Tips for Teachers
From the 2018 College of Letters & Science Teaching Fellows
If you have questions or concerns about your teaching, please contact the
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We produce training materials for use by L&S departments and TAs, provide
TAs with information about professional development opportunities on
campus, and maintain a web site with information relevant to Teaching
Assistants at UW-Madison.

Check out the L&S TA Resource Center on-line!
http://www.ls.wisc.edu/ta.html

Please give us a call or email with questions about your work as a TA.
Lesson Planning 101: How to Efficiently Prepare a Foreign Language Class  
Priya Ananth, Department of Spanish and Portuguese

Lesson Plan Template:
Date – Topic

Class Objectives

I. Warm-up – something oral/active if possible
   Transition

II. Topic 1 – introduce topic quickly and address student questions

III. Practice – something quick
   Transition

IV. Topic 2 (or continuation of previous topic where you go into more detail), address further student concerns

V. Practice – something that requires more production
   Transition

VI. More complex activity to tie everything together.

____________________________________________________________________________

Things to Consider When Planning:

General Tips:
- Keep your course calendar with you when you plan. It may be a good idea to stick to it for the first semester.
- Think about the types of exams that students will have to take – what skills do they need to know? For example, is there a listening portion? If so, include some listening activities in class.

Time Management:
- If you can, plan on the weekends. It’s better to sacrifice a few hours on a Saturday planning for a week than two hours per night planning for the next day.

Materials:
- Use your book and any supplementary materials you are given, but feel free to adapt.
- If you have access to other textbooks (in your target language or others), look them over. You may get some ideas.
Collaboration:
- Get help if you need it!! Talk to your coordinator, and most importantly, other TAs. Find out what resources are available to you. You do not have to reinvent the wheel.
- Review any activities that you get from another TA. Feel free to adjust them to your style so you will be more comfortable using them in class.
- Plan with a friend. Two heads are better than one!

Activities:
- Start the class with something that gets your students moving and, most importantly, talking. Try to review something from the day before.
- Use a variety of activities that increase in difficulty level/require them to produce more. Try to work on speaking, reading, writing, and listening, even if it is just a little, each day.
- Don’t be afraid to do a worksheet or grammar activity. Sometimes it’s necessary. Encourage group work to keep them speaking in the target language. If the worksheet has multiple sections, consider doing them one at a time. Some can be done orally, some in pairs etc. This also helps you to control how long students will spend on a worksheet/activity.
- If any activity is repetitive, feel free to do only a few.
- Review any activities from the textbook or from worksheets again carefully before you teach. You may need to explain a word or provide your students with some help before they begin.
- Do NOT plan for a long grammar description. You will lose your students’ attention. Divide up your grammar topics into smaller bits and do a brief activity after each one (sometimes oral, sometimes written, sometimes in pairs etc.).
- Encourage group work.
- Always have an extra activity planned just in case your students move through the material quickly – maybe something from the book so you don’t have to prepare anything extra.

Helpful things to add to your lesson plan:
- List your day’s objectives on top of each day’s plan. You can write that on the white board/chalkboard in class.
- Include the page numbers for your activities in your lesson plan.
- Include transitions, they will help to steer the class towards a goal for the day. A transition can be something that you use to connect two topics and it doesn’t have to be elaborate.
- Put an approximate time next to each activity. As you get to know your class better (and yourself as a teacher), this can change.
- Make sure to think through your instructions (perhaps write them out) for larger, more complex activities.
- For more complex topics, maybe write out the points you want to mention. If you plan to write something on the board write it in your plan.
• When you are planning, make a list of copies you will need, sheets you need to print out etc. on the side of each day’s lesson. That way on class day, you will not have a problem gathering materials.

After class:
• Save your lesson plans when they are done. Maybe mark down in another color what worked and what didn’t for next semester.

Activity ideas:

• **Interviews** to practice new verbs or vocab words.
• **Dictation** – for listening or spelling practice
• **Hangman** – To practice spelling and vocabulary
• **Verb races** to practice conjugations – Have students form groups and get in line near the board. Each member of the group comes to the board and conjugates one form. Another version is to call out a new verb and subject each time a new group of students come to the board.
• **Ball toss** for conjugation practice.
• **Fly Swatter Game** – put up a gameboard, each with a vocab word. Bring two students up to the board and give them each a fly swatter. Read a clue (or have another student read a clue) and the students must use the swatter to hit the right vocab word.
• **True/False activities** to test comprehension. You can build on these by asking students to make the sentences true (or false), or, if they are opinion questions, ask them for more information.
• **Information Gap Activities** – One student has half the information and the other student has the other half. They need to communicate to complete the activity.
• **Crosswords (ex. of Information Gap Activity)** - Half of the class gets sheets with the vertical answers filled in, and the other half with the horizontal answers. They need to talk to each other to get the rest.
• Use **images** to work with vocabulary and grammar – What are the people in the images doing? Describe the scene? Use certain words/verbs to create the description. Create a story around the image.
• **Problems and solutions** to practice commands
• **Music** – Find a song in the target language with relevant vocabulary or grammar. Have the lyrics printed out for them so they can follow along. Maybe have them listen to a particular part and fill in words they should recognize.
• **Autograph activity** – make a “gameboard” with different categories that review the grammar/vocab (ex. “____ has a cousin that lives in California” or “_______ has two older brothers”. Model the question they must ask to get the necessary information. Students must walk around the classroom, introduce themselves in the target language and get the name of the person who fits in a certain space. You can then ask them to tell you (in the third person) about the family of one of their classmates.
• **Free write** – To practice writing later in the semester, perhaps ask students to write a few sentences and then share with the class. Collect them and return them with more detailed corrections.

• **“Pyramid”** – Put up a word on the board and have students in pairs. One facing the board and the other turned away. The student facing the board has to describe the word (in the target language).

• **Catch Phrase** – Same idea as “Pyramid”, but without moving students around. Can be played in pairs or larger groups.

• **Broken Sentences** – Write out a few sentences and then cut each one into pieces so students will have to construct the sentence from scratch. This helps them to think about syntax and basic structure.

• **Advertisements** (ex. for a car or a house) – Have them write an ad for a house/car etc.

• **Jeopardy** to review chapters
Creating a welcoming classroom environment
It is crucial to foster a welcoming and supportive environment in your classroom early so that students feel comfortable speaking up and taking chances.

- This environment will likely change throughout the course of the semester as the lessons and lectures change, but you can continually check in with students by having them write their concerns about new material or fears of communicating new topics periodically in the course. These can be anonymous.
- Rewarding attempts over accuracy will result in greater participation. There is no shame in not knowing the answer, or not knowing how to express clearly. Studying, learning, and communicating are skills that will be learned – the main ingredient is that your students are motivated.

Activity idea:
- Brainstorm strategies for creating a welcoming environment. You can begin the semester with a round-table discussion of what the students expect to have in a welcoming classroom and write these on the board. This is an opportunity for the students to set the pace and determine the foundation for their learning environment.

Peer teaching and facilitating – how not to stand at the board and lecture
The theory of “co-construction”: “A social process in which people interact and negotiate (usually verbally) to create an understanding or to solve a problem”. Negotiation gives learners confidence in mastering the material.

- Peer teaching reveals to students the inconsistencies between what the peer teacher is explaining and what the peer learner is listening to about what is known.
- When a student attempts to explain what they know to a peer, or when a student is trying to understand the explanation from a peer, they are actively testing the fit of their understanding.
- Try encouraging students to assume more leadership roles in your classroom by inviting students to use the board while you take the role of learner. Other students can volunteer to rotate in to write/draw/explain on the board.
- **Question-based learning** – learning comes from questions, not necessarily from answers.

Activity idea:
- Have students co-create or co-teach a lesson. In a lab setting, enlist one or a few students to introduce the lab task for the day and demonstrate setups or experiments. In a discussion, have students work together to diagram or create a concept map of a complex lesson or process learned in class or readings and have everyone contribute to filling it in.
Managing group work to encourage peer teaching

Speaking at the front of the room to a full class can be terrifying to students without practice. A great way to incorporate peer teaching in your classroom is through group work. Breaking into smaller groups sharpens social and communication skills in a supportive environment (that you scaffolded with your early activity on defining a welcoming environment!).

- Group work gives students the opportunity to practice what they are learning
- Learning as a ‘verb’ instead of a ‘noun’
- Active learning vs. passive learning – passive learning refers to lecturing material to students with the hopes they retain information. Active learning engages methods that require more student involvement, back-and-forth discussions, and group work to give students practice communicating what they do know.
- Students who work in groups speak more often and ask more questions
- Some strategies for working in groups include:
  - Think-pair-share: A question is posed to students, often one that is complex, and students take a few minutes to think through the question on their own. Then students pair or triplet off to discuss and come to a consensus. When a consensus is negotiated, the pairs and groups share their response with the rest of the class.
  - Reciprocal peer tutoring: Students pair off or join small groups and take turns acting as peer tutor and peer tutee. One student will tutor on a concept covered in lecture, and then the roles switch.
- While students are working in small groups, the TA can hear the discussions and pick up on student understanding that may have not been apparent before. The TA can also join those groups individually to offer clarification.

Activity ideas:

- Have students work in small groups and discuss separate concepts. Then have the groups reshuffle to have one student ‘teach’ the new group on that lesson or concept
- Use self-assessment and peer-assessment periodically throughout the semester to have students reflect in certain terms on their ability to work in groups and to provide feedback to their peers. These can also be anonymous as the goal is to take the time to reflect and examine their own progress.

Tips for cultivating confidence in the TA, because confidence can be infectious!

- Preparation will go a long way in cultivating confidence early on. Enter each class session with clearly laid out goals. These can include direct and indirect objectives. E.g., physical objectives: conduct X experiment, record X observations, complete X worksheet, turn in X deliverable, and develop ‘soft’ skills: critical thinking, writing, or speaking skills. Outline these objectives for yourself before every class, and even write these on the board so that you don’t forget them.
o Have confidence in not knowing the answer. The role of the facilitator is to co-operatively bring students to the answer with you. “I will get back to you on that” or “let’s figure that out together” are perfectly reasonable answers to students’ questions. You can also invite students to quickly research a question in their textbook and give a brief explanation or demonstration to the rest of the class.

- Remember, pretending to be confident actually works. There are also multitudes of strategies for boosting confidence in professional settings that you can explore online. An article I found useful when first starting as a TA:

Teaching Groups: Improving Group Working Skills for Better Learning Outcomes
Tiago de Silva Ribeiro, Department of Integrative Biology

Classrooms at UW-Madison are usually composed of a diverse group of students with different backgrounds, learning styles, and skills. The use of different teaching strategies is important to offer different students a chance of excelling in college. Group work in particular can be used in discussion-based classes or lectures to strengthen communication skills, improve ability to detect and solve group problems, and increases exposure to (and acceptance of) different ideas.

The benefits:

- Potential to increase learning outcomes of the course content:
  - Students with different skills can assist each other, which can be beneficial because the students share similar levels of understanding;
  - Interaction among peers can feel more comfortable, allowing students to further explore the material.
- Potential to create a more collaborative classroom environment:
  - More dynamic classes;
  - More interpersonal interaction;
  - More space to have their voices heard.
- Many different kinds of activities:
  - Beneficial to employ different skills and abilities from different students;
  - All groups could be working on the same task, or different groups with different tasks to be shared later.

How do I design the groups?
There are many ways to design groups, and different strategies might work better with different TA and/or classroom personalities. The general rule of thumb is to have high diversity within the individual groups, but to maintain similar groups in the classroom as a whole.

Possible ways to form the groups:

- Randomize the students into groups;
- Assign each student to their group;
- If allowing students to choose their own groups, be aware of potential problems or exclusions and prepare them to work together.

You also have the option of keeping the groups consistent throughout the semester, change them a few times, or change them every week.

Because all classrooms are varied and instruction doesn’t always work the same way across different contexts, different strategies might work better for different classrooms. So, get to know your students. In the first week or before you can ask the students to answer a questionnaire. Questions about their major and school year might be helpful towards creating the diverse groups. Questions about how they behave in groups might help as well. However, the
questionnaire won’t replace classroom observations. It is also important to keep in mind that you can change the rules of the game if you think this will result in a better classroom environment. You can change the ways you assign the students to groups and how often you assign them to group work.

Challenges of working with groups:
These are some of the main challenges to think about when working with groups:

- **Fostering interactions:** the awkward silence problem gets exponentially worse when working with groups. When you ask students to work together, it’s not unusual to see them sitting at the same table but not even talking to each other.
- **Digression:** as opposed to not talking at all, some groups won’t have any trouble interacting, but will expend most of their talking about everything but the class content.
- **Floating students:** some students might abuse the group setting to sit back and let everyone else do the work for the group. Individual self-evaluations can help them reflect about their behavior, and group self-evaluations can help them know how the rest of the group perceives them.
- **Conflicts within a group:** working with people can lead to interpersonal conflicts. Learning how to identify and solve problems isn’t trivial, and if they are not handled in a timely manner, they can hinder the students’ progress.

Group work strategies:
It is important to know that there are many ways to address challenges in the classroom, and each teacher needs to find out what works better for them in each classroom context. Here you can find some of the things that have worked for me in some situations. One highly recommended practice is to walk around and circulate the groups. Pay attention to what they are talking about, answer questions, ask questions, and try to point out discussion directions. Even though the students might be doing most of the work on their own, working with groups won’t give you free time to sit back and relax.

- **Fostering interactions:** talk to them yourself, get close to the group and interact with them directly instead of just addressing the whole class. If needed, get a chair and sit with them, become part of the group and help start the interactions. Talk/ask questions to different students within the group, make sure they all have something to say, and give them positive feedback for their contributions. When asked a question, it’s often a good idea to redirect it to the rest of the group.
- **Digression:** digress with them; get into the topic that they are talking about, make comments and ask questions, but briefly shift the conversation back to the classroom content.
- **Floating students:** without using a punishing/challenging tone, make sure to consistently ask questions to a student who does not appear to be actively contributing to the group. Try to convey that their participation and opinion is important; acknowledge their presence and value what they have to say.
- **Conflicts within a group:** conflicts are very different from each other and have to dealt with case by case. Use your best judgement on how to proceed. In most cases (but not all) it is important to listen to all parts involved before deciding how to proceed. Think about when and where will be the best moment to talk with the students. Consider asking them to talk with each other as well, as it might be open up the possibility for one side to understand the other better. Try to maintain a professional, impartial tone while helping the students with their conflicts.

While this does not address different kinds of activities that can be used in groups, I would like to point out that some of the challenges of group working can be addressed with the design of the activities as well. For example, if the students have to produce a laboratory report they might not have too much time to digress and will have to interact to get it done.

Lastly, do not refrain from asking for help from any fellow TA or course coordinator. In most cases, the challenges you are facing have been faced by other TAs and coordinators as well.
Teaching with Technology and Instructional Games
Christine Evans, Department of German, Nordic, and Slavic

As a teaching assistant, you will have the opportunity to design lessons and interact with students both in and out of class. What role can and should technology play in your teaching? Which tools are available to you, and how can they be used most effectively? Being deliberate about the use of technology will help you keep your teaching organized, save time, support students with different abilities and needs, and create an engaging learning environment.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common (Mis)Conceptions</th>
<th>Best Practices for Utilizing Technology</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Instructional technology is overwhelming, and there’s no way to learn it all as a new TA!”</td>
<td>▪ Start small, and set goals about the kind of instructional technology you want to use</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Utilize L&amp;S Learning Support Services <a href="http://lss.wisc.edu/">http://lss.wisc.edu/</a> and other on-campus resources to learn about and use tech effectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Finding and creating digital materials takes too much time.”</td>
<td>▪ Value your time, and put more effort into activities that can be reused and will best support students</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Remember you can involve students in the process of creating course materials, like review questions</td>
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<td>“Using technology makes you a cool TA.”</td>
<td>▪ Define the pedagogical purpose for each activity to help make the most of class and your students’ time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Consider the benefits and drawbacks of using one type of technology over another (or none) for a particular activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>“All students here have smartphones.”</td>
<td>▪ When requiring smart devices, have students work in pairs or teams so that devices can be shared</td>
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<td>▪ Utilize campus resources, such as LSS, to provide students with the required technology (computer labs, loaned devices, etc.)</td>
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<td>“This generation of students is digitally savvy and will know the technology better than you.”</td>
<td>▪ Provide instructions and/or links to training resources when asking students to use a new website or tool</td>
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<td>▪ Be clear with your expectations about how students should (not) use technology in relation to the course</td>
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<td>“Students always love [insert app/website here] – you should use it all the time!”</td>
<td>▪ Respect that each student and class may respond differently to a specific game or type of activity</td>
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<td>▪ Be prepared to try new options throughout the semester</td>
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<tr>
<td>“It’s impossible to teach a great lesson without technology.”</td>
<td>▪ Have a backup plan for if the internet is down, the projector stops working, etc.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Practice integrating a variety of teaching methods with and without technology to expand your own abilities as a teacher and to engage different students</td>
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Activities in Canvas*
*Canvas is the learning management system used by UW-Madison. If an official website has been created for your class, it is most likely a Canvas site. Learn more at https://learnuw.wisc.edu/

Examples:
- Quizzes (graded and non-graded)
  https://canvas.instructure.com/courses/1005709/pages/quiz-options
- BookWidgets

Why would I use this?
- Adding tasks in Canvas can guide student learning outside of class
- You can easily keep track of each student’s work and integrate tasks into the course gradebook, if applicable

When could this be useful?
- You want to have an online activity to ensure students have read the syllabus
- You want to assign homework that can be automatically graded
- You want to offer optional review activities outside of class before an exam

Polling and Interactive Presentations

Examples:
- Poll Everywhere https://www.polleverywhere.com/
- Mentimeter https://www.mentimeter.com/

Why would I use this?
- Ideas and answers are collected anonymously
- Students who are tired or otherwise hesitant to participate can easily contribute

When could this be useful?
- You want a dynamic chart that reflects student responses to “get to know you” questions
- You want students to collectively brainstorm what they know about a new topic
- You want a digital record of questions students have about an assignment or lesson

Online Quizzes and Games

Examples:
- Kahoot https://kahoot.com/
- Socrative https://www.socrative.com/
- Quizlet https://quizlet.com/
- Jeopardy Labs https://jeopardylabs.com/Why would I use this?
- Competition is a motivator for many students
- Well-designed games can facilitate whole-class participation
- Online activities can help reduce paper consumption and be easily shared with students for additional review

When could this be useful?
- You want students to take an informal pre-test in class before beginning a new topic
- You want an energizing way to check reading comprehension or homework completion
- You want students to work together to review important definitions or facts
Promoting Student Engagement
Christian Geske, Department of Mathematics

As a TA in a quantitative discipline, one of your primary goals is to have your students learn to solve problems on their own. A discussion section is a perfect opportunity for a student not only to practice problem-solving, but also to refine or correct understanding of key concepts, to request and receive feedback on his/her particular problem-solving process, and to collaborate with classmates. Unfortunately, many students underutilize what their discussion section has to offer. Let us first ask why this occurs, and then we can broach the question of how to minimize this under-utilization.

**Understanding the Problem.** Quantitative skill (especially in the US) is often associated with natural intelligence. This comes with various negative implications, most obviously association of lack of quantitative skill with lack of intelligence, which can manifest in a student’s reluctance to engage in the classroom. Here are a few examples of student behavior I’ve noticed that you might also encounter, and which could be attributed to the association of quantitative skill with intelligence:

- Reluctance to ask questions or seek help even when needed (fear of appearing “stupid”).
- Reluctance to collaborate with classmates.
- Reluctance to actively work on problems during a problem-solving session (can be related to a reluctance to seek help).
- Head-nodding even when not understanding (or more generally pretending to understand).

Before presenting tips on how to minimize this behavior, let’s organize your duties as TA.

**TA Duties.** We list four aspects of your role as a TA:

1. Board work: You may be at the board at the start of your discussion section, reviewing material from the previous day’s lecture and fielding questions from confused students, or near the end, pulling the class together to present solutions to a worksheet. Either way, this is a hybrid role where you shouldn’t quite be a lecturer because there should be more collaboration between you and the students.
2. Problem Solving (PS) Facilitator: A significant portion of a discussion section should involve students attempting problems on their own. You should be there to guide or help them when needed, without explicitly providing solutions.
3. Content Creator: Often you will be asked to compose worksheets and quizzes yourself. Their design is important in helping the learning process along.
4. Quiz Proctor: Many courses require that their students take quizzes (weekly, biweekly, etc.) in discussion section. You will be there to make sure the quiz-taking process runs smoothly.

The tips for promoting engagement are organized by their relation to your roles.
**Board Tip:** Effectively asking and fielding questions. If at the board you have just solved a problem and ask ‘Any questions?’, it is not uncommon that you receive no response, despite the fact that your students do have questions. There are simple ways to modify the standard ‘Any questions?’ to get more of a response. For example:

- Instead of waiting until the end of your solution, ask questions along the way, encouraging them to fill in the next step. You the TA should not be the sole ‘owner’ of solution, rather it should be constructed in collaboration. Students are more likely to ask questions about a solution they have had a part in creating.
- Ask a more specific question, perhaps one which only requires a ‘yes/no’ response. For example, point out a specific step which you suspect could be confusing, and ask whether ‘going from here to there’ makes ‘perfect sense’. A simple ‘no’ response could open the floodgates to many other questions.
- Modify a question with suggestions that a concept is ‘difficult’ or ‘is not obvious’. This helps make students feel at ease, and more likely to reveal their confusion.
- Allow long pauses. You need to give your students the time to formulate a response. When learning a brand new concept, it can be hard to grapple all your thoughts together!

**PS Tip:** Actively initiate TA-to-student and student-to-student interactions. Once a problem-solving session has begun, while you do have the option to simply wait at the head of the room for a student to call you over for help, only the more motivated and brave students would benefit. Many students might simply ‘check out’ or descend into unrelated conversations, becoming completely disengaged and deriving virtually no benefit from this part of the session. It would be wiser to circulate among your students, and actively initiate interactions, ensuring they are on the right track and giving them the hints they need to continue. Here are some suggestions for how to make this easier:

- Group work can be a lifesaver. If you consistently assign students to work in groups, they will often already be interacting with each other by the time you walk over to them. Having already discussed difficulties or ideas with each other, they will be quicker to convey these thoughts to you.
- Without being too invasive, look over student’s shoulders and get a sense for where their work is at. There is often not enough time to interact with every student one-on-one, so this gives you an opportunity to organize the areas in the classroom by how much help is needed.
- Ask specific questions, especially ones which require an answer more than ‘Yes’. For example, instead of asking ‘How’s it going here?’ you could ask ‘Could you roughly describe your ideas so far for part (a)?’.
- Especially during group work, encourage a student who is ahead and has already solved a problem to explain that solution to you or to his/her neighbors.
- Be open to alternative solutions or approaches than the one you have in mind. If a student suggests an idea that is technically correct, then try to work with it. If you have a quicker solution in mind, you can always suggest it later. If the student’s idea is really unwieldy (for example if it requires excessive computation), you can hint at the approach you have in mind.
- Whenever a student answers a question, ask other students (in a group) whether they agree.
• A small number of students work well alone and genuinely do not (almost ever) want to talk to other students. You do not have to push them to do so. Focus on students who would benefit from student-to-student interaction.

**Content Tip: Think about how you are assigning ‘mental load’.** If a problem requires a ton of non-relevant computation (for example requires mentally simplifying huge fractions, when you are trying to teach the basics of differentiation) it is easy for a student to burn out and become disengaged. If you want students to learn new content, you need to ensure that the majority of their mental energy goes to thinking about and interpreting this content. Here are some tips for achieving this when creating your worksheets and quizzes:

• Choose problems that ‘work out nicely’, e.g. don’t require simplifying huge fractions.
• Mix ‘easier’ problems with ‘more difficult’ problems. While solving easier problems, students can recover some mental energy. Difficult problems will better prepare them for exams, and often are more conceptual, so force students to really analyze their understanding of a topic.
• Make your phrasing as clear and non-ambiguous as possible. It is easy for a student to expend a ton of mental energy interpreting bad wording of a problem.
• Provide ample hints. Students can only expend so much energy trying to become unstuck in a problem. A hint can keep their mental load from overflowing.
• For worksheets, provide a few ‘final answers’ (for example the final result of a differentiation, without intermediate steps). A student can spend too much energy on a problem that they solved correctly, if they see that a neighbor has found a different (wrong) answer.
• For worksheets, you could possibly provide one per group. This encourages students to work together on problems, and consequently allows them to avoid some of the ruts they might stumble into if working alone.

**General Tip: Think about the long-term classroom atmosphere.** As the semester progresses, a sense of a ‘normal discussion session’ and ‘normal expected student behavior’ will develop. If you consistently set the expectation that discussion session is a time to be engaged, eventually you will have to do very little prodding to get students to participate. This becomes even easier if the atmosphere you have created is welcoming and non-judgmental. This is a topic to think about on your own!
Setting, Articulating, and Achieving Learning Goals
Amy Hendricks, Department of Classical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies

Within the classroom, learning goals (or “learning objectives,” “learning outcomes”) help lend structure to every component of the student experience, as well as that of the instructor. By identifying the learning objectives for the assignment, day, or course as a whole, you can not only organize your teaching strategies but also help your students get the most out of your class.

What is a learning objective and how do I write one?

- Academic expectations; statements that define what the students will learn within a certain lesson, semester, course, or activity
  - Example: “Students will be able to recognize, describe, and analyze features of Greek and Roman religious practices.”
- Good learning objectives are measureable and applicable
  - “Students will know…” is not a very effective way to phrase a learning objective. Student knowledge is difficult to measure, and it leaves them wondering how that knowledge will matter in the class or in the future.
  - “Students will be able to…” is a great way to phrase a learning objective. It tells the student exactly what they can expect to do by the end of the class and beyond. Try to include at least one action verb (words like critique, distinguish, interpret, define) to let your students know what will be expected of them.
- Good learning outcomes are specific
  - This can be especially difficult if your class has a title that feels self-explanatory (e.g., “Introductory Latin”). But the learning objective “Students will learn to read Latin” is too general to be effective. Instead, try something like “Students will be able to translate basic Latin sentences and explain their syntax” or “Students will be able to define basic Latin vocabulary (approx. 1000 words).”
- When you create a learning objective, think about what you want your students to get out of the class. In order to keep your learning objectives active and measurable, ask yourself **what the students should be able to do by the end of a class or assignment.** Consider how you will evaluate their progress: students that will eventually compose a paragraph in a foreign language should have different learning goals than students that will be performing lab work or mathematical equations.

Why are learning objectives important? They can…

- Help students focus their energy and engagement; help them understand the point of an assignment, activity, or evaluation.
- Help TAs design activities and evaluations that feel relevant to the class; help them place course knowledge in context and draw connections beyond the class.
- Help institutions understand what role certain courses play in a student’s comprehensive education; help them identify gaps in learning and find ways to fill those gaps.
- As part of the ongoing accreditation process for UW-Madison, learning outcomes are required on every course syllabus as of Spring 2018!
Where do I put my learning objectives and how do I use them?

- The most important place to include goals for the course is on your syllabus. Even if you feel that the course description portion of the syllabus describes some of the things students will learn, it can be helpful to include a separate section of the syllabus dedicated to your learning objectives. This way students can easily refer to it throughout the semester and understand what is expected of them, while you can be confident that the expectations are clear and organize the rest of the course according to clear goals. **Go over these learning outcomes on the very first day of class** so that your students know they will be important.
  - It can also be a rewarding experience to bring them up at the end of the semester, or whenever you observe that students have accomplished a goal. This is a great way to affirm students’ accomplishments, but it is also a good opportunity for you and the students to reflect on the work it took to get there and the things they have learned along the way.

- The other important time to mention learning objectives is at the start of **every class period**. Although it may seem slightly tedious at first, knowing and acknowledging the learning goals for each day is a great way to keep your class focused, structure your time, and make every class count. **Writing them up on the board** or including them on your PowerPoint for the day is a good way to let students see them. It can also be helpful to actually talk through the goals for the day at the start of each class with your students— they will know what to expect, and it’s a great way to keep yourself accountable throughout the period.

- Other places to use learning goals might include **midterm evaluations**, **grading rubrics**, and **assignment descriptions**. For example, the description for a research essay might include the learning outcome of “The student will demonstrate the ability to use online and physical sources appropriately.” Working goals into assignments lets the students know what to be aiming for, but it will also help you when it comes to grading.

Other helpful resources:

- Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy contains a wealth of information about different types of knowledge, and in particular, a number of suggestions for verbs to use when writing learning objectives. A great guide can be found through the Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching: [https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/](https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/)
Engaging Students in the Learning Process
Joy Huntington, Department of Design Studies, nominated by Art History

Creating a learning environment that is engaging can be difficult to achieve over the course of a semester. How can you establish an expectation of engagement for your students? And how can you maintain this expectation and engagement over the semester? And most importantly why would you want students to be engaged? You have a framework and milestones set by the syllabus that guides you but what makes the class engaging falls on you the TA. Here I give ideas that aid in setting an engaged environment and strategies that you can incorporate in the classroom, where you are not just telling students what they need to know but making the journey of discovery and learning engaging.

1. It all starts with us! Before the class ever meets your preparation matters, and office hours keep you connected.
   - Know your topic and identify the learning outcome for each class. What do you want your students to know?
   - Do everything you’re asking your students to do. Think about how best to present this information in a clear and concise manner. What did you struggle with? This is a sign your students might struggle as well.
   - What do you wish you were taught when starting out in this field? Chances are your students may need the same instruction. Think about how you can pass along this information.
   - What excites you about this class and the current topic? This is where you bring yourself and use that excitement to encourage students. Think about why this topic is not just important but exciting?
   - Think about your class and develop a consistent rhythm for what every class will follow. Ex. Welcome, questions remaining from last week, turn in assignments, what due next, what we are covering in class today, presentation/activity, wrap up, and return assignments.
   - Having a grading rubric that you can hand out to your students with every assignment allows them to self-evaluate before turning in their assignments. This also keeps grading consistent and gives you guidance on when meeting with students who don’t agree with their grade.
   - Require your students to come to an office hour as part of their participation grade. This is where you continue to build a learning environment and discover where your students struggle and how they think. Use this information to guide your class presentations and activities.
   - Your role is not just to present the information but to provide an environment of discovery where students answer the what, who, where, how, and why.

2. It is time to teach, now what?
   - The first class is a treasure trove of information that can help plan your classes in the future and begin making yourself approachable.
     1. Take the time to find out why your students are taking the class, what their expectations for the class are, and how they best learn.
2. Any questions you ask the students answer them yourself have fun with your students.
3. Have the students write their answers on a note card and use this information to plan activities, lectures, and questions.
   - A weekly email that reminds students what they learned and what to expect next week in section keeps you thinking about how to connect the previous week’s topic to the coming week.
   - Require students to submit a question, critical thought, an idea that connects to another reading or topic from class, or summary of the readings. These are prompts that you can use in class discussion.
   - Set your room up for any activity you plan on having. Minimize students having to move around.
   - Flip the classroom! It works and forces students to engage with the material.
      1. Have your students teach a on a topic. This will make your students read critically and encourage other students to participate in hopes of it being reciprocated.
      2. Debates are a way to get students to critically think about topics and discover different ways to support or promote their position.
      3. Peer editing on assignments. Pairing students up and have them evaluate projects or papers based on the rubric and be graded on their edits results in students becoming more effective in their own self-evaluation.
   - Games are great ways to conduct reviews. Have students submit questions based on topics, this reduces your work but creates a fun environment that helps with information retention.
      1. Jeopardy gets students thinking about the topic in a bilateral way furthering engagement with the information.
      2. Kahoot! a way for students to either team up or play individually where various types of questions are asked.

3. What are the benefits of an engaged student? How does this impact learning, grades, and student interest in your field?
   - You rediscover your love for your field and makes the teaching fun. When your students get excited you get excited and the work of teaching and grading is easier.
   - Sometimes only the grade matters and changing the stakes of how grades are achieved requires more engagement and investigation by your students.
   - When you have to think about the who, what, where, why, and how you retain more and become a critical thinker. This is a lifelong skill that everyone needs.
   - When students teach, edit, or compete with classmates critical thinking, engagement, and many times fun can ensue.

4. Beware that some students won’t connect to the class material and no matter what you do, they will not engage. As long as you bring your personality, excitement for the material, consistency, and preparedness you will be successful and increase interest in your field for the majority of your students.
Project-based learning including digital projects are increasingly popular across all disciplines and classrooms. Digital projects, however, can be daunting for both students and TAs! Students may struggle with project development, time management, and technological hurdles such as new software. As the TA, you may struggle with overseeing numerous projects spanning an array of topics or have limited experience with the tools that your students are using. How are you supposed to keep track of 40 individual projects and troubleshoot software glitches on the fly?

In this workshop, we will review digital projects and their role in the classroom. We’ll also cover a series of project management strategies that will help you and your students successfully work through digital projects. We’ll also discuss some tips and tricks for digital projects in the classroom. And don’t worry! You’re not alone. There are plenty of campus resources to help get you through digital projects!

But first, what are digital projects and why incorporate them? Digital projects take a variety of forms ranging from websites, blogs, presentations, videos, photography, multi-media stories, graphics, and maps that are hosted online or are shared on screen. Digital projects are pedagogical or teaching strategies that promote hands-on and active learning. Some courses may have labs or small digital assignments throughout the semester and some build up to a large-scale, final digital project.

Project Development
Digital projects require a significant amount of time and planning. Even if the projects aren’t due until the end of the semester, you want your students to begin thinking about them as soon as possible.

1. **Brainstorming Digital Projects Individually:** Remind your students throughout the semester about the digital project. Ask your students to write down their project idea or their top three ideas at the beginning or end of a class period. This can be a low-stakes, ungraded brainstorm and students can provide as much or as little details as they have. The point is to get them thinking about the project early on. You could do this a more than once if need be because it doesn’t have to take much time.

2. **Brainstorming Digital Projects Collectively:** Have your students pair up or team up in small groups to brainstorm their projects. Students can help each other flesh out ideas as you jump from group to group. Collective brainstorming will also help develop comradery and support in the classroom as students learn about each other’s interests. This is a huge asset going into digital projects!

3. **Digital Project Proposals:** Once your students have had ample time to brainstorm, ask them for a written project proposal. These can be graded or ungraded but should be more formalized than the brainstorming activities. Ask your students to solidify an idea through writing. Things to ask for in a proposal:
a. **Title:** Titles can be really hard. The perfect title requires students to really think about their project holistically.

b. **Topic:** Think of this as an elevator pitch. Ask students to distill their idea into one sense. (ex. This digital project is about…)

c. **Description:** Students should complete some preliminary research on the topic and should understand context surround the project. Ask for a brief description to get a more thorough understanding of the project.

d. **Why:** Encourage students to develop a digital project that interests them, and they are passionate about. This helps empower students to do their best work! Ask students to explain the reasoning behind their particular topic. This helps justify the topic but is also an opportunity to get to know your students and their passions.

e. **Resources and Data:** To make sure a project is feasible (super important), ask students to provide early resources and data for the project. Are there resources or data available to complete this project? Is this project possible?

f. **Sketch / Mockup:** Ask students to sketch or create a mockup of their project. How do they envision the project right now? What style and vibe are they going for?

g. **Scope:** Have students create a workflow with a corresponding timeline to help them plan and scope their project. Ask students what they would add to the project if they have extra time (i.e. wish list) and what they would remove from a project if they run out of time (i.e. first cut). Contingency plans are key!

4. **Workshopping Digital Project Proposals:** If time allows, have students bring multiple copies of their proposals to class and have them workshop their proposals collectively. Ask students to provide informal, on-the-fly feedback in person and then ask them to provide more formal feedback after rereading the proposal. Canvas discussion boards are great for collecting/grading this feedback!

5. **Final Project Proposals and TA Feedback:** Now that students have brainstormed and finalized an idea, it’s your turn to provide feedback. This can take a variety of forms. You can read and provide written feedback. If possible, I also suggest meeting with each student to discuss their proposals. Make sure these meetings are short and sweet. I’ve found that early feedback and interventions dramatically impact digital project progress.

Lastly, encourage students to work collectively and come to your office hours!

**Tips and Tricks for Teaching Digital Projects**

1. **Examples:** Inspire your students throughout the semester! Share and discuss digital projects from the news, blogs, or past semester final projects. Examples help get the mind going and help students envision the possibilities.

   **Important Note:** You MUST ask previous students for their permission to share their projects. If you haven’t taught the course before, ask former TAs for examples. Focus on positive examples.
2. **Collective Examples:** Create a discussion board on Canvas for students to post digital projects that they’ve found and enjoy! In class, ask students to describe the projects they’ve post and why they like it. What works and what doesn’t work? Why? Make sure they provide attribution in their examples too!

3. **Critique and Engagement:** Use these examples in constructive critiques. In the beginning, walk your students through a critique and facilitate the conversation. Teaching students how to effectively and meaningfully critique is crucial. Ask students to critique existing projects individually, in pairs, and in small groups. Finally, have students critique each other’s work. Emphasize constructive feedback and encourage multiple layers of engagement.

4. **Demos and Avoiding Taking Your Student’s Mouse:** If you have time in front of your students and there are specific tools that they are using, try some live demos! This can be a really daunting task because demos can go completely awry. The important thing is to work through a particular workflow with your students and then have them apply the same concepts to their own project. Also, if your demo goes bonkers, this is a great time to demonstrate troubleshooting. You can also screen capture your demos and post them online to Canvas! This is super helpful as a resource later on too.

When helping students one-on-one, avoid “driving” your student’s mouse. Let your student drive as you assist or describe a particular workflow. This may be slower, but is really valuable!

5. **Office Hours:** Digital projects are very hands-on for students and offering a variety of office hours types will help you navigate time demands and protect your time.

   a. **Additional Office Hours:** In general, you may want to add additional structured time for office hours during digital project assignments. This additional time will hopefully offset student requests for additional meetings outside of your office hours.

   b. **Two Settings:** You may also want to divide your office hours into two settings. You can host some of your office hours in the lab setting to provide technical support and then host some in your office hours in your office to think about bigger picture components of the project.

   c. **Collective Office Hours:** Reserve a computer lab or a space for your students to collectively work on their digital projects on a weekly basis. You don’t have to be there, but by having collective office hours, students know peer support will be there! This is a great way for students to connect, help, and motivate one another.

6. **Grading:** Digital projects are often difficult to grade because each topic and medium is very different. Here are some strategies for grading.

   a. **Mile Markers:** Once projects are underway, schedule mile markers or check-in points that count towards their project grade. Mile markers help students keep up
with time management and progress. Ask students for updates about where they are at, their successes thus far, and any sticking points.

b. **Feedback**: Different kinds of feedback throughout the development and completion of a digital project are key. Create opportunities to provide feedback and collective feedback. Digital projects should be in good shape if feedback is iterative. This makes grading much easier!

c. **Rubrics vs Written Feedback**: Formal grading strategies are up to you and your supervising professor! Some professors require a rubric and others do not. We won’t debate this here, but the more feedback you give, the further justified a grade becomes. Feedback also supports transparent grading and reveals reasoning behind the grade. I ask students to reflect on their grades for a couple days before contacting me, but be open to in-person dialog.

d. **Reflections**: Submitting a reflection with a digital project or after submission is a great way to understand the progression of a project. Ask students to write about their workflow as well as the ups and downs of a project. How did the project change from the beginning to the end? Is the project what they envisioned? Is there anything they didn’t get to or something they would love to include in the next iteration? What did the student learn and what will they utilize going forward? Reflections provide insight and help contextualize projects before you grade them.

7. **Resources**: Students working on digital projects come from a variety of backgrounds. Some may have plenty of experience working with technology while others may be far from proficient. Either way, there are resources to help you and your students!

   a. **Google**: Asking the internet for help can be extremely helpful, but it can also be a rabbit hole. Students might need a primer on how to ask Google for help and to be efficient in finding an answer. First, have students start with the “Help Information” provided on a tool’s webpage. If students move to Google, review key concepts for your digital projects which will help streamline any Google search. During class or lab, provide a quick demo on troubleshooting a question. Further, politely ask students to help each other and “Google It” before calling on you in for help. This helps them troubleshoot, but also alleviates pressure for you to have all of the answers.

   b. **Use Campus Resources**: Campus has a bunch of resources to help you out and there are also plenty of online open source resources available. Below are a few that I suggest:

      i. UW–Madison Design Lab: Digital Media Design Consult ([https://designlab.wisc.edu/](https://designlab.wisc.edu/))
      ii. UW–Madison Information Technology: Online and in person software training ([https://it.wisc.edu/learn/](https://it.wisc.edu/learn/))
      iii. Lynda.com: Online software training ([https://it.wisc.edu/services/online-training-lynda-com/](https://it.wisc.edu/services/online-training-lynda-com/))
How to Achieve a Positive and Successful Working Environment for Supervisors, Students, and You
Caroline (Carrie) Larson, Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders

Three action items that will promote well-rounded success in your role as a TA, as well as any role you assume as a graduate student:

Be Diligent
*Academia expects accuracy and consistency over immediacy.*

Transitioning from the workforce or undergraduate careers can represent a shift in expectations.
   a) Undergraduate careers often draw on traditional academic skills and graduate careers draw on similar skills, but in ways that require careful consideration about what is consistent with a particular situation.
   b) Workforce demands are often fast-paced and highly specific whereas academia is often slower-paced (with the exception of approaching deadlines) and less-specific: you are here to grade, teach, and tutor as a TA; you are here explore, learn, and develop a line of study as a student.

Reliability builds trust which, in turn, builds respect for and confidence in your abilities.
   a) Inconsistency is perceived as carelessness: you are in an environment that affords time and opportunity to be accurate and thoughtful.
   b) Inconsistency causes conflict: grading—your students will notice and you may lose credibility; independent work (e.g., developing a lecture, statistical analyses)—your supervisor expects you will complete a task at a high caliber; reliability— it affects what your students will gain from the course; attaining new opportunities— with students (e.g., supporting thesis projects) and your supervisor (e.g., guest lectures, research projects).

Be Responsive
*At a minimum, express a positive acknowledgement of communications, obligations, and deadlines.*

Everyone appreciates a response, even when you are unable to address the issue immediately.
   a) Show respect for their time and responsibilities: students, staff, supervisors, and advisors.
   b) Provide a timeframe in which they can expect an outcome.

Positive attitude and resilience to conflict demonstrate emotional intelligence which is key to success.
   a) There is no success without conflict: your job is to resolve and move forward (e.g., fixing grading mistakes, resubmits or rejections from journals).
   b) Create a network of support by being supportive: individuals with whom you will interact are colleagues for your entire career.
   c) The time and experiences you will be given are priceless: express that appreciation.
Be Aware
Of your limitations... Ask for help!!!

You cannot know and do everything—no one expects you to. You can learn a lot and create a foundation to be more independent by drawing on others’ experiences.

a) Talk to other graduate students and post-docs in your lab and otherwise: reach out!
b) Use the supports UW offers—like this workshop: writing classes, mental health counselors, groups, clubs, exercise facilities, events, etc.
c) Ombuds: seek impartial and confidential guidance promoting fairness in the workplace.

Useful Links

Writing Center: https://writing.wisc.edu/Individual/LocationsHours.html

Mental Health Services: https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/mental-health/individual/

UW-Madison Organizations: https://win.wisc.edu/organizations

Recreation Facilities: https://recsports.wisc.edu/facilities/

Outdoors Activities—Hoofers: https://union.wisc.edu/events-and-activities/outdoor-uw/wisconsin-hoofers/

Events Calendar: https://today.wisc.edu/

Ombuds: https://ombuds.wisc.edu/
Crafting a More Inclusive Classroom from Day One
Leah Parker, Department of English

What is Diversity & Inclusion?

UW-Madison’s Institutional Statement on Diversity: “Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW-Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinions enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. The University of Wisconsin-Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background—people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world.”

Inclusion means creating a welcoming and safe learning environment for students...who are racial/ethnic minorities...with disabilities—including physical impairments, mental illness, chronic illness, and learning disabilities...of all genders and sexual orientations...of any socioeconomic status...of all ages...practicing any religion...regardless of citizenship status...with a variety of political views...with any marital or parental status...who have formerly been incarcerated...who commute, rather than living on/near campus...who have survived sexual assault or other abuse/trauma...who are the first (or among the first) in their families to attend college...who have historically been excluded from higher education and marginalized within the university community

How can you make your classroom more inclusive?

Start with the syllabus

You can include several kinds of statements on your course syllabus (or section/lab syllabus) affirming your commitment to diversity & inclusion, such as an accessibility statement, crisis resources, and expectations for class discussion and respect. Feel free to use any part of this brief example:

Your success in this class is important to me; my goal is to facilitate your intellectual development and curiosity as best I can. I am happy to discuss any academic, medical, or personal circumstances that may impact your opportunities for success in this course, and to work with you to find appropriate accommodations and/or support. If you have accommodations designated by the McBurney Center, I am notified automatically and will make arrangements with you for any logistical adjustments. If you have any questions about how your accommodation applies to this course, please visit me in office hours or send me an email. If you believe that I should know about a disability not on record with the McBurney Center, or anything else affecting you in this class, you are welcome to discuss it with me. Full accessibility also requires inclusivity. I am committed to creating a classroom environment that is free of discrimination based on race, religion, age, gender, sexuality, disability, or any other feature of students’ identities. I will do my best to notify you of
course materials that contain images or discussion of sexual assault, hate speech, or graphic violence. I expect you to treat one another with respect, with a willingness to learn from any missteps, and I will endeavor to do the same.

The first day of class

1. Introducing yourself: be clear about how you would like your students to address you, how to pronounce your name, and what pronouns they should use for you.
   Ex: “My name is Jane Doe, and you can call me Jane or Ms. Doe. I use she/her/hers pronouns.”

2. Student introductions
   a. To each other: invite students to introduce themselves by their preferred name and pronouns (regardless of whether pronouns are “obvious”)—this format fits into virtually any kind of introduction activity or icebreaker!
   b. To you, privately: give students opportunities to notify you privately if their preferred name is different from the name on your roster, as well as to disclose anything they want you to know about, but that they might not feel comfortable sharing with classmates (e.g. religious observances, disabilities, particular concerns about prejudice).
      Ex: On a first-day-of-class introduction form, you can include a catch-all question, such as: “Is there anything else you would like me to know about you, your interests, or how you learn that might be relevant to your success in this class? (e.g. allergies, learning styles, hobbies, language skills)”

3. Introducing course content: be clear about how the material covered in the course connects to/can benefit from diverse perspectives.
   Ex: “Our analysis of these texts will be made richer by having a variety of perspectives come out in discussion—a major part of this course will be giving voice to your own ideas, but also practicing listening to the perspectives of others” or “New scientific ideas come from all kinds of sources—I encourage you to think about how your unique background helps you think about X in a new way.”

4. Classroom ground rules: spend time establishing expectations for respectful classroom dynamics. Brainstorm what respect looks like. Students especially benefit from hearing that it is okay to make mistakes as long as you own them, correct yourself, and endeavor to do better and be better in the future. Giving students language to apologize and improve can help, e.g. “I apologize. That was inappropriate/inconsiderate/my mistake. I should have said X.”

Throughout the semester

1. Use light days (after an exam, when there’s no new reading, etc) to talk about inclusivity in your field.
   E.g.: How does [field] get used in public discourse? In current events? Why has [field] historically been dominated by [group]? What can we do about it, even if we belong to that dominant group?

2. Respond to current events in the field: share news with students and give them space to process and develop as future professionals.

3. Reach out to students who may be in crisis—they may disclose to you, but they also may
simply stop attending class, or change their participation habits. You can also connect them to university resources that may help with a potential crisis. 

Ex: “Hey, I noticed X, how have you been doing lately?”

4. Keep helping students think about how their language or behaviors promote inclusivity (or not so much), e.g.:

“I’m not sure that came out the way you intended. The phrase you used suggests that people [of a certain background] are inherently [something problematic]—would you like to rephrase that comment?”

“I believe you meant [correct name or pronoun].”

“[Student] just said something very interesting, let’s take a step back for a moment and think about what that means. [Explain why a word/idea is inappropriate or offensive.] Knowing that, would [student who misspoke] or anyone else like to pick up where we left off?”

“Let’s keep in mind that this material assumes that sex and gender are binary, but there are also other ways of thinking about gender, for example, as a spectrum. How would we approach this experiment/study differently if we instead assume that sex does not equal gender, or that gender is not binary?”

5. Own up to your own missteps! Apologize, rephrase, and follow up with individual students if appropriate.
At the end of each semester, your students will evaluate your performance as an instructor. But that’s not the only time that you can--or should!--get feedback about your teaching from your students. Informal assessments that you can do throughout the semester provide you formative feedback about your students’ learning and experiences in the classroom, helping to support the summative assessment information you get from their grades and your teaching evaluations.

Informal assessment strategies can help you troubleshoot your course mid-stream and help you understand what works well for your students as you develop as a teacher. Getting feedback from your students about your teaching and the classroom dynamic before the end of the course builds rapport, diffuses tensions, gives your students an opportunity to shape the structures of your course, and builds a more democratic classroom environment. As an added bonus, informal assessments give you language and perspective to develop and deepen your personal teaching philosophy. Having language for discussing the success of your teaching is crucial if you go on the academic job market.

Here are some of the positive outcomes of informal assessment:

- According to Suskie (2009), informal assessment can help encourage your students to think metacognitively about their learning (learning how they learn best) and to practice synthesis (putting together what they have learned across all the content in the course).
- Informal assessment can help build classroom environments where students engage with social justice critical learning, in particular by leaning into their discomfort with difficult to discuss topics (Hicks Peterson, 2018).
- Informal assessment can help instructors teaching highly specific and difficult content to better understand their students’ comprehension of subject knowledge and connection across different concepts in a course (Heywood 2018).

Some methods of informal assessment in college classrooms:

- **Semester-long reflections.** Informal reflection can build into summative, formal assessments at the end of the semester. In addition to or instead of an “index card” approach where you ask for students to report basic information, you can ask students to write about their preexisting knowledge about the course content on a form that you take up. Reading these at the beginning of the semester can help you tailor your approach moving forward. Returning these reflections at the end of the semester can help them see what they’ve learned and how they are building upon a broader foundation of knowledge.
- **Classroom openers.** You can use the first few minutes of class as a moment for quick verbal informal assessment. Icebreaker questions--whether related to the content of the course or not--can help you understand what’s going on in your students’ lives and their reactions to the course. Asking questions like “What’s something you’re learning in..."
“Another course?” or “What’s something you’re learning as you work on your project?” at the start of class to take attendance or prime discussion can help you see where your students are at.

- **Questionnaires.** If you want targeted feedback on a classroom issue, such as completion of readings or discussion dynamics, using a questionnaire to take the temperature of the class can be useful. A wide range of free survey software is available, such as SurveyMonkey and Google Forms. Surveying students in class and then reviewing responses with students can help jumpstart discussion about the course dynamics and also keep them accountable to their responses.

- **Assignment feedback.** Some instructors find great benefit in asking students to give feedback on an assignment after it is completed, often as part of material turned in with the assignment. In college composition classrooms, for example, asking students to write a short “writer’s memo” after completing their paper often elicits reflections on what students learned as they wrote the paper. These memos are short, 250-300 word reflections asking students to account for their revisions and what they learned about writing and/or the content of their paper. You can also ask students questions like “How would you change this assignment?” or “What elements of the assignment were most helpful for you?” to assess the assignment itself.

- **Exploratory writing.** As discussed in John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas*, exploratory writing is a useful way to assess if students are grasping the material in the class. One method of exploratory writing that you can use to informally assess students is *focused freewriting:* having students explore a set topic or question related to your course content for a short period of time. The focus on the question helps your students focus their thought towards the topic at hand, and you can use their responses to see where their thinking lies on the content you are exploring with them. Short, focused writing, such as asking students to jot down a question or point of confusion they have about course content at the end of each class session can also help you gather information about their experience of the course and how well they are grasping content.

**Bibliography and Further Reading**


Common Pitfalls to Avoid in the Lab
Cayla Stifler, Department of Physics

 TAing a lab can be a daunting experience! In addition to usual TA duties like answering questions and explaining concepts, there is equipment and safety concerns to worry about. Over the course of this session, I provide sets of good practices to help TAs be successful in preparing before the lab, ensuring the lab runs smoothly during the session, and enacting fair grading and make up lab policies afterwards, which are provided in the outline below. Additionally, I provide student feedback of TAs, that describe which strategies students find effective or not, so TAs can best serve their students.

1. Successful preparation tips for a smoothly run lab section
   a. Physically do the lab yourself if possible:
      i. This allows you to gauge which parts are tricky or take a long time.
      ii. It also allows you to become familiar with equipment to answer questions better
   b. Set up equipment
      i. This prevents you from rushing as students are coming in, cutting into their time and making the environment more disorganized
      ii. It also allows you to check for broken equipment and replace it before anyone uses it in lab.

2. Effective strategies during the lab to maximize student engagement and learning
   a. Introducing the lab, a little goes a long way
      i. Limit pre-lab “lecture”, highlight most important parts, say as few words as possible
      ii. Show students what to do instead of explaining it in words
      iii. Pre-lab discussion should be no more than a few minutes.
   b. Answering all student questions efficiently and effectively
      i. Make sure to circulate around the room so every group has the chance to ask questions
      ii. Try to answer questions thoroughly and briefly
      iii. Examples of positive student feedback of lab TAs
         1. “X tries very hard to make sure everyone who had questions has them answered before lab was over”
         2. “X is very patient with students when responding to questions. X is very approachable and never makes you feel dumb, even if your questions are kind of ‘iffy’”
      iv. Examples of constructive criticism from students
         1. “In lab, Y takes too long with individual groups. It has taken a half an hour to get a question answer in lab”
         2. “There is a discrepancy between what Y thinks is obvious and what we actually know. Y says ‘this is easy’ too much”
   c. Examples of encouraging and discouraging phrases to say when helping students
      i. Encouraging statements to use that build up student confidence
         1. Can you show me what you tried?
         2. I’m here to help!
3. I had to practice this too.
4. I get stuck all the time!
5. You did a good job with the first part, so let’s start from there.
   ii. Discouraging statements to avoid that make students feel frustrated/stupid
       1. This is easy/obvious.
       2. You can do it!
       3. You should know how to do this.

d. Tailoring your teaching methods to different skill levels
   i. Know the prerequisites for the lab/course and don’t use concepts in
      explanations that students might not be familiar with (e.g. if only algebra
      is required for a course, don’t use calculus in an explanation).
   ii. Consider the level of the course. For introductory or general audience
      courses, it is best to present information in a more direct fashion. For
      advanced courses, it might be more appropriate to “guide” students to
      figure out the issue on their own
   iii. Student feedback on helping students of differing skill levels
       1. Effective TA- “X is very clear and helpful about leading you to
          correct solutions without explicitly telling you how to do it”
       2. Ineffective TA- “Y often favors the better students in the lab and is
          very excited about helping them understand complex concerns but
          not excited to help other students understand fundamental concepts

e. Addressing equipment and safety issues that arise during lab time
   i. A piece of equipment breaks
      1. Find out who oversees your lab/course and save their information
      2. Find out where extra equipment is stored or who to contact if
         something breaks beforehand
      3. If extra/spare equipment cannot get there soon enough, split that
         group up among the other groups
   ii. Safety concerns
      1. **It is always appropriate to call 911 if you are sufficiently
         concerned about a student’s health**
      2. For minor, non life-threatening injuries (cuts, burns, eye injuries
         etc.) provide first aid equipment and offer to call an ambulance if
         injury is serious enough.
      3. For chemical spills, check to see the protocol for cleaning up the
         particular chemical before lab and if evacuation is necessary
      4. In the case of a small fire, use a fire extinguisher/other appropriate
         method for extinguishing flame. If you feel unsure that you can
         extinguish the fire yourself, evacuate the room and call 911.

3. Grading, late/make up work, and other concerns after a lab is completed
   a. Grading labs fairly and consistently
      i. Decide whether you will grade labs on completion, accuracy, or both and
         remain consistent throughout the semester.
      ii. Look at the course objectives to see the purpose of the lab and keep it in
         mind as you grade.
iii. Consider how to make sure each student is graded based on the same criteria?

iv. Return all work in a timely manner.

b. *Late work and make up labs*
   i. Be clear about your policy from day 1 and try to be as consistent as possible
   ii. Know when/where make up labs are held and if you are responsible for running them or not
Surviving and Thriving as an International TA
Ziwei Wang, Department of Economics

The biggest challenge for international TAs is the role transition from a student to a teacher in a new academic environment. International TAs need to not only adapt to the rules, patterns, and expectations in a new system, but also determine the meaning, purpose, and value in a teaching career. Three important areas to consider are:

- Preparing for big changes and new things that may seem shocking or nerve-racking
- Building confidence as a teacher and allaying concerns about language barriers
- Discussing how to genuinely enjoy the experience of teaching and maximize your own payoffs from this opportunity

Changes and new things you may expect

- Interactions between students and TAs are close and extensive. For example, you may need to attend lectures with the students, hold discussion sections and office hours, and grade the quizzes and exams. Having a responsible and competent TA is crucial for a student to succeed in a course, so you need to be aware of the importance of this role you play.
- Courses are customized by instructors instead of being limited to the contents of certain textbooks. Some courses are designed to cover chapters in different textbooks, and some instructors even have their own lecture notes. Therefore, you need to have a big picture of the material, and comprehend it on a deeper level in order to acquire the ability to teach and help your students.
- Students expect quite a lot from you, and their evaluation of your work will be recorded and presented in the form of an anonymous “customer review.” Hence, you do need to invest a certain amount of effort in order to get positive feedbacks, and a good record of teaching evaluation gives you an edge when you are on the job market.

How to build your confidence and allay concerns about language barrier

- Let your students know on the first day that you are from another country, and English is not your first language. Tell them (and yourself!) that this is not likely to be a problem, and that you will try your best to overcome this barrier and improve yourself along the way.
- Build a connection with your students and establish a good rapport. Try and remember your students’ names in the first couple weeks. It’s also okay to have fun with the material. For example, you could prepare some jokes related to the assigned material. Encourage your students to raise questions at any time, and let them feel comfortable when they do so. Here are some tips of how you can handle questions:
  - It is okay to ask, “Can you say that again?” or simply “I’m sorry?”, when you didn’t understand the question or didn’t hear it clearly. Also, you can double check whether you get it correctly by asking, “Let me see if I understand what you’re saying. Are you wondering that…?”
  - You can always start your answer with “That’s a good question/point!”, “Thanks for bringing this up!”, or “I’m really glad that you asked!” (This also buys you some time to think!)
When you feel that some students may have trouble understanding a certain point, you can ask the class, “Is there any question or comment?”, and then look them in the eyes and wait for a few seconds. You can also just raise the question yourself, and encourage them to give an answer.

Always try your best to present an elaborated answer. Don’t just say “yes” or “no.” Put yourself in your students’ shoes and figure out the best way to help them understand.

- **Practice pays off.** This is the most important but simple suggestion I would give to you. Write down everything you want to cover in section when you prepare, and think about how you would use the blackboard in advance. Run through your plan the day before you teach, and keep the big picture in mind. To gain some experience and improve yourself, you can find a classroom, practice together with your colleagues, and then give comments and suggestions to each other.

Enjoy being a teacher and benefit from it

- Most of you will be teaching an introductory course in the first semester, but this does not imply that you should treat this task lightly. An introductory course teaches the most fundamental elements of a subject, and it is dedicated to explaining profound theories in the simplest and straightforward ways. From my experience, teaching a course, especially an introductory one, gives yourself much more insights and intuitions, than taking a course. So, stay focused and try to maximize your own payoffs from this great opportunity.

- If you want to stay in academia after graduation, teaching helps you prepare for it from many different aspects. For example, you will be more confident speaking in front of a group of people, which is crucial when you teach a big course as an instructor. This experience also improves your academic presentation skills: You will become more sophisticated when you explain new ideas to others, and more elegant when you answer questions raised by your audiences.
Balancing Rapport and Respect
Jaclyn Wypler, Department of Sociology

This workshop discusses strategies to balance developing rapport with students while maintaining a respected position in the classroom. We will address key statements to include on syllabi, first day activities, and ways to assess and evolve over the course of the semester:

**Syllabus:**
In your syllabus, include 1-2 pages on your policies. Include statements about expectations, classroom etiquette, and means of contact. Be reasonable and relatable, as well as clear and precise.

Examples:
- “Expectations: Student engagement is vital for a useful, productive, and interesting discussion section. I expect you to come to section prepared from attending course lecture, putting quality time into course readings, thoughtfully writing reading responses, and completing all homework and project assignments. Please come to class prepared with physical copies of readings, questions, and notes, and ready contribute in a thoughtful way.”
- “Classroom Etiquette: Respect classmates, the TA, and yourself. Provocative ideas and questions are encouraged; do not be afraid to voice your opinion just because it may be different. However, avoid language with the sole purpose to provoke or disparage others.
- “Office Hours: If you have a logistical question, please first consult the course and section syllabi. If you missed lecture or section, first contact a fellow student for notes. Email me with “Soc 357” in the subject line about accommodations or absences, to schedule an appointment, or with questions to address in section.”

When going over the syllabus on the first day, verbally state your intent and values behind the syllabus and key policies.
For example:
- “My hope is that we can go through the nitty gritty in the syllabus today, but will not need to revisit these policies. I know you are all super busy as students with family, work, volunteer, club, and team responsibilities. I’m a student too, so I understand – we all have a lot of stuff going on in our lives. I’m going to give my best effort to help you learn and succeed in this class so I want you to likewise bring it for these 50 minutes each week.”

**First Day:**
- Arrive 15-20 minutes early to prepare. You may want to play music as the students arrive. Write the topics that you will cover on the board or on slides (e.g. syllabus, introductions, something related to the curriculum) and include instructions. For example, I ask students to take a piece of paper for a nametag and index card.
- When class begins, I pass around a sign in sheet - I have the students’ names from the roster and ask them to write what they want to be called next to it.
- On the index card, students write their name, pronouns, year, major, learning style, something interesting about them. I also cut up their rosters pictures and bring glue sticks - I ask them to paste their pictures on the backside of the index card.
- I then go over the syllabus (see above).
• Introductions: students “interview” a neighbor, take notes, and then introduce the partners. I prompt them with questions to ask: hometown, major, what did you do this summer, which cartoon character would you want as your best friend, some niche interest you’re passionate about?

• No matter how much time, include an activity around the curriculum. Set the tone that discussion is for engaged learning and ends on time, not early. For example, I asked students on the first day of social psychology to review the basic theoretical perspectives, divided them into groups (one for each theory), and then played a clip from *Orange is the New Black*. Each group took notes and discussed how their perspective would analyze the scene.

**Over the semester:**

• Learn and use the students’ names; ask the students to do the same. You can use the index cards from the first day as flashcards.

• Begin class with icebreakers in the first few weeks. Show that you are listening. For example, if a student shares about an upcoming show, ask about it in the next section.

• If you feel comfortable and want to do so, you can share relevant and appropriate aspects your experiences. For example, when a methods course discussed ethnography in the middle of the semester, I told students about my queer farmer ethnography and shared that I am queer. My intention for doing so was to signal to students that I trusted and respected them by explicitly disclosing my sexuality.

• Provide and seek feedback. Tell sections when they are doing great. If things are off, ask for anonymous written feedback on the following: what is going well in section, what could be improved, and how they could personally contribute to improvements? Report back, and ask students to commit to the things they listed.

• Maintain boundaries and expectations. Your goal is to educate, and learning happens in a supportive environment. Create that support, but do not lose sight of student-teacher boundaries and classroom expectations.

• Remember to keep TAing in perspective. I encourage you to care, invest, and do what is necessary to engage students. At the same time, the classroom is not a reflection of your value as a human. As best as you can, place ego aside and do not take things personally. Keep up self-care and find colleagues to bounce ideas, share successes, and problem solve. Try to enjoy the experience: you get to be an educator, mentor, and role model which is an honor and can be hugely rewarding.
Teaching Controversial Issues in a Democratic Classroom
Aaron J. Yarmel, Department of Philosophy

In a democratic classroom, students see each other as equal collaborators in the search for the most reasonable answers to important questions. When these questions concern controversial issues, students have a rare opportunity to practice one of the most important skills that they will learn in college: the ability to have productive conversations with people with whom they disagree about controversial issues.

Running a democratic classroom can be both exhilarating and daunting. This handout provides 12 rules that have helped me navigate the unique challenges of this sort of teaching as both a TA and a lecturer at UW-Madison.

Rule 1: Organize Your Room
- Arrange your students based on your lesson plan (e.g., a discussion circle, small clusters of desks, a fish bowl, or a lecture hall).
- All of your students should have a clear line of sight to the chalkboard and to you.
- Keep your desk neat and tidy.
- Have a plan that’s more detailed than necessary (and know when to break it).

Rule 2: Show Care for Others
- Scrutinize ideas, not students.
- If an upset students approaches you, help them articulate their observations, feelings, and needs, and check to make sure that you’ve understood them.
- Learn about the challenges that your students are struggling with.
- If students show insufficient care for each other, have a dialogue about it. Say, “Hey everyone, let’s take a few minutes to check in on our community and see how we’re doing,” and then help the students raise issues and come up with collective solutions to them.
- If a single student is showing insufficient care for another student, say, “Hey, [name], I noticed that you said [statement] and I’m worried because I want [students with characteristic X] to feel comfortable participating in the future. I value your contributions and I won’t censor you, but I would like your help maintaining our democratic community; what are some concrete ways that we can [the legitimate aim the student had when they made the statement] while fostering an environment where everyone feels comfortable participating?”

Rule 3: Show Care for the Inquiry
- Focus on one, and only one, question/idea/example/reason/argument at a time.
- Put tangential contributions in the freezer and thaw them out when appropriate.
- Invite students who show insufficient care for the inquiry to reflect on the goals of the classroom and how they can help realize them.
Rule 4: Foster Creative Thinking
- Allow students to develop ideas alone, in groups, and one-on one with you.
- Encourage students to risk making mistakes.

Rule 5: Foster Critical Thinking
- Offer explicit tools for assessing the quality of arguments, reasons, examples, etc.
- Teach students to be equally critical of arguments that support and don’t support their views.
- Evaluate the strongest versions of arguments on both sides of the issues you’re teaching.

Rule 6: Keep Track of the Inquiry
- Keep track of who has/hasn’t spoken.
- Keep track of which examples, positions, arguments, and reasons have been offered and how these are related to each other (preferably on a chalkboard).
- Keep track of progress towards finding the most reasonable answer to the question you’re discussing.

Rule 7: Find the Space between Dogmatism and Nihilism
- Avoid telling your students, “there’s no right answer and it’s just a matter of opinion.”
- Avoid telling your students, “there’s only one acceptable way to think about this issue and I know what it is.”
- Do tell your students, “this is a really tough question, but if we work together we can make progress towards finding the most reasonable answer to it.”

Rule 8: Don’t Proselytize
- Assume that some of your students disagree with you about your deeply held moral, religious, or political beliefs. Don’t punish them for that.
- Assume that some of your students agree with you about your deeply held moral, religious, or political beliefs. Don’t reward them for that.
- Your job is not to indoctrinate your students into accepting your beliefs about controversial issues, but to give them tools for pursuing reasonable positions about these issues.

Rule 9: Be Approachable
- Get to class early and have conversations with your students.
- Stay after class for a few minutes in case your students have questions.
- Memorize your students’ names by the end of the 2nd week of class.
- Smile and say, ‘Hello [name],’ to your students when you run into them outside of class.
Rule 10: Create Appropriate Boundaries

- Always keep your door open when meeting with a student.
- Don’t hang out or become Facebook friends with students during the semester.
- Offer lengthy explanations in person rather than over email.
- Set limits to your workday and don’t check your email outside of those limits.
- If a student presents you with a problem you do not feel comfortable helping them solve, find someone who can give them the help they need.

Rule 11: Make (New) Mistakes

- If you never make mistakes, you’re not taking enough risks.
- When you make a mistake, learn what you can from it and move on.
- If you make the same mistake more than once, figure out what you need to change so that it doesn’t happen again.

Rule 12: Learn from Others

- Watch what good teachers do in the classroom.
- Ask good teachers for feedback on your own teaching.
- Be skeptical whenever someone (even me) offers you advice about teaching.