

# Teaching at Columbia

## A Handbook for Teaching Fellows

**Steven Mintz**  
Director, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences Teaching Center

### Table of Contents

#### *Introduction*

#### *1 / A Teaching Fellow's Roles and Responsibilities*

The various teaching roles and responsibilities assigned to graduate students at Columbia.

#### *2 / Working With Faculty*

Advice about how to coordinate your teaching efforts with those of the faculty member in charge.

#### *3 / Working with Students*

Setting boundaries; romantic relationships with students; handling problematic student behavior; working with disruptive students; and preventing and detecting plagiarism.

#### *4 / Effective Teaching*

How to leading substantive, successful discussions, run effective labs, and deliver memorable lectures.

#### *5 / Active Learning*

Ways to infuse active learning techniques into your classroom.

#### *6 / Classroom Management*

Practical advice about how to deal with common classroom problems.

#### *7 / Testing and Grading*

How to design effective tests and minimize complaints about arbitrary and unfair grading.

#### *8 / Teaching With Technology*

How to effectively integrate new technologies into your class.

#### *9 / Writing Letters of Recommendation*

How to write effective letters of recommendation.

#### *10 / Teaching and the Academic Job Market*

How to market your teaching experience and skills.

### **Introduction**

Teaching can be the most fulfilling part of being a professor or a graduate student. It is extraordinarily satisfying to share your knowledge and insights and watch your students grow intellectually.

But teaching can also be extremely stressful and dealing with students can be exasperating. This manual offers practical advice about classroom management, lecturing, leading discussions and labs, and testing and grading, among other topics.

Successful teaching does not come easily. Most of us learn to teach the hard way – through trial and error. This manual is designed to help you avoid common errors and provide up-to-date information on “best practices” and promising new practices.

## **1 / A Teaching Fellow’s Roles and Responsibilities**

Teaching Fellows play an essential role in undergraduate education at Columbia.

- As discussion section leaders in large lecture classes, Teaching Fellows amplify and clarify concepts covered in lectures, answer student questions, and provide students with the opportunity to actively engage the course material and apply what they have learned.
- As leaders of recitation sections in large science courses, Teaching Fellows not only help students understand and apply material introduced in lectures, but also teach students how to solve problems.
- Lab assistants assist students with experiments and other hands-on activities and help students understand the theoretical basis and significance of experiments.

In addition to these responsibilities, Teaching Fellows in large lecture classes are expected to:

- Attend all lectures and assist the instructor as needed;
- Direct students to additional resources;
- Grade student papers, problem sets, quizzes, and exams;
- Hold regular office hours and communicating with students online;
- Lead review sessions;
- Serve as a liaison between the students and the course instructor; and
- Maintain class records.

Teaching Fellows’ responsibilities vary by department, program, and professor. In the languages and mathematics, Teaching Fellows generally teach introductory courses independently. In most cases, fellows are provided with a standardized syllabus and curriculum.

## **2 / Working With Faculty**

Before the course begins, you should have a good idea of what is expected of you. Arrange to meet with the faculty member and clarify your responsibilities. Among the issues you should discuss are these:

- Are you expected to attend lectures? Take attendance? Order desk copies of books?
- Will there be regular meetings to discuss the course? If so, when and where will they be held?
- How many office hours are you expected to hold?
- Are you expected to conduct review sessions? Proctor exams? Manage the course’s Blackboard site?
- Will you be asked to deliver lectures? Could you request the opportunity to lecture?
- Will you or the faculty member design the content of the discussion sections or labs? The class’s quizzes and tests?

- How should you handle student absences, late arrival or early departure, missed tests, and requests for extension?

### **3 / Working With Students**

#### ***A / Setting Boundaries***

One of your responsibilities as an instructor is to be accessible to students. But remember: you are not a therapist, best friend, or financial adviser. Since your primary responsibility is to complete your own education, it is essential that you establish clear boundaries.

- Encourage students to see you during your regular office hours, if at all possible.
- Resist the temptation to give students your personal telephone number. Tell students to contact you by email or by the departmental number.

#### ***B / Romantic Relationships***

Columbia University strongly discourages romantic relationships between instructors and students, and the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences prohibits any personal or intimate relationship that reduces a fellow's ability to fulfill responsibilities to objectively teach, mentor, and evaluate students. Such relationships are fraught with potential problems. There can be accusations of favoritism, bias, conflicts of interest, harassment, and exploitation, even if the relationship is consensual.

The student-instructor relationship is based on respect and trust, which can be undermined if there is a romantic relationship. Given the imbalanced power relationship between a professor and a student, consent in such relationships is suspect.

#### ***C / Handling Problematic Student Behavior***

As an instructor you will encounter students who have problems or behaviors that might cause you concern or discomfort. Sometimes, these behaviors are simply odd or eccentric. At times, however, these behaviors will provoke a more intense concern. A student might seem unusually sad or anxious or irritable or lacking in motivation and concentration. A student might regularly fail to attend class or arrive late or depart early. A student might make angry outbursts or be verbally antagonistic toward you or the other students. You might detect slurred speech or a confused sense of reality or extreme suspicion of others. Especially disturbing are veiled references to suicide or homicide.

You are in a unique position to observe changes in a students' mood and behavior. You might notice a sharp decline in a student's achievement or sudden, frequent absences or changes in interaction patterns with peers. You may fear that a student is suicidal, clinically depressed, paranoid, or potentially violent. Or you may think that a student is under the influence of psychoactive drugs or alcohol. Or you may learn that a student is suffering from an eating disorder or abuse or assault.

If the problem seems to be mild, you might speak with the student in private and discuss your observations and express your concerns directly and listen carefully to what the student tells you. If the problem seems severe, you should definitely consult with appropriate individuals, such as a dean, an adviser, or the counseling center.

- Do not ignore inappropriate behavior.
- Do not promise confidentiality or assure the student that you are a friend or advocate
- Be aware of your limitations.
- Refer the student to appropriate campus resources.

Please see the “Support Services” resources that provides contact information for school deans and other campus resources, including Columbia University’s Counseling and Psychological Services.

### ***D / Working with Disruptive Students***

As a teaching assistant and as a faculty member, you will encounter many kinds of troublesome behavior that disrupts the classroom environment and interferes with learning. Students will arrive late to class, and leave early. Cellphones will ring. Some students will make hostile and disrespectful comments to you or to fellow students. In extreme cases, a student might make threats or even subject you to harassment.

How might you best respond to disruptive behavior?

***1. Don't assume that all students know the basic standards of proper classroom etiquette.***

Set clear standards on the first day of class. Spell out the kinds of behavior that you expect: civil, collegial, courteous. Make sure that the students understand your policies regarding interruptions, side conversations, tardiness, and other forms of disruptive behavior. Involve your students by asking them to describe the norms for proper classroom behavior.

***2. Recognize that an instructor's teaching style, conduct, and inter-personal communication styles can inadvertently contribute disruptive behavior.***

Exhibit the kinds of behavior you expect from students. Listen respectfully, use civil language, exhibit respect and understanding, and speak with, rather than at, students.

***3. Avoid responding defensively to student comments or behavior.***

Acknowledge the student's frustration or disappointment. Help the student understand precisely what it takes to succeed in your class.

***4. Respond to a problem calmly and professionally.***

Defuse a potentially nasty situation by depersonalizing the disruption. You might, for example, say: “Let’s call a halt to interruptions.”

### ***E / Dealing with Student Excuses***

During the course of the semester, some students will miss deadlines, missed tests, and request for extensions and make-ups. How should you respond?

***1. Recognize that some excuses are acceptable.***

These include instances when a student is involved in an official university activity (which may include athletic activities) or absences due to a funeral, an illness, a health related problem, a court appearance, or military obligation.

Contrary to what some faculty members assume, student rarely lie when they explain a missed deadline due to a death in the family.

***2. Build safeguards into your syllabus.***

Deduct points based on how late a paper is handed in. An instructor might subtract five points for every day an assignment is late.

***3. Encourage students to stay on track.***

For the most part, students miss deadlines because they waited until the last moment to complete an assignment and discovered that it was more difficult and time-consuming than they had assumed. One way to deal with this is to require students to submit portions of a larger assignment in stages: They might have to hand in a bibliography, followed by an outline, and then a preliminary draft, before submitting the final paper or report.

**4. Be flexible-but don't be a push-over.**

Require evidence. Depending on the circumstances, this might be a doctor's note or a police report.

**5. Require students who must miss a test to notify you beforehand.**

Students might be informed that if they fall ill on the day of a test, they need to contact the instructor (by phone or email) prior to the beginning of the test.

**6. Create alternates.**

Consider allowing students to drop one quiz or test. Or create an optional test or final exam, or require students with less than a B average to take the final, while excusing those with a higher average.

**F / Preventing and Detecting Plagiarism**

Students need to know that any unacknowledged use of the words, ideas, insights, or the original research of another is strictly prohibited. There are several steps you can take to ensure that students do not pass off someone else's work as their own.

**1. Spell out the rules of academic honesty.**

Make sure the students understand what constitutes plagiarism. In many instances, students do not understand how to properly quote, paraphrase, and cite sources. Inform students that Columbia and Barnard use a plagiarism detection service, Turnitin.com.

**2. Require the paper to be developed in stages**

For example, you might require a preliminary bibliography, a prospectus, an outline, and a rough draft

**3. Be specific about an assignment's components.**

Create assignments not easily "transferable" from student-to-student or course-to-course, for example, by requiring a specific text or focus on an event of the past six months.

**4 / Effective Teaching**

When asked how they evaluate instructors, students say that they value:

1. Presentations that are clear, understandable, and well organized;
2. Classes in which they feel that they have learned something of significance; and
3. Instructors who stimulate their interest in the course, encourage questions and discussion, are open to students' opinions, and are sensitive to students' concerns, confusions, and progress.

Effective teachers aren't boring. They grab students' attention, bust myths, focus on problems and puzzles, and bring abstractions to life. They care about their audience, and are well-organized, clear, and expressive. They also have a distinctive voice, which expresses their personality, approach, and style. Above all, they convey the excitement and the significance of their topic.

**A / Leading Substantive Class Discussions**

Discussion adds a personal dimension to the learning process. It stimulates students to more actively engage in the course materials. It also helps students develop their reasoning and communication skills. Discussion encourages collaborative thinking and attunes students to a multiplicity of viewpoints and perspectives. In addition, it allows an instructor to get prompt, continuous feedback on students' understanding or misunderstanding of the course material. Above all, discussion can help students gain confidence in their intellectual abilities and learn how to evaluate a theory, read a text, or synthesize ideas.

But successful discussions are hard to stimulate. Students tend to consider discussion inconsequential. How can you ensure that the discussion is substantive?

**1. Remember your role**

You are responsible for:

- setting the agenda
- clarifying concepts and issues
- promoting discussion
- keeping students engaged and the section on track, and
- handling problematic behavior

But remember that you are a facilitator and coach, not a lecturer. Your role is to guide, focus, and structure the discussion. But the students themselves must have a chance to express their ideas and arrive at their own conclusions.

**2. Preparation is the key to a successful discussion**

Preparation requires setting specific objectives and designing activities and questions to meet those goals.

**3. Begin your class with a bang**

This might involve starting with a problem, a controversy, or an illustration

**4. Preview the material you will cover**

Give an overview or share an outline. This helps *you* stay on track, too.

**5. Don't stick to words**

Use the blackboard. Use diagrams, charts, and other audio-visual resources to bring the material to life.

**6. Make the discussion goal-oriented**

Explore questions and have outcomes.

**7. Vary what you do in class**

- Use images, film clips, and new stories
- Stage debates, break the class into small groups, have student presentations. Brainstorm: Have the students suggest ideas and then have the class build on the ideas, embellishing them and suggesting improvements and modifications.
- If the students are discussing a text, ask them to identify a question that they found significant; to write down one question raised by the text; or to identify a scene or image that stands out in their memory.

**Getting Students to Participate**

Students are often hesitant to participate in discussions. Sometimes they are unprepared or bored or aren't paying attention. At other times, they don't understand the question or need time to formulate a response. Silence is a form of student feedback. How should you respond?

**1. Wait**

Give students time to digest the question and an opportunity to respond.

**2. Give a hint**

Invite students to refer to the book, their notes, or a peer.

**3. Vary the kinds of questions you ask and use invitational, not inquisitorial, questions**

There are a many kinds of questions that you can ask.

- Information questions ask where, when, who, or what.

- Diagnostic questions ask what is going on behind the scenes.
- Challenge questions ask students why do you think that; how would you explain that; what's the evidence to support that.
- Action questions ask students: What would you do in so-and-so's shoes?
- Summary questions ask students to summarize the most critical issues that have been discussed.
- Generalizing questions ask students: What generalizations can we make?

Some questions require deduction. Others might ask for hunches or imaginative leaps. Questions with many valid answers reduce anxiety over being wrong.

#### ***4. Encourage students to draw upon their feelings, perceptions, and life experiences.***

Help students relate these to class topics (rather than just share their own opinions).

#### ***5. Build a sense of classroom community***

Have students introduce themselves and work with partners or small groups.

#### ***6. Reward student contributions and provide feedback***

- Look attentive. Make eye contact and the student's names if possible.
- Paraphrase what the student said and ask a follow-up question.
- Comment on the student's thinking process and point out what was valuable in the student's contribution.
- Invite other students to add their reactions or reflections.

### **Common Problems**

#### ***▪ Dealing with Anxiety***

- Remember: Teaching is performance. Rehearse. Look confident. Smile and make eye contact. Display enthusiasm.
- De-center your classroom. You do not need to make yourself the center of attention.

#### ***▪ Students direct all answers to the instructor***

- Redirect questions to other students.
- Ask whether everyone agrees.
- Help students see conflict as a good thing.
- Announce that you will be note-taker.
- Break the class into small groups.

#### ***▪ Non-participating students and excessive talkers***

- Consider emailing discussion questions to the class ahead of time.
- Pause before calling on a student.
- Look for non-verbal signs of readiness to speak.
- Turn statements into questions: Do you agree with that argument?
- Ask non-participating students to sum up what's been said.

#### ***▪ Instructor dominated discussions***

- Avoid answering your own questions.
- Be patient; wait for responses.
- Be a moderator: summarize, re-direct, keep the problem in view.

#### ***▪ Consider offering a midterm evaluation.***

Sample questions:            Do you look forward to attending discussion each week?  
    Which topics do you find particularly interesting?  
    What are the discussion leaders major strengths and weaknesses?  
    One thing I want to tell you is....

## ***B / Being a Successful Lab Instructor***

A lab is a place where students can be scientists: designing investigations and experiments, collecting and recording data, handling scientific equipment, analyzing results, discussing their findings, and drawing conclusions. In a lab students learn how to apply scientific reasoning, to work independently and collaboratively, and to test scientific theories based on empirical research.

It is in the lab that learning, rather than mere memorization, takes place. It is here that abstract scientific concepts become concrete.

As a TA in a lab, your responsibilities include:

- Preparing handouts, including lab notes, diagrams, drawings, illustrations, and outlines
- Distributing lab materials
- Supervising student work and correcting faulty procedures

Here are some practical tips:

### ***1. Assume nothing***

Don't assume that your students know how to use even the simplest pieces of scientific equipment. Emphasize laboratory safety rules, in writing and orally.

### ***2. Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse***

Test the equipment and practice experiments and demonstrations at least once before class. Know where first-aid equipment is located.

### ***3. Be orderly***

Announce the day's project; describe the students' tasks in detail; at the end of class, review what the students have learned. To heighten student interest, you might relate the day's experiment to a current controversy or scientific dispute.

### ***4. Reinforce student learning with visual aids***

Diagrams, drawings, and PowerPoint slides help students understand basic concepts.

### ***5. Invite students to ask questions***

The lab is where students can resolve confusions and clarify perplexing points. Don't wait for students to come to you; be pro-active: circulate throughout the lab and ask students questions.

### ***6. Link theory and practice***

Explain to the students how the course's lectures, readings, and lab experiments interrelate. Help them understand how a particular experiment clarifies basic concepts and tests various theories that were described in the lectures or readings.

## ***C / Delivering Unforgettable Lectures***

Lecturing offers a highly efficient way to cover course material. But successful lecturing is not easy to do. It requires an instructor to be very clear, well organized, and engaging.

Here are some of the techniques that highly effective lecturers use. They

1. Grab students' attention and keep them engaged
2. Highlight key points and articulate them in more than one way.
3. Write key terms on the board or in a PowerPoint presentation.
3. Give students breathing room by illustrating key points anecdotally rather than packing too many ideas and factual support into their presentations.
4. Provide written handouts for key ideas and instructions.
5. Vary presentation methods and forms of student-teacher interaction.
6. Supplement oral presentations with visual material.
7. Build various kinds of questions into lectures. These include:
  - Initiating questions: Questions designed to provoke students
  - Probing questions: Questions that encourage students to elaborate
  - Convergent questions have a single correct answer; divergent questions have many plausible answers; e.g. What are the real-world implications of this material?.
8. Periodically review and ask questions about main points.
9. Monitor students understanding and don't assume students "get it."

## 5 / Active Learning

Today's students do not want to be passive learners. They demand learning experiences that are more inquiry-based, engaged, and experiential than in the past.

How, then, can we shift from an instructor-centered to a learner-centered classroom? Here are some strategies that you might consider:

**1. Collaborative or team-based learning:** Many instructors, who recall bad experiences with small group learning, worry that some students will fail to pull their weight or that group dynamics will be a source of complaints. In fact, today's college students have extensive experience working with small groups and find this a productive way to solve problems and to learn from one another. Here are some helpful tips to ensure that collaborative learning is successful:

- Groups should consist of approximately five members.
- Make sure that the groups are equally diverse.
- Give the groups assignments that are relevant to the class.
- Consider having students take a quiz individually and then collectively as members of a group.
- Let students evaluate each others contribution to the group.

**2. Inquiry-, case-, or problem-based learning:** Teaching through inquiry engages students in the research process. This approach is question driven, rather than topic or thesis driven. In case-based learning, which is widely used in business and law schools, students explore how issues and principles learned in class interact with real-world situations. Problem-based learning involves presenting students with a detailed problem and students try to solve it individually or in teams.

**3. A research "scavenger hunt":** This approach teaches students how to conduct library or online research by having them hunt for the answers to a series of questions. It gives students the opportunity to practice and refine their research skills and to learn about various library and Internet research resources.

## 6 / Classroom Management

As an instructor, you will encounter a wide range of classroom management issues:

- Challenges to your authority
- Belligerent, disruptive, and annoying behavior
- Students who interrupt, heckle, or dominate
- Shy and withdrawn students
- Chronic tardiness and early departure

- Disputes over grades

Your challenge is to handle these issues in a calm, professional manner. The best way to do this is to avoid problems in the first place and to prepare strategies for managing these problems when they occur.

### ***Common Classroom Management Issues:***

#### **How do I establish my authority and credibility?**

1. Establish your credentials on the first day of class.
2. Be clear about your expectations—about attendance, late assignments, missed classes.
3. Make sure that each class session is clearly organized.
4. Be professional—in your demeanor and even your dress. Start out hard nosed and you can ease off later.
5. Keep order in the classroom.
6. Be consistent in your enforcement of class policies.

#### **How do I handle disruptive or disrespectful students who chat or pass notes or sleep in class, interrupt, heckle, challenge your authority, arrive late to class or leave early?**

1. Define your expectations and policies clearly in the very first class.
2. Get to know something about your students and use their names so that they don't feel anonymous.
3. Make direct eye contact with students and physically move to the area where the disruptive students are.
4. Vary your teaching style. Move into group work, for example.
5. Be positive rather than negative

#### **How can I maintain order in my classroom?**

1. When students get off-topic, re-focus their attention back to the subject. Consider using visual aids, such as writing on the blackboard.
2. When a student rambles, say: "Would you summarize your main point please?" or "Are you asking...?"
3. If a student heckles you or becomes argumentative or grandstands, acknowledge the student's positive points and redirect the topic back to the group or to supportive students. Say: "I appreciate your comments, but I'd like to hear from others," or "It looks like we disagree."

#### **How do I motivate apathetic students?**

1. Give students some kind of assignment before each session.
2. Pose questions that make students think about the subject matter, even if they have not read the material.
3. Use real world examples to illustrate your points.
4. Present material as problems to be solved.
5. Share your enthusiasm and incorporate interesting anecdotes or demonstrations. Make your class interesting.

#### **How can I best deal with late papers or missed quizzes or tests?**

1. Have a clear policy for missed, failed or late assignments and tests—and stick with it. Deduct points based on how late a paper is handed in. An instructor might subtract five points for every day an assignment is late.
2. Recognize that some excuses are acceptable.
3. Encourage students to stay on track. For the most part, students miss deadlines because they waited until the last moment to complete an assignment and discovered that it was more difficult and time-consuming than they had assumed. One way to deal with this is to require students to submit portions of a larger assignment in stages.
4. Be flexible-but don't be a push-over. Require evidence.
5. Require students who must miss a test to notify you beforehand.

6. Create alternates. Allow students to drop one quiz or test. Or create an optional test or final exam, or require students with less than a B average to take the final, while excusing those with a higher average.

#### **How can I best handle grade disputes?**

1. Establish and explain your grading criteria
3. Provide students with written comments on their work.
4. Show a student your grading criteria.
5. Don't feel pressured to make a decision on the spot.
6. Don't change a grade out of sympathy or compassion (or to end the dispute) or because of a student's personal needs.
7. Have the student explain why your original grade was wrong.
8. Tell the student that you will re-grade the entire assignment, not just one portion, and that the final grade could be lower rather than higher.
9. Tell the student how to raise the grade in the future.

#### **How can I create a more inclusive classroom environment?**

1. At the beginning of your class, establish a "respect your classmates" rule.
2. Get to know your students.
3. Be sensitive—to language, terminology, and diversity issues. Be wary of assuming that all students share certain cultural reference points (e.g. that everyone knows about the TV show Friends) or a common set of values and orientations.
4. Never ask a student to speak for an entire group. Treat students as individuals, not as representatives of a gender, race, or ethnic group.
5. Don't let a comment that maligns a particular group pass without notice.
6. Give all students equal attention.
7. Increase the amount of time that you wait before calling on students. This allows more students to formulate an answer to a question in class.
8. Solicit student opinions. Encourage questions and encourage critiques of the course itself.

#### **How do I deal with controversial topics or with "hot moments" in the classroom?**

1. Introduce controversial topics in impersonal terms. Rather than asking a student, for example, "Do you think high schools should make contraception available to students?" present the arguments usually made for and against contraception in high schools and ask students to critique or support the arguments.
2. When "hot moments" arise, turn them into a learning opportunity. Explore different views about the topic that provoked the hot moment. Listen for the sub-text. Get students to view the hot issue from multiple perspectives.

## **7 / Testing and Grading**

As a Teaching Fellow, you may be asked to design as well as grade assignments and tests. If you are designing assignments, ask yourself:

- What do you want the students to learn?
- What are the goals and objectives of the course?
- How does the assignment contribute to those goals and objectives?
- What skills do you want students to employ: to solve, to argue, to create, to analyze, to explain, to demonstrate, to apply?

To determine if an assignment is effective, ask yourself:

1. How well focused is the assignment? Are the instructions clear and concise? Does the assignment give the students a clearly defined, unambiguous task?

2. Do you want students to engage in research that goes beyond the course content or do you want them to stick to the course materials? What should the assignment format be? When will the assignment be due and how long will you need to grade it? When will the assignment be returned to students?

3. Will you allow students to rewrite the assignment if necessary?

4. Can this assignment be realistically completed given the knowledge, ability, and time constraints of the students? Is it clearly related to the course content? Are the research materials needed to complete the assignment available in sufficient quantity?

5. Is it possible for you to grade this assignment effectively, given your workload and other commitments?

6. How is this assignment going to contribute to the student's final course grade?

If you are asked to design a test, there is certain information to keep in mind. Some tests simply measure student recall of information. More sophisticated tests seek more reasoned answers. These tests assess students' higher-order thinking skills: Their ability to apply knowledge, analyze and manipulate information, solve problems, and develop supportable generalizations.

Effective tests do not simply ask students to parrot back material from course lectures and readings. Effective tests promote student learning.

If you are asked to make up a test, you should begin by clearly identifying your instructional objectives and then writing questions appropriate to these learning objectives.

**Objective questions** – including Multiple Choice, Matching, True-False, Short-Answer, Identification, Fill-in-the-Blank, and Number questions – offer an especially efficient way to measure students' command of the subject matter, such as their recall of key terms, facts, and principles. Well-written objective questions may also allow an instructor to assess students' ability to apply knowledge, solve problems, and apply concepts and formulae.

In designing objective questions:

1. Make sure that the question does not simply test students' vocabulary and reading comprehension.
2. Make sure that the wording is straightforward. Avoid extraneous detail and the use of negatives.
3. Answer options should be about the same length and parallel in grammatical structure.

**Essay questions** require students to construct a response rather than merely select a response. Essay questions can be time consuming to score and difficult to grade fairly. But these questions allow an instructor to assess students' abilities to reason, create, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. Effective essay questions often present students with a "real-world" problem to solve, rather than simply selecting a solution from a limited list of possibilities. Compared to other kinds of test questions, essay questions require more systematic and in-depth thinking.

Effective essay questions are particularly difficult to write. Students need to know exactly what is expected of them. The essay question should also encourage complex thinking and original responses.

1. An effective essay question should not only require students to recall facts, but to make judgments and to explain the reasoning behind the judgment.

2. Effective essay questions are built around a "directive verb" such as: compare and contrast, defend, describe, define, evaluate, explain, identify, interpret, predict, propose (a solution), or trace.

3. An essay question should provide students with clearly defined task or focus.

4. Include a limited number of essay questions in a test because of the time required for the students to respond to them and the time required for the instructor to grade the responses.

5. Tell the students the criteria for grading. Write a model answer and construct a grading rubric.

**Examples of effective essay questions:**

1. Ask students to summarize and evaluate an argument.
2. Ask students to summarize and evaluate an article's methodology.
3. Ask students to infer the significance or unique contribution that a text, object, or event has for our understanding of a particular event or the development of scholarly literature.
4. Ask students to compose an explanatory narrative, saying how some event, institution, idea, or attitude came to be and why, explaining causes or the main results, or the role that a certain element played in the story.
5. Ask students to evaluate a hypothetical or counterfactual narrative.
6. Ask students to undertake a comparative analysis.
7. Ask student to take a position on a given issue or question.
8. Ask students to apply or test a theory, model, definition, method, or category to some data.
9. Ask students to contextualize an event, work, or debate, saying how its circumstances (artistic, cultural, biographical, or institutional) played a role in making it what it is, or how we understand it differently, knowing this context, than we otherwise might.
10. Ask students to recommend a course of action.

**Effective Grading**

Many students complain that grading is arbitrary, inconsistent, and unfair. Meanwhile, many instructors grumble about grade inflation, the excessive amount of time devoted to grading, and the many complaints that grading prompts.

Grades play at least three roles: evaluating students' work, communicating how they might improve, and motivating them to do so. Here are some exercises to help students to develop a better appreciation of the grading process:

**Peer Review:** Assign a short paper or ask students to bring a draft of their next assigned paper. Split students into pairs or small groups and have them read and evaluate each other's papers together. Structure their time by giving them a checklist of tasks to work through as they review each other's work. For example, ask them to begin by working out a set of criteria to be used in evaluation. This exercise can be effective in getting students to think more deeply about the assessment process.

**Discuss Sample Papers:** Identify sample assignments in each grade range, copy them and remove names, and discuss your comments and grades with students in section. Explain why you chose to comment as you did, what criteria you used, and ask the students for suggestions about how the work might be improved.

**Grading Criteria**

Having clear criteria not only saves you time when grading, but it also helps to make the grading process more consistent, enables you to explain very clearly to students both what you expect from them and what they can expect from you, and helps students to understand why you have given them a certain grade and how their work might be improved. It also enables you to clearly diagnose students' strengths and

weaknesses, and thereby to focus on improving the appropriate areas more effectively. You should also think about your policies on correct grammar and usage, late papers, and revision.

### **Sample Grading Policy Statement**

Students appreciate it if you spell out your grading policy.

**Anonymity:** As far as possible, grade papers and exams anonymously and ask students to write their name only on a cover sheet.

**Regrades:** Consider having a “cooling down” period before you regrade an exam or paper to give students time to consider your comments. Tell students that they need to explain why they think that the grade needs to be changed. Also, inform students that the entire paper or exam will be reassessed.

**Typos and Mechanics:** Inform students that papers will be graded down for excessive typos, misspellings, and mistakes in mechanics.

**Extensions and Make-Ups:** Have a clear policy regarding extensions and make-ups. For example, you might require students to ask in advance for an extension and to document all excuses. You might also institute a policy of docking a student’s grade depending on how late the paper is.

### **Rubrics**

Rubrics clearly spell out the criteria used for grading. Rubrics can help you give constructive feedback to students. Rubric contribute to fairness and consistency in grading. They also reduce student anxieties about subjectivity and unfairness in grading and reduce grade challenges.

### **Clarity, Strength, and Development of the Essay’s Argument**

- Is the argument clearly and compellingly stated?
- Is the analysis original and sophisticated?
- Is the argument well substantiated?
- Is the argument well developed?

### **Use and Interpretation of Evidence**

- How accurate and thorough is the student’s research?
- Is the evidence sufficient to support the essay’s argument and is it accurately interpreted?

### **Application of Course Lectures and Readings**

- Does the essay demonstrate a solid command of the course’s themes and readings?
- Does the essay accurately define and use key course concepts?
- Does the essay situate its argument within a broader disciplinary context?

### **Quality of the Writing**

- Clarity of expression: is the expression of ideas clear?
- Persuasiveness of the argumentation: How persuasive is the argument?
- Whether the essay’s structure is clear and logical: Is the essay’s structure clear and logical?

### **Organization and Mechanics**

- Clear organization: introduction, transition sentences to connect major ideas, and conclusion
- Proper grammar and punctuation, accurate word choice, and correct spelling
- Use and integration of quotations
- Proper citation of scholarly ideas

**Grading efficiently:** Identify common problems students had with an assignment and prepare a handout addressing those problems. This helps you to avoid having to write the same comments multiple times. It

also enables you to address the problem in more detail and helps students realize that others share the same problems.

***Making sure your comments are useful:*** Make sure you have adequately explained the reason for the grade. Avoid one word comments such as "good" or "unclear." Explain your thinking in concrete terms. Write specific comments in the margin and more general comments at the end of the assignment. Give students a good sense of how they might improve their work. Don't comment only on weaknesses or omission. Also identify strengths.

### **Grading Class Participation**

Establish clear criteria and let the students know what they are. For example:

0 Absent.

1 Present, not disruptive.

- Tries to respond when called on but does not offer much.
- Demonstrates very infrequent involvement in discussion.
- Often unprepared

2 Demonstrates adequate preparation: knows basic reading and lecture materials, but does not show evidence of trying to interpret or analyze them.

- Offers straightforward information (e.g., straight from the lecture or reading), without elaboration or very infrequently (perhaps once a class).
- Does not offer to contribute to discussion, but contributes to a moderate degree when called on.
- Demonstrates sporadic involvement.

3 Demonstrates good preparation: knows the reading or lecture material well, has thought through implications of them.

- Offers interpretations and analysis of case material (more than just facts) to class.
- Contributes well to discussion in an ongoing way: responds to other students' points, thinks through own points, questions others in a constructive way, offers and supports suggestions that may be counter to the majority opinion.
- Demonstrates consistent ongoing involvement.

4 Demonstrates excellent preparation: has analyzed the topic exceptionally well, relating it to readings and other material (e.g., lectures, readings, course material, discussions, etc.).

- Offers analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of case material, e.g., puts together pieces of the discussion to develop new approaches that take the class further.
- Contributes in a very significant way to ongoing discussion: keeps analysis focused, responds very thoughtfully to other students' comments, contributes to the cooperative argument-building, suggests alternative ways of approaching material and helps class analyze which approaches are appropriate, etc.
- Demonstrates ongoing very active involvement.

## **8 / Technology and Teaching**

According to one recent estimate, a typical college student will read eight books this semester--but 2,300 Web pages and 1,281 Facebook profiles. The student will write 42 pages, but over 500 email messages.

Technology, in short, is an integral part of today's students' lives. How can we use technology to enhance learning?

Columbia offers a very easy way to facilitate communication with your students and to give your class a web presence. Called *Courseworks*, this resource allows you to quickly create a course website.

Like Web CT and Blackboard, *Courseworks* allows you to place your syllabus, reading list, and other class resources – including film clips, slides, maps, animations or audio clips -- on a password protected website. It also allows you to easily send email messages to your students, to run discussion groups, and to poll your students.

You may wish to experiment with more advanced tools that emphasize collaboration, active engagement, and social interaction. Wikis, blogs, mash-ups, podcasts, tags, and social networking are the buzz words of Web 2.0. These technological innovations offer opportunities to students to:

- learn from one another
- share resources, and
- engage in collaborative projects.

### *A Glossary of Web 2.0 Terms*

**Blog:** An online journal.

**Mash-up:** A web application that combines data from more than one source. An example might involve plotting social phenomenon on a Google map.

**Podcast:** A digital recording, which almost any user can create, which is broadcast online.

**Social networking:** A website that allows users to link to, interact with, and share information with one another.

**Tagging:** User-assigned commentary (or tags) to text, images, and other resources.

**Wiki:** A site that allows users to add and edit content collectively.

## **9 / Writing Letters of Recommendation**

You will be asked repeatedly during your academic career to write letters of recommendation. These letters are of the utmost importance. The strongest letters are those with the most specifics.

Before writing a letter, meet with the student and ask about the student's accomplishments and objectives. Also, get material you can draw on, including a resume, a transcript, a list of the student's accomplishments and extracurricular activities, and copies of the student's essays.

Be candid with the student. Do not agree to write a letter if you do not know a student well. If you do not feel that you can write a strong, supportive letter, say so and recommend that the student find someone more appropriate.

In writing a letter, you need to:

**1. Establish your credibility and describe your relationship with the student.**

Identify yourself, explain how long and how well you have known the student and in what capacity.

**2. Describe the student's intellectual potential, skills, personal qualities, and interpersonal and communication skills with specifics.**

Avoid vague generalities. Is the student an especially original or analytical thinker, or an unusually articulate speaker or skilled writer? Is the student especially reliable, motivated, empathetic, or responsible? Does the student have special leadership skills or is the student able to work collaboratively?

**3. Include descriptions of the student's written work.**

Be sure to make the significance of the student's writing clear to non-specialists.

**4. Address any weaknesses or ambiguities in the student's record.**

Your letter will be more credible if you include an area where the student needs improvement. And it will be a strong letter if you can describe the student's recognition of this weakness and her or his plans to improve.

## **10 / Teaching and the Academic Job Market**

About half of all job questions at the most recent Modern Language Association convention involved teaching. Among the most popular questions were these:

- How would you teach an introductory class?
- What books would you assign and how many?
- What are the key themes or questions you would explore in class?
- What upper level undergraduate and graduate classes would you like to teach?
- How will you engage and motivate students?
- What kinds of assignments do you find most effective?
- How do you teach students to engage in a discussion in a civil and respectful manner?
- What do you consider the relationship between teaching and research?

Why so many questions about teaching? In part this is because over half of Ph.D.s will teach at institutions in which teaching is as important, if not more important, than research. But it is also because most colleges and universities expect new hires to "hit the ground running." Few have the time or interest in providing on the job training in teaching.

Even elite research universities have begun to attach a priority to teaching. These institutions have also discovered that teaching is a useful proxy for a wide range of issues that search committees consider important, including candidates' familiarity with the literature in a particular field as well as their conceptual skills and intellectual breadth.

### ***How can you effectively market your teaching experience and skills?***

A **teaching portfolio** can be an important asset when you look for a job. It provides evidence of your teaching experience and showcases your teaching achievements.

A teaching portfolio should include:

**1. A brief table of contents**

**2. A personal statement**, typically two to four pages long, that describes your teaching philosophy, pedagogical strategies, and objectives. It should explain how you use technology in instruction; the relationship you see between teaching and research; and how you integrate writing instruction into your courses.

**3. A list of courses taught, supplemented with syllabi and classroom handouts.** You want to demonstrate how you structure courses, the kinds and amounts of reading you assign, and the helpful supplementary materials that you create for your students.

**4. Evidence of effective teaching**, including teaching evaluations. Keep copies of teaching evaluations, including student comments. You can't count on your department to keep copies of these records.

**5. Supporting materials**, such as a videotape that offers an example of your teaching and statements from professors that document your teaching ability and commitment to high quality teaching and advising. The faculty letters should also refer to any opportunities that they have had to observe your teaching and any discussions that they have had with you about pedagogy.