

Five Teaching Strategies That Work

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A class is an interaction, an exchange of ideas between the students and instructor, and between the students. The following strategies can help an instructor to maintain the attention and energy of the class and generate new ideas, debates and questions.

1. **Write an effective syllabus:** Students tackle difficult subjects when they understand the importance of the topic. It helps if the readings in a syllabus represent interesting ideas and have a compelling intellectual core. Here are some concrete strategies.
 - Consider starting with 3-4 sessions of orienting and big-picture foundational texts.
 - Case studies or news articles can lighten the mood and add context to abstract and complex topics.
 - Assign an article and its critique in the same week, or find other ways to make the readings for the week speak to each other.
 - Assign the pieces you enjoy reading. Students are still developing a ‘taste’ for good scholarship. If the instructor finds a reading boring, it will make lectures boring.
 - Tell students what is interesting about the text, and why they should read it, to motivate reading. Consider having reading notes be a part of the assessment (students can choose a subset of weeks to write these notes. The notes can be written in google forms to streamline assessment).
2. **Create interesting assignments that have clearly articulated learning objectives:**
 - *Have students write their final paper as drafts:* This strategy requires significant assessment time for the instructor and is workable in smaller classes. Students appreciate this process as it helps them find a topic early on in the semester, and to pursue it while receiving focused guidance.
 - *Stress the application of theory to empirical examples:* In an undergrad class, we had all read a newspaper article relevant to the readings. We then brainstormed what would be a research question based on this article. In a grad class, we considered a range of policy instruments, and then tried to think through the

revenue implications of the different instruments – in which of those would the state recover revenue vs. spend money vs. no difference.

- *Write detailed assignment guidelines*: These serve as a rubric and provide another point of interaction with students (e.g. remind them of the parts of the paper – question, argument, provide guidance on content or how to choose a topic).
3. **Lecture less**: Substitute some lecture time for class discussion, student summaries of the readings, in-class exercises, and writing prompts.
 - Effective in-class group exercises take time to organise and don't always work. Individual or paired in-class work is more reliable. Having pairs of students exchange writing prompts, the first page of their term papers – it creates a few minutes of student interaction and adds energy to the class.
 - One example would be to start each class with a writing prompt (e.g. students write for 2-5 minutes about their term papers, the key argument of the class's readings, or a more opinion-based question); ask for a few responses and use those to guide lecture. This is a good way to start class off in an interactive way in each session (a writing prompt followed by discussion; this can be done in less than 10 minutes).
 4. **Try in-class writing prompts**: I have found that both Masters and Bachelors students find in-class writing exercises to be useful. These allow for a 5 minute space for reflection, re-orient class energy, and allow students to come up with a considered reflection on the readings. For those classes where students are writing a serious term paper, the writing exercises can also help students break through writing resistance, articulate their questions and arguments in class thus allowing for a class-wide discussion of writing strategies. Writing prompts can be exchanged with partners for added interaction. One student told me that the exercises helped in 'getting my mind to work'.
 5. **Plan for a varied class structure**: It helps to have a varied class structure, mixing lectures with discussion, student presentations of readings, class exercises, in-class writing prompts, peer review exercises and the like. Aim for a few strategies in each class. This keeps up the energy of the class, allows different learning styles to be engaged, and allows students to take more responsibility for their learning.