement is to the learning goals you have set. The highest amount of points should be given to a section of the assessment that is your top priority.
- The rubric should communicate all of the achievements or tasks needed to successfully complete the assessment. Ideally, the rubric should be a prioritized to do list for students.
- You do not need to break down every small expectation on your rubric, but you should include enough detail that making a decision about whether a student has or has not fulfilled the criteria should be fairly straightforward.
- If you are focused on skill development, consider using progressively more demanding rubrics as students' skills improve.
Introduction to Assessments

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 7 minutes
Implementation time: Ongoing

Throughout the rest of this manual, we use the term assessment to refer to any activity that is used to judge, measure or estimate student learning. In educational terms, assessments fall into one of two categories; summative assessments and formative assessments. Both forms of assessment have their own specific uses and limits and there is an enormous amount of literature that you can turn to as you improve and grow. With that in mind, we've provided a succinct overview here, intended to help you jump into using both assessment types right away.

Summative Assessments

Though you may not have been aware of it, you are already very familiar with summative assessment methods from your own education. A summative assessment is any activity or assignment that tries to judge what a student knows or how well they know it. Exams, quizzes, and worksheets are all commonly used as summative assessments. Summative assessments are useful in judging students’ progress, assigning grades and providing evidence of student improvement. In many universities, summative assessments, in the form of midterms and finals are university wide requirements. But despite their ubiquity, summative assessments have many disadvantages and students are generally well aware of them. Because summative assessments are meant to judge students, they can cause anxiety (especially when they are highly influential on students’ grades which can affect student performance and produce results that do not accurately portray student knowledge or abilities. This drawback can be addressed by instituting more frequent, lower risk summative assessments throughout the course.

Additionally, summative assessments that are not well written can punish students for failing to understand what is asked of them, again inaccurately measuring their completion of learning goals. This is not only unfair to your students, but it erodes their trust of you and can negatively impact their sense of classroom community. This drawback can easily be managed by always asking a colleague to quickly review your assessments before you give them to students.

In addition to judging student progress, cumulative summative assessments are useful for judging retention, which is crucial in courses that have been designed with an eye towards scaffolding. That said, many students find cumulative assessments overwhelming because they don’t have an effective way of keeping track of what they have already learned. A good way to address this is to keep a running list of important topics, or a study guide that is added to with the introduction of each new topic. This provides students with a visual way of charting their learning, reminds them to keep earlier material fresh, and clearly communicates your expectations without requiring you to do additional work on material you have already finished. Finally, this strategy can be helpful in motivating students to revisit mistakes they made on earlier assessments, rather than simply charging ahead without completing all the course’s learning goals.
Inclusion and accessibility tip:
Insisting students find an important piece of information themselves should be reserved for times when the learning goals you have set include research skills or self-reliance. In all other cases, it is generally advisable to have the student give you their best guess and then either provide the correct information or direct them to the exact place they can find it (this is easier if you follow the reading suggestions here) Try to keep your focus on the student learning goals you set.

Formative Assessments
In contrast to summative assessments, formative assessments are intended to be active learning opportunities. Formative assessments are any activity or assignment that aims at helping students discover information or practice a skill through the completion of the assessment. Reading, for example, is a formative activity, but it is only a formative assessment if you include questions or activities which provide you with a sense of whether the hoped for learning actually occurred. Formative assessments are common as writing assignments (where communicative skills, and not just fact recitation are considered) and in "lab" assignments, but they can be adapted to any setting and many educators have success with well-planned formative activities even in lectures with hundreds of students.

Formative assessments can be powerful because they activate experiential learning, but if students feel un-supported (i.e. they don’t have sufficient access to the information or skills needed to successfully complete the assessments), they may deem the assessment impossible, and refuse to really engage with it. This drawback can be addressed by providing students with easy access to the needed information. This includes ensuring they can easily find the information they need. Telling them the information is "in the book" is only helpful if sections and key terms are highlighted and clear. Making yourself available and open to the most basic of questions also helps to ensure the success of formative assessments.

Formative assessments can also be challenging because they produce uncertainty for students. They will not know at the outset exactly what they will learn, if they are doing a skill properly or what the outcome of the assessment might be. We hope that students will experience this uncertainty as excitement and curiosity, but previous experience or high risk may instead provoke students to fear, suspicion, or a sense of being trapped. While you can’t change their past experiences, maintaining an open, safe learning community and minimizing grade risk can help to alleviate this. If you think a formative assessment is likely to be particularly unsettling, you may even consider awarding extra credit points or non-grade related incentives. We are all familiar with using candy or other treats as a reward, but other effective incentives can include: excusing one late arrival to class (within reason), shortening one assignment by a paragraph, a problem, etc., giving the class an extra five-minute break, giving students an opportunity to redo part of a past assignment, or allowing students to turn in an assignment a day late.

Additionally, skill centered formative assignments are crucial for providing students an opportunity to practice and improve their abilities, but practice is still monotonous. There are two approaches to this monotony that can help lessen its boringness for students. The first is to keep practice-aimed assessments short but regular so that the assessment can become a class habit and actually help to provide reliability and routine for students. This can be especially helpful if other assessments in the class are stressful. Alternatively, practice aimed assessments can be more interesting when students have more choice in the assessment. For example, allow students to choose their own topics for assessments (if you have concerns about this, let them submit two or three choices and then choose the best one) or allow them to embellish the assessment with their own ideas. For example, if students need to solve several math problems, ask
them to write the problem first as a word problem however they like, or encourage them to come up with silly uses for a new scientific law they are learning. This not only makes the practice a little less boring, but it also makes it more memorable. Finally, if the learning goal is communication, and not specifically writing, consider allowing students to submit comics, drawings, videos, or presentations (or let them choose between these methods). Not only will your students be more engaged, but you will enjoy the variety as well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion and accessibility tip:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Formative assessments often rely on all students experiencing the assessment in similar ways, but the diversity of our students means this is seldom ever the case. When creating formative assessments try to think about how students’ identities might impact their experience of the assessment. Often you will find that considering and highlighting this diversity will enrich learning and improve the quality of the assessment for your entire class.</td>
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### Choosing Assessment Types

#### TIME COMMITMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First reading time:</th>
<th>5 minutes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Implementation time:</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
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How will you evaluate students’ learning during the semester? There are as many different types of evaluations of student learning as there are different types of students. We have only discussed the most common types of assessments used in higher education here, but the term assessment includes any activity or assignment you use to help you gauge student learning.

- **Exams** – Exams are valuable assessments in higher education for a number of reasons. First, exams allow for broad ranging, cumulative assessments of students’ knowledge of facts and procedures. They encourage students to find their weak points in any given material and to study accordingly. They are also fair mechanisms for determining grades and comparing students’ progress. Exams are not useful, however, as a means of checking students’ understanding as the semester progresses, and therefore, they should be supplemented with some kind of assessment that provides the instructor more immediate and constant feedback regarding students’ progress.

- **Papers** – Papers can be used to test both fact based knowledge, and learning skills (such as comparison, critical thinking, etc.) and they require a deeper mastery of class material. Unfortunately, a single paper assignment will only show mastery over one topic, and so papers might not be a good choice for classes where there is a large range of material that needs to be learned. Papers can also present difficulties in comparing students’ abilities, because they are often reflective of students’ learning histories, and therefore, not always a fair evaluation of the class at hand. Finally, papers can be difficult to fairly grade because they require subjective evaluation. This can be remedied by the use of rubrics, which are especially effective when they are provided to students beforehand and are used for the final grading.
• **Group projects** – Group projects are often popular because they mimic workplace requirements and thus give students additional career focused training. They can also be helpful in teaching particularly complicated concepts as students will explain and work out ideas together, thus allowing for important learning in the process of creating the assessment itself. Group projects pose some challenges, however, in that students may have social difficulties which interfere with your ability to evaluate their grasp of the subject and stronger students may skew the accuracy of group projects as an evaluation of learning as weaker students may be corrected or overruled in the project work without recognizing their own errors. It is also important to remember that group projects generally require significantly more office hours and additional student meeting time than other forms of assessment.

• **Individual projects** – Individual projects are especially effective when the semester is designed so that each lesson builds off the previous one. Student project components can mirror this class outline, and encourage students to put new knowledge to use as they acquire it. Individual projects do significantly increase grading load, and younger students may need additional help managing time and component requirements, though checklists and recommended self-deadlines can help alleviate this significantly.

• **Social learning projects** – Projects that include community involvement are excellent skill building assessments that can help students to build important workplace and community belonging skills while also allowing students to demonstrate their knowledge of broad concepts. They are not, however, very good at evaluating students' mastery of a set of facts or a discipline specific canon. In addition to the extra meeting hours these projects generally require, the instructor must also account for obstacles beyond their students’ control, which can make this a less reliable assessment of knowledge gained. Finally, instructors must be willing to take responsibility for the actions of their students outside of the university setting.

• **Individual presentations** – Presentations are popular assessments because they simultaneously allow a student to demonstrate their proficiency on a given topic, increase their understanding of the topic through the creation of the presentation, and provide other students a useful review of the material at hand. They also inject additional opportunities for visual learning which is useful given the verbal/oral emphasis of much of higher education. The challenges that presentations present generally fall in to one of two categories: getting students to focus on the presentations of other students can be difficult for a variety of reasons, and skill deficiencies, in public speaking, presentation preparation, etc., can make accurate evaluation of students’ mastery of the class learning goals difficult.

• **Group presentations** – Group presentations combine the strengths of individual presentations and group projects, but they also retain the same challenges. Group presentations also have the added difficulty of being difficult to schedule because one student absence can affect your entire presentation schedule. Group presentations will generally require that you dedicate several full class periods to presentations, which also subtracts from the total instruction time available to you. One other thing to note with presentations. Your feedback to each group, and to each individual is important to the success of this part of the presentation. This takes time, attention, and detail.

• **Quizzes** – Quizzes can take a variety of forms and are great for quick, nearly instant assessment of student learning. Quizzes are most effective when they are low risk for your
students (meaning they are not worth a large percentage of their final grade) so that you can check students’ understanding and retention without them incurring penalties. Quizzes can increase your workload initially as you have additional questions to create, but once quizzes are written, they can often be modified and reused fairly easily. Too many quizzes can also be stress inducing for students, which is another reason why low risk quizzes are often a wise choice for assessments.

- **Multiple choice questions** reward information recognition and formulaic problem solving. They are less effective in demonstrating information recall, understanding or application of complex concepts.

- **Short answer responses** are useful for judging students ability to understand, apply or critique given information, but they can also be useful for judging how well students can recall important information. Short answers are much more difficult to grade, because they require subjective evaluation, but they are usually too short to make a rubric useful. When using short answer evaluations, especially with multiple graders, it can be useful to write an example of an acceptable and unacceptable response, or to agree ahead of time what the minimum information requirement will be.

- **Formatted responses** - In some cases, it can be very useful to give students a template for submitting their responses. This can range from worksheets and handouts to formatting for term definitions or required lecture note formats. Formatted response can function as evaluations, but they are often more helpful as a teaching tool that helps students organize the information presented to them. Formatted responses are also useful in that they can serve as study aids for students as they prepare for other learning assessments.

### The Components of an Assessment

#### TIME COMMITMENT

- **First reading time:** 2 minutes
- **Implementation time:** 5 minutes per assessment

Designing successful assessments can be difficult for many new educators, particularly because our experiences with assessments are often limited only to the assessments we were given when we were in school. The information that follows will help you understand the important characteristics of assessments and provide you with some guidance in assessment design.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad Learning Goals</th>
<th>Summative</th>
<th>Formative</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Choose summative to judge knowledge or level of achievement in a skill</strong></td>
<td>Choose summative to judge knowledge or level of achievement in a skill</td>
<td>Choose formative to form new knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific Learning Goals</strong></td>
<td>What knowledge/skill should students know (i.e. At this point in the semester, students should know the following:)</td>
<td>What new knowledge or skill should students be able to display? (i.e. After completing this assignment students should be able to do the following:)</td>
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</table>
Additional considerations:

- Is this assessment related to knowledge or to a skill
- How much of an effect will the points/grade of this assignment have on student success in this class? If the class is a pre-requisite or cannot be re-taken, what effect will the point/grade of this assignment have on student success in their future classes?
- Assessment format: Are you asking students to display a skill correctly state a definition or identify information, etc.
- Time to completion: How long will this assessment take students to complete? Is the time required in a reasonable ratio to the risk for this assessment?
- Grading burden for you: How long will it take to grade one student’s finished assessment?
- Assessment communication: How are instructions, expectations, and due dates communicated to students?

How Many Assessments?

**TIME COMMITMENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First reading time:</th>
<th>5 minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Implementation time:</td>
<td>10 minutes per semester</td>
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</table>

How often will you evaluate students’ learning during the semester? When considering this, make sure you are tying your number and types of assessments back to your learning outcomes. When considering assessments, the learning outcomes should be your guide.

**Assessments per semester:** We have included a box for each of these assessments to estimate the grading load and the Level of Difficulty ensuring students meet class objectives through completing this assessment.

- **Two assessments:** This is the traditional midterm, final only format. This is best suited to advanced level students or survey courses where learning goals are largely based on familiarity with (not mastery of) a specific knowledge base. Generally, younger students will struggle with fewer assessments as they often lack the study skills required to prepare effectively. If you choose two evaluations per semester, consider ways that you can encourage students to space out their studying and also help them identify what is the most important information.

- **Three assessments:** This often is used in the format of two exams and one written assignment or project. Assessing students learning three times a semester allows you to add one skill-focused assessment to the standard twice a semester, fact based assessments. Using both fact based and skill based assessments improves students chances of doing well in the course by giving different types of learners two different types of assessments and thus raising the chances that they will have an assessment that best suits their learning style. It can also be helpful in classes with a mix of younger and older students, because it allows older students to challenge themselves, while still providing some skill building opportunities to younger students.
• Once per main unit (topic, or theme) with two cumulative assessments: This is often used in the form of biweekly or monthly quizzes in addition to a midterm and final. This is better suited to first and second year students because it addresses the two challenges of the twice a semester model; it encourages students to spread out their studying as they prepare for each section assessment and they can use the quizzes as indications of what type of material might be on the two larger evaluations. More advanced students may feel that this is "busy work", but even advanced students tend to have higher final grades using this method and are much more likely to have good mastery of the material. With more advanced students, you should pay special attention to make sure that the more regular assessments improve fact retention or are effective skill builders to maximize their effectiveness and help students see their value.

• Weekly or per class assessments (possibly conducted in discussion sections): This is the option that is most responsive to students’ actual learning progress, and allows for the most variability in assessment type. It is well suited to all levels of classes, though older students will expect that the usefulness of each assignment is abundantly clear (or that the assessments are relatively quickly completed). There are some techniques (discussed later) that can be used to help mitigate the heavy grading load this requires.

Assessments Targeted at Addressing Specific Problems

The assessments that follow can be used to help you avoid some common trouble problems that can arise during the semester. Plan to use them ahead of time to try and prevent these issues, or you can draw on them as needed as problems arise.

Assessments for Attendance

**TIME COMMITMENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Time Commitment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First reading time</td>
<td>1 minute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation time</td>
<td>up to 3 or 4 hours per semester</td>
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**Quizzes.** This can address problems with doing the readings, as well as attendance issues. These quizzes can be simple multiple choice or short answer or a variety of other formats. Quizzes should function as a "be here or miss the points" assessment that boosts attendance, as well as giving you quick feedback on whether students have a basic grasp of the information that you've presented thus far.

**Entrance and Exit Activities.** These are activities that you can assign at the start or end of class. Besides quizzes, it can be summaries of an article, a response to a question, simply signing their name and telling you something about themselves, or any other activity that they turn in to show you they are in attendance. You may choose to only use these types of activities occasionally. To do so, list them on your syllabus as "At the Instructor's Discretion" assessments, so that it will be clear to students that these activities can occur at any time.
Getting Students to do the Reading

TIME COMMITMENT

| First reading time: 2 minutes |
| Implementation time: up to 10 hours per semester |

It is very difficult to discuss an article that the students have not read. Ensuring that students have completed the assigned work and are prepared for discussion is one of the most difficult tasks of a TA or an instructor. Multiple techniques can be used to address this issue.

Journal Entries. Assigning a journal entry that summarizes and then critiques the articles for the week is a hefty assignment, but ensures readings of the material. The benefits of this assessment are that it will actually help students to better understand the reading, give them additional writing skill development opportunities, and produce higher quality classroom discussion. The difficulty can be that students often feel that too many of these assignments is too heavy of a workload, which can lead to poor reviews and skipped classes. Assigning these assessments at your discretion can help with these problems. Additionally, consider allowing students to choose a few readings which they do not have to write about. This lowers their homework load, but still ensures that at least a few students will have read the reading for any given class.

'Twitter' Responses. Article summaries in a tweet format (not submitted via Twitter) which is 150 characters in length. Include a requirement for two questions or comments for each article. This is useful because it is a format that is much easier for students to complete and it prevents them from feeling overburdened. This does not, however, require an in depth understanding of the reading, and is therefore more effective with older students or students who already seem to be doing some of the readings.

Main Idea Go Around. At the start of class have each individual contribute to a summary of the article main ideas. This works well because it helps students to jump immediately into a discussion of the articles, while still making them more accountable for having done and understood the reading. This can be difficult, however, if the majority of students all picked up on only one or two main ideas. If repetition becomes a problem, you can ask some students to point out pieces of supporting information in the article or to identify real-life examples that demonstrate the article’s main points.

These are just a few tried and true methods for getting students engaged and prepared for class. Remember that all of these methods can also be used together. Consider alternating between responses to get just the right balance of engagement, writing skill development, and homework load for your course.

Gauging Student Comprehension

TIME COMMITMENT

| First reading time: 2 minutes |
| Implementation time: Up to 10 hours per semester |

Have you looked at your students and wondered if they understood a single word of what you just spent an entire class period sharing? There are class topics and time periods within the semester that are difficult, confusing, or prone to kids just not paying attention (e.g. midterms, final three weeks of the
semester, etc.). It is during these times that you may want to assess where students are in their learning – and to do so quickly and efficiently. Here are a few tactics that will help you to accomplish this goal.

**Yes, No, Hmm Papers.** This activity incorporates student thoughts about a given set of materials – lectures, readings, etc. The papers ask three major questions: **Yes!** What struck you as interesting about this topic/article? Why is it important? How does a given article relate to the topic of the day? How does it relate to topics covered in previous class sessions? **No!** Are there problems with the author’s conclusions or methods? Are there issues brought up during the lecture that you do not agree with? **Hmmm!** Does the reading/lecture/class section raise additional questions or issues? These are some, but not all, of the questions that students can address in these papers – or you can customize what you want them to address in these sections.

You can use Yes, No, Hmm in two ways. One way you can use it is to assess understanding at the end of a particular class. Alternatively, it can be used to help develop critical thinking about course material or a section of the course. Both solutions answer the same basic questions, they only differ in paper length. The paper written at the end of class is limited to a half page and the other choice is generally anywhere between one and three pages. You can also choose whether to make it a smaller assignment they complete more often or a more intensive assignment that they complete two or four times per semester.

**3-2-1.** Three-Two-One activities can be used at any time during the semester to assess student learning. This is also a great way for you to assess your teaching. This is especially useful when you are either a new instructor, teaching a new course, or covering a section of material that is difficult for students to understand or for you to teach. This activity can be used at the end of the lecture for students to review what they have learned but can also be used as an exit activity to double as an attendance record. 3-2-1’s are:

- **Three:** Three things the student learned from the lesson.
- **Two:** two things that the student found interesting and they would like to learn more about
- **One:** Then, have students record one question they still have about the material.

**Variations on the 3-2-1**

- **Compare and Contrast 3-2-1:** Students record three similarities, two differences, and one question about two different items/concepts/ideas.
- **Reading 3-2-1:** This is very helpful when navigating difficult or dense texts. Ask students to record three main ideas, two supporting details for each of these ideas and one question about each of these ideas.
- **Pyramid 3-2-1:** This is a helpful way to have students think about the broader impacts of the subject matter. Have students divide a triangle into three sections – in the bottom they determine what three things they have learned in this class. On top of that, they write two questions about what they have learned. Finally, ask them to think of one way this information is applicable to their daily lives.

**Quick Write Review.** At the beginning of class, ask students to spend 2-5 minutes writing a short explanation of what was covered in the last class. This not only helps to check their understanding without the use of formal, higher risk assessments, but helps students to draw on what they learned in the last class for use in today’s discussions.
Writing Exams for Instructors

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 3 minutes
Implementation time: 30 minutes per exam

Writing exams; a daunting process, but you are not alone! Writing exam question can be a long and difficult process. It is much easier when done as a group. If you have TAs, it is perfectly acceptable to expect that they will assist you with writing the exam. If you do not have TAs, consider buddying up with another instructor in your department and exchanging exams, so that you can be sure that your questions are clear, and fair before administering the exam. Poorly written tests will cost you time in the long run because you will have numerous student complaints, office hour visits, and grading changes to make. It is in everyone's best interest to have exams proofread by someone else in your field that will have at least the basic requisite knowledge to give helpful advice.

If you have TAs, there are a few ways to work together to write the exam.

1) Assign each TA a topic or section and ask them to produce a set number of questions. (This results in a broader range of topics on the exam)
2) Ask TAs to submit a set number of questions on any of the material. (This results in tests are less broad, but which is very focused on the most important ideas, and tests knowledge of those ideas in multiple ways)

You will also need to decide whether each student will have the same version of the exam (better for smaller classes fewer chances of cheating) or multiple versions of the exam (good for large classes that are difficult to monitor)

While some instructors prefer to create multiple versions of the exam that have completely different questions, students may complain that some versions of the test were harder than others, and it will be very difficult to counter this claim. Instead, to make multiple versions, it is usually best to use the same questions in a different order. If you make different versions, it can be difficult to keep track of each student's exam version. Printing the different versions in different colors helps with this because students can generally remember which color exam they took (rather than a version number) and it allows you to quickly visually sort their exams as they submit them. Some testing services also have computer functions that can tell you whether a student scored higher on a different version of the exam, but this is not helpful if students did poorly on both versions.

When using an online test administration system, such as Blackboard, you may wish to allow the computer to randomly choose which questions each student sees to mitigate academic dishonesty if students choose to take exams together. Our recommendation is to avoid multiple choice or true/false exam questions if cheating during online exams is a concern for you.

As much as possible, always have your TAs (or yourself) take each version of the test once to check for errors and typos. This also helps to weed out questions that are too difficult or confusing. If you need to create an answer key for the test, you can do that at the same time. Proof the exam. Proof the answer key. Then give your TAs copies to do the same. It may take you an extra day but it will be worth it as students complete their exams and you can respond to overall questions rather than addressing test issues.
Writing Exam Questions for TAs

**TIME COMMITMENT**

- First reading time: 1 minute
- Implementation time: 30 minutes per exam

**Writing the exam questions**

There are two responsibilities you may or may not have in preparing for exams: helping your professor and preparing your students. Your instructor may not think to ask you to help prepare the exam, but offering to help is often a great way for you to practice assessment creation skills that will be important to you in your teaching career going forward.

What you need to do to help your professor plan for exams will vary from professor to professor. There are multiple tasks that may you may be asked to help with. As you are with the students in a smaller setting than your professor, the instructor may ask that you provide questions for the exam based on your discussions within your section. This helps not only ensure the exam is tailored to the current semester’s content, but also to provide variation – professors get into ruts too!! Make sure that you know how many questions your instructor expects you to submit, on what topics, and in what format. Also be certain that you are not duplicating the work of another TA by dividing topics between you so that all relevant topics are evenly covered on the exam.

**Proofreading the Exam and Confirming the Answer Key**

When the exam is complete, you may be asked to proof the exam versions. This may be multiple documents (if there are multiple versions) or proofing questions online on blackboard. You will need to check for the following items:

- Is the test question clear in what it is asking? Can you think of any other reasonable, alternate interpretations of the question? Are all of the terms specific enough to make sure there is only one correct answer? Do all of the questions line up with how the material has been taught in lecture and in your section?
- Do the answers challenge the test-taker to think rather than trick them?
- Are there any typos?
- Are the questions and answers all formatted the same?

After proofing, it is always wise to check the answer keys – especially when there are multiple versions of the exam. If you take the exam and choose an answer that is different than what is on the answer key – you may want to bring it up to your professor. Don’t doubt yourself on this; if the question seems tricky or too hard, it probably is. If you find yourself challenging a question, it is more than likely going to be challenged by one or more students as well.
What's on the Test

TIME COMMITMENT
First reading time: 5 minutes
Implementation time: 30 minutes in class time

The number one question from students is always, "what is on the test?" While it is very easy to respond by saying everything is fair game – your students will appreciate you providing strategies to help them succeed. While some educators have concerns about teaching students’ testing strategies, it is important to remember that these strategies are really just logic skills in which many students have not been trained. Rather than thinking about this as teaching them to be good test takers, consider this a way to help them to be good decision makers. You have an opportunity to provide your students with important life skills, so do not miss the chance by being overly focused on how these skills apply to tests specifically. Here are some strategies for test taking that you may want to share with your students.

Think About How Test Questions are Developed. Successfully preparing for an exam often entails thinking about how the exam questions were developed. Have students read an article and then work in groups to write an exam with 3 multiple choice questions, 1 short answer question, and 1 essay question. Have the class reconvene and discuss how students decided what questions to ask. Stress that professors are using the same kind of logic and that this logic is a means for identifying the most important information in a large body of facts.

Multiple Choice Strategies. Simple test taking rules can help your students be successful!
- Always eliminate answers that are clearly wrong. Explain to students that they should focus on the fewest possible choices in order to make the best decision.
- If students really do not know the answer, tell them to avoid choices that are written very strongly (with words like always, never, etc.) because real world phenomenon are generally more complicated than these extremes express.
- Look for synonymous meanings. There can only be one right answer!
- When in doubt, advise students to choose what sounds the most familiar to them because it is likely that they are partially recalling what they learned in class.

Short Answer Strategies. Answering short answer exam questions is not as difficult as it sounds. By incorporating the following strategies your students can be successful. Preparing for these questions is as simple as asking them to think about the processes, events, or definitions that their professor went over carefully. These are likely to be short answer questions. Students should pay attention to repetition in their notes. If something comes up repeatedly, it will more than likely come up on the test. Tell students to think about the skills the professor has had them practice in class. This can include writing short summaries, explaining how to find the answer to a math question, or talking about the positive and negative aspects of something.

Essay Question Strategies. Essay questions ask students to provide their thoughts, opinions and analysis of topics discussed in class. Help your students plan by having them think of topics that did not have clear "correct" answers in class – these are topics that are likely to be essay questions.
How to prepare? Write out several possible essay questions, and then... ANSWER THEM! Usually students can predict what the essay question will be, and smart students have already written out responses. They just have to think back to the practice answer they did at home (with their notes!), and re-write what they remember. Essay questions seem hard, but they should be the easiest questions on the exam if they have studied properly.

Preparing students for exams is not only supporting your students but also providing a great review of the material and provides you with an insight into any concepts of the class that students may be getting wrong, not understanding, or otherwise struggling with. You need to warn your instructor of any potential problems so that they can be addressed prior to exam day!

Preparing Your Students for Final Projects

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 2 minutes
Implementation time: up to an hour in a half per semester

While most final projects will require that students do the bulk of the work on their own, there are a few small things that you can do to help that will still make a big difference.

Students, especially those who are new to college or are returning after a lengthy absence, often have a hard time keep tracking of multiple project pieces and formatting guidelines. Some of the things you can do to teach them how to be successful are:

- Creating a checklist for students
  - This list will not only help them track the individual project elements so they don’t lose points for small mistakes, it will provide a tool they can re-create for themselves in future classes.
  - Include project components, formatting requirements, and major topics that should be addressed.

- Provide students with sample checkpoints or deadlines
  - Helping students break final projects into smaller tasks can help them think about the time each portion of the project will require.
  - This also helps them realize that the final project is not something that can be completed the night before it is due.

- Designate office hours for project feedback
  - By letting students know that these specific office hours are specifically for project discussions, you may encourage students to start their projects early and to seek out help.

- Set deadlines for emailed questions on the project
  - This cannot only make the end of the semester less hectic for you, it also gives students another good reason to get started early on their projects. For example, you may tell students that you will not be answering any emails about the project that are emailed in after 8pm the Monday before the project is due. This is also particularly helpful, because it makes it clear early on that you will not be responding to late night, last minute questions.
Yes, these steps add additional work to your already hectic schedule. However, these extra steps will not only help your students be successful, it will make your end of year grading much easier. Students who complete the project in phases will have more time for not only thinking through the project but also in revising and clarifying their points. These more complete projects will be much less frustrating to grade for you in the end.

**Grading Tips**

**TIME COMMITMENT**

- First reading time: 5 minutes
- Implementation time: 1 hour per semester

Grades are a necessary part of the academic career. But what do they mean? Grades help us evaluate the work a student has completed, motivates students to complete assignments, and most importantly, assesses the students’ learning. Grades should also be beneficial to you to assess the success of your lesson plans. However, grading is stressful. It is time consuming. It is frustrating, especially when student performance is low.

Grading is a challenge because you are evaluating student work but also because you need to be fair across sections and across individuals. To save time in grading these steps may make it a bit easier:

- Establish clear criteria for grades. If you do not use a rubric, then establish the requirements for what is an A paper/assignment vs. a C assignment and so on.
- Develop different grading techniques for different types of assignments.
  - A letter or numeric grade may be ideal for papers and projects but not so much for more frequent assignments
  - Try using a check, check+, check – strategy for those frequent assignments such as short quizzes, response papers, etc. Not only will these be easy to grade, but these assignments do not require much feedback!
- Create assignments that have clear goals and criteria for assessment. The better students understand what you’re asking them to do the more likely they’ll do it!
- Test and assignment corrections – if your professor agrees, allow students to make corrections on their exams or correct assignments to make up points lost. This will improve their learning and help them with future projects.
- If you are grading a large number of papers or assignments, read through a part of the stack first to get a sense of how the students performed on the assignment. If you are concerned about how you are grading, and there are other TAs in the same class, you may want to work together to grade a sample of papers and compare grading techniques. The other option is you can each grade a sample of papers, trade and grade each other’s papers. By comparing how each of you graded, you can see if there are inconsistencies you need to address.
- Tracking your grades. Most classes are on Blackboard and use the gradebook through that program. Regardless of whether you will be using blackboard or not, it is good practice to keep a separate spreadsheet in excel. This spreadsheet will provide you a space to make notes, track excused absences and more.
Comments on papers and other course assignments can take a tremendous amount of time. In order to make this be beneficial for your students as well as efficient for you, the Ohio State University teaching resource center put together these guidelines for writing responses to student papers.

☑ Summing It Up

For students, assessments are the most important aspect of any class as they require the most effort on the students’ part and they have the most tangible effect on their futures. This also means that assessments are a significant source of student stress, and too much student stress can take a heavy toll on you and your course’s success. Thoughtfully planned, balanced, and clearly explained assessments help students to focus on growth and learning and will have a much more lasting, positive impact than their letter grades ever will. Designing effective assessments takes practice; so do not be afraid to start by exploring others’ resources. We have provided several resources in this handbook, but ask in your department as well as they are likely to have both the material and expertise to get you started.
Lesson Planning

Objectives:
After reading this section, you will:

- Have a better understanding of your own teaching style
- Understand what makes a lesson effective
- Be able to plan effective lessons
- Have a reading lesson plan on hand for use in any class at a moment’s notice
- Have a plan ready to use in case you are ever ill

Making Lesson Plans

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 5 minutes
Implementation time: 30-45 minutes per lesson

Creating lesson plans is a time-consuming task, but it makes each class easier, and once you have enough of them prepared, it gives you a useful collection of lesson plans you can quickly turn to in the future. Even though students rarely complain that an instructor did not have lesson plans in their year-end evaluations, that is usually what they are referring to when they complain that a professor is boring, unengaged, or disorganized. If you expect students to invest energy and time in your course, you need to match that investment with quality lesson plans.

Fortunately, making lesson plans does not have to take much time, and the more you practice, the faster these become. After you have written your first few lesson plans, you should be able to be able to write a lesson plan in about 30 minutes (making it a quick project for your office hours)

Your lesson plan should include:

- Class Name and Date (adding the week often helps in knowing where in the semester you are)
- Reminders
- Learning goals
- Assigned reading Important Note: Always know which section of the day’s reading is most important for your learning goals. You should be able to zoom in on that section, without having
to frantically look for it in front of the class as soon as you see that students have not done or have not understood the reading.

- **Activity**
- Have you accounted for: visual learners, Oral learners, active learners, learners with other needs, students from other disciplines, majors, graduate students
- Next assignment (assessment)
- **In class assessments**
- Upcoming related assessments
- Post class notes (what worked, what didn’t, changes that could be made)

Once you've addressed the basics above, here are customizations you can make:

- Divide your class time into even increments that you can use as class time units. For example, you may have a 50-minute class, which you divide into five 10-minute increments. Consistently planning your lesson plan in 10 minute increments will help you keep on time in class and with practice it will allow you to make very precise estimates about how long any given activity will likely take.
- Keep your general class flow consistent throughout the semester. For example, you may start every class with a 5-minute review of upcoming assignments and announcements, and another 5 minutes reminding students of last week's discussion and an outline of the class for the day. This eliminates 10 minutes that need to be planned for each lesson, allows students to have a general sense of what is going on in class on any given day, and the sense of routine can be very reassuring for yourself, especially if you are new to teaching.
- Create a lesson plan binder that you can slowly add to and that will function as your go to teaching resource for future lesson plans. This will be more valuable to you than any other teaching resource because you will have tested and tweaked it yourself. Not only will this allow you to save time by making it possible to repeat past lessons that were successful, but also it will make you better at lesson planning overall.
- We have included some of the types of students you may need to think about as you write your lesson plan, but consider adding categories once you know the general make-up of your class.

**Using Your Teaching Strengths and Preferences**

**TIME COMMITMENT**

- First reading time: 5 minutes
- Implementation time: Ongoing

As educators, many of us are already aware that students have different learning styles and that incorporating multiple ways of presenting material can be an important tool for helping all your students to learn, but not as many of us also pay attention to our own teaching styles and maximizing learning by strategically using our skills. Particularly when working with adult students, many of whom already have lots of experience being students and learning in a variety of ways, one of the best things that we can do is to leverage our strengths to their advantage. For example, if you know that you feel uncomfortable giving
speech style lectures, and that trying to do so means that you will speak too quickly, fidget nervously, and struggle to engage your audience, you can often achieve better results, regardless of whether most of your students are auditory learners, by switching to a teaching style that puts you more at ease.

To determine your teaching strengths and preferences, consider taking the mini-quiz below:

- When you are talking with your friends about a new film, how are you likely to express your excitement about the movie?
- In which interactions with others do you find yourself to be the most open and comfortable?
- If a colleague was struggling to understand a new concept in your field, how would you explain it to them to help them understand?
- What is your biggest teaching fear?
- What is the one word that you hope students would use when describing you to your department head?
- What is the one word that you hope students would use when describing you to a friend of theirs who is considering taking your class?

**Teaching Styles**

**Interaction.** You prefer working with students to traditional teaching methods. Your students are likely to benefit most from lessons that revolve around small group work with instructor input on a turn-by-turn basis. Your students are likely to benefit from this approach even more if you can supplement it with handouts or slides which provide a visual component to your hands-on teaching.

**Presentation.** You relish speaking to large groups and putting together captivating presentations. Your students will benefit from your enthusiasm and interest in lecture formats. You can further help them by ensuring that your presentation slides allow for different types of visual learning.

**Experience.** You see yourself more as a guide than a teacher. You can best help your students by incorporating lesson plans that create scenarios or case studies for your students. You can further help students who learn best by reading or listening by carefully selecting accompanying reading materials and providing handouts that summarize the main points of the activity.

**Collaboration.** You want to hear what students think and teach them through engagement and debate. This type of teaching can be made even more inclusive by asking students to also bring in images or short written responses to include in debates or classroom discussions.

**Deliberation.** You feel most confident dealing with your students through reading assignments and their written work. You are also likely to feel most confident working one on one with students. You can leverage your mentoring ability by having workshop style classes, where students actively work on in class assignments with you providing instant and continuous feedback. You can make this even more effective by having students present their ideas to each other in class and then receiving low risk feedback from you. Remember, it is usually far better for your students and yourself if you teach in a way that makes you feel excited, committed and invested. There are a multitude of ways to teach any given subject; find the one that makes you love teaching and you will see your students’ learning improve too!
As serious graduate students committed to diligent academic study, it is easy to take ourselves, and our work, too seriously. But learning is more effective when its enjoyable, and you will be a better teacher if you are having a good time. So how can you bring a little bit of joy to your semester?

We have already talked about how useful it is to teach to your strengths, but there are many things you can do to liven up your class while still getting work done. Here are some of our favorites, but we encourage you to add to this list as you find things that work for you.

- Play music in the few minutes before class begins.
- Play calming or energizing music as students are working on something in class.
- Do not underestimate the power of stickers. A good grade feels even better with a little bit of celebration and a bad grade is a little less discouraging with an encouraging sticker. As an added bonus, you might have fun buying stickers for your class.
- Teach outside of your classroom
- Get students moving, even if it is just to move in and out of groups.
- Vary your classroom layout - moving from rows or groups to circles can have an amazing impact.
- Look for unexpected examples in popular culture, music or films
- If it is not important to your learning goals, try to take it lightly. Avoid being strict without a purpose, but do not be afraid to be strict about things you have committed to teach your students.
- Look for opportunities to give your students choices.
- Food and coffee are always appreciated.
- Limit your formality – be flexible. Sometimes the important lesson for the day has nothing to do with what you have planned in your lesson plan.
- Give positive, public feedback as much as you can.
- Make your number one commitment be student success, and then communicate that commitment to your students.
- Remember that your class is already full of interesting, funny people; then give them opportunities to relax and be themselves.
- Friendly competition (low risk) can bring activities to life.
- Encourage students to share little victories with you and to celebrate with the class. Birthday wishes, congratulations on new jobs or relished sports victories make a big difference!
- Ditch the red pen. Students appreciate feedback that looks friendly.
- Decorate your classroom. Even though most of us cannot leave things in our classrooms, bringing a silly poster, a dish of candies (food!) or a class mascot can make a more relaxed class atmosphere.
- Invest in classroom supplies that make you feel relaxed, confident and organized.
Give students a chance to find common ground with you on something outside of school. Let them know if you love sports, if you are a cat or dog person, or you are from out of state. These personal connections will not undermine their respect for you, but rather often provide something to bond with students about, making class more interesting for everyone.

**Tying Discussions to Lecture**

**TIME COMMITMENT**

- First reading time: 10 minutes
- Implementation time: 5-10 minutes

As a TA, a large part of your job is to supplement and support your instructor's lessons. At first, it can be difficult to figure out how to do this, but with practice, you will become very fast at finding ways to tie discussions to lecture. Here are the basic steps. You will have to do them slowly and consciously at first, but after some practice, this should not add more than 5 minutes to your lesson planning.

**During lecture.** If your lead instructor includes a main points slide for each lecture, you may simply choose which of these main points should be reviewed or expanded in discussion section, and then follow the lesson planning tips.

If your lead instructor does not include a main points slide, you will need to make a brief note at each lecture about the main ideas students were supposed to have learned from the lecture. If you are unsure about your instructor's priority for a given main point, consider whether you expect that point or idea to show up in any of the semester's assessments. If the information will be included in a future assessment, it is key material and you should try to re-visit it in discussion sections. To do so, follow the lesson planning tips.

**During Discussion Section.** When planning for your discussion sections, you need to first think of the theme and objectives for this week's lectures and readings. Additionally, you should have a discussion with the instructor to verify if they have additional objectives they would like for you to meet during the discussion section. Think about what may be on an upcoming exam or will need to be learned to support an upcoming assignment. Make sure you are driving these concepts home with your students. Ask them questions, have a discussion about the concepts, find out what they know and what they think. You will then be able to help alleviate any confusion and explain any concepts on which they may not be completely clear.

Make sure you are engaging students by actively listening to what they are saying. This will help you not only gain their trust and cooperation, but also allow you to become aware of issues they are facing in understanding the material. The key elements of active listening for you as a TA/Instructor are:

- **Allow yourself to listen.** Leave your biases behind and really listen to what the individual is saying.
- **Understand the message.** First, allow the student to finish their thought. Then ensure you understand their question or statement which may include confirming that you understood their comment/question (i.e. Let me be sure that I understand the question – you are asking if _____. Right?)
• **Evaluate the question or statement.** Think of not only what they are asking, but the reasons why, and how they have asked the question. Do they really not understand a concept? Are they being combative? Are they asking out of curiosity? These will all impact your response.

• **Respond.** Now that you understand what they are asking and why – provide an answer. Ask if you have addressed their question or comment sufficiently.

Your responsibility as a TA is to ensure your students are meeting course objectives. Your opportunity to assess their learning is in your discussion section. Deliberately incorporating lecture reviews into your lesson plan will not only make your students more successful, it will make you look like a rock star!

Regardless of the subject matter you teach, helping students to be better communicators is an important part of your job as an educator. In many college level courses, these skills are primary addressed through **modeling** and through writing practice, but skills that are so central to student success deserve dedicated class time. Teaching this material can also be tricky because many of us have never been explicitly trained in these techniques ourselves. With that in mind, we've included a few early in the semester lesson plans that you can incorporate into your classes either as early skill building or as remedies to communication difficulties that emerge throughout the course. If you are having difficulty finding the time for these types of lessons, consider that the time normally assigned to ice breakers can often be better used with socially organized "communication skills" activities.

### Effective listening lesson plans

**I Heard That:** Time Required: 15- 20 min in a class of 25-30, for larger classes break the class into groups of 5 or 6 students and allow 10-15 minutes. The instructor should check in with each group briefly.

Ask students to spend no more than 5 minutes writing 4 or 5 sentences that they will share with the class (or their small group). In their writing, they should try to convince their fellow students of something silly and obviously untrue, (like that the sky is green or that all cars are actually made of chocolate). Within their short persuasive piece they must also include one factual, undisputed statement (there are clouds in the sky, cars have wheels, etc.).

When the writing period is over, ask students to read what they have written in their most persuasive voice. Instruct the audience to listen carefully for the grain of truth hidden in each student’s piece. After a student reads their piece, ask the audience what the truth was. The aim of this lesson is to remind students how hard it can be to listen for something we do agree with when it is surrounded by things we strongly reject, so feel free to move quickly through the activity.

**Modification one: Test prep and listening**

Instead of giving students broad choice as to what they write about, ask them to incorrectly describe material they have learned in class, and challenge the audience to identify the correct information and correct the incorrect information. Warning: This modification takes much longer because you must be certain that all incorrect information is identified and clearly corrected to prevent student confusion.
Modification two:
For classes with a strong base of shared information and a supportive class environment, you can experiment with more substantial real life issues related to class material. To do so, make it clear in your instructions to the audience that they should not confuse opinions with fact and that, for this exercise, the focus is on identifying verifiable facts. Be aware that this modification takes significantly longer than the original plan and that it may open up more difficult conversations, which you can prepare yourself for by visiting this section.

There's Something We Can Agree On
In American early and secondary education, students are generally accustomed to debate formats and persuasive arguments, but they have much less experience finding common ground. This activity works on helping students practice empathetic listening.

Divide the class into small groups and assign groups to pro/con sides of topics relevant to your course. Give students no more than 5 min to write out their arguments to support their position. Once the writing has been completed pair students (1 pro student with 1 con student) but instead of asking them to try and convince each other, ask them to finds 3-4 points of agreement. For added efficacy, end the activity with a class discussion of what listening skills they used to achieve the activity goal.

Activities

TIME COMMITMENT
First reading time: 1 minute
Implementation time: Ongoing

Activities have the power to bring concepts from the readings to real life for your students. Abstract concepts, ideas, and theories become accessible when students engage with them in real time. Think outside the box about your class objectives and how to best illustrate these objectives through an activity. This can be as simple as listing student names, majors, and home towns on the board to demonstrate variation, to teaching them about the concept of development by creating mini-trade, resource, and loan scenarios. Depending on your class size, you can do small group work or choose questions for each group to discuss before bringing it back to the main group. Activities, when well planned, and well thought out, are valuable teaching tools. Using them throughout your course in a variety of contexts will help students become more engaged with the topic and create a better understanding of your objectives.

Activities can be challenging to plan because they need to tie in to and illustrate the major points of your lesson. While we are not able to give specific advice for planning activities here, we have made a list of general activity resources that you can consider. Additionally, you will help yourself greatly if you keep a sort of "activity toolbox" for yourself; a place where you jot down activities that you see in other classes, or that you develop over time. Having a bank full of activities that can then be modified to your specific needs is the easiest way to begin moving from all lecture teaching to more student engaging approaches.
Writing a lesson plan is similar to making a syllabus in that it is a somewhat backward process. You will start by looking at each day’s learning goals and then plan your lessons so that these goals will be met. The type of lesson plan you create will largely depend on the type of learning that you are hoping to achieve. Below we have given you a "cheat sheet" of the general approaches useful for different learning goals based on a foundational educational principle known as Bloom's taxonomy, along with one example of an activity that you can use to begin brainstorming lesson plan ideas. Bear in mind that none of these categories are more important or valid than the others. That said, you will find that students who have not mastered the first categories of learning listed here will find the other categories increasingly difficult. When you are ready to move beyond this first level of lesson planning, we encourage you to read more about Bloom’s taxonomy and the many ways it can enrich your teaching. You will find some great starting resources in the resource list we’ve given here.

**Fact retention.** If your goal for this lesson revolves around fact retention, you are going to want to create activities that help students to remember what they are learning. More than repetition, experiential learning can be very effective. Look for activities that will allow students to discover the facts for themselves through the course of the class. For example, if students must learn a set of characteristics for several objects (or systems, etc.), provide students with real life examples of these objects and ask them to make comparisons between the objects for every characteristic they can think of. When they have completed this, ask them to try to create a classification system that arranges these objects by shared characteristics. This will allow them to discover the characteristics for themselves, and will aid their retention of facts associated with each object.

**Conceptual Understanding.** When the learning goals are more geared towards being able to describe a process or complicated concept, you will find that activities that encourage students to explain or teach the ideas to each other are generally the most helpful. A technique called Jig Sawing, or any variant of it, can be very effective. Break students into several groups and assign each group a topic or process. Instruct students that you will give them 10-15 minutes to figure out, within their groups, how they would teach their topic to their classmates. When the time is up, rearrange students to form new groups with one member of each of the original groups. Now ask the students to teach their new group members the topic they had originally been assigned. Observe students and provide feedback throughout.

**Application.** For many classes, you will want students to be able to successfully apply concepts that they have learned. Whenever possible, provide students with real life examples or case studies and ask them to work together to write a short explanation of how this demonstrates the concept you are teaching, or to explain what the effect would be if they applied course concepts to the case study. To make this more
thorough and challenging for students, you can provide small groups with different case studies and then have each group present their case study to the class for feedback from their classmates.

**Evaluating and judging.** As students’ breadth of knowledge increases and they begin to be introduced to competing theories or approaches to material, it will be important to develop their ability to evaluate and judge the material being presented to them. Effective lesson plans will ask students to take a position on a given topic and to use facts, concepts, and theoretical application to defend their position. Position papers, debates, and class presentations can all be effective methods for allowing students to make a judgment about a given topic and to receive useful, alternative approaches from you and their classmates.

**Perspective Forming.** When students begin to approach mastery of a given subject or discipline, your role will be in helping them to form coherent perspectives of the subject that take into account their evaluations of a set of concepts that draw on a wider diversity of facts and topics, and that make use of their full range of critical thinking skills. Traditionally, these lessons are generally accomplished through more extensive writing assignments, but these types of lessons can also be extremely useful for end of the semester (or major topic) reviews. Lessons which encourage students to persuade their classmates to their way of thinking through engaged, in-depth dialogs, class round tables, or activities which encourage students to reach conclusions about case studies or real life examples which do not directly reflect the material previously studied can all be effective ways of planning this kind of learning.

**Emergency Lesson Plan – Close Reading**

**TIME COMMITMENT**
- First reading time: 2 minutes
- Implementation time: 10-30 minutes in class time

You may find at some point in the semester that your original lesson plan isn’t going to work, or that students do not understand the material as well as you thought they would. In these cases, this short lesson plan, to be used in conjunction with assigned class readings, is a valuable emergency backup.

Ask students to take out a relevant reading and explain that you are going to work on advanced reading strategies as a class. Remind them that active reading is an important skill that even their professors continue to work on and improve. Use this as an opportunity to teach them what reading like a scholar means.

Once they have their readings out, direct students to the paragraph where the first main idea is located. Then have them locate, before reading the section together, any terms that look like they are important or new. Have them jot down a one-word definition, reminding them that the reading may provide them a new or more nuanced understanding of the term. Go through each sentence in the paragraph and have one student explain what each sentence means. Then provide a paragraph summary.

To assess student understanding, ask each of them to highlight whatever portion of the paragraph helps them to remember or understand what you have just discussed most clearly. Have a few students share what they selected for an immediate zero-risk assessment of their understanding. If there are additional main ideas in the text, you can either repeat the process or break students into small groups and ask them to attempt to repeat the process on their own. Again, use their highlighting for a quick assessment.
of their understanding. If you still have concerns about whether students have grasped the main idea or not, finish by asking them to write a one sentence summary in the margin or in their notes of the main idea.

Planning for Sick Days and Other Emergencies

**TIME COMMITMENT**

First reading time: 5 minutes  
Implementation time: 30-45 minutes

Being sick is terrible, but couple being sick with the possibility of canceling your class or the need to cover the class due to absence and it is even worse. You can focus on resting and recovering if you have a sick day plan lined up ahead of time. Sick day plans should account for two possibilities: canceling class, and having someone take over your class for the day. You should always plan for both of these situations because the decision over which happens will often fall to your department and not to you personally. A sick day plan for canceling class should have two parts: an email to your department and an email to your students. You also need to know ahead of time who in your department you should be contacting if you are ill; it could be your department’s administrator, the department head, or the lead instructor. Make sure you have this information at the beginning of the semester so that you aren't scrambling to figure out what to do on an actual sick day!

Here’s a starter template for the email to your department:

Good Morning {name},
I’m very sorry, but I’m ill this morning and cannot possibly teach my {class number} class scheduled for {time}. My plan is to cancel class today and continue with my normal teaching schedule from the next class period. I will contact my students through email, but it would be a great help to me if you could also put a sign on the classroom door (building and room #) to avoid confusion.

I have also included a copy of the message I will be sending to my students below, in case you have inquiries from any of my students. Thank you in advance!

Sincerely,
And here is one for your students. In the email to your students, you will want to keep things as generic as possible so that you do not need to go back to your syllabus and try to figure out what they need to be ready for in the next class.

Good Morning Students,

Unfortunately, I am not well today, so today's class is cancelled. Please have your assigned readings and homework for both today's class and the next class period ready when we next meet.

Any appointments/office hours planned for today are also cancelled. I will contact you to reschedule as soon as I am able.

See you all on {date}.

Sincerely,

Having someone take over your class requires more planning, but it also is better for your students. However, there are a great ways to have productive classes even when you cannot be present that avoids the "just play a movie" strategy. Students generally regard this as a waste of their time, and you may see repercussions in your teaching reviews if you use this strategy. Some students also take this to mean that attendance in class is not that important, and so you may find that this has a negative impact on attendance, especially if students begin reporting it on your evaluations, ratemyprofessor.com or other professor review websites.

However, there are times and specific concepts that can be well supported through the showing of a particular movie or series of video clips. To do this effectively, you need to plan for the movie along with a movie guide to help students connect the film with the course concepts. A series of clips can be used to address specific concepts or to act as a review of a larger set of concepts. Provide a PowerPoint that has questions for the students (and answers in the note section for your TA or colleague who will be filling in for you!) and discussion points for a variety of video clips. This opens both small and large classes to a discussion and a more interactive session. They will never know you are gone!

Strategy 1 - Guest lectures: While planned guest lectures are great additions to your regular teaching plans, setting up an emergency class swap with a colleague can be a great way to deal with an unexpected sick day. Find someone whose research is relevant to the class, and ask them if they would be willing to come and present their work if you are ever ill. This allows them to practice that conference paper they are working on or recycle old presentations about their research and prevents them from having to come up with something new on the spot. This also allows students to see what cutting edge work in the field looks like, get a greater sense of what kind of research is done at your university, and works well even without assigned readings. Of course, this option should always be used in conjunction with another back up, just in case your colleague cannot make it to class on such short notice.

Strategy 2 - Discussion leaders: Contact your students ahead of class and let them know that someone else will be teaching class and tell them that you expect that each of them will come to class with one question that they would like to discuss (for many classes, this will just be a reminder of what they ought to be doing daily anyway). Remind students that those who come to class unprepared will lose participation points for the day. Let your colleague know that they simply need to call on students to share
their questions and facilitate discussion of the answers. If you have concerns that your class will not be as talkative with a new instructor; ask your colleague to break them up into groups of three or four and to go between the groups to keep them engaged and on task.

**Strategy 3 - Case Study:** Prepare a case study assignment ahead of time that asks students to apply the major lessons of the class. This is something that you can use either as a great review tool near the end of the semester or as an activity that works well when a colleague takes over your class. Print out all of the material for this ahead of time so that your colleague simply needs to pick up the handouts, pass them out to the students, and keep student groups on task. If your colleague is in the same field as you are, it is likely that they will not only find this an easy activity to assist your students with, but that they will also bring a fresh perspective to it that makes the activity even more rewarding for students.

Preparing a sick day plan when you are at the start of the semester seems like a tremendous amount of work, but being sick is generally a surprise to everyone! This time spent planning, like all of your course planning, will be valuable in those cases you just cannot make it to class. And if you get to the end of the semester, find yourself tired, uncharacteristically unprepared for class, or just need a mental health break, you can always incorporate one of your sick day plans yourself. This planning is time well spent.

**✓ Summing It Up**

Planning your lessons in advance and keeping a file of lesson plans that worked well for you and your students is the single most important thing you can do for your teaching career. Carefully planned lessons will ensure that your students learn the material, and will be reflected in student grades and end of the semester evaluations. These lesson plans will also help you to assemble a strong teaching portfolio that showcases your particular approach to teaching and provides concrete evidence of the perspectives and commitments you will describe in your teaching statement. These lesson plans will also be available to you for reuse in future classes, either as they are or as inspiration for when you sit down to prepare for new classes. Finally, years from now, you will be able to look back at the lesson plans you have collected and see how your teaching has grown and evolved over the years, helping you to continue honing your craft. Lesson planning is a difficult habit to begin, but it is well worth the effort.
Running Class

Objectives:
After reading this section, you will:

- Understand that setting the tone in class is a form of modeling that can help you achieve student learning goals
- Know concrete ways to assist your lead instructor during lectures
- Have several strategies to help with nervousness and stage fright

Setting the Tone

TIME COMMITMENT
First reading time: 3 minutes
Implementation time: Ongoing

The way in which you present the material, the topic, and the plan for the semester will set the tone for your section for the rest of the year. On the first day of class, introduce yourself, your expectations, and your objectives for the class. It is important to encourage students to participate and for you to be excited about their learning experience every time your class meets if you want to keep student involvement high. This first day will help you begin to set the tone for the semester as well as begin to build a sense of community within your classroom.

Also make sure to establish a policy of personal respect between yourself and your students. Regardless of your discipline, you will want to create a safe space where students feel comfortable sharing with each other and discussing difficult, uncomfortable, or volatile subject, because your role as an educator extends well beyond your particular subject matter. Students look to college instructors as examples of professional, mature behavior. It is part of your job responsibility to model tolerant, rational interactions for your students. Doing so will also provide a safe environment for asking questions regardless of the topic and help your students to learn material that might otherwise be confusing to them.

Setting the tone also includes making a personal connection with your students and developing a respectful relationship with them. When you are friendly and respectful to your students, the students respond to you in the same way and this will make the semester easier for everyone. Making students feel as if you are approachable is important, as you are the conduit between the student and the instructor and
because, as an educator, you often deal with students who feel vulnerable or insecure about what they know and understand.

Use both tried and true and new and innovative ways to make your class engaging. This does not mean that you need to conduct a song and dance for every class. But find ways to engage with your students and allow them to engage with you. This will help engender positive feelings about your course, students will want to attend because they are a part of the process, and most of all, you will have a much better time teaching.

**Lecture Support**

**TIME COMMITMENT**

First reading time: 5 minutes

Implementation time: Ongoing

A large part of your responsibilities as a TA is assisting your lead instructor. But figuring out how best to help can sometimes be difficult. There are several ways that you can help before, during and after lectures that will not only help class run more smoothly, but also prepare you for your own teaching career.

**Before Lecture.** The 10 minutes before the start of a lecture is often busy. Students want to ask one quick question of the lecturer, presentation tools need to be set up, and, ideally, your instructor should have a quiet moment or two to focus before class begins. To make all of this happen, there are a few things that you can do to help.

- **Field student questions:** Ideally, the lead instructor will always plan on staying for a few minutes after class to answer student questions. If possible, it is wise to write this policy directly into the syllabus so that it is easier to tell a student that their question is best asked after lecture, not ahead of time. If students really feel that they need to ask a question before class, TAs should try to make a habit of trying to answer all student questions that arise before class, and only allow absolutely important questions to be asked of the lead instructor before lecture begins.

- **Technology:** Arrive early and make sure that the computer is booted and ready for your instructor to load their presentation and begin. Even if the class before you always has everything ready for your when you walk in, there will always be a few days in the semester where things are not set up the way they normally are. Having that sorted out before the lecturer arrives means that the beginning of class is never delayed, and your lead instructor can feel more relaxed before their lecture.

- **Announcements:** Remind your lead instructor of any reminders that they may want to give students regarding upcoming deadlines or exams. It is your responsibility to check the syllabus ahead of each lecture so that you can make sure that your students are given every opportunity to be fully prepared to meet all class expectations.

- **Class Material Preparation:** TAs should also be responsible for making sure that all the necessary class materials are ready prior to lecture. This includes printed handouts, scantrons for exams, and exam copies, pencils, or any other material needed for class.
During Lecture. It is tempting to use lecture time to think about your own upcoming responsibilities, but there are actually many things that you should be doing during lecture to make your course successful.

- **Address student disruptions:** Even in the best class, there are always a few student disruptions. Students arrive late or leave early. They talk to their friends, and use social media. These disruptions are not entirely preventable, but they can be easily dealt with. Again, the best way to address this is first in the class syllabus, and then in class as disruptions occur. Having a designated row or seating area reserved only for late comers (preferably in the back of the class) will not only limit the disruptions of coming and going, but make students aware that their late entry is noticeable to the class and, especially, to the professor.

- There are different ways for dealing with social media and talking in class. One way is to set a class policy that students who disrupt class will be asked to leave class all together. Another is to ask students who are making too much noise to move to the front of the class. In either case, this is much better when handled quietly by the TA before the disruption affects the lecture. At least one TA should be on alert to handle disruptions before they become a more serious problem. That said, walking through the rows or “policing” the room is likely to create a more difficult classroom atmosphere. Instead, consider having TAs sit at the back of the lecture hall so that they can observe students easily and more casually.

- Additionally, at least one TA should be closely attending to what is actually said in lecture, if not actively taking notes. Occasionally, a lecturer may forget a point or need clarification about how something was explained in discussion sections, and it is much easier if a TA is paying attention and is ready to provide whatever additional information is needed. Taking notes is a particularly good way of doing this because it means that the TA is attending to what is said in class, has a written record of how things were explained in class which they can refer to if there are questions in discussion sections or office hours, and can help students who struggle with note taking skills by having lecture notes that they can compare with the notes recorded by their students. Some TAs may even decide to provide a copy of their notes to students with excused absences, but that is a decision that needs to be made in conjunction with your attendance policies. Finally, taking notes during lectures can be a great way to provide feedback on lecture effectiveness as it allows the lecturer to see what information their listeners are understanding as important and can help the lecturer refine future talks with a better focus on the information needed to meet their learning objectives.

- Pay careful attention to any questions asked during lecture. Often, these questions are a strong indication of what you will need to review in your discussion sections.

After Lecture. Finally, there are several things that you can help with to keep things moving.

- After class, many students will come up with questions, or concerns that need to be addressed. Generally, students tend to think they need to speak with the lead instructor, but often TAs can take care of their concerns just as easily. Make it a policy that each TA first tries to answer the questions of any of their students that come up after class, before allowing the student to speak to the professor. This will streamline the question process and help everyone get the full attention that they need.
• Make sure that the classroom is empty of trash and as clean as you found it once the students have left. This is especially important because different departments share rooms and the reputation of a department can suffer if they always leave messy rooms behind them.
• Again, pay attention to the questions that students are asking after class. Often students feel embarrassed to ask certain questions that they think are too easy, and so they wait until after class to privately ask the professor. The reality, however, is that many students often have the same question, and addressing this question in your discussion section can greatly improve test scores and student learning overall.

You may feel that some of these activities are the responsibility of the instructor; you are just the TA. However, a TAship is training for your future career and preparation for being a lead instructor, so it is important for you to master these skills now. Being an instructor is not easy and comes with a tremendous amount of responsibility. Helping your instructor will not only create a more cooperative atmosphere between you and the instructor, it will create a class environment in which there is solidarity in teaching and contributing to your students’ success.

Managing Stage Fright

**TIME COMMITMENT**

First reading time: 5 minutes
Implementation time: Ongoing

There are three typical TAs: those who are terrified to stand in front of a classroom full of undergraduates, those who relish in the opportunity to stand in front of a class, and those who are nervous until they say their first hello. You can be any one of those or a combination of all three. What is important is not whether you are nervous, terrified, or eager to stand in front of a class, it is the fact that you do it regardless of your fear. And there are several things that you can do to help you conquer your fear and be successful in the classroom.

• **Be Prepared.** Being ready to address the class with a clear plan is the first key to success. Each lesson plan should include a warm up activity, the objectives for the day and the assessment technique for these objectives. Keep all your classroom supplies in one place, so that you can grab everything before class without having to check for every supply you might need. Also, at the beginning of the semester, make sure that you know where your classroom is, how to get there, and how long it will take you to get there. Part of being prepared means removing little obstacles ahead of time so that you can focus on the important stuff. Knowing that you are prepared, have read the material for the day, and know the activities you are going to use will help your class run smoothly regardless of the day.

• **Practice.** If you are really nervous, run through your talking points out loud before class. It will help you be familiar with the way it sounds to you and to others.

• **Take a Beat – but be on time.** Before class, close your office door or find a quiet place to just take a moment to relax and think of the class. Take some deep breaths and visualize class in your mind. Try to arrive in the classroom 10-15 minutes early. This will provide you with an
opportunity to turn on any equipment, test your slides, and make sure the mike is working and the room is set up properly. If all is well, it also provides you with a spare few minutes to grab a drink of water, chat with students, or look over your notes.

- **Start with a Signal that Class Has Started.** The easiest way to ease into the class is to start with a "good morning" or some signal that class has started. This provides you with an opportunity to check in with the students, get a sense of their energy level, and also provides them with an opportunity to share any concerns/questions with you. It does help to have a short warm up activity that leads into your topic. But sometimes you do not have enough time for a complete activity, which makes your welcome a bit more important.

- **Find your comfort zone.** Though classes have traditionally been taught with an instructor standing in the center of the classroom in front of their students, this format only adds anxiety for some. As much as possible, visit your classroom before that first day of class and see how it feels to teach from different angles. You may find that you prefer to sit behind a desk at the front of the room, or to move away from the podium. Orient yourself in whatever way makes you feel the most confident and comfortable, while allowing you to engage your students, even if it is not the way your classroom is usually used. Students will learn much better if your extra confidence helps you to speak slowly, clearly and with less stress.

- **Remember where the focus is.** Often people feel nervous when they begin teaching because they imagine that the entire class of students will be focused on them, but unlike many public speaking engagements, that is rarely the case in classrooms. Students know that the material you present is important to their futures and their grades, and their focus will be on what you are teaching them far more than how you say it or what your hands are doing. When you feel nervous, try to remind yourself that your students are too busy worrying about writing that last fact down and they do not have time to pay attention to the fact that you said "like" 6 times. As an educator, you are a conduit for information, not the focus of attention.

- **Make your students your allies.** Another great way to handle early teaching nerves is to just be honest about it with your students. Tell them at the beginning of class that teaching this many students, this subject, or this format is new for you and you are a little nervous. Say that you hope they will be understanding while you get used to it. Most of them will do you the favor of politely nodding or smiling as you get started, just as you yourself have probably done for so many nervous public speakers. This will help to establish an early bond between you and your students, and it will assure them that you are doing your best. Once you have asked your students to be patient supporters, you will experience a reduction in the pressure, and by the second or third class, you will find your nervousness to be greatly decreased.

- **Last Ditch Effort.** If none of these things work try talking yourself through the worst that could happen. Yes, you may trip over the podium, the computer cord, or continually press the handicap bar on the classroom door. But that is just going to show your humanity. Focus on five-minute increments. If you get through the first five minutes of class, you generally are on a roll and can get through it all.

Do not be discouraged if your plan does not work or go as you had hoped. Take notes and make changes the next time. Keep going, teaching will be the most rewarding – although sometimes the most difficult – part of your career!
Students’ Basic Skills and Previous Knowledge

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 5 minutes
Implementation time: 20 minutes

Skill/Knowledge Inventories

Now that you have planned out your ideal semester with your syllabus, it is time to bring your plans back into the real world. You have made all of these plans without any information about the students in your class and what their skills and needs are. To set yourself up for a successful semester, it’s important to gather this information about your students as soon as you can, so that you can adjust your schedule and learning goals now. You will want to know what basic skills your students possess. In this section and the rest of this manual, the term basic skills is used to refer to learning skills that are generally not offered as separate college coursework such as note-taking, effective reading skills, presentation skills, grammar for native speakers, writing components like thesis writing, paragraph structure, and short essay formats, and computer skills. Your field may have additional basic skills of which you need to be aware.

At the beginning of each semester, it is important to get to know your students and this includes getting a sense of what they do and do not know. Skill and knowledge inventories are incredibly useful in this regard. Skill and knowledge inventory methods include any early-in-the-semester assessment that is zero risk (i.e. not worth points and preferably anonymous) and that gives a fair indication of the students’ knowledge. These assessments can be short writing activities, multiple choice questions, true and false, or questions which demonstrate a skill (solve the following problem, evaluate the following example, etc.). If you have had the opportunity to teach courses at both basic and advanced levels, you may even consider using short sections of one of your final assessments as a starting point in drafting appropriate inventories for your higher level courses.

To put together your own inventories, begin by going back through your syllabus and making quick lists of the basic skills students will need to meet your expectations for the course, and a list of basic skills students would need to excel in your course. For example, if your course is reading heavy, students will need to have some experience with efficient reading techniques to pass the course, and they will need fairly good note taking skills to do very well. These lists will allow you to prioritize essential skills, while keeping additional skills on your radar. Once you have identified the basic skills you rely on the most heavily, you will need to draft your inventory. The most effective inventories will be short (taking no more than 15 minutes of class time), written at a level you expect all students will do well at, and only relying on summative assessment types (see summative and formative assessments for more explanation). The most important thing to remember about inventories is that by using them, you are essentially committing to taking what you learn about your students’ abilities into account as the semester continues. If your inventory shows you that 75% of your class cannot define a thesis statement, it would be extremely unfair of you to deduct points on future assignments for weak thesis statements unless you supplement their knowledge throughout the semester.

Focus your inventory on the skills you rely on the most, and do your best to make sure that each part of the inventory gives you a solid understanding of exactly what students do and do not know. For example, asking students to choose the best example between three thesis statements tells you that they
can (or cannot) recognize a good thesis, but it does not tell you if they can craft a thesis. Though we have mostly referred to skills here, the same method can be used for background knowledge. When doing knowledge inventories, focus on definitions, fact recall, and example identification. If your inventory asks students to discuss, explain or come up with their own examples, the inventory will be a reflection of their skills related to discussing, explaining, and applying knowledge and will not be useful to you in identifying their background knowledge.

Once you have completed a skills/knowledge inventory, revisit your syllabus as soon as possible and adjust your schedule and expectations as necessary.

**Addressing Gaps in Student Knowledge Identified by Skill Inventories: Teaching “Missing” Material**

**TIME COMMITMENT**

- First reading time: 5 minutes
- Implementation time: 30 minutes

If you have used a skill/knowledge inventory, you may have found that students have some gaps in their knowledge and abilities or mid-semester assessments may have identified some gaps in student knowledge. There are two general strategies for addressing these gaps without needing to devote a large section of your semester to catch up (in addition to on-the-spot strategies discussed here) students who lack the expected knowledge or skills.

The more extensive of the two strategies is to teach the students the material or skills they need as efficiently as possible. To do so you will need to focus only on the gaps that are the biggest obstacle to student success in your course. This will first require you to be very honest with yourself about your expectations for students. If, for example, students will need to be able to take good notes in lecture, the most efficient response would be to provide students with one note taking template and to structure your lecture so that students can easily identify the transition from one topic to another. By doing this, you have saved time by not having to teach a range of note-taking strategies or devoted a great deal of lecture time to developing this skill, but you can still be reasonably confident that all of your students will have moved closer to mastery of this note taking strategy by the end of the semester.

The general steps for this sort of efficient gap filling are:

- Minimize the skill or knowledge you will try to supplement for students by choosing a single way to do something, rather than teaching multiple methods like you would in a class more focused on skill expansion. You can do this by mandating a thesis or paper structure, by only using one assessment format (only short answer questions, only “word” problems for math, science, etc.) and by restricting your own presentation of materials to one format (i.e. lecture follows a predictable format, readings are all similarly structured, etc.). Some students may find this less interesting, but it may still be necessary if a larger portion of the class doesn’t have the knowledge or abilities they need to meet your learning goals.
- Institute frequent low risk formative assessments that allow students additional practice without threatening their success. This is a situation where short assignments can benefit
students while remaining manageable from a grading standpoint. Be careful, that these assignments are relatively quick to complete so that students do not feel they are putting in a lot of effort, for very few points or you may find students do not bother to do these assignments.

- Have supplemental material on hand. While it is a good policy to have a section with other resources as part of your class website, students are not likely to look there for answers to specific questions. To help address this, keep a few copies of each resource printed on your desk and available as an attachment to email. When you grade something that still does not reflect your expectations or you have a student come to you with questions during office hours, highlight the section of the most useful resource you have, and provide a copy to the student. Generally, you will be able to reuse the same resources for most of the classes that you teach, so you only need to make time to identify resources once. Including YouTube links in your resources increases the likelihood that students will consult these resources and also increases the accessibility of your supplemental resources.

### Modeling “Missing” Skills

**TIME COMMITMENT**

- First reading time: 5 minutes
- Implementation time: Ongoing

Modeling is one of the most powerful teaching tools that we have at our disposal, as it allows us to teach 2 things at once; the class material and relevant skills. In the section on handling difficult topics, we discussed the importance of modeling effective, reasoned discussions to help students learn to improve their verbal communication, but modeling can be used to teach any skill. If, for example, you find that students don’t have the skills to communicate effectively via email, paying more attention to your own emails to students, and intentionally modeling an appropriate format can be very effective. Because we often forget all the ways that we serve as examples for our students, here is a list of skills you can intentionally model for students via lecture, and your interactions with them:

- academic debate
- appropriate email correspondences
- asking (phrasing) good questions
- locating additional resources
- scheduling time and planning how long work takes
- verbally summarizing information
- using mind maps to visualize ideas
- analyzing new information
- going through the process of comparing and contrasting
- formatting written material professionally
- disagreeing respectfully
- admitting mistakes
- finding answers to questions
- deciding what is important in presented materials
- being prepared for class
supporting the learning of others
• critically considering new information.

All of these are skills we use everyday, but we do not always strive to make these skills visible for our students, and sometimes we consider these things as best done outside of class, away from student observation. Yet, it is helpful to remember that these are all things that we can do in front of our students if it will help them further their own skills. Some of these skills, like identifying what is important in new information has become somewhat reflexive by the time you reach graduate school, but taking the extra 30 seconds to explain our thought processes is a quick and powerful way to help students improve their skills while also keeping you on track in your teaching schedule.

**Inclusion and accessibility tip:**

Though we have focused on skills that students lack in this section, it is also important to remember that our classrooms are full of unique and important talents. As you get to know your students keep an eye out for what they do well and try to provide opportunities for them to benefit the class with their gifts.

**✓ Summing It Up**

Of all the things that we have discussed in this chapter, the one that probably hits home for the most people is dealing with the stage fright or insecurities that arise when we stand up and take the lead in the classroom for the first time. Running class is an intimidating responsibility that can take some getting used to, so it is important to remember that everyone feels nervous or worried about how to make class “happen”. Allow yourself time to adjust to this new role and be patient with yourself.
Tips No One Tells You

What to Do When You Are Overwhelmed!

Ask for help before you are overwhelmed! Many graduate students feel embarrassed about getting overwhelmed by their teaching responsibilities and in an effort to cover up their teaching struggles, they end up using large amounts of what should be studying time for teaching preparation. This is not a good strategy and its likely to cause trouble for you on a number of levels. Instead, let your lead instructor or your advisor know immediately if you start to fall behind on teaching. Others can help you prepare for your classes much more efficiently than they can help you study or get your own papers written. If you are falling seriously behind, asking a colleague to give a guest lecture can be a great way to give yourself a quick break to get back on track.

Save Everything!

Make sure all of your teaching prep work is recyclable. Every handout, syllabus, lesson plan, checklist, rubric, and reading assignment that you put together should be another tool in your teaching toolbox. We have tried to point out opportunities in your day to day work to build your portfolio, but always do your teaching work with an eye to how you could use what you are working on again in the future (and in your teaching portfolio).

Teaching Buddies Save Semesters

Find a teaching buddy! Try to develop a partnership with someone in your department who you can work with on bigger tasks. Even grading goes much faster when you do it as a group. Being able to quickly ask a colleague, “Does this sound correct to you?, or How many points would you take off for this?” will make grading decisions faster and keep you from agonizing over whether you have been fair or reasonable. The same is true of preparing lesson plans, looking for reading material, and many more teaching tasks. Your colleagues, even outside your course focus, may have great ideas for designing activities, or addressing difficult topics.

Focus on the Teaching

Finally, bear in mind that teaching is a highly individualized task, but teaching planning is not. Many of the tasks necessary to prepare for your classes are the same across disciplines. There are resources that
can help with the heavy lifting of teaching prep, and as you continue to teach you will develop systems that work best for you. Find resources and share them, and if you find that you keep doing the same task over and over and cannot find a resource, work to create one and share it with your colleagues. As college educators, we should be spending as much time as possible doing our two main tasks; teaching and researching. Anything that makes the organization and preparation of teaching faster is generally a good investment of your time in the long run.

One last helpful hint: while there are many great resources dealing with teaching at the primary and secondary levels, and many of the pedagogical theories used in these resources are enormously useful, it is also necessary to keep in mind that those materials are often created by professionals who are more centrally focused on teaching alone and who can invest more time into more complicated and innovative ways of preparing teaching materials. We, on the other hand, have less time available to dedicate solely to teaching so it is helpful to encourage yourself to be at your best when you are actually in class, educating your students, and to simplify your prep tasks as much as possible.

☑️ Summing It Up

We hope that your biggest take away from this section will be the reminder that the educators around you are one of your greatest resources as a new instructor. All educators have their own, personally tested set of tips and tricks that they rely on to do their jobs well, and most of us are excited to share this information with anyone who is interested. No matter how small your challenge, or how unimportant it may seem, more than likely there are many people around you right now who have creative ideas for making it easier. Reach into the wealth of information at the desks next you, and you will be amazed at how much easier your job can become.
Accommodating Student Issues

Objectives:
This section provides specific advice for specific problems. Though reading all of this section in advance of your teaching would help you to avoid some common teaching pitfalls, we know your time is limited. We have designed these sections to be resources that you can refer to as specific issues or challenges arise. We hope you will be able to return to these chapters for insight, solutions, and friendly commiseration!

What to Do When You Are Overwhelmed or Confused by Student Needs!

In some circumstances, you may have students who have disabilities that were not accommodated in your original lesson plans. In these cases, it is best to work closely with the Disabilities Resource Center at your university to correct this oversight in your planning. At the end of the semester, you should also consider re-working these lessons to be more inclusive for the future.

Most importantly, try to bear in mind that most universities are deeply committed to creating safe and inclusive atmospheres and that creating those atmospheres is one of your most important responsibilities as an educator. It is tempting to think of the adjustments you make in response to these situations as "special exemptions", but it will be more in the interest of your students, your teaching career, and your university's values if you think of these circumstances as opportunities to create more inclusive learning for all your students. It is not necessary to plan in advance for every possible challenge one of your students may face, but it is useful to use each challenge you encounter as a learning moment for yourself where you can work to create lesson plans that exclude fewer and fewer students. Use this as an opportunity to make sure that all your lesson plans are more inclusive, even in only a very small way, going forward. The most flexible, effective educators know that any one student rarely has "special" needs, and instead, that they represent a small student population that you haven't yet encountered. Your students, and your student reviews, will appreciate the extra effort and the commitment to inclusive teaching that these changes indicate.

A student has a reasonable excuse for why they cannot attend one or a few classes

Even though your syllabus should have a formal policy for excused absences, there may be situations where that policy does not feel well suited to the situation at hand. In deciding how to handle excused absences that fall outside of your policy, consider how these absences will affect the learning goals
you have set, and what alternative means can be used to reach those goals. Perhaps there are additional reading or writing assignments that you can turn to, or an oral assessment you can do with the student to make sure they know the most important material.

A student has a reasonable excuse for why they cannot finish the semester after the drop/add deadline

In most cases, students will have two choices in this situation; they can either be given a W or they can be given an incomplete until the coursework is complete. The W, while not ideal on a transcript, is also not likely to having lasting impacts on a student with an otherwise good college record. Alternatively, you can arrange for the student to be given a temporary incomplete, with the understanding that they will complete the course requirements at a later time.

While making a decision about whether to recommend a W or an incomplete consider a few things; first, if the student is in serious distress or is overwhelmed, will simply extending their deadlines with an incomplete really put them more at ease and enable them to complete their work, or is it simply shifting the problem to another time? It may not always seem like it to the student, but there will be situations where it is really in the student's best interest to take a W and be able to shift all of their focus to the other issues in their life.

On the other hand, if the student is simply dealing with too many responsibilities at once, they may benefit from an incomplete because they will be better able to focus on your class requirements once some of their other responsibilities are out of the way. In some situations, instructors tend to suggest a withdrawal as a form of punishment when students did not plan their time well or have overextended themselves due to carelessness. Rather than suggesting the W as the consequence of their actions, it is in the student's best interest that their interactions with you and your disappointment should be the teaching moment used to encourage these students to be more responsible. Don't assume the "stain" of a W on their transcript will do the educational work that needs done here.

A student needs assistance or support beyond what is normally considered part of your job responsibilities

In these cases, you will often have to make decisions about what you can reasonably provide for your students and what time and energy you have available to offer them. While going above and beyond is rewarding and important, taking care of yourself and your own needs is important as well, particularly as you deal with all the rigors of graduate student life. To better prepare yourself for these situations, try to make yourself familiar with the additional support services your university offers and how students can access them. Often services like writing labs, counseling centers, major-related tutoring, and others are under-utilized even though they often are exactly the services student need. Simply knowing where these resources are and how students can access them, and then providing that information to your students can be an enormous help. If you do decide to take on additional responsibilities or support for one of your students, consider sharing that information with your own supervisor, so that you will know that you also have resources for additional support should the situation become something you cannot continue to handle on your own.
A student who finds themselves with additional out of class, unexpected responsibilities and they do not know how to balance their new expectations

An important part of college education is teaching students to be responsible and resourceful, and these lessons are often learned in conjunction with discipline specific and general knowledge coursework. When a student comes to you overwhelmed by their workload or additional responsibilities, you may find it useful to point them in the direction of the UIC’s student support resources, which include services in the realms of academic, financial, social and cultural, health and wellness and career support. (http://www.uic.edu/academics/student-support). You will also have to decide whether allowing them deadline or assignment flexibility is likely to help them learn better time management or if it is only going to enable disorganization and poor planning. Remember too that the preparation you give students in this regard affects other educators at your university, who will have to adjust to whatever skill set you provided to your students. Try to make your decisions bearing in mind both what will help the student to be immediately successful, but also what will help them in the long run.

A student has a reasonable excuse for why your normal late homework policy should not apply to them

This situation should be handled with care, not only because there are many perfectly acceptable situations which could prevent students from adhering strictly to the assignment due date (or time), including economic issues like computer and internet access. Before you decide on a policy for handling these situations, consider what you are hoping to teach your students through your late homework policy. Are you trying to teach them to have contingency plans for every unforeseen obstacle? If so, you may want to adhere more strictly to your late policy. On the other hand, you may hope to teach your students the kind of accountability that they will need in the workplace after graduation, in which case, you might offer them the same kind of leniency you would offer a colleague in a similar circumstance. Finally, you will always have to decide which of the two learning goals at play here; learning personal responsibility or learning the course material is more important to you in this circumstance. You may find that you are much more committed to your students’ mastery of the material then you are to personal responsibility in this interaction, in which case it would be wise to allow enough leniency that the assessment gets completed no matter how late.

A student has studied, attended every class, participated, and is still doing poorly in class

Even the best teachers will sometimes struggle to help a particular student, and even the brightest students will find material that is simply enormously difficult for them to master. Ideally, in this situation, the student will seek you (or the lead instructor) out for additional help. While tutoring these students in office hours, and looking for alternative ways to present the material may help, they are unlikely to have an immediate positive impact on the student’s grades. In this case, consider allowing the student to do alternative assessments that better align with their learning strengths, or allow them to resubmit
assignments they did poorly on the first time around. Having ideas about what kind of additional assignments seem reasonable to you ahead of time will make this situation easier to handle.

A student has an issue with another student in your class

For the most part, the best strategy for dealing with students who are having issues with another student in class is to refrain from getting the personal details, and instead to make arrangements so that the two students interact as little as possible in class. You will find it more difficult to deal with these situations if you allow yourself to be positioned as the arbiter of right and wrong and instead should simply take action to minimize distress and disruption in your class.

The exception to this is when a student informs you of an issue with another student that is, or borders on, physical, verbal or sexual harassment. In these cases, you must follow your university’s reporting requirements and, as a graduate student, you should additionally report this to either your department head or the director of undergraduate studies. It is not your responsibility to solve these issues. Rather, it is your responsibility to report them to those better empowered to protect all of the students involved. It is also your responsibility to enforce whatever decisions your supervising faculty member makes.

A student has a reasonable excuse for why they cannot participate (either in a specific activity or in everyday class situations)

Though this may seem to be an unlikely situation, you will be surprised by how often students have reasonable extenuating circumstances which limit their ability to participate in class. Religious obligations, work requirements, transportation difficulties, parenting responsibilities, and a host of other things can occasionally create participation difficulties for students. Often, the best solution is to return to the learning goals that you have set for the class, and try to think of an alternate way of achieving those goals, without unduly burdening the student.

Though we have focused on skills that students lack in this section, it is also important to remember that our classrooms are full of unique and important talents. As you get to know your students keep an eye out for what they do well and try to provide opportunities for them to benefit the class with their gifts.

Inclusion and accessibility tip:
When trying to create inclusive syllabi and lesson plans, it is important to remember that many of the greatest challenges for your students will be things you may have never considered. From micro-aggressions that you never noticed before to economic situations that make basic supplies unaffordable, to survivors of the most traumatizing experiences, you may find that for many students class time may be one of the easiest, safest parts of their day. Before making a decision about whether a student’s request or challenge is or isn’t “reasonable”, remember to leave room for life experiences that differ widely from your own. Our students are much better served when our model for what is “fair” is not based solely on our own experiences and capabilities.
Every student has their own set of life challenges and strengths, which makes addressing student issues possibly one of the most difficult tasks we face as educators. Though there is no one size fits all approach to addressing student issues, in our experience, compassion and patience (even for issues we do not or cannot fully understand) have consistently served us well. When students come to us with issues, we always begin by giving them the benefit of the doubt that they are being honest and facing a situation that is genuine and difficult for them. After listening, we look for solutions that are most in line with our learning goals, not with our rules or college level expectations. There will be times when students appear to be trying to take advantage of a situation, but in our experience, those students have been in the minority compared to students who could benefit from class expectations tailored more to their needs and challenges. When you consider whether to take an open approach to student issues or rather to begin from a guarded position against possible cheating, we hope that you will think carefully about the student and the obstacles in their lives.
Troubleshooting

Objectives:
As in the previous chapter, this chapter provides practical solutions to common difficulties. Whether you have time to read the entire chapter before you begin teaching or not, we hope you will return to this chapter whenever you find yourself dealing with a new or unexpected challenge.

Poor Attendance

Setting your attendance policies for your syllabus was discussed earlier and there are additional suggestions for assessments that also assist with attendance issues here, but if you still have a problem with attendance there are two correctives available to you. The first is to make participation/attendance worth a greater percentage of points. You can do this mid-semester, without altering your syllabus, by informing students that participation will be more carefully or systematically tracked going forward. You can also do this by re-allocating points from another upcoming assessment (like a quiz or short writing assignment) to in-class activities. Generally, students will appreciate this change because it rewards them more for attending class, and is thus an easy way for them to improve their grades. Another strategy is to create short activities that are completed in the early or late part of class to address latecomers or students leaving early (depending on which issue you face) and to only allocate attendance points to students who completed the attendance activity.

Students Consistently Come Unprepared to Class

Fortunately, this issue can be easily resolved at any point in the semester by using the techniques discussed in "Getting Students to do the Reading". Please consult that section for additional assistance.

No One Did the Reading

This happens. Regardless of how much incentive you give, students may not read the article. Feel free to have them pull out the article, give them five minutes to review and bring to the discussion one or two main ideas. If the issue appears to be that they didn't understand what they read, (either at home, or just now in class) consider switching your class plan for the day to a lesson on close reading.
Students are not Participating in Discussion

There are days in which discussion is really, really hard. There are days that you will say, "Good morning!" and your students will begin talking. The latter does not happen often, and just be grateful when it does. If you have created a space in your class where students feel free from judgment about their ideas and feel empowered to share their thoughts, you will have fewer difficult days, but bad days happen to the best of us. Rather than give in to frustration, here is a plan you can use to try and get yourself back on track.

On days in which discussion is slow, you first need to diagnose the problem. Did they not do the reading? Is it the end of the semester and they are tired? Did a major event occur locally or nationally that made them concerned, excited or distracted? Diagnosing the problem will help you determine the best way to address the issue.

Once you’ve diagnosed the issue, jump to the appropriate section:

- No One Did the Reading
- Students are Tired
- Students are Distracted by World Events
- Class Just Didn’t Go Well

Students are Tired

This happens after busy holidays and at the end of the semester. Try breaking them into small groups to talk about the articles. You can wander between groups and get a sense of the conversation. You can easily assign groups different articles or tasks and bring the class back together to discuss. Or give small groups 5-10 minutes to talk about the articles – especially difficult topics. This will give them the confidence that they understood the topic and have the confidence to share their ideas with the larger group. Occasionally, you may find that you can re-energize a very tired class by promising to let them leave five minutes earlier if they can complete the tasks you had planned for the day a few minutes early. Having a tangible reward and feeling like they only need to work hard for a shorter amount of time can help them to re-focus and make it through class. Use this strategy with caution; however, as it decreases in efficiency each time you use it.

Students are Distracted by World Events

An event occurred on the local or national news. Events, tragedies, elections, and championship games occur throughout our semesters and are all outside of our control. There will be some days where students are too excited to get right to work. In these cases, acknowledge the exciting event or achievement, propose dedicating this class period of hard work to their heroes and harness that energy. At other times, there will be events that occur which affect your students in a more meaningful way. These are times when you grab a cup of coffee, a chair, and sit with your students to let them talk. Many times they need to talk with someone who they trust and who will listen to their concerns, worries, sorrow. It is times like these that listening is the most powerful form of teaching. Remember at these times that your students are young adults and they will count on you to model mature and healthy responses to difficulties that they may not yet be prepared to face. Your job here is not to protect or soothe, but rather to help your students develop the skills to be calm, rational, tolerant and resilient.
Inappropriate Student Questions

You will have those days where a student asks one of "those" questions. We have all had the students who raise their hands at inappropriate times, asking unrelated, inappropriate, and sometimes derailing questions. Or the students who just will not stop talking throughout the class. The first line of defense is to say to the student, "thank you for your participation today, but let’s try to let someone else answer." Or another tack is to say at the top of the class that you want everyone to participate so to get to everyone’s comments we will be limiting everyone to short answers. A last resort effort is to talk with these student about their behavior. Sometimes you may find that you are asked a question that is reasonable and shows understanding, but which asks about more difficult or unusual cases of what you are discussing. Because these questions add complexity to your discussion, the answer is likely to be confusing to some students. In these cases, tell the student that either the information is coming in a future lecture and you will be able to explain it more fully then, or that they have asked about a more complicated phenomenon and that you would be happy to discuss it in office hours or after class. Avoid the urge to respond just to show the student that you know the material, because doing so could put your learning goals for other students in jeopardy.

A Difficult Topic has Come Up in Class

The diversity of backgrounds and experiences in our classrooms means that we will all deal with difficult or sensitive topics in class. Ideally, we would like to be able to plan and prepare for these conversations, but sometimes these discussions begin unexpectedly. When that happens, here are a couple of things you can do to keep the discussion fair, calm, and compassionate.

First, take a breath. As educators we feel responsible for everything that happens in our classrooms and this sometimes means we feel the need to jump in immediately and control the situation. If you haven’t done so yet, take a moment to pause and to remind yourself that your students are all adults who remain responsible for their actions and how they respond to their emotions.

Second, briefly interject to remind students that this is a difficult topic and restate your expectations of the classroom community (respectful, patient, etc.).

Next, mentally clear your schedule for the rest of class so that you do not feel the need to rush through the discussion. Students on both sides of an issue often feel frustrated and unheard when the instructor’s primary focus is getting back on track.

Now, embrace this moment as an opportunity to model what respectful, reasoned conversations look like. Rather than focusing on whether the student is saying something appropriate or not, try to interject to help them say it in a way that fosters more dialog. If a student is sharing unpopular sentiments, nudge them in the direction of sharing their feelings or the experiences that those ideas come from so that the student can be engaged rather than ostracized or attacked. You should step in immediately, however, if what the student is saying are things that are demonstrably not factual, they are making broad claims that cannot be supported or they are making incendiary comments solely to incite disagreement.

Finally, when it feels like the engaged students have all been heard, without interruption, tell students "This feels like a good place to say that we understand each others arguments, but we disagree." Let students know they are welcome to discuss the topic with you in office hours if they wish to discuss this
more. If one student seemed particularly isolated, you may want to privately invite them to your office hours so they know you are committed to everyone's sense of safety and fairness in your course.

**When a student is being disrespectful**

If a student does not seem to be upholding your expectations for classroom behavior and respect, it is generally better to end the conversation immediately. You may offer an organized out of class discussion as an alternative if you feel students need an outlet for the conversation. Alternatively, you may just tell students that you will defer the discussion until everyone has shown themselves ready to have this conversation in accordance with your classroom expectations.

This works much better if you had students agree to your classroom atmosphere and behavior policy on the first day of class.

**Planning for Difficult Discussions**

You may also want to use the effective communication lesson plan to give students the tools needed for handling difficult conversations in a mature and balanced way.

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<td>Because we can never know all of our students' backgrounds and experiences, what seems unproblematic for us may be difficult for someone in our classes. Trigger warnings have been developed to try and address this issue, but there is still a great deal of debate about the effectiveness of this approach. An alternative that can be helpful, and which also remains learning centered, is to list a few keywords, either on the board or in the syllabus, that give students a sense of what upcoming material will be and also functions as a way to recall what was discussed in any class period.</td>
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**Classroom Discussion Policy Reminder:** It can be helpful to remind students in your syllabus that the goal of some of the conversations that take place in your class can be more productively thought of as "I understand your point, but disagree" rather than debating until someone is convinced.

**Students Lack Expected Knowledge or Skills**

Though we may not always be aware of it, each of us plans our classes based on assumptions about what our students already know. The more you teach, the more accurate these assumptions will become, but we all sometimes find ourselves in a situation where students do not have the information or skills we hoped they would. We usually realize this when the results of an early assessment fell far below our standards, or when a "basic" question only results in bewildered stares. This is almost always a frustrating experience, because it means all of your plans, and possibly even your semester timeline, needs to be modified. Even if you left wiggle room in your planning, there still may not be enough time to do everything. Here are a couple possible situations that you may experience.

**Situation One: You asked a question you expected them all to know, and now all your students are staring at you.** Fortunately, this situation is the easiest to deal with because it has the smallest effect on other aspects of the course. You will need to think on your feet.
Consider two things: is this really important information? If not, jot a definition/description on the board and move on. If so, ask yourself, "Is this something you know well enough to teach off the cuff?" If yes, reroute the rest of the day’s lesson to teaching this new concept or idea. If no, tell students you will begin the next class with a more in-depth discussion of the material and do what you can to make the rest of your lesson work. Using an analogy or real life example here can often give students enough of a grasp of the material to continue on. If you tell your students you will revisit the topic next class, make sure that you incorporate that change in to your lesson plan.

Situation Two: Students have fallen far short of your expectations on an assessment. When all of your students do poorly on an assessment, there are generally only two possible reasons; they did not understand what was expected of them, or they lacked the knowledge/skill needed to do well. The second circumstance is often caused by a lack of something that you thought they had learned earlier in previous classes. When this happens, it is important to make it clear to students that they will not be penalized for not knowing something that you have not taught in the class. This is very important because these situations not only cause students to panic about their grades, but can also make them feel insecure about their abilities and the possibility that they will do well in your course. Additionally, in classrooms where students come from very different educational backgrounds these situations can further divide your classroom and make some students feel that their educational past makes future success unlikely.

For the same reason, it is best not to express your frustration about what other instructors did or did not teach or what students were "supposed" to have already learned. We all know that not every student will come into our classes with all the knowledge and skills we wished they had, but its more productive to focus on teaching them the needed skills, rather than to focus on what did not happen.

Generally, the best course of action is to allow all students the opportunity to redo the assessment, but with additional support or material from you. If students lacked a skill or skill set like writing, for example, having students re-submit in smaller chunks can be very helpful. For example, if all the essays you received were poorly organized, ask the students to first only submit a thesis statement. After you have given feedback on the thesis statements, have them submit outlines. Once their outlines have been returned, ask them to submit the original assignment. Though this seems to take longer, you will find the grading goes much more quickly when you have smaller, more focused criteria to look for and the smaller chunks generally produce more focused, higher quality student work. If you had not originally provided students a grading rubric, doing so now can also be a big help.

Filling in the Gaps. Ultimately, you will have two choices for how you try for students to achieve the level of learning you expect of them: you can teach the material yourself, if you can make the time in your schedule and have the confidence to do so, or you can seek support from colleagues. If your students lack background knowledge on a topic, having a guest lecturer who focuses on that topic can be a great, and more interesting way, to fill in gaps. If students lack writing skills, note taking skills, or presentation skills, a class trip to the writing center, the library, or peer tutoring resources can be an immense help. You should not feel obligated to teach students everything that they "should" have known by this point, but you are obligated to direct them to resources and opportunities to gain the knowledge and skills they are missing.

Remember also, while it can be tempting to say that it is not your responsibility to teach students basic skills or background information, the learning goals you set for the semester constitute a commitment to your students, so you should do everything you can to get them to the end point you have
chosen, regardless of what unexpected material doing so might encompass. Your learning goals are also a commitment to the other instructors at your institution that every student with a C or higher in your class has met your expectations for them and is ready for more challenging material. By honoring this commitment to each other, we all get closer to having well prepared students in our own courses.

**I am behind.**

Despite our best efforts everyone falls behind at one point another. Ungraded assignments pile up, or reading your students' assigned readings always come after the readings for your own classes. Either way, the most important thing to do now is to keep the problem from growing. It can be difficult to admit to yourself, let alone to your fellow TAS or lead instructor, but it’s important to let your co-educators know as soon as possible so that additional tasks don’t continue to pile up. When you have this conversation, it can be helpful to have a plan for how you are going to get caught up again. Below we’ve included two skeleton plans that you can use as starting points to get caught back up.

**Situation 1: You are behind on the reading.** When you realize you are behind on your reading, the very first thing you should do is look at the next class’ reading assignment and choose the part you think will be the most difficult for your students. Do not commit yourself to reading the entire chapter, article, etc. Just find the really tricky part(s) and read that right now. Once you are minimally prepared to get through the next class, you can make a catch up plan without feeling like your just falling further behind.

Take out your syllabus and identify which reading assignments are the most difficult or the most important of the upcoming readings. You will skim these readings first. Next identify the most difficult (crucial) readings that have already passed. You will skim these readings next. Finally, as time allows, skim the rest of the readings for the next class, and then revisit older readings when you can. You will likely need to accept that you cannot go back and read everything, so just resolve to do better next time.

**Situation 2: You are behind on grading.** If you are dismally behind, get help from your lead instructor or another colleague right away. The sooner you ask for help the less upset the other person is likely to be about having to lend a hand. If you are certain that you can get caught up on your own as long as you manage it properly, here is a strategy to help you.

First, remember that grading, like so many things, expands to fit the time allowed. As a general rule, any assignment for a class of 30 students should take you 10 min each to grade. If that seems woefully insufficient, the assessment is probably too large both for you and your students and it may be wise to break the assignment up into pieces in the future. The exception to this is cases where you only grade 1 or 2 assignments for the entire semester (but consider whether infrequent assessments are productive for your learning goals)

It is very difficult to be able to grade anything within 10 minutes especially when you first begin. One strategy for accomplishing this is to force yourself to move on to the next assignment after 10 minutes whether you have finished grading something or not. Knowing that you will need to go back and finish a growing pile of grading is a powerful incentive to stay on track. Using alarms to mark the half-way point and when it is time to move to the next assignment will also help to keep you within reasonable time limits.

If procrastination is the issue, make a grading appointment with a friend. This will help both of you focus and get your work done, and by having someone else around you can quickly ask for a second opinion, make a decision, and move on.
The one thing that causes grading to take a long time is that it requires you to make a long series of evaluations and decisions. The more deliberation a grading decision takes the more time you will spend grading and for many of us, the more frustrated you will feel. That is why grading rubrics are enormously helpful and creating a grading rubric can help you get through any grading back log at a much quicker pace.

**Situation 3: You are behind on everything.** As a graduate student, your committee, your professors and your lead instructor all know that you are learning to manage your time and on occasion mistakes will be made. Meet with everyone, explain what happened and ask where there could be some flexibility to help you get back on track. Once you have some options, make a plan and commit to it with everyone involved. It will help enormously if you can also tell everyone what you will do in the future to keep this from happening again. (For ideas that may help see the section on "I am behind").

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| As a university employee your supervisor has a responsibility to make accommodations if you require them, including allowing for extra time where needed. If you foresee needing accommodations to be successful in any of your responsibilities, meet with your supervisor and have a plan in place as soon as you become aware of the issue.

**Teaching Material You Do Not Know Well**

If you find yourself teaching a subject outside of your own expertise, you may have to learn as you go. This can be a daunting task, but it is manageable if you approach it the same way that you approach doing student readings. You will need to continually remind yourself that you only need to master the material you are teaching, not every aspect of the subject. You can also use your other teaching tasks as an opportunity for self-study. After you have read what has been assigned to your students, immediately put together test questions (or study guide questions) as a way to test yourself on what you've just learned and to save yourself some time later. Once you have test questions ready, you can then quickly prepare any additional learning materials you might need (lecture slides, handouts, etc.) while the material and the expectations for the test are still fresh in your mind. If you find yourself turning to additional resources, like youtube videos, flash card sets, etc., be sure to make a note of what is helpful as it may also be a useful resource to recommend to struggling students.

Dedicating 15 min of every office hour to reading your students assigned reading is a good strategy for keeping yourself on track.

**Reading to Teach**

Reading to teach is different than reading to learn so try to use this strategy as you skim. Your primary responsibility in regards to the text is to be able to direct students to the information that they need, so organize your notes and highlighting by pages. For example:

- March 1st Reading: Ecosystems definition: pg 41 Oceanic example: pg 43-44
- Characteristics: pg 45
Skim the reading for definitions, examples, characteristics, comparisons, analysis, or arguments. Remember, you don’t need to be relearning these topics, you just need to be able to give students a good road map of the reading. For some people, trying to do this in a very short time period, say 15 min, can keep you from reverting to your scholarly reading habits and will make your work more efficient.

Textbooks can provide an additional challenge in that we often find one or two definitions or examples that do not fit our own understanding of a topic or idea. If the lead instructor has decided to teach "according to the book", make a note to remind yourself to send students directly to the text’s definition, so that you don’t create confusion by teaching a different approach. If the instructor prefers a different definition from what is in the text, cross out the erroneous information in your own copy and make a note of where students can find the correct information (Lecture 8, slide 3, for example). Having students do the same in their copies will prevent confusion and conflicts come test time.

Remember that you are the teacher in the room, not the reading. Reading is best used as a supplement to your teaching, not the other way around. Also remind yourself that your responsibility is to have a mastery of the material you teach, not the texts themselves. You will help your students more if you are a source of supplemental explanations and examples, so it isn’t necessary for you to remember exactly how something was explained in the reading. And if a student has a specific question about the text, you will probably need to reread that section on the spot, regardless of how many times you’ve already read the material, so don’t worry about referring to the text when you are answering questions.

**Inclusion and accessibility tip:**
Recently, educators have focused on learning styles for students, but have shown less concern about how TAs learn material they have not chosen themselves. If you find that your lead instructor has assigned or presented material in a way that you find challenging, consider locating alternatives and either recommending them to the lead instructor (if you feel comfortable) or making them available to other TAs and students as supplements. Your students have no choice but to accept the material assigned, but you have both the position and the background knowledge needed to find useful alternative resources that may be helpful to students with other learning preferences.

**Students are Complaining About Me/My Class**

You have done everything you could, but it just does not seem to matter. Somehow you overheard that mean comment, got that harsh review, or had an uncomfortable meeting with someone else in your department. So now what?

**Step 1:** Breathe. This is part of teaching. Fortunately, you are not just an educator; you are also an interesting person, an insightful scholar, and a lot of fun in your own quirky way. It is ok if not everyone understands that.

**Step 2:** Determine the seriousness of the complaint.

How many people complained? If the answer is just one, congratulations, you have found a student that does not mesh with your teaching style. You also have some circumstantial evidence that your teaching is working for everyone else. Unless you really feel like the complaint is legitimate and important, consider if there is anything you could change in your class as a peace offering to this one student, but otherwise carry on. If the answer is many students, it is time to do some triage. Is the complaint a result of a mismatch between
student expectations and your own? If yes, find a way (in the future, directly in your syllabus) to make your expectations and your rationale for those expectations clear. This can be accomplished through a class announcement or a "check in" email. To make sure you are clear, ask a colleague (maybe your teaching buddy) to review before you post/send.

Is the complaint related to your teaching style? If yes, revisit the teaching styles inventory for suggestions to better address the weaknesses of your particular style. In the future, think of ways that you can better communicate what your teaching style is early in the semester so that students who do not match well with what you can offer can adjust their schedules as necessary. If you have made your teaching style clear well before the drop/add deadline and a student decides to remain in your class, it is fair to remind them they made an informed choice and there is little you can do to accommodate them now.

Is the complaint specifically related to workload? If yes, revisit your syllabus and estimate how much time students should be spending on assignments for your course (in the future do this as part of course design). Multiply that number by 4 to estimate the amount of time students with a full load of courses would be spending on homework. If that number is not reasonable, the workload you have expected is unfair and, out of respect for your students and the other instructors at your institution, you must find a way to reduce workload.

If the number is reasonable, your student either lacks time management skills or had unrealistic expectations for the course workload. You can assist their time management skills by providing them with time estimates for remaining assignments or by providing them with suggested done by dates for sub portions of the assignments. You can correct their expectations by communicating your time expectations with them and giving them an explanation of why those time commitments seem reasonable to you. If you suspect your estimates may not align with the time students are actually spending on an assignment, or students have alleged this to be the case, speak with 2 or 3 students that you trust to find out how long they spent on the assignments. Make adjustments as necessary.

Is the complaint related to course material? Sometimes students complain because they feel the course material is biased and you will need to decide how to address that issue in which case our advice for handling hot topics might be useful to you, but in some cases the issue is simply that the student doesn't enjoy the subject you teach. In that case, remind the student that they have learned something about their own interests and advice them to avoid this subject in the future.

Is the complaint mean-spirited, about factors outside of your control or related to your personal characteristics or identity? If yes, go immediately to your supervisor with the complaint. Your supervisor has a responsibility to ensure students do not treat you unfairly and that your teaching reviews are not tarnished by unfair criticism. Ask that your supervisor provide some sort of documentation regarding the complaint in case you face questions or evaluations based on your teaching reviews in the future. Once you have done that, revisit step one.

Does the complaint allege serious misconduct on your part? If yes, go immediately to your supervisor with the complaint. Follow your supervisor's instructions and do not engage
with the student in anyway beyond what your supervisor instructs. Ask your supervisor if there is any documentation or evidence you can begin to collect in your own defense.

We have already discussed the importance of documentation of student interactions, but it is even more important in the face of student complaints. If students have complained make sure that you document a) the complaint as you understood it, b) the information you gathered to better contextualize the complaint, c) all the steps you took to address the complaint and d) all interactions written and verbal with the students involved.

**Inclusion and accessibility tip:**
Many complaints arise out of students feeling excluded or discriminated against, and these are serious complaints. You will not be able to predict every way a student may feel excluded, but making it clear that you have an open door policy for such concerns in your syllabus and class introductions can go a long way towards avoiding these difficulties.

**Class Just Didn’t Go Well**

Sometimes, you will be prepared every day, as engaging as you can possibly be, sing and dance for every class, deploy as many reading/discussion strategies as you possibly can and a class will still not come prepared, not engage, and not respond to you. IT IS NOT YOU. Sometimes, it is just an off-class. Sigh.

**✓ Summing It Up**

Teaching, like anything else, is full of bugs and hiccups. We have tried to give you solutions to common problems here, but every situation is different and you will doubtlessly find more elegant solutions to the issues you regularly face as you become more experienced. We encourage you to keep a notebook or file (we keep ours with our lesson plans) where you can jot down these discoveries as you make them. Our personal lists contributed significantly to this manual, and they continue to help us have even smoother, more enjoyable semesters every year.
Mistakes
(Yes, we all make them!)

Objectives:
We have included this section with the hope that it will help you through some of the frustration and embarassment that arises out of the sticky fact that educators are also human beings. We also know, from plenty of experience with our own missteps, that mistakes are often the greatest teaching moments, and we encourage you to make your mistakes something that helps you grow and improve.

Mistakes Happen

Mistakes happen. Unimaginable things happen in your classroom – you may say something completely out of character, may forget a well-known fact, or realize your clothes are on inside out (don’t laugh, it has happened). We have also had students have a melt-down, technology not work, lesson plans fall flat, forgot our notes on a particularly technical day, and much more. You may miscalculate midterm grades (or final grades), forget to submit grades, or write an email full of typos. These are all mistakes that happen. And it is okay.

Classroom mishaps. Many times humor is the best way to handle these situations. If you are laughing at yourself, no one else can laugh at you first. There is really no back up plan for you to use in these situations, except to remind yourself to let it go and keep moving. If you shift your focus back to work, your students will too.

Technology Meltdowns

Even though it is impossible to plan for every little misstep, technology difficulties are foreseeable and preventable. Always take hard copies of your notes with you even if you do not ever plan on using them. You may never need them, but if your tech does not work or stops working, you will not lose an entire class period. You will have to decide how you want to handle a class without your presentation tools, but at least you will have the material that you need to present in front of you as you switch to plan B. There are a couple of things that you can do; switch to an activity that you had reserved as part of your sick day plan, lecture without your visual aids, or use this opportunity to have discussions with your students. If engaging the whole class seems too difficult, encourage small group discussions and then bring it back to the larger
group. Encourage students to participate and to engage with you. Rather than letting this hiccup throw you off, use this day to make a memorable day of instruction for you and your students.

**You Called a Student by the Wrong Name, Possibly Even on Multiple Occasions**

Students know that instructors cannot possibly learn everyone’s name, so they are generally forgiving of this error, especially if you are genuinely apologetic when you realize your mistake. This is something that just happens from time to time and if you really feel embarrassed about it, remind students that age, lack of sleep, and general academics is taking its toll on you, and let it go.

**You Give Students Incorrect Information in the Course of Your Teaching**

Beginning instructors often feel embarrassed about misspeaking or getting their information confused in front of a class, but there is no reason to feel that way. Remind yourself that making a mistake is probably a result of the pressures of speaking in front of a group, and not a reflection of your mastery of your subject. Students know that instructors occasionally make these kind of mistakes, and they are much more understanding about them if you correct mistakes quickly and honestly, with an emphasis on getting students the right information and not on maintaining your credibility. Occasionally you will have a situation that the previous class was a disaster. Maybe it was an off day for you, you were ill, you were struggling with new information, or you tried something new that failed miserably. Take the time to correct it in the next class. Yes, you will need to adjust your course content to make up for the day, but because you planned in your class schedule for unforeseen circumstances you will not fall behind. Do not feel bad about this. Just make it right. You might find this day to be the best of the semester!

**Your Attendance Records are Off or Incomplete**

No matter how hard you try to stay on top of attendance records, the big spreadsheets and sign-in sheets and multiple transfer points (blackboard, your personal records, handwritten attendance from class) make mastering attendance surprisingly difficult. It can help to take attendance without counting it towards students’ grades for the first two weeks, while your student roster settles and you develop your attendance workflow. Still, sometimes you may be in week 13 of class and suddenly find a mistake in attendance. The most important thing is to make sure that students’ grades aren’t affected by this mistake, so it is often best to just treat that day as a free day, and calculate grades as if no one was absent on that day. This may give a small boost to some students, but it is generally too small to have a major effect and it still treats all students fairly.

If you find the mistake is much bigger than a single class, you will generally have to find an attendance proxy (like having turned in assignments or quizzes on a given day, and to omit from grading any dates that you cannot account for at all. This is frustrating, but it happens when you are new to teaching, so try not to get too caught up in it. If this is something you think you will always struggle with, consider switching to sign in sheets (even in large classes) so that you will have a permanent record of attendance that you can return to if you have errors in your spreadsheets.
You Get Stumped in Lecture

Yes. There are days that you will be in front of your class of 250 students (or 12), open a slide, and completely go blank on why you put it there, what it was supposed to talk about, and what on earth it means. There will also be those days (hopefully not the same day!), that a student will ask you a simple, basic question and the answer will completely elude you. Or they will ask a brilliant question to which you have no idea.

If a student asks you a question, honesty is the best policy. You should not try to make up an answer. Depending on the circumstances, a response of “that’s a really interesting question. I haven’t thought about it so I’ll have to look into it.” may be appropriate, and it is a response students will be familiar with and will respect. Either provide the student with an option to come to your office hours to discuss further, or tell them you will return to it during the next class session. If it is a question that you forgot the answer to (it happens to all of us)– you can respond to the question with, “That is a good question. And I do know that answer, but for some reason it is escaping me right now.” Let me come back to this in a minute. And if it is question that you just do not know the answer to, be honest. “That’s a great question, and I am not quite sure of how to answer it. But let me do some research and I’ll come back to this next class period.”

The biggest thing is to respect the student’s request, do not avoid the question, and do not try to fake your way through. Also, make sure you write down the question and you get back to the answer in the time frame you gave. Students can sense if you are not telling the truth. So just be honest. Every expert runs into a question they just cannot answer at the moment.

You Cannot Get an Assignment Graded by the Day You Promised

This mistake is better off avoided if possible. While students want to know when they will have their assignments back, committing to a specific time or day does not always take into account all of your other grad school related responsibilities. Consider putting a grading policy directly in your syllabus that commits to returning assignments a few days before any exams, but that makes no further promises.

You Miscalculated or Forgot to Submit Grades

You are not the first to make a mistake, nor are you the first to forget submission of grades. If the mistake is caught early, resubmit. If you forget, contact your department administrator for assistance and submit as soon as possible.

A Turned in Assignment Goes Missing

This one is especially tricky because you generally do not know for sure whether the student actually turned the assignment in on time to begin with. If you cannot find an assignment, let the student know as soon as possible. If the assignment was printed or emailed, the issue is solved easily enough, with a second copy. If the assignment is handwritten, you can ask the student to visit you in office hours and ask them to tell you the answers to the most important questions, rather than asking them to complete the entire assignment again. If the assignment was quite lengthy or was worth a relatively low grade, you may need to excuse the student from the assignment altogether in the interest of fairness. If this is something you think you may struggle with, consider placing a check next to each student’s name on your attendance
sheet as they turn in the assignment, and to commit to only doing grading in your office so that you aren’t carry student assignments from place to place.

**You Spoke Ahead of Thinking**

We are all passionate about our subjects and sometimes say things that we do not necessarily mean. We also have students who will sometimes push our buttons that make us frustrated, angry, or determined to make a point. These situations may cause us to say things we do not mean or to express something in a way that we may not be proud of. If you realize your mistake right away, embrace the opportunity to immediately correct and clarify. If you have said something too strongly or in a way that was flippant or disrespectful, immediately apologize, tell your students that you know that what you said was poorly worded, and try again. Handling this mistake right up front is not only easiest in the long run, but it models good communication skills for your students, and re-enforces that you are committed above all else to their education and creating a safe and supportive learning environment.

If you realize this only after class is over and you have had time to think about what was said, you have a couple of choices. You can try to ignore what you said, which may be appropriate in some situations, but in other cases, you may find that ignoring the issue only means that it re-surfaces in student reviews as evidence of your bias, unfairness, or discrimination against certain viewpoints. In most cases, it is better to begin your next class by acknowledging what you said and telling students you would like a chance to rephrase yourself and express your point more clearly or more in line with what you actually believe. Once you have explained yourself, thank the students for listening and re-affirm your commitment to having a strong classroom environment.

For example, you might say, "In the last class, we were discussing X’s theories, and without really thinking about it, I called X’s idea stupid. Even though I don’t think there is strong evidence to support that theory, I know that there are some people who find it convincing and calling the idea stupid didn’t support my argument at all. I know it's probably not a big deal to some of you, but I just want to make sure that you all know that any idea, even one I strongly disagree with, is something we can have serious, respectful conversations about. With that in mind, let’s return to the evidence we have, so that you can make your own judgments on the issue.”

**✓ Summing It Up**

We hope this chapter’s tips have helped you move past some of the stress and frustration that accompanies learning to be an educator. Learning to teach is especially tricky because we must learn in front of an audience of students and colleagues making even small mistakes feel much bigger than they are. While it is important to take each mistake as a lesson, it is also important to remember that the mistakes you make as educator only feel so serious because they are visible to many others. Most times, these mistakes are not serious and are forgotten by everyone else fairly soon. Take your cues from those around you and allow yourself to have a short memory on the mistakes you make as you learn. You will find it will drastically improve your semester.
Semester End

Objectives:
The suggestions that follow will help you preserve what you’ve learned this semester for use in the future. They also bring the semester to a satisfying end; allowing you to appreciate what you’ve learned and accomplished and giving you a sense of closure as you head in to a well deserved break.

Saving Your Files

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 1 min
Implementation time: 10 – 20 minutes

At the end of the semester, all any of us want to do is take a break, but before you do, take a few minutes to debrief yourself on how the semester went. The most important thing is to make sure that you save all of documents and plans you made this semester somewhere that you will be able to find quickly when you need to teach the class again, or when you are looking for material for your teaching portfolio.

Consider having a binder or a file on your computer that contains the following sections:

- Use For All Classes
  - Blank Templates
- Syllabus
- Course Outline
- Grading and Attendance Trackers
- Lesson Plan
- Rubric
  - Syllabus Policies
- Class Title (Specific to one class)
  - Syllabus
- Complete Syllabus
- Syllabus Debrief
  - Assessments
- Exams
- Assignment Specific Rubrics
- Lesson Plans
  - Lesson Plan Debrief
After Semester Clean Up

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 1 min
Implementation time: 5-10 minutes

At the end of the semester, take 5 or 10 minutes to do this quick evaluation:

- Was the textbook or assigned reading effective? If not, what texts could you try next time?
- Were there any policies that did not work well, or were not complete enough to help you avoid difficulties for the semester? If so, what change should you make next time?
- Was the general order of the lessons logical and effective? If not, sketch out a brief alternative order of the topics.
- Did you feel that the assessments you used were effective in evaluating students' accomplishments of your learning goals? If not, what other assessment measures could you try?
- What was the average grade in the class? Do you feel that this grade accurately reflects the general level of mastery of the material, or does it reflect weaknesses in your syllabus and lesson planning that can be improved for next time? What changes could you make to your syllabus and lesson planning to improve student mastery of the material?
- Were there any assessments that students struggled too much with, or which didn't work the way that you hoped? Are there changes to any of the assessments that need to be made?
- Did your syllabus and lesson planning make you feel confident, prepared and energized in front of your class? If not, what changes can you make to feel more at home and effective the next time you teach this course?
- What were the three major points raised in your student evaluations of the course? If the three most common responses were not as positive as you would have hoped for, what changes can you make to your syllabus or lesson planning to address students' experiences. If the three major points were positive, print them out and include them in your teaching portfolio next to the syllabus for this class.
Lesson Plan Clean Up

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 1 minute

Implementation time: 5 minutes

Look at your lesson plan outline and consider the following questions:

- Were there any lesson plans that you did not like and that you would not reuse?
- Were there any lesson plans that worked so well that you should consider adapting them for other classes as well?
- Were there any lessons that students really didn't respond to or that they viewed so negatively that the teaching goals were not achieved?
- Were there any lessons that students really enjoyed that you should be sure to repeat in future (and possibly other) classes?

Helpful Course Reviews

TIME COMMITMENT

First reading time: 1 min

Implementation time: 15 minutes in class time

Start this review by asking students to write your name at the top of the page. Having your name at the top will make it easier to include positive feedback in your teaching portfolio later. Additionally, in large classes, you sometimes get feedback from students who rarely attend class and who are not familiar with your teaching. When you come across a review where the student did not know your name to write it at the top, you know that the rest of the feedback may be of limited value.

Considering the class so far:

- What lesson did you most enjoy?
- What lesson did you least enjoy?
- What lesson had the biggest impact on you, either in terms of new information or in terms of new ways of thinking about things?
- What material has been the most challenging for you thus far?
- What can I do to help you better understand the class material going forward?

Assessing your students’ learning is an important step in creating a successful class and also helps to improve your teaching. These informal assessments will demonstrate how well your students are grasping difficult concepts and main ideas that are important for you to meet your course objectives.
Making Sense of Student Feedback

**TIME COMMITMENT**

- First reading time: 1 minute
- Implementation time: 5 minutes

Making sense of student evaluations is difficult at best. Focus on the points below to get the most out of your student feedback, and to avoid getting caught up in harsh criticism.

- What was your strongest teaching point according to your teaching reviews? Does it agree with your personal teaching assessment, or do you have strengths you did not realize you had?
- Do any of the negative comments you received help you to pinpoint a teaching weakness that you can either plan to improve or to avoid in coming semesters?
- Are there any comments which are specific enough that you can use them to improve this course the next time you teach it?
- You will have plenty of feedback that does not fit into any of the first three questions. That feedback may be valid, but it is not usable. Take it with a grain of salt and keep focused on the feedback you can do something about!

**CONGRATULATIONS!!!!** You have made it through the semester – and better yet, you are prepared for the next time you teach this class!

**✓ Summing It Up**

Once again, congratulations on making it through another semester of challenges and curveballs! We hope that by taking the advice we have given on wrapping up your course, you will not only realize the monumental task you have completed, but you will reward yourself for a job well done! But do not let your celebration end there! Take the time during break for some much-needed time to rest and recharge before you dive in to another new semester. And when time comes to get back to work, we hope that this manual, and the experiences you gained this semester, will serve you well again.

Wishing you many happy semesters to come! - Kim and Sarah
External Links

Reading Levels - http://readable.io

Syllabus Formatting – http://salsa.usu.edu

Techniques for Responding to Students -
https://carmenwiki.osu.edu/display/osuwacresources/Techniques+for+Responding

University of Illinois at Chicago

- Academic Calendar - https://catalog.uic.edu/ucat/academic-calendar/
- ACCC (Technology Issues) - http://accc.uic.edu
- Blackboard Learn (Learning Management System) - 
  http://accc.uic.edu/service/learning-management-system
- Midterm/Final Exam Dates - 
  https://registrar.uic.edu/current_students/calendars/final_exam_schedule.html
- Midterm/Final Grade Policies - https://tlc.uic.edu/midsemestergrading-policy/
- Syllabus Policy - https://tlc.uic.edu/syllabus-policy/
- Center for the Advancement of Teaching-Learning Communities - https://tlc.uic.edu