

Tips for Faculty Teaching for the First Time

As you take on what is likely to be a new experience of having full responsibility for teaching courses in your field, you will also be learning to balance the time you spend on teaching, research, and service to your department and the University. Even if you have already had full course responsibility as an assistant to instructor, you will be taking on a new role of authority in the eyes of the students.

The following tips are meant to help you strengthen your effectiveness as you make the transition into this new phase of your teaching career:

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Take Advantage of the Resources Available to You

Do your research. Ask your colleagues about what you can expect of Washington University students. Ask them what they wish they would have known about teaching before they taught their own courses for the first time. Your colleagues can provide helpful insights about teaching specific courses and about teaching in general (what works and what doesn't).

Learn about and participate in Teaching Center programs. The Teaching Center's professional-development programs for faculty include workshops (such as a lunch-time series for junior faculty), Teaching Strategies handouts, and scholarship on teaching and learning. For more information, [contact us](#).

Before the Semester Starts: Course Planning

Start by defining course goals. Rather than beginning by defining the content your course will cover, start by defining your goals for student learning. Establishing what you want your students to learn (including both knowledge and skills) will help you determine the appropriate content, teaching methods, assignments, and exams. For detailed guidance on course planning, see [Designing a Course](#) and [Course Planning Timeline](#).

Consider your expected enrollment. Keep in mind that the methods and approaches you use will be shaped not only by your course goals, but also by the size of the class and the types of students who will be taking the course (majors or non-majors; first-years, seniors, or a mix; etc.).

Begin the process early, at least six months in advance if possible. Give yourself plenty of time to plan the course as well as to order or otherwise make available to students all necessary materials. If you plan to set up a course Web site, seek out any needed technical assistance well ahead of time.

Blackboard, the University's learning-management system, offers a convenient means of creating a Web-based community for each of your courses. The Campus Bookstore asks for book orders in April for the following fall semester and in October for the following spring semester. The University Libraries can place materials on "reserve" (electronically or in hard copy) for your students. For information, go to <http://library.wustl.edu/reservesinfo.html>. You can also post electronic documents on Blackboard. If you are planning to put together a photocopied packet of readings for students, be advised that it can take several months to obtain copyright clearance from publishers. See the University's guide to copyright and fair use.

Set high, but realistic, expectations for student learning and achievement. Your students will rise to the occasion and meet your expectations, but only if you plan and approach the course in a way that will provide them with the tools they need to succeed. (See Designing a Course.)

Develop assignments and exams that will help your students advance their thinking. For example, begin with assignments that require them to recall information and define terms, then work up to lengthier assignments and exams that ask them to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. (See the discussion of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives in Designing a Course).

Establish the course policies. Establishing all course policies, including those pertaining to academic integrity, grading, and attendance, before the class begins will go a long way toward preventing problems. Keep in mind that it is always easier to set clear, even rigid policies at the outset and then be flexible later on, when the occasion warrants, than to try to enforce more rigid policies later in the semester. When applying course policies and discussing them with students, make it clear that fairness to all students is your goal. All policies should be included in the course syllabus (see Preparing a Syllabus).

If you are supervising Assistants to Course Instructors, communicate with them before the semester begins. Determine and explain all assistant to instructor roles and responsibilities. Ensure that assistants to instructors understand, and have opportunities to ask questions about, the course content and policies.

Check out your classroom and any available multimedia. You can see details (including photos) of your classroom by using the Classroom Directory on the Teaching Center Web site.

However, it is always best to visit the classroom yourself, so that you can familiarize yourself with the layout and any available multimedia. If you are teaching in a University-managed classroom and would like to schedule a multimedia training session, call The Teaching Center at 935-6810.

Take time to prepare for the first day. Prepare to teach, rather than just to introduce the course and its requirements, the first time you meet with students so that you can give them a sense of what to expect in the course. You should also be prepared to explain all course requirements and policies, and to give students a clear idea of what you will expect in terms of their participation (see [Tips for Teaching on the First Day of Class](#)). Practice your first class session, preferably in the classroom where you will teach. Rehearse how you will use the chalkboard, how you will manage the time, when you will pause to ask questions, how you will present yourself, etc.

Before Each Class Session or Office Hour

Prepare. Preparation is the best cure for nervousness or uncertainty. Ensure that you have a grasp on the course content as well as access to all necessary materials, including textbooks, lab equipment, and other resources.

As you prepare for each class, help session, or office hour, do not merely go over the same content that the students are learning. Take a broader view, considering the ideas and assumptions behind the content and anticipating questions that students, who may be seeing this material for the first time, will ask you.

Having a “Plan B” ready to go if your “Plan A” does not go as anticipated will help you maintain confidence and control. For example, sometimes a discussion that you expected to last 15 minutes is over in 5, but still achieves the goals you had in mind. Rather than letting the class go early because you have run out of ideas, you can devote the remaining time to another activity that will help the students learn the material (e.g., summarizing the key ideas of the day, asking the students to list what they see as the key ideas, or presenting a problem or mystery that you will solve during the next class).

Plan to use a variety of teaching methods. Expect that your students will bring into the course different learning preferences. While some may be active learners who prefer to solve problems in order to learn concepts, others are reflective learners who prefer to master concepts through uninterrupted reflection. Recognize your own learning preferences and make efforts to extend your approach beyond those preferences. In other words, do not assume that you can teach something in the same way that you learned it and get the same results with all of your students. You can be most effective if you combine teaching methods to reach as many students as possible: for example, combine verbal and visual explanations, explain concepts using both a “big-picture” and a detail-oriented approach, and give students opportunities for active learning and reflection. (For more information about the learning preferences referenced here, see [Professor Richard Felder’s web site](#).)

Get organized. No matter what teaching methods you are using, you can enhance your students' learning and gain their appreciation if your classes are well organized. Each class period should have a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Try not to “cover” too much material in a single class period; include time to summarize important points and make connections to material that you covered during the last session.

You can present more information and ideas in a lecture, for example, if you do not summarize and make connections; however, you will reduce the likelihood that the students will learn and retain all of the material (see [Teaching with Lectures](#) and [Teaching with Discussions](#)).

Get emotionally ready for each class. Set aside time right before you teach to focus your mind on your goals for that day and to look forward to teaching—to interacting with students, helping them learn the day's material, and responding to the questions and ideas that they bring to class.

During Each Class Session

Arrive early, start on time, and end on time. Showing your respect for everyone's time will encourage your students to do the same. Arriving at the classroom early will allow you not only to set up for class but also to talk with students informally. This informal interaction will help you establish a rapport with your students, which will in turn help them feel confident to participate in class and to ask for help when they need it.

Interact with students; include opportunities for active learning. Demonstrate from the first class that you are interested in what students are thinking. Include plenty of opportunities for students to ask and answer questions. While a lecture course will provide fewer opportunities for interaction than a discussion course, you will find that students will be able to learn and retain more material if you pause every 15-20 minutes to ask questions or to ask students to apply a theory, solve a problem, or discuss a debated point. (See [Teaching with Discussions](#), [Teaching with Lectures](#), [Asking Questions to Improve Learning](#), and [Increasing Student Participation](#).)

Show passion for the subject and for your students' learning. One of the most effective ways to inspire your students to learn is to show that you are truly interested in, and excited about, the course content and their learning.

When responding to your students' questions and comments, use both verbal and non-verbal cues to show them that you are listening and engaged. Do not use this time to look down at your notes or remind yourself of the next topic. Students can perceive these actions as indications that you are not truly listening to what they are saying.

Be flexible. Be prepared to have good days and bad days in the classroom. If you are not getting good results teaching in a particular way, try something new. For example, if the students in your discussion or recitation section are extremely quiet, break them up into smaller groups to solve a problem or answer a set of questions.

If students appear bored, include more opportunities for active learning. Pause in the middle of class to have students ask and answer questions, provide examples, or solve problems. Do not assume that students look bored because they know the material and then decide to speed up your pace; it may be instead that they are having trouble understanding what you are presenting to them. It may also be that they are sleep-deprived, as college students often are.

If you do not know the answer to a question, say so. Tell the students that you will find an answer, and then get back to them. Present the answer to the entire group during the next class; do not let the matter drop. You do not need to be all-knowing to maintain your credibility. One way to lose it, in fact, is to bluff by giving an answer of which you are unsure and that students may later find out to be untrue. Model intellectual curiosity and honesty. Your enthusiasm to learn something new will inspire your students to follow your example.

When asking questions, do not be afraid of silence. Often, silence means that students are thinking. Do not give in to the temptation to end the silence by answering your own questions, which will only convince students that if they wait long enough, they will not have to think because you will supply the answers for them. Wait 5-10 seconds for an answer. If, at that point, you are getting blank stares and quizzical expressions, rephrase your question. (For additional questioning strategies, see [Asking Questions to Improve Learning](#).)

After Each Class Session

Jot down brief notes on how it went. Take five minutes to note what worked and what didn't, as well as any new ideas that occurred to you while teaching. Include these notes in your lecture notes or lesson plan, so that they will be readily accessible when you are preparing for the next session or teaching the same course again. If you wait until the end of the semester to reflect on how the entire course went, you will have forgotten the specific details that will be helpful to you later.

Make any necessary adjustments to your plan for the next class session. For example, will you need to clarify or review any material from the session that just ended? Will you need to start at a different point than that which you had anticipated? Do you need to make changes in the way that you present material? Is there anything you can do to improve student participation?

Anticipate questions that students may ask in office hours, review sessions, or subsequent classes. Prepare answers, as well. Do not stick to the material itself. Take a step back to consider why this material is important, what difficulties a novice learner might have with it, and how you might explain it in ways that appeal to different learning preferences (e.g. visual vs. verbal methods).

Working with Students

Learn about your students. As with anything that you are communicating, you can be most effective when you shape what you are teaching for your specific audience. In general, be cognizant of your students' level of familiarity with the course material, as well as their relative intellectual capabilities: for example, undergraduate students will not be prepared to discuss ideas at the same level of complexity and ambiguity that you became accustomed to as a graduate student. Therefore, you may need to adjust your own language and approach when teaching undergraduates.

The more you know about your students' academic backgrounds and abilities, the better able you will be to help them learn what you would like them to learn. You can learn about your students by asking your colleagues about their teaching experiences, by paying attention to the kinds of questions that students ask, or by administering diagnostic exams or informal first-day questionnaires.

Be proactive when dealing with student concerns and complaints. Some students will feel comfortable coming to you throughout the semester to ask questions. Others will struggle on their own and need encouragement to seek help in office hours or help sessions. First-year college students, some of whom may be accustomed to excelling academically with less effort than is now required, may have a particularly tough time asking for help. Presenting yourself as approachable and interested in their questions and concerns will go a long way toward encouraging students to ask for assistance when they need it.

When students come to you with a complaint, take the time to listen to what they have to say before responding. Keep the discussion calm and focused. When you do respond, keep in mind the importance of sticking to your course policies (e.g., on grading and attendance) and University policies (e.g., on academic integrity violations). To ensure fairness for all students, you should make exceptions only when circumstances warrant, and not in order to end a conflict with an individual student. If a student is complaining about a grade, explain the justification behind the grade, but eventually turn the conversation to strategies the student can use to improve her or his performance on the next assignment or exam, or in future courses.

Seek out assistance when you need it. Often, a student's academic performance is affected by non-academic issues such as medical concerns or personal problems. If you suspect this may be the case, or if you have simply noticed that a student's academic performance has declined suddenly, you may find it helpful to consult with the student's academic advisor or Student Health Services. See the [Teaching@WashU](#) page for a link to The Teaching Center's guide to these and related Washington University resources.

Recommended Reading

Davis, Barbara Gross. *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.

McKeachie's *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. 12th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.



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