

that bad teaching experiences set the stage for successful teaching experiences later if you take the time to reflect on what worked, what went wrong, and what you will do differently the next time you cover that material.

LECTURING

Although lecturing has long formed the core of most college teaching, research on student learning increasingly has shown that it is not always the best way to teach—it is effective in some circumstances but not in others. As a result, instructors have developed other ways to help their students learn. Lectures still have their place in most classrooms, however, even in a writing class. Good instructors know when to lecture and how to do it effectively.

When to Lecture

Lecturing is one of the most effective ways to provide students a clear, organized overview of new material. Through lectures, teachers can introduce students to different concepts and ideas and lay out the groundwork for future learning. Inductive learning—letting the students learn the material on their own through structured exercises—has its strengths, but lecturing allows teachers to cover more material in a shorter period of time.

At certain points in writing and literature courses, lectures are fairly common. For example, you are likely to deliver a lecture the first day of class, offering your students an overview of and introduction to the course. You will also lecture when you assign a new paper. After you distribute the assignment sheet, you need to tell your students about this particular type of essay, explain the rhetorical context of the assignment, and describe the grading standards you will apply. Whenever you present new information—how to organize, draft, or revise one's work; how to achieve greater sentence variety; how to use semicolons properly; how to write about literary texts—you will likely introduce the material through a brief lecture. Developing a sense of when you need to lecture and when you need to employ other instructional techniques comes with experience.

How to Lecture Effectively

Like any other instructional technique, lectures lose their effectiveness if they are handled badly. Below are some guidelines that will help you improve your skills.

Be Brief

In writing classes especially, good lectures tend to be short. You will rarely need to lecture for an entire class period. In most cases, you will combine lectures with other learning activities. For example, a ten- to fifteen-minute lecture followed by some hands-on student work or class discussion is often the best way to present new material.

CHAPTER 7

Presenting Material in Class

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VARIETY: A KEY TO EFFECTIVE TEACHING

There is no one right way to teach—teaching is more of an art than a science. Over time, every teacher develops a unique teaching style, a way of presenting course material and interacting with students he or she finds comfortable and effective. Good teachers, though, know how to adapt their teaching style to suit the size and structure of each class they teach and to address their students' individual needs.

During your years as a TA, take the opportunity to experiment with ways of presenting course material and begin to develop your own teaching style. This chapter will outline different methods of instruction. Discuss them with your teaching supervisor and experienced peers. See what has worked for them. Try a few yourself. Of course, when you try something new, you run the risk of failure—you may not respond as enthusiastically as you had hoped. However, remember

Plan and Organize

The best lectures are well planned and organized. Few experienced teachers—and even fewer new instructors—can offer effective extemporaneous lectures. Instead, good lecturers spend considerable time planning and rehearsing what they will say to their students. When planning a lecture, first consider these questions:

1. What is my goal? What do I want my students to learn from my presentation? Decide on the content, length, and structure of your lecture.
2. What background information do my students need to comprehend this new information? The best way for students to absorb new ideas is to relate them to familiar ideas, what they already know and understand. Without an adequate introduction to the topic of your lecture, your students might not be able to grasp the new material.
3. Why is it important for my students to learn this material? Start your lecture by appealing to your students' needs and concerns, letting them know why and how the material you are about to present is important to them.
4. What are the key points I need to cover? Edit your lecture and keep your presentation brief and focused. Jot down all the main points to serve as an outline for your presentation.
5. What is the best way to order this information? Are there logical or chronological connections between the key points I want to cover? If so, how can I highlight these connections in my presentation? Does some material have to come first so the students can understand what comes next? Refine the structure of your lecture so it presents the material in the most coherent order.
6. What examples can I offer to illustrate and explain the material? Too many TAs fail to develop illustrative examples while planning their lectures. Instead, they hope examples will just spring to mind as they talk in class. A better course of action is to develop them ahead of time.
7. What visual aids will I employ as I lecture? How will I use the chalk board or overhead projector? What handouts or outlines can I develop that will help my students understand my presentation? Effective visual aids take time to plan and prepare; you need to start early.
8. When will I pause for questions as I lecture? What questions might my students have? How will I answer them? Many new TAs are afraid that their students will ask them questions they cannot answer. They fear the embarrassment and loss of credibility that might result if they have to stumble for a response. As you plan a lecture, take time to consider the questions your students might ask and the answers you might give; this will considerably lessen your anxiety.

Answering these questions will help you develop and structure your lecture. As you prepare for class, set aside enough time to consider each question carefully.

Speak Clearly, Maintain Good Eye Contact, and Pace Yourself

Remember the fundamentals of good public speaking. First, make sure your voice is loud and clear. As you begin your lecture, ask your students, especially those sitting in the back of the room, whether they can hear you.

Second, do not read your lecture in class. Instead, lecture from brief notes you can refer to when necessary. Try to talk to or *with* your students, not *at* them. Look your students in the eye as you speak, moving your gaze around the room. Maintaining good eye contact will help keep your students engaged in the lecture and will help you “read” the room—puzzled looks on your students' faces will let you know when you need to pause for questions or to clarify points; bored looks will let you know when to change your delivery or to move on to the next point you plan to cover.

Your lectures also need to be well paced. Too many new TAs rush through their lectures, only pausing at the end for questions. Pacing your lecture means speaking at a comfortable rate and pausing at regular intervals for student questions and comments. In fact, good lecturers pause often to reiterate points, solicit questions, or offer clarifying examples or explanations. If you find yourself talking too quickly as you lecture or sense that you are pausing too infrequently for questions, stop occasionally to write something on the blackboard or on an overhead. As you do, ask your students if they have any questions. At certain points in your lecture, stop and ask your students to write down any questions they have or to summarize in a sentence or two what they have learned. You can collect their responses and read them later or ask a few students to share their questions or summaries in class, answering their questions or clarifying their understanding of the material before you continue with the lecture.

Use Examples

Good lecturers use lots of examples to help explain the material they are covering. In fact, the more abstract the concept, the more important it is to offer illustrative examples. If possible, draw these examples from your students' experience and knowledge—the arts, popular culture, sports, history, current events—anything that can help your students better comprehend the material. Analogy and metaphor are useful too: explain concept A, which the students may not understand, by relating it to concept B, which they likely do. Do not make the mistake, though, of believing that examples speak for themselves or are self-evidently clear. Be sure you explain the relevance of the examples you offer, explicitly demonstrating their connection to the material you are presenting. Finally, many instructors believe that using several short examples to illustrate a point is more effective than using a single, extended example; it increases the likelihood that you will find one that helps every student.

Draw Connections

Point out connections between material you are covering for the first time and material the students have already studied in class, and explain the differences or similarities. Even though you might think that the connection

among units in your course is clear, do not expect your students to make those connections on their own. Highlighting these connections is a proven way to improve student learning. It affords students a context for the new material, a way to relate the unknown and new to the known and understood. It also helps unify your course. Students can see how the material they cover in class does not lose its relevance and how one unit builds on the next.

Link Lectures and Exercises

Finally, good lecturers know that students learn more by doing than by listening. Develop in-class or out-of-class exercises and activities that require your students to apply the information or concepts you discuss in your lecture. Follow-up exercises help students master the material and help you determine how much your students learned. Therefore, design exercises that call on more than just the students' ability to memorize and repeat information. If these are the only critical thinking skills the students must use to complete the exercise successfully, you are not helping them learn the material as thoroughly as they can and should. Instead, develop exercises that require students to employ the new material in meaningful ways—to solve problems, for example, or to advance their work on a class assignment.

CLASS DISCUSSIONS

Giving lectures requires you to do most of the talking. To achieve the opposite effect, use class discussions. Preparing for and managing a class discussion takes about the same amount of time and work as preparing for a lecture. However, in class discussions, you employ a different set of teaching skills and achieve goals that are hard to reach through lectures.

The Roles Discussions Can Play in a Course

Class discussions help students explore ideas, develop positions, learn from their peers, and become more involved in the course. Some teachers like to use discussions early in a course as an icebreaker, an opportunity for students to speak their minds and get to know each other. Others use discussions throughout the course as a way for students to develop important critical thinking skills. During discussions, students must present their ideas clearly and convincingly to a sometimes skeptical audience. If they are challenged during the discussion, students have to listen carefully to the questions or objections being raised, assess their merit, and explain or defend their own position, skills that can transfer to their written work.

Sometimes discussions just happen. There are hot topics on campus the students want to talk about or a course reading that pushes the right buttons. When this occurs, teachers have a hard decision to make: cut off discussion

and get on with the lesson plan for the day or let the discussion continue and catch up on the lesson plan some other time (truly gifted teachers can combine the two, finding a way to draw connections between the spontaneous discussion and their planned class activities).

Most of the time, though, discussions are planned and purposeful—teachers set aside time on their syllabus for discussions as a way to cover course material, teach particular skills, or achieve certain class goals. For example, teachers may use discussions to help students gain a better understanding of a required reading. If this reading will serve as the basis of a paper the students are writing, the discussions help them understand and interpret the text, acquaint them with alternative interpretations of the reading, and help them develop material for their papers. Often ideas and insights generated by these discussions find their way into the students' papers. Other times the reading may serve as a model for a paper the students are writing. In this case, discussions are often analytical, the class working together to dissect the reading's content, structure, or style. Again, students can use the insights generated by this discussion to plan and draft their own essays. Still other times, the reading may serve only as a prompt for discussion. The teacher has certain rhetorical or argumentative skills he or she wants the students to develop through discussion and asks the students to discuss a reading likely to elicit strong responses.

Sometimes discussions will focus on the topic of the papers the students are writing—single parenting, the presidential election, deforestation, parking on campus. These discussions can help students better understand the issue and develop material for their essays. More importantly, though, they help students determine what they really think about the topic, where they stand on an issue, and how they might best communicate their ideas. During discussions, students can articulate their positions and ideas provisionally to see what kind of reaction they receive. Articulating their ideas during a discussion can serve as a kind of "rough draft" for these students. The responses they receive from their peers will help them develop, refine, or more clearly articulate their ideas when they write them out.

Still other times, teachers use discussions just to energize their students. On a day that the students seem particularly tired or distracted, they may decide to talk about the upcoming Oscar presentations, campus drinking policies, or the career expectations of men and women—any issue the students may find interesting. As they discuss the topic, the teacher may expect the students to employ some of the rhetorical skills they have learned in the class, but usually the goal is simply to have a good discussion. Sometimes even a brief debate can raise the energy level of the class, reignite interest in the course, and motivate the students to learn what the teacher will cover next in class.

Types of Discussions

Some discussions are open and others are structured. Open discussions allow the students to set the agenda. To begin these discussions, teachers may pose a general question to get the students talking (something like “*What did you think about the readings due for today?*” or “*What did you think of the president’s speech last night?*”), but they allow the students to dictate the content and direction of the discussion. With structured discussions, teachers set a more definite agenda, perhaps writing on the blackboard a specific question or two they want the students to address (“*Which of the readings due for today made the best use of emotional appeals?*” or “*During his speech last night, the president specifically addressed several people sitting in the audience—how did that help him advance his argument?*”). As the students respond to these questions, the teacher keeps them on topic, not allowing them to drift to unrelated issues. Either type of discussion can be effective, and you ought to experiment with both.

Discussions can also be brief or long. Sometimes you may want your students to discuss a reading for only the first ten minutes of a class before they move on to some other task. At the end of a lecture, you may want to reserve ten or fifteen minutes for questions and a short discussion of the material you presented. Other times you may want to devote an entire class period to discussion. If your students are tackling a difficult reading, for example, you may want to spend the entire class talking about the text and answering their questions. Other times you may want to spend a class period debating the topic of the students’ papers. As a teaching tool, class discussions can be very flexible.

Finally, with the widespread use of technology today, you might want to use electronic discussions, both in class and out of class. Electronic discussions—through chat rooms, threaded discussions, and the like—allow students to “meet” and exchange ideas any day of the week, any time of day. If you are not skilled at setting up electronic discussions but would like to use them in your class, ask your teaching supervisor for help locating people on campus who can instruct you. (See Chapter 8 for advice on using on-line threaded discussions.)

The Teacher’s Role in Class Discussions

During a class discussion, the teacher has several roles to play. You have to get the discussion started, keep it going, and keep it organized. More importantly, though, you have to be sure the discussion is serving its intended purpose and meeting your students’ needs.

Teacher as Prompter

As the prompter, you start the discussion and keep your students active and involved. If the conversation flags at some point, step in and reenergize it. If some students are not participating, draw them in. If important points are being ignored or shortchanged, redirect the conversation.

Teacher as Organizer

This role starts before the class meets. Prepare for a discussion the way you prepare for any other class activity, choosing the topic or question you will ask the students to address, deciding on the format of the discussion, and determining the amount of time you will devote to the activity. During the discussion itself, keep the students on task, point out trends you see in their comments, and redirect the discussion if it moves in unproductive or inappropriate directions. The catch: you need to do all of this without monopolizing class time or commandeering the conversation, a tricky procedure that takes a lot of practice to master.

Teacher as Recorder

As the recorder, you take notes on the blackboard or on an overhead projector, recording the points students raise as impartially and comprehensively as you can. At the end of the discussion, you and your students can sort through these notes to identify trends, weed out errors, or synthesize ideas.

Teacher as Synthesizer

Class discussions should not end in confusion. Instead, when possible and appropriate, help students synthesize their comments, producing a final position or statement most or all can accept. However, when the point of a discussion is not to build a consensus but rather to air ideas and explore possibilities, help your students summarize, as clearly and impartially as they can, what they have heard each other saying and what their final positions seem to be.

Teacher as Instructor

Finally, at the end of any class discussion, point out what the students should have gained or learned from the conversation. Over the years, I have watched TAs lead wonderful discussions, but when the class was over, I wondered whether the students made any connection between the discussion and the course. Did they understand the reason for the discussion? Did they see how it was connected to particular course goals or writing projects? I know from talking to some of these students and reading the evaluation forms they complete at the end of the term that these connections are often unclear. With this in mind, at the end of every discussion, be sure to explain why you chose to devote class time to the activity and how the students might use the ideas and insights they generated in class. As an alternative, ask your students to write a brief, informal essay at the end of the period in which they summarize what they learned in class that day and critique its utility.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Class Discussions

Class discussions can be unpredictable and unwieldy. No amount of planning can help you completely control where a discussion might go. Though that unpredictability might frighten you as an inexperienced teacher, the

possibilities should also thrill you. Class discussions can generate a lot of heat, but also a lot of light. Your students will often amaze you with the quality and depth of their thinking. They might also disappoint you with the predictability and shallowness of their comments. Class discussions bring out both kinds of responses from students.

Though class discussions can be time consuming, if you manage them well they can greatly benefit your students. First, students generally like discussions. They often do not get an opportunity to express themselves in their classes. The enthusiasm discussions generate spills over into other aspects of the course. Second, students usually find discussions instructive. They like hearing what other students think, and they learn from their peers in ways they might not learn from you. Do not get fooled into believing that you alone are responsible for educating the students in your class. Third, lessons learned during class discussions often transfer to the students' writing, helping them develop, organize, and present their essays more effectively.

Finally, discussions can help make classes more interesting and exciting for you. Listen carefully to what your students have to say; they will raise questions you have not considered and offer interpretations you find interesting or challenging. Play the role of student yourself and see what you can learn. During almost every discussion I've had in my classes, students make comments that increase my understanding of the material and help me develop new ways of presenting it in class.

ORAL REPORTS

Oral reports increase your students' involvement in their own education. Turning the classroom over to your students puts them center stage while you take a seat. There are many ways to structure oral reports and many uses they can serve in the classroom.

Types of Oral Reports

Oral reports can introduce new material, supplement your own teaching, or showcase the results of student work. In the first case, you ask students to research material you want to cover in class and have them briefly report their findings. This approach can work with even the most mundane topics. For example, I have students report on documentation practices when I have to cover that material. I assign one group of students to study MLA documentation and another to study APA. I give them a list of points I want covered in their reports, such as what material needs to be documented in papers, how to document that material, and how to write up a works cited list, then allow them two weeks to gather their information and develop their presentation. I encourage the students to be as creative as they can be. Presentations have included lectures, films, demonstrations, mock quiz shows, and even a "documentation Olympics."

Oral reports can also supplement instruction you offer in class. For example, suppose you are teaching the novel *Frankenstein*. You may want to offer a brief lecture introducing the book and its author, then ask groups of students to develop more detailed oral reports on Mary Shelley, the Prometheus myth, the rise of modern science, child-rearing practices of nineteenth-century Europe, or any other relevant topics. The students' job is to take your comments as a starting point, investigate the topic more thoroughly, and present the results of their research orally in class. All the students in class will benefit from these informative reports.

Finally, oral reports focus on the student's own writing. Many teachers require oral reports as part of a longer research project. After the students have finished writing their research papers, they report on the topic orally in class, offering a brief abstract of their paper, discussing the research questions they investigated, summarizing their findings, or giving a full account of the steps they followed when completing the project. Oral reports acknowledge publicly the students' hard work and offer them an opportunity to instruct their peers.

Oral Report Guidelines

If you employ oral reports, these guidelines can help you design the task, manage the presentations, and provide your students the guidance they need to complete the assignment successfully.

1. Consider whether you want your students to work individually or with others. Students can work on the projects individually; they can work with others but present their reports individually; or they can work in groups and offer a group presentation. Working in groups on oral presentations offers some real advantages, even if the students will give individual presentations. Members of the group can help with research; offer advice on the content, structure, and style of the presentation; provide moral support for students who might be nervous about speaking in public; and serve as rehearsal audiences.
2. Offer detailed guidelines that specify the topic you expect them to cover, the format you expect them to employ (whether you want individual or group presentations), their goal (what the presentation should accomplish), the appropriate tone and diction (serious or humorous, formal or informal), the time limits for each presentation (minimum and/or maximum time limits), the use of visual aids (such as overheads, charts, pictures, samples, or graphs), and required handouts or other documents (e.g., presentation notes for their peers, a summary of the report for you, or a reflection essay on the process of developing the report). The more detailed and clear the guidelines, the better the presentations are likely to be.
3. Strictly enforce these guidelines. Managing time is often difficult for students giving oral reports, but if a presentation runs long, you need to cut it off and stick to your schedule. Not doing so is unfair to the other presenters.