

One of my central goals as a history instructor is to challenge students intellectually while teaching skills that are applicable to other disciplines and employment opportunities. Analyzing primary sources and developing sound argumentative skills in writing are paramount. To help students become more effective writers, I operate from the premise that writing is a process that requires several drafts and revisions. Students find it helpful when I hand out examples of successful and problematic introductory paragraphs, discussing effective writing techniques aloud as a group. I give detailed rubrics and handouts notifying students of my expectations, and show examples of “A” quality papers so that students may emulate sound writing. These techniques help students become more effective communicators in writing, which can have positive spillover effects in public speaking and life more generally.

Students in my class also discover the value of becoming well-rounded, informed citizens through active participation in the public sphere. Some of my most lively experiences as an instructor occurred when I asked students to debate controversial topics related to course material. And while certain activities demonstrate clearly that the study of history has intrinsic value, I explain that students also learn practical skills. These include – but are not limited to – understanding the perspective of another person or culture; balancing the importance of individuals and structural forces; paying attention to the complexity of the human experience; developing a skeptical outlook of the world that demands evidence; detecting patterns over a series of events; and using logic and reason to evaluate arguments.

In order to maximize students’ absorption of content and skill, I have consciously separated the approach of lectures and reading. Textbooks provide background, breadth, factual information, and comprehensive coverage of content. Lectures provide some of this information, too, but on the whole, they offer in-depth coverage of two to three major points, and further, an opportunity to evaluate differing historical interpretations and discover how sound arguments require evidence. The result is a comprehensive synthesis where the two forms of knowledge necessarily complement one another. Since many students can point to prominent historical figures, but do not sufficiently grasp the importance of larger structural, economic, and geographical forces, my lectures often cover the movements of peoples and commodities across space and time. My Powerpoints are highly visual outlines that incorporate supplementary photographs, maps, political cartoons, engravings, tables, printed material, songs, videos, and other miscellaneous material. Instead of overwhelming students with excessive amounts of text on powerpoint slides, which is common for inexperienced professors, I phrase concepts as questions and take brief interludes in class for discussion. Slides showcasing “Key Questions to Consider,” moreover, alert students to central course themes and prepare them for short-answer questions on exams.

Many years of pedagogical research and quantitative studies suggest that students need much more than lecture to thrive. On that note, I have constructed an assignment in recent years that not only fosters group interaction – a crucial skill for the job market – but also facilitates student-centered learning where students are placed in charge of their own education. For this assignment, students must divide into groups, read the primary sources due for a particular week, and develop a list of questions, along with an accompanying activity, to run discussion. Effectively, they are in charge of the class. The group can choose, for example, to construct a board game involving the primary sources; bring candy or food as an inducement for participation; craft a Youtube presentation; make fliers and posters, etc. This assignment encourages students to develop their artistic creativity, collaborate, divvy up responsibilities, and

communicate clearly and confidently in front of the classroom. Throughout the process they often discover how difficult it is to be a teacher!

While the specifics may vary depending on the particular course, I typically assess student performance through two exams, an essay assignment, and a group primary source assignment. Measuring class participation for grades is not based solely on verbal participation, which can be intimidating and arbitrary for some students, but upon other writing assignments and group activities. Being flexible means that I make slight adjustments and fine-tuning for each new semester as I see what works well and what does not work well based on trial and error. Being warm, approachable, and encouraging means that I notify students of how they may best contact me, offer them multiple study tips, and make them aware of learning resources on campus. I pass out informal, mid-term evaluations to make periodic adjustments and tailor my teaching techniques to the particular personalities of each classroom. In keeping with the latest trends toward assessment in the classroom, I have students write down the most important points that they learned in lecture, compose questions on concepts that need clarification, complete exercises in synthesis and analysis, practice ungraded free-writes, and engage in a variety of other activities. Having students generate a few of their own test questions and lead discussion sections effectively puts students in charge of their own education and lays the groundwork for future educators and learners.