Teaching for the First Time
Fundamentals: Teaching + Learning Workshop Series

Explore the Sheridan Center’s online resource Teaching at Brown. Designed to help orient instructors new to teaching at Brown, it includes resources on getting started teaching at Brown; videos of faculty and student sharing their perspectives on teaching and learning at Brown; and “Teaching at Brown: From A to Z”, listing key campus resources and unique Brown terms.

Preparing to Teach (things to think about before the Semester starts):

Prepare a Syllabus

The syllabus communicates to students the course expectations and structure, so it is critical that you fully understand what is being asked of students and what students can expect from the course and instructor(s). The syllabus should clarify the following:

- learning goals and objectives
- assignments, assessments, & grading policy
- course policies and procedures, disability support
- schedule & instructor contact details

Clarify roles and responsibilities

If you are co-teaching or teaching as part of a team, you may wish to raise some of the following questions:

- Will the team convene regular meetings?
- What is the role of TAs in this course? Should TAs attend lectures? Will TAs be provided with lesson plans/handouts or are they expected to develop their own?
- Who will guide the grading of student work? If there are different grades, how will grading be standardized?
- Who will hold office hours? How many? Where? What should one expect?

Familiarize yourself with the classroom and any instructional technology

Find the classroom location & learn to operate the lights, and instructional technology you will be using. Make sure you always have a backup plan of what to do should technology not be working and verify that you have access to all online resources for the course. This can help your first day run more smoothly. Getting used to the room can be helpful for new instructors nervous about teaching for the first time.

The First Day of Class (setting the tone for the semester):

Introduce yourself & set course goals & expectations:

You can never make a second first impression. The first class sessions will set the tone of the classroom environment and set the norms of student behavior in the course.

- Introduce the course (or laboratory or discussion section) and the expectations of the students (refer to the Course Syllabus).
- Consider how you would like to handle shopping period: At Brown students have 2 weeks to finalize their registrations. The student population may change during those first two weeks and accurate records may be difficult.
- Have a plan and practice ahead of time; teaching is a presentation.

1 [http://brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-learning/teaching-brown](http://brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-learning/teaching-brown)

2 Advice from Brown Faculty: [http://brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-learning/teaching-brown/a-z#shopping](http://brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-learning/teaching-brown/a-z#shopping)
Get to Know Your Students:
Understanding your students’ backgrounds can help you aim material at the right level. Understanding students’ expectations and interests can help you motivate your students to learn. Example activities include:

- Ask students to introduce themselves to the class and perhaps provide some information relevant to the topic of the course (in the classroom or online).
- Create and distribute a student questionnaire, where students can provide you with basic information about themselves, their background in the subject area and any particular concerns they may have about their ability to succeed in this course.
- Give students an opportunity to get to know each other. Ask a question that they can discuss in small groups of 2-3.
- Learn student’s names to encourage them to interact with you. At Brown, Banner has an online picture roster that you can print and take to class.
- Encourage students to see you during office hours.

Planning Classes and Engaging Students (advice for planning your course):

Plan Individual Class Sessions
Set goals for each class session and communicate them to the students to provide a roadmap for them. Clearly articulated learning objectives help your students differentiate among different types of knowledge, focus on important details, balance their independent learning with your guidance, and increase their ability to guide their own learning. You can post a class outline and any announcements online or on a projector or board at the front of the classroom.

As you develop lesson plans for each class session, it may help to consider:

- What do I want my students to learn from this session?
- What learning activities will best support those learning goals?
- How will I know if students have achieved those learning goals?
- How does this class session fit into the overall course and into the class sessions that precede and follow this one? How will I help students understand that?

Engage Students
The more you diversify your material and repeat important concepts using different techniques, the more likely your students are to learn the concepts at a deeper level. As you plan for a particular class session, it may useful to think about:

- How might I use images and audiovisual resources to reinforce concepts I am explaining or to help bring material to life for students?
- Have I created opportunities for hands-on, active learning? This can help students take ownership of the material, and allow them to learn from each other. This is also an opportunity to regain students whose focus may have wandered.
- Do I ask questions of my students and provide them with opportunities to ask questions? This not only provides feedback so that you know how the pacing of your class is going, but also allows students to clarify points of confusion on the spot.

Provide your students with feedback:
Formative feedback provides the students with information that allows them to modify their thinking or approaches to studying to improve their learning. It can also be feedback collected by the instructor with the purpose of modifying and improving the course. Formative feedback does not need to connect to a grade and should occur frequently to help your students succeed in the course.
Tips for Teaching Science Laboratories:
Laboratory environments address many different types of teaching from pre-lab lectures, to organizing group work and providing assessment to students on their work. In laboratories the instructor helps the students to think through the concepts underlying the experiments they are performing, and ensure the experiments run smoothly logistically. Instructors must know the lab methods thoroughly to help students with both logistical and procedural questions and understand the connections between the overall course learning goals and the laboratory activities. To help with these goals consider:

- Meeting with the faculty teaching the lecture component of the course to better understand the expectations of the lab and how it fits into the broader course goals. See Clarifying Roles & Expectations above.
- Creating a pre-lab assignment to help students understand the theory and principles addressed in the lab and how the lab relates to the course content.
- Designing a pre-lab introductory lesson that connects concepts in the course lecture and pre-lab assignment to those in the laboratory. Outlining the lab logistics for the students can help them focus on the goals of the day’s experiment and get them thinking about interpretations or data analysis that they may be performing later on.
- Asking questions that prompt student discussion (e.g. “What do you understand from X?” rather than “Do you have any questions?”). Guiding questions can encourage students to think one step further, consider the relationship between the activities and the lab’s goals or keep them heading in the right direction.
- Summarizing the major points of the exercise at the end of the laboratory period.

Gauging Student Learning:
Ask Questions:
Asking your students questions and encouraging them to ask you questions lets you assess what they know and can help keep them focused on the class. It is okay to not be able to answer a question on the spot. You can always ask if other students know the answer or how they might find the answer (and then let them search for or discover the solution). The key is to get back to them at the next class with more information. When asking questions it is helpful to remember:

- Give students ample time to respond to questions. Some students take a moment or two to mull over an answer before they are ready to speak.
- Vary the kinds of questions you ask.
- You can collect questions ahead of time or after class, using a class discussion board (or google forms, email, etc.) or 3x5” cards in the classroom. Consider asking students to answer a question or respond to what they are most confused about or interested in from the day’s topic.
- When a student asks a question, engage the rest of the class in your answer (e.g., repeat the question so that everyone has heard it, seek answers or input from other students in the room)

Hold Office Hours:
Office hours can be helpful to you as an instructor as they provide an opportunity for you to get to know your students and get immediate feedback on their backgrounds and progress in the course. For students they provide a chance to experience personalized teaching and learn through discussion with an expert. You can consider taking a poll to see what times might work for students and encouraging your students during class to seek out office hours.
Becoming a Better Teacher (continue your development as a teacher):

**Reflect after each class:**
Taking time after each class session to consider what went well and what could be improved can help you prepare for the next class and prepare for future courses.
Consider: Did students have lots of questions? Did I time things well? Did I accomplish my goals? What could I do better next time?

**Solicit student feedback on your teaching:**
Mid-Semester Feedback can provide valuable information about the progress of your course and help you improve your teaching mid-semester
- Ask your students for feedback (e.g., in a survey). Students appreciate knowing you are interested in their opinion and can feel more invested in the course. Making your own feedback form can be useful later on when you are looking for information to include in a teaching statement for a job application or tenure/promotion review.

**Ask for feedback from others:**
An impartial observer can help you focus on your students’ learning experience and provide useful feedback.
- Ask your faculty supervisor (if you are a TA) or a departmental colleague (if you are a faculty member or postdoc) to observe your class and give you feedback. An impartial observer can help you concentrate on your student’s learning experience and provide useful feedback.
- Request a free and confidential Teaching Observation from the Sheridan Center’s trained consultants: [http://brown.edu/sheridan/consultations/teaching-observations](http://brown.edu/sheridan/consultations/teaching-observations).

**Resources from Brown & the Sheridan Center:**

Explore these topics on the Center’s website ([http://brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-learning](http://brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-learning)):
- Teaching at Brown
  - Getting Started Teaching at Brown
  - Teaching at Brown: From A to Z
- Teaching Assistants
  - TA Handbooks and Tips
  - First Day(s) of Class
- Feedback on Teaching: Feedback from Students
- Course Design: Creating a Syllabus
- Effective Classroom Practices: Teaching Labs

Attend another session of the Sheridan Center’s Fundamentals: Teaching + Learning Workshop Series (Interactive Classrooms, Grading Strategies, Designing Grading Rubrics, Classroom Communication, Syllabus Design) or another Sheridan Center program.

See Upcoming Events on the Center’s website: [http://brown.edu/sheridan/upcoming-events](http://brown.edu/sheridan/upcoming-events).

Sign up for the Sheridan Center’s Teaching Certificate I program. To learn more or to register, see [http://brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-certificates/certificate-i](http://brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-certificates/certificate-i).

**Helping students in distress**
Faculty are teachers, mentors, and advisors to students and can become aware of a variety of student issues from academic struggling to emotional or psychological distress. *There are a variety of resources at Brown to support students in distress*, see the Student Life Key Contacts for information of whom to contact: [http://brown.edu/Administration/Campus_Life/cr_faculty/index.html](http://brown.edu/Administration/Campus_Life/cr_faculty/index.html).