

## Top Qualities of an Effective Teacher

The skills needed for effective teaching involve more than just expertise in an academic field. You must be able to interact with people and help them understand a new way of looking at the world. This is not an easy job! Although there are many different ways to teach effectively, good instructors have several qualities in common. They are prepared, set clear and fair expectations, have a positive attitude, are patient with students, and assess their teaching on a regular basis. They are able to adjust their teaching strategies to fit both the students and the material, recognizing that different students learn in different ways. As a teacher, you are a role model who sets the tone for the class. If you are able to show enthusiasm and commitment, your students are more likely to reciprocate. Conversely, when you are negative, unprepared, or impatient, these qualities will be reflected in the attitudes of your students. Undergraduate students at Georgetown have high expectations of their instructors, and they also have many competing interests beyond the course you are teaching. Give them a reason to remember your class as an important part of their college experience!

### POSITIVE

Keep your students engaged with a positive attitude. Teaching is most effective when students are motivated by the desire to learn, rather than by grades or degree requirements. Many first-time TAs are confused by the new authority of being a teaching assistant, and mistake intimidation for respect. Think of your students as teammates, not adversaries. Learning and teaching are challenging, but that doesn't mean that you can't have fun in the classroom. Stay focused, but don't be afraid to be creative and innovative. Allow yourself to be enthusiastic and find ways to let students see what is interesting about your subject.

### PREPARED

You should know the course material. If students are required to attend lectures and read assignments, then it seems reasonable that you would do the same. Most faculty expect graduate TAs to attend lectures, especially if they have never taken or taught the course. Review key concepts and ideas if you are unclear about them, particularly if it has been a while since you have worked with the topics you will be teaching. Think about how the material can be most effectively demonstrated and design a strategy. Write an outline or take notes to follow during a lecture, and prepare your overheads, diagrams, handouts and other aids well in advance. Don't wait until the morning of the class!

### ORGANIZED

Have a plan for what you want to teach. Your job is to illustrate key points and essential context, to help students integrate all of their work (reading, labs, exams, papers, lectures, etc.) for the course. Given that there is never time to teach everything, choose the most important concepts and show how they are related. Explain ideas so students are able to build on material they have already mastered, whether from your course or previous classes. Don't just focus on what you happen to be teaching today. Show students how what they are learning now is connected to material covered later in the course. Keep your long term goals in mind, pace yourself so that you don't run out of time at the end, and try to end every class with a conclusion.

## CLEAR

Effective teachers can explain complex ideas in simple ways. As you develop expertise in an academic field, it is easy to forget that students may have no prior knowledge of fundamental concepts that you take for granted. Help students understand and use new terminology, so they can become fluent in the language of your discipline. Many concepts can be more effectively demonstrated with visual aids such as diagrams, drawings, charts, slides, etc. Make sure that they are large enough to see, neat enough to read, and don't stand in the way! Think about the role body language can play. Having your teaching observed by someone else (or even better, having it videotaped) can reveal habits that you would never notice on your own.

## ACTIVE

Keep your students thinking. Unless they are actively using the concepts you are teaching, most students will remember only a small fraction of what you teach. A lecture is an efficient way to deliver information to large numbers of people, but it is an inefficient way to provide students with lasting knowledge and skills. Consider using at least some classroom time for activities other than traditional lectures, discussions or question and answer sessions. Problem solving exercises in small groups can take no more than a few minutes, yet allow students to engage with the material being covered.

## PATIENT

Remember what it is like to learn something for the first time. Give students time to process information and answer questions. Know that it is fine for students to make mistakes if they can learn from them. Realize that learning can be hard work, even for the most motivated students. Rather than blaming students when things don't go right, consider ways you could change your approach to reach them more effectively. Concepts, background information or conclusions that seem obvious to you may not be so clear to someone who is new to the subject. Be patient with yourself, too. Teaching can be difficult and frustrating at times. Give yourself the same opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them.

## FAIR

Consider what it would be like to be one of your students. Chances are you would want an instructor who set clear expectations, applied them consistently and could admit when they were wrong. Whether you mark off points on an exam question, give a low grade on a paper, or penalize someone for a late assignment, you should be able to explain why you did it. Of course it helps if you have already outlined clear policies, both for the entire course and for each assignment. Once you have set standards, it is very important to apply them equally and consistently, otherwise you will lose credibility. On the other hand, if you make a mistake or don't know the answer to a question, it is much better to acknowledge rather than ignore it.

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## TECHNOLOGY TIP

Since it is often hard to remember what it is like to encounter your discipline's material at an early stage, peer instruction offers an alternative to the "sage on stage" model. Peer instruction, which usually happens in small group activities or paper response assignments, allows students to get feedback at their own level of discourse and understanding. This provides a helpful complement (not

replacement) to instructor feedback. Technology such as the discussion tool in Blackboard helps peer groups stay in contact over long distances and over different periods of time.

## WHAT'S YOUR LEARNING STYLE?

CNDLS has several ways of helping you discover the learning styles you tend to favor. Being more aware of your own tendencies will help you recognize similar or different preferences in your students and react accordingly. Besides the more well-known Myers-Briggs test and visual, auditory, and tactile differences, there are also documented differences in how people problem solve. For instance, you might prefer identifying problems, evaluating solutions, or testing solutions. This might affect what assignments you give, what you focus on in a lecture or discussion, and how you weight grades. Visit us to find out more, either in our suite, Car Barn 314, or online at [the CNDLS website](#).

## TECHNOLOGY TIP

E-mail is an excellent and perfectly acceptable way to give feedback to your students. In fact, several professors ask their students to turn in assignments over e-mail. By having a digital copy of students' work, faculty can make comments using the editing tools in Word, have access to the papers wherever there is an internet connection, and keep up with less paper-work, not to mention having a date and time record of when the student turned in the work.