



On Course: A Week-By-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching

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You go into teaching with high hopes: to inspire students, to motivate them to learn, to help them love your subject. Then you find yourself facing a crowd of expectant faces on the first day of the first semester, and you think "Now what do I do?"

Practical and lively, "On Course" is full of experience-tested, research-based advice for graduate students and new teaching faculty. It provides a range of innovative and traditional strategies that work well without requiring extensive preparation or long grading sessions when you're trying to meet your own demanding research and service requirements. What do you put on the syllabus? How do you balance lectures with group assignments or discussions--and how do you get a dialogue going when the students won't participate? What grading system is fairest and most efficient for your class? Should you post lecture notes on a website? How do you prevent cheating, and what do you do if it occurs? How can you help the student with serious personal problems without becoming overly involved? And what do you do about the student who won't turn off his cell phone?

Packed with anecdotes and concrete suggestions, this book will keep both inexperienced and veteran teachers on course as they navigate the calms and storms of classroom life.

On Course: A Week-By-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching **Details**

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Charlotte says

This book is set up as a week-by-week guide for a 15-week semester (as implied by the title), however, I'm glad I read the whole thing before my first semester as a college teacher began. I know that I'm going to be referring back to this book again and again as the semester progresses, but reading the excellent advice all the way through is definitely a good idea.

If you are a new college teacher, I would highly recommend this book. I haven't started my first semester yet, but this book already answered some of the questions and concerns I was having, and I know I will be a better teacher for having read it.

Carrie says

I guess the last thing I need in my life is yet another white guy telling me what to wear and how to teach. I'm probably being unfair here, as I'm sure some of the advice is good, but this was too prescriptive for me to finish.

Joe Smith says

Packed with great advice on everything from how to write a syllabus, to teaching techniques (this is where I learned the most), to how to construct grading rubrics, to developing a teaching persona. I've got notes scribbled all through the margins about things I want to incorporate into my class next semester, and some about things I've already tried this semester with great success. I wish I had read this book a year ago. But I knew too much then

Sebah Al-Ali says

It's a very nice and friendly book. Reading through the book, it felt like a friendly conversation with a colleague, sharing his experience, giving indirect pieces of advice, and sharing stories/anecdotes that can help you understand the essence of effective teaching.

It was a really enjoyable read.

> The syllabus:

"The process of drafting the syllabus forces you to think about the learning objectives you want to establish for the students in the course, and those objectives should be formulated by answering a simple question:

What should students know or be able to do as a result of taking this course? Put more broadly, when students walk out of the final exam, or hand you that final paper, in what ways will you have changed them?"

"The course plan, and the syllabus, need to focus on the students. If you have designed a course which could theoretically be taught to an empty room of iPod recorders, without any real change in your course plan, you probably need to head back to the drawing board."

:)

> First day:

- Don't dress casually

- Don't see yourself as their friend or peer.

- "Opening the semester by introducing the students to the course topic or material in a substantive way sends the message that you are excited and eager to help the students learn in this course, and that the time they invest in coming to class matters."

- "Whatever you decide to do on the first day, you should ensure that you cover three bases: present the syllabus to the students; introduce the course topic and/or some initial material; and require at least some students to participate"

-I really liked the idea of understanding students' background about the class material so that the teacher can know what s/he is dealing with. He suggested to hand out a paper during the first class, ask students to write some info about themselves, and then answer a few questions (3) "about their past experiences with the course topic, or about their understanding of the ideas you will be presenting over the course of the semester."

- Importance of catching students' interest from day 1 and maintaining it throughout the course.

> Lecturing:

- "Vary your teaching methods. No single teaching technique should constitute the sole pedagogical method in any classroom; the most effective teachers are those who use multiple approaches."

- He mentions that, "You can be certain of one thing when you are lecturing: whatever you write on the blackboard, on an overhead, or on a PowerPoint slide, students will copy into their notebooks." As a result, he says that, a teacher should make use of this information and try to make sure to have the main points displayed for students on the board or any other way to help them write it down. He also stresses the idea of not overwhelming students with too much information they don't need to keep in their notebooks.

- "Make sure that, when you attempt to solicit questions, you communicate a real desire to hear those questions.... you ask a question, stop talking for 10 or 20 or 30 seconds, and wait. Take a drink of water, walk to a different part of the room, or just scan the faces for half a minute."

- Reasons for including discussions in classrooms:

1. "the more ways you can engage your mind and body with new ideas or material, the more deeply you will learn that material"
2. "discussion gives students the opportunity to try out ideas and theories which they can then develop

further and more formally in their papers and exams."

3. "you are helping them understand something important about learning: that you are not the teapot of the sociology of race, and they are not the teacup."

- Ways to start a discussion:

1. "START DISCUSSIONS WITH LOW-STAKES WRITING": have them write a short passage answering the opening question before they start discussing it as a group.

2. "USE SMALL GROUPS OR PAIRS PRIOR TO DISCUSSION"

3. "FORCED DEBATE":

"Identify an issue about which there are two clearly defined and opposed positions, and let students know one class in advance that they will be required to select a side and defend it. On the discussion day, divide the room physically into two sides and ask the students to sit on one side or the other. I usually follow Frederick's suggestion to leave a space in the middle for undecided students—who, however, have to move to one side or the other before the class has ended. In fact, any student who changes her mind can move during the class: from one side to the other, from one side to the center, and back again."

4. Integrate discussions early on.

"Several weeks of listening to lectures will condition students into a passivity that will be harder and harder to break as the semester continues."

> Assignments:

- "In *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Bain argues that penalizing late work puts an undue emphasis on the assignment as a performance, as opposed to seeing assignments as a learning experience."

* Take a few minutes after each class and ask students what the most important thing they learned in class was. Or have them write it down on a piece of paper.

* "Be transparent in your teaching. Take the time to inform students why you are doing what you are doing in the classroom"

* Great sample stuff in appendixes.

* *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain

* Names :(: <http://www.insidehighered.com/workpla...>

Gerald says

Fantastic book! Will read it again.

Bryan says

Informative and yet an enjoyable read. Written in informal language as *Becoming a Library Teacher*, but not as off-the-wall. Prof. Lang uses a non-journal article approach to put the newly minted college professor at ease, although the audience for *On Course* is not limited to just tenure-track professors. There are lots of useful information in here for adjuncts and teaching graduate assistants, as well. *On Course* is broken down in "weeks," and each of these has an annotated bibliography of recommended readings.

Wade says

I found this to be an excellent introduction to teaching, and a nice refresher even for those not in their first year but who are looking to improve. Since so many academic get little to no preparation in their own education on how to teach, this is a book that should be welcomed by students as well. I picked up several ideas for ways to incorporate more active learning styles into my classes. The 'week by week' is a conceit to order the chapters, but a wide variety of topics are covered, from the syllabus, the first day, different teaching styles (lecture, small group, large group, outside work, etc.), grading, and more. I've mentioned it to several friends who all have been as pleased as I.

Cynthia says

This book remains the one I most consistently pick up to remember why I teach and how to stay positive and productive in the classroom. The fact that it is interdisciplinary is also a plus.

Richard Wu says

There is no reason for me to have read this book other than that it happened to be on my Airbnb host's bookshelf. This random occurrence, far from any algo-derived confirmation bias, depended nevertheless on my fascination, for had I not found it interesting then I would not have picked it up.

And what could be more interesting than teaching, the fundamental transmission of human knowledge? Woody Allen said that "those who can't do, teach." But I prefer Einstein's line, "if you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough." After all, only one of the two can be referenced by surname alone, which is really just the perfect way to compare two famous persons' total contribution to humanity, you know.

Teaching: decades of study, research, and practice have led to the refinement of this basic art; to ignore it would be to ignore the aim of learning itself. Furthermore, as a budding documentarian, what I'll be doing in addition to simple storytelling is persuasive didactics, so any angle I can get on the matter must be in some way helpful. Lastly, learning about teaching is very meta, and any book concerning itself with meta-ness of any sort automatically touches my personal sensibilities. So –there's my rationalization for reading this. You likey?

The section on preconceptions and prior "knowledge" was particularly helpful; the typical mind fallacy is

among the worst any instructor can commit. Professors of all people should be cognizant that others believe in all sorts of myths grounded on false assumptions and impoverished mental frameworks. By understanding how others develop these frameworks, we're able to nudge them in better and better directions. The goal is to redraw the lines on the map such that, as much as possible, they match the territory they describe: framework corresponds to reality.

James earns five stars because he presents valuable, practical ideas, is at once concise and entertaining (a difficult achievement), and most importantly demonstrates a genuine empathy for students throughout. The critiques taken by other readers are largely addressed in the preface, and it's hardly fair to slam a work for something it is not and explicitly claims not to be; to do so reflects more on the reader and his curation ability.

Favorite quotes

"...one of the strangest experiences you will have as a new faculty member will be to see people writing down the things you have to say, as if you actually knew what you were talking about." [p.78]

"Throwing around Perry's name at a cocktail party wouldn't be nearly as bad as authoritatively quoting Freud at a psychology convention—more like citing Newton rather than Feynman at the annual physics department picnic." [p.172]

"One person complaining about another person, including a faculty member who complains about the chair, does not tell you anything you can trust about either of them. For all you know, the complainer is the insane serial killer, and the chair is handling this person the best way she knows how." [p.262]

Lona Manning says

As a new teacher, I really appreciated this encouraging book. It was like having a coach at my elbow.

Ryan says

A good read with lots of helpful tips and concepts. Offers practical assignments and advice (grading, dealing with cheating/plagiarism, etc.) that can be adapted to your particular setting. Also provides some tools for helping to assess your ideals and principles as a teacher.

It's a bit long, due to its conversational tone, so if you need a more succinct guide for diving into college teaching, I would recommend Peter Filene's *The Joy of Teaching: A Practical Guide for New College Instructors* (UNC Press, 2005).

Christine Kayser says

Unbelievably helpful and reassuring. I took notes while reading it, and can definitely see that this will be a well-highlighted, bookmarked book for years to come.

Jennifer Brady says

“Of course, it’s still possible for students to cheat by going into the library and finding books and articles that aren’t available online- but any student who goes to all that trouble, it seems to me, deserves to get away with it. At least they’re in the library” (201).

No. This is not only a disrespectful mindset of your colleagues and fellow departments, whom I might add, ensure you have the information and materials needed to conduct research, but it is just condescending to the individuals that visit those hallowed halls.

The writing is mediocre and a compilation of others original thought- when he has his own, we get statements such as those above.

Tato says

This was a very practical source to start your first year as a new faculty (TA, lecturer...). I did not find it anything innovative or groundbreaking, but this book is definitely helpful. I did not like how it was divided into 16 weeks, that, in the most part, had nothing to do with the contents of the weeks of teaching, but I did like how every advice was relevant and useful for each aspect of teaching. Overall, an essential read, especially if it is your first time teaching at a college level.

Hao Ca Vien says

Inspiring and extremely funny and witty. Hilarious commentary on teaching and good techniques for the new teacher. Great!!!!
