

Teaching Tips

Suggestions for preparing and delivering your very first class.

1. Go to the room where you will be teaching the day before the class and check that you know where everything is, that you know how to operate the screen and the lights and the computer hookup, and that the software is working.
2. If you have checked out the class the previous day, then on the day of the class you should still go early, but after a very quick check of the equipment, use the time before class begins to just chat with students as they drift in.
3. I am sure that you will know the material well, so concentrate more on looking at the class, making eye contact, and speaking loud and clear. Most instructors talk to the "T," those students who sit in the front rows and in a line up the middle. What you should do is talk to the "U," those students who occupy the back rows and down the sides. If you speak to them, and make eye contact with them, you will project your voice adequately and will capture the T students as well.
4. Since this is your first time teaching, you will be nervous but that's ok. Being a little nervous is good for giving a good lecture.
5. In preparing for the class, remember that you cannot really teach more than three or four significant ideas. Everything else you teach should relate to those ideas. You can put those ideas in the form of a lecture outline on the blackboard and then, as you complete one section and move to the next, you can check it off. This helps students to keep track of the big picture and not get lost in the details.
6. Try not to over-prepare and end up with too much material that you rush through at the end. When teaching for the first time, it is hard to know how much is enough, and teachers are so afraid of running out of material that they put in far too much. What you can do is prioritize your material into what you must do, and other stuff that you will do if you have time at the end.
7. Know how you want to end the class and make sure that you segue to that end as time runs out, rather than letting the class end on an incoherent and confused note.
8. Start promptly on time and end promptly on time.
9. This is advice I give to young women faculty. At least for the first few weeks, dress a little formally. Respect is a tricky issue and women have to work harder to gain it than men. So wear dress slacks (or skirt) and a nice top or sweater. Also, when you are well dressed, it gives you more confidence.
10. It is good to periodically ask for questions but most people don't wait long enough for students to respond. Count silently to ten before moving on and, while counting, keep an eye open for students who look puzzled but are not raising their hands. You can speak to them directly,

saying something like, "You look a little puzzled. Was something not clear?"

11. It is really important to respond to questions respectfully, even if the question sounds trivial to you.
12. If a student asks a question, treat it as if it is a question from the whole class, and after initially looking at the student, shift your gaze to the whole class when you answer. It is fine if the student asks a follow-up question, but avoid more than three brief exchanges with the same student. Then you should say, "Let's discuss this after class."
13. If a student asks you something for which you do not know the answer (even after clarification), don't try to bluff but say that it is an interesting question to which you don't know the answer right now but to talk to you after class and that you will investigate the issue and get back to him/her. This is particularly effective when you have the occasional smart-aleck who wants to show off by stumping the professor and asks questions involving esoteric stuff like, "But what about the implications of the Smoot-Hawley tariff?" Saying you will research the question and get back to them is better than bluffing because students can usually tell when you are faking knowledge. Realizing that one need not know everything off the top of one's head also removes a lot of the pressure to prepare error-free, comprehensive lectures.
14. Humor is tricky and I would avoid attempts at it.
15. Make the first day count.
 - Start the class with an experiential exercise that gets the students conversing with each other. Make it intriguing, for example, a small puzzle to solve that involves course content, or a fascinating demonstration of some sort with a follow-up discussion. Make it interactive (e.g., having students work in small groups of 3-4 and have a few report what they discussed.) Leave them "wanting more."
 - Try to put a few names with the faces that are in your course. You can check Joe'sS for the roster as there will also be student pictures available.
 - Explain why you are teaching this course. What do you love about the subject you are teaching? Passion expressed through the sharing of one's love for their topic can help grab the attention of students. Start each day talking about why this topic is important to you as a chemist, a psychologist, a historian, a political scientist, etc. Passion is extremely contagious and your students will get the bug for the content.
 - Don't just read the syllabus to the students. Start by taking students on a journey through your class. Where does the journey end (course objectives and outcomes) and how are we going to get there? Consider the flow of this journey description. What are the key elements of the journey? How does learning occur in this course? Thoroughly discuss the notion of shared responsibility with your students. What is expected of them (e.g., preparation, appropriate behaviors) and what do you expect of yourself (creating exercises that applies what they prepare and makes it relevant to them).
Go over performance indicators last, but in detail (i.e., tests, assignments, grading, etc.)
End on a note of encouragement.