
On Course

A WEEK-BY-WEEK GUIDE
TO YOUR FIRST SEMESTER
OF COLLEGE TEACHING

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BEFORE THE BEGINNING

The Syllabus

The teaching process starts with the construction of the syllabus, the document that will guide you and your students throughout the course. You'll labor intensely over it, hand it out on the first day, and continue to consult it throughout the semester. And while this may sound like a Zen koan, you begin a syllabus by thinking about the end of the semester.

The syllabus is a required element for most college courses, and an essential tool for helping you stay on track and retain your sanity throughout the semester. It puts the design of the course into concrete form, so syllabus writing really means course planning. The process of drafting the syllabus forces you to think about the learning objectives you want to establish for the students in the course, and those objectives should be formulated by answering a simple question: What should students *know or be able to do* as a result of taking this course? Put more broadly, when students walk out of the final exam, or hand you that final paper, in what ways will you have changed them?

This can seem like a daunting question. It's much easier to think about your course according to the coverage model: What material do I need to cover in this course, and in my discipline, between now and the end of the semester? But the coverage

model, by which an unfortunate number of college and university faculty still operate, considers only two elements in the teaching process: you (as the coverer) and the course material (the covered).

Raise your hand if you can identify the missing element in the teaching-learning triad.

If your hand is waving wildly, and you're dying to shout "Students, students!" you are ready to begin writing your syllabus. The coverage model constructs teaching as a performative act that involves pulling material out of your head and throwing it on the desks of your students; their job is to figure out the best way to lap it up and hold it down. The model you *should* follow in planning your course, and writing your syllabus, entails your thinking first and foremost about what knowledge or skills students should learn in your course, and then thinking about the best ways for them to learn that knowledge or those skills. This may seem like a subtle shift, but it's an essential one—it views teaching through the lens of learning, rather than focusing on teaching and letting the students learn as they can.

The course plan, and the syllabus, need to focus on the students. If you have designed a course which could theoretically be taught to an empty room of iPod recorders, without any real change in your course plan, you probably need to head back to the drawing board.

Just about every chapter you'll read in this book will address the importance of focusing on students and their learning, so I'll stop lecturing you at this point and begin letting the practical advice about syllabus construction enact this learning-centered pedagogical model. The rest of the chapter is organized around the elements that a syllabus should contain, with a discussion of the parts that require some decision-making or that might not occur to you on your first trip through the syllabus grinder. The fol-

lowing chapter, on the first days of the semester, will include some suggestions for ways to introduce the syllabus to your students.

Course Title, Time, and Location

If you need too much advice in this area, you might want to reconsider your career as a college professor. I will note that the room location and times of the course are worth including; in the first week or two of the semester I frequently have to glance at my syllabus, as I'm rushing across campus and spilling hot tea on myself, to remind myself what room I'm teaching in. Your students may be doing the same thing, so it's helpful for everyone to have that information at the front of the syllabus.

Contact Information

Provide your office number and your office hours (check with your department chair, if you don't know already, on how many office hours you are expected to hold per week; most colleges have a stated policy on this), as well as the best methods for reaching you outside of class. If you have a strong preference for either e-mail or the phone, give them that information.

The only sticky question here is whether to give students your home (or cell) telephone number. It is not at all necessary, since it's doubtful that any student will have such an emergency with the subjunctive mood in Spanish that they will need to interrupt you on a Friday evening. So if you're uncomfortable with the idea of students contacting you outside of the official channels of teacher-student communication (the classroom, office hours, office phone, and your school e-mail account), leave it off.

I know of only one good reason to include it, and it's the rea-

son I have been putting it on my syllabus for the past six years. Offering on your syllabus your home or cell phone number can be a symbolic gesture that demonstrates to the students your eagerness to help them learn (as in: call me anytime you want to talk about *Beowulf*, kids; I'm always up for it). The gesture is small, but in the long and complicated relationship that you are trying to forge with your students, even the small things can help. And while students vary from campus to campus in their willingness to seek help from their professors outside of normal channels, I would estimate that during the six years of full-time teaching in which I have been putting my home phone number on the syllabus, I haven't received more than ten calls.

Course Description

Real thinking about the course begins here, at the front of your syllabus, the first place that should capture students' interest in the course. The course description should fit within the space of a paragraph or two, no more than half a page, and should function like an abstract for a scholarly article. It should provide a brief overview of the main elements of the course: the subject matter, the course promises, and the major assignments the students will complete.

I would argue, though, that the best course descriptions contain something more—an explanation of why the knowledge and skills you are offering to your students *matter*: how will their fifteen weeks with you and this material make them into a better student, a better citizen, or a better human being? Will they be better equipped with skills they will need for their other courses (writing, speaking, calculating, theorizing, and so forth)? Or better equipped to read and understand the daily news? Or more capable of making informed ethical decisions?

One means of helping students to see the importance of the course topic can be to frame the course as a whole with what a colleague of mine (Lucia Knoles, whom you will meet more formally in the second chapter) calls a "meta-question": a broad and important question which the content of the course will help them understand more deeply, and which ultimately will enable them to construct their own answer by the end of the term. My colleague teaches American literature and history, and her meta-question is a simple one: "What is an American?" Every book or essay they read during the semester, every work of art they consider or song they hear—all of them provide another bit of information or perspective to help students answer this question. By the end of the semester, the students are prepared to offer their own definitions of what it means to be an American. If you can identify a meta-question that will help you frame the course, the description is the place to ask that question and to help the students understand why it matters.

This section of the course description may sound a bit like a sales pitch, which is just fine. You want to convince them that they should take this course because it will be wonderful, not just because they have to fulfill a requirement. The course description offers you the first opportunity to make that case.

Course Promises

You won't see a section on the promises of the course on every syllabus you read, but the idea of the promises that you make to students has always struck me as an excellent way to entice them into the learning process. I am borrowing the idea of a "promising syllabus" from Ken Bain, who claims that the syllabi that he studied from outstanding teachers in higher education—though every one of them may not have used the exact same language—

all described in some way a series of promises that the course made to their students.

Promises can appear under different names—learning goals, learning objectives, course objectives, and so on—but the idea is that you are explaining to students what they will know and be able to do as a result of taking your course. Duffy and Jones make a distinction between “objectives” as measurable outcomes while “goals” are more impressionistic, hopeful outcomes (79–80)—but I’m not convinced that this distinction is important, so I am using the terms interchangeably here. Again, tune the language of this part of the syllabus to the frequency of student learning, rather than the language of material coverage. You should not promise, in other words, something like this:

- This course will review the history of western civilization from 1500 to the present, considering the historical forces that have shaped our contemporary American culture.

Promise this instead:

- Students will develop a rich understanding of western civilization from 1500 to the present, and will be able to analyze and discuss contemporary American culture in light of the historical forces that have helped to shape it.

Better still would be a set of more closely defined objectives that identify a handful of specific forces that you want them to understand.

Assuming that you can get this language down, and phrase your learning objectives as promises to your students, what kinds of promises should you be making to them? The literature on learning objectives in higher education, or the sorts of promises you can make to your students, is vast and ever-growing, so I’m going to jump backwards in time over most of it and return to a

source that still carries weight in higher education today (although its widest influence has been in elementary and high school education): Benjamin Bloom’s *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, written in 1956. In this book Bloom described a hierarchy of learning objectives that apply to all levels of schooling, including postsecondary education. Bloom’s work has been revised and updated and argued about over the intervening half a century; one recent contributor to this discussion is Norman Gronlund, whose *Writing Instructional Objectives for Teaching and Assessment* is now in its seventh edition. But you can find Bloom’s taxonomy easily enough by typing that phrase into any search engine; you’ll come back with lots of hits, all of which will list and define the six broad cognitive skills that Bloom identified: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. They ascend in difficulty, with the first levels serving as building blocks for future ones. So knowledge, for example, is required for comprehension, which encompasses both the ability to recall learned material and an awareness of its meaning and significance. Evaluation, or the ability to use criteria to make judgments of value, requires some development in all of the previous five categories.

How this translates practically into learning objectives for your syllabus requires thinking another step ahead. A useful article that makes use of both Bloom’s and Gronlund’s work in the context of higher education appeared in 2003 in the *Journal of Management Education*; it lists kinds of evidence that could be used to demonstrate a student’s successful mastery of any of Bloom’s categories. These examples of evidence coincide nicely with kinds of assignments you might give to your students, and with learning objectives you might list on your syllabus:

Knowledge: “definition, outlines, recall exercises and requests to reproduce knowledge acquisition”;

Comprehension: "comparison and contrast, paraphrasing, extension, and summary";

Application: "classification, development, modification, organization, and prediction";

Analysis: "breaking down, categorizing, classifying, differentiating";

Synthesis: "creative behaviors such as development of a research proposal or a scheme for classifying information, and the creation of new patterns or structures";

Evaluation: "assessments, critiques, and evaluations" (536).

So, for example, you might promise students that they will leave your course with the ability to paraphrase a complex article in your field, which both describes a learning objective (under the category of comprehension) and sets in place one or more of your assignments for the semester.

Of course, you will want to push your learning objectives as far as you can toward the highest cognitive levels of the list; you certainly want to move beyond simply asking students to memorize definitions or engage in other activities that just test their ability to memorize the facts and formulas of your discipline. Much of the specific knowledge that we have to offer to students will be of limited value to them in their careers (or will be out of date by the time they get into their careers), especially in the kinds of introductory courses you are likely to teach in the first part of your career, when many of your students will not be majors in your discipline. So you should think hard about what kinds of intellectual skills you are offering to your students. Aside from whatever knowledge you want students to take away from your course, what skills—such as synthesis, analysis, or evaluation—can you promise that you will at least help them develop or

hone in their fifteen weeks with you? Knowledge of a particular chemical formula, while necessary to pass your course, might not prove of much use to an eventual accountant; but that accountant's ability to evaluate the competing claims of two scientists on the reality of global warming will certainly affect decisions she makes as a citizen in a democracy and as a consumer.

Once you have identified both the knowledge and the intellectual skills that students will develop in your course, sketch them out in general terms on a piece of paper; then write them more specifically in relation to the knowledge base and terminology of your discipline; and finally, formulate them as the promises of your course. If you have framed the course with a meta-question, you will want to make sure to promise that you will help them answer the meta-question by the end of the semester.

Student Responsibilities/Course Policies

Of course, your promises to the students are premised on the assumption that they will make a good-faith effort to learn in the course. So the promises section of the course has to be balanced with a section outlining the responsibilities the students have in order to help you fulfill your promises to them. Many syllabi list what I am calling responsibilities here under a section called "policies," though I think the word "responsibilities" provides a nice complement to "promises."

In this section of the syllabus, outline all the expectations you have for students in terms of their behavior and work habits in the course (assignments and grading will be addressed in the next section). The three major issues that most syllabi address in this section are attendance, late work policies, and classroom behaviors. In all of these areas, keep in mind that there are no right answers. Talk to five different teachers, or read five different arti-

cles on these subjects, and you will hear five different opinions. Formulate these policies according to your personality and your developing teaching style.

On attendance, first, you have to decide whether you will take it and, if you do, how you will respond to students who do not attend. Eventually, after your first year or two of teaching, you will sort yourself into the kind of person who requires attendance or who doesn't; for now, here's a simple guideline. If you are teaching a class with twenty students or fewer, and will be teaching mostly through discussion, group work, and other interactive exercises, you should require attendance. Those kinds of activities depend upon students being in the classroom, and you will find attendance easy enough to take, after the first few weeks, by scanning seats or by checking names off when you collect or pass back work. Establish consequences for those who do not attend—some adjustment to the final grade for the course—though you should allow students an absence or two without penalty for emergencies that might arise.

If you are teaching a larger class, and are planning to rely more on lectures than discussion, you should still emphasize the importance of attending class, but you might also find that trying to keep track of attendance and calculate it into everyone's grades can be a tremendous time sink. I would hold off on requiring it for larger classes, at least in your first semester, and hang on until you've been through a few semesters before you decide what kind of attendance policies you want to set in your courses.

How you will handle late work—and you will get late work, I promise—is an equally open question. I know teachers who say that as long as the students do the work, they don't care when it comes in; I know others (including myself) who believe that students who turn in work late might be spending time on material we covered weeks ago, and not paying enough attention to the

material we are covering now—and so we penalize or simply don't accept late work. I'll return to this topic in more detail in Chapter 6, so I'll stick with general advice for the moment. If you feel confident enough to set a firm policy on late work before you start teaching, set it and note it in your syllabus here; if not, use a generic phrase like "All assignments must be submitted in class on the due dates," and then handle late work on a case-by-case basis.

Finally, you should note on your syllabus any expectations you have about classroom behaviors, both positive and negative. If you expect students to participate in every class, say so—and say why it's important for them to do so (see the explanation on my sample syllabus in Appendix A). If you want them to take notes on your lectures, say so. If you think steam will come out of your ears if you hear a cell phone go off in class, then let them know that all cell phones must be turned off. Focus on the main behaviors that you want to encourage and discourage—don't legislate every possible behavior you can imagine in the classroom, or they may feel as if they are being treated like schoolchildren.

On the other hand, if you have pet peeves that you know may influence your attitude toward a student, or your grading of him, you owe it to the students to give them fair warning about those pet peeves on the syllabus. If nothing makes you more angry than people wearing red shirts before 10:00 in the morning, make sure you address that specifically.

Evaluation

There are no right answers or easily formulas here, either—and lots of decisions to make. Begin with the simplest and most important one—will the students' major graded assignments be timed examinations, take-home exams, papers, oral presentations, or

some other product? You had four years of college yourself, and you'll undoubtedly speak with colleagues about their courses and assignments, so that will give you some ideas about the options available to you. You also probably have some idea about what constitutes a reasonable student workload in your discipline (if not, run the number and nature of your planned assignments by your department chair, and ask for her opinion).

Make your decisions here by looking back at your promises—don't just give three timed exams because that's what you think everyone else does, or assign a major research paper because that's what you had to do as an undergraduate. Look at each of the objectives you have established for the course, and then devise assignments that will let you know whether the students have achieved that objective.

Let's say you are teaching a media studies course, and you promise students that you will provide them with a vocabulary of terms to help them analyze the commercials they see on television outside of class. You have embedded two assignments in that promise: they need to have the knowledge of a set of media analysis tools, and they need to be able to use those terms to analyze a commercial they have never seen before. A two-part exam would fit the bill here: part one asks them to write definitions for the major terms of the course, and in part two you show them a commercial they have never seen before and ask them to provide a written analysis of it using the terms they have just defined.

An exam which asked these students to recite or remember analyses of videos you have already reviewed in class would not fulfill that objective; neither would a major research paper on the history of a particular film technique. You might of course have other objectives that such assignments would fulfill, but the key point here is that you should assign nothing that does not

help them fulfill one of your course promises. If you have established a solid set of promises, and offered the students more than simply the drilling of content in your discipline, you will still have a wide enough variety of choices in the assignments you can give to them. Don't limit yourself to what you know from your undergraduate experiences and what you see your colleagues doing; be creative, and find different ways to help them demonstrate to you that they have learned what you have asked of them. Think about how your discipline's content and skills might be useful to them even after graduation, and design an assignment that will help show them that—have them design a website for a famous historical figure or event, or analyze newspaper stories about global warming, or collaborate on business memos about an ethics breach, or write letters to the editor addressing a political crisis, or give a report to shareholders about a new product, or provide annotations to a poem. You don't need to reinvent the nature of student work in higher education, but one creative assignment like this in your first semester can make a big difference in students' perceptions of your course (and, therefore, in your student evaluations).

Once you have settled on the major assignments, you will have to make decisions about the extent to which smaller assignments—quizzes, homeworks, lab reports—factor into the student grades. Until you have a firm grasp on the campus culture where you are teaching, I would recommend including some level of weekly assignment that will ensure that students are keeping up with the assigned reading, and that will help you to gauge their understanding of that reading. Such assignments will benefit the students by requiring them to stay on top of the assigned work for the course; they will benefit you by letting you know whether students are doing the work, and whether they are having problems in any specific areas. This does not necessarily mean daily

quizzing, though that certainly is an option. A weekly quiz, as long as students don't know the day on which the quiz will be held, can serve the same purpose while requiring less grading from you.

A better option, one that should work in most disciplines, may be to give weekly writing exercises. A substantial amount of research has been done to demonstrate a link between writing and understanding—in other words, when you ask students to write out responses to a question or explanations of an issue or problem, it increases their understanding and retention of that issue (see Sorcinelli and Elbow in the “Resources” section at the end of the chapter). So one easy method to take advantage of this connection, and to ensure that students are keeping up with the work, is to take ten minutes at the beginning of one class per week and pose a thought question about that day's or week's reading; ask the students to write a paragraph or two in response to it, making sure they refer very specifically to the assigned work in their answers (see Chapter 4 for specific examples of these kinds of thought questions).

Grading such exercises does not have to represent a major time commitment. Instead of writing copious responses to each student, display a few sample responses on an overhead or a PowerPoint the first time you give the writing exercises back, and explain carefully what makes for a good response. Once you have done that, you can respond to the exercises with just a grade, and with a spoken explanation at the beginning of each class. Make the exercises count for something, but not much—in my classes, each writing exercise counts for 1 percent of the final grade.

This leads to the final issue to consider in grading, and in your syllabus—points, letter, or some combination of both? Chapter 6 offers a more detailed discussion of this issue and presents two

different systems for you to consider, so I'll hold off on this question until then. But whatever system you decide upon, spell it out in this section of the syllabus.

Academic Honesty

Your institution or department may have a specific statement about academic honesty that you must include on your syllabus, so check with your department chair on that. The undergraduate handbook or catalog may also have a statement that all the students will have seen or heard at orientation, so another option would be to cite that statement to them on the syllabus. But even when such statements are mandated, the decision about how to handle various kinds of academic dishonesty—cheating on a test, plagiarizing, students turning in identical work—will likely be left to you.

That there will be consequences to academic dishonesty deserves a mention on your syllabus, since it allows you to explain to them what would constitute academic dishonesty in your course (and that can vary on such things as the acceptability of students doing homework together, for example).

As for identifying the consequences of academic dishonesty, experience has taught me to be firm and threatening, but not so specific that you are locked into the same policy for every case. An easy way to do this is to borrow the kind of “weasel” language that deals with crimes in our legal system: “Plagiarism may be punished by failure of the assignment or the course,” or “Consequences for plagiarism can include zero points for the assignment, failure of the course, or expulsion from the college.” These kinds of statements convey the seriousness of the issue but still give you some flexibility in determining the right response to a specific case. Much more on this topic can be found in Chapter 9,

where I make specific recommendations on setting policies and handling breaches.

ADA Statement

Many schools also now require that the syllabus contain a statement that the institution and instructor will offer additional assistance to students with conditions that fall under the Americans with Disabilities Act. If your institution doesn't mandate such a statement, it is worth crafting a simple statement of your own indicating that students with special medical conditions or learning disabilities should come and speak with you about how you can ensure that their needs are accommodated in and out of the classroom in your course. Such a statement sends a positive message to the students about your ethos as a teacher, and of course it's also the right thing to do.

Schedule

My syllabi conclude with a detailed schedule that presents the readings, assignments, and topic of every class period throughout the semester; however, I have colleagues whose course schedules simply break the semester up into three or four big topic areas, give those areas a one-word title, and roughly correlate them with the weeks of the semester. The advantage of having a detailed schedule from the start is that it requires less thinking from me during the semester—I just have to check my syllabus to know what's coming on a particular day, as opposed to sitting down and doing course planning in the middle of the semester. The disadvantage is that the course never proceeds exactly as you hope it will, so in about half of my courses, I have to issue an

updated course schedule at some point in the semester, with a new listing of assignments and due dates.

Keep in mind that the students—and you yourself—will be juggling multiple courses, as well as their extracurricular commitments and perhaps jobs and crises in their personal lives, so it seems only fair to inform them from the start about the due dates for the major course assignments or exams. It's also a good idea to minimize the amount of course planning you have to do while you're trying to keep your kayak afloat in the midst of the raging river of the semester. You'll have more time now, before the semester begins, to do the work of breaking the semester down into topics and texts on a weekly basis than you will in the midst of it.

But you do want to allow yourself some room to make adjustments on the fly, so a useful way to proceed with that first semester course schedule is just to provide fifteen weekly headings, listing the topics and texts to be covered in that week, and including the exam days and due dates for major assignments. Fill in the readings and other details as you go, and be prepared for the fact that you may have to send around a schedule update at some point. Don't stick to the syllabus schedule just because it's in print, if you think a modification midway through the semester will make for a better course.

The subject of teaching with technology, and of putting courses online, begins in the second-week chapter, but I should note here that having your course available online—either as its own website, or in a Blackboard-style environment—enables you to make the syllabus an interactive document that can lead the students wherever they need to be on a particular day. An online syllabus might have links to assignment sheets, to study questions, to events that you are encouraging students to attend, and to mate-

rial on the Internet that you want them to see. If you keep a detailed schedule in your online syllabus, it will be much easier to make revisions to that schedule when your plans or due dates or assignments need adjustment in midstream. Even if you decide not to run a very technologically sophisticated course—which is a perfectly fine decision—it might be worthwhile to construct an interactive, online syllabus that contains the most up-to-date course schedule and serves as the official repository of the course's documents. Most institutions will have a virtual learning environment program (such as Blackboard) that enables you to do this very easily.

Finally, take a small step to help keep the chaos of your first semester at bay—something that I saw a colleague doing in her office and immediately adopted a few years ago. Wherever you do most of your school work—whether it's in your first office as a faculty member, or a shared office with other graduate students, or a corner of your basement—take the schedule sections of your syllabi (and you can annotate them as you go, filling in the details as you figure them out) and tape them to the wall, right next to each other. That way when you're trying to avoid grading papers or are finally finished watching that YouTube video someone e-mailed you and you are ready to start working, you'll be able to glance over and see exactly what you have coming from and for the students, and you can think more carefully and in advance about how to schedule your own time and work sessions throughout the semester.

Resources

Athanassiou, N., Jeanne McNett, and Carol Harvey. "Bloom's Taxonomy as a Learning Tool." *Journal of Management Education*, 47.5 (2003): 533–555.

This use of Bloom's taxonomy, unlike many sources you'll see on it, specifically applies to college and university teaching.

Bain, Ken. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004.

See pp. 74–75 for Bain's descriptions of the promising syllabus.

Bloom, Benjamin. *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*. New York: Addison-Wesley, 1956.

You'll find an edition of Bloom's book somewhere in your institution's library (perhaps even in your public library), sometimes in its original form, sometimes revised by later editors. The revised versions that I have seen have been aimed at K–12 teachers, so I think you're best off just heading back to the original work. But subsequent editions will probably be fine as well.

Duffy, Donna Killian, and Janet Wright Jones. "Stalking the Superior Syllabus." In *Teaching within the Rhythms of the Semester*, 55–119. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.

Duffy and Jones offer a very full analysis of how differently students can react to a syllabus, and use that analysis to argue for what they call an "enriched" syllabus—a monster of a document, size-wise, but one that contains features I don't include here, and are worth thinking further about. For example, they advocate leaving numbered blank spaces on the syllabus for students to write *their* learning objectives for the course (84), which would make for a great opening-day activity that you might add to the list of possible opening-day techniques you'll find in the next chapter.

Gronlund, Norman E. *Writing Instructional Objectives for Teaching and Assessment*, 7th ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003.

Like some of the revisions you'll find of Bloom's work, this one

is aimed mostly at K–12 teachers. Still, the language of writing learning objectives will cross the boundaries into syllabus construction, so it might be worth a look.

Lang, James. “The Promising Syllabus.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53.2 (September 1, 2006): C2.

This column on the syllabus includes additional thoughts from Ken Bain on the promising syllabus, which came from an interview I conducted with him on the topic.

Sorcinelli, Mary Deane, and Peter Elbow, eds. *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 69 (Spring 1997).

This issue of *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* contains a dozen essays on the use of writing in the college classroom, all of which are grounded firmly in research on writing and learning. It’s an excellent starting point if you are interested in pursuing that research further, and it also describes some great practical strategies.

First Days of Class

I walked into my very first college course as a teacher three weeks before my twenty-second birthday, in late August of 1991, the first week of my first year of graduate school. It was English composition, 8:30 A.M., and I had seven students enrolled. Concerned about the fact that I was probably only three years older than the students I would find in the class, I decided to forget about trying to impress them with my authority, and to try instead to seem like one of them—so I was wearing sandals, a pair of navy-blue khakis that I had cut raggedly into shorts, and a white T-shirt. I was nervous, so I kept it short. I gave them the syllabus and the first assignment sheet for the course, read through both documents, and then let the students go.

I’m willing to shoulder only part of the blame for all of the bad decisions I’ve just described (if you think you can identify all of them, put your name and address on a postcard, send it to me, and you’ll be eligible for a drawing for a free lunch). Like the other new graduate student instructors that year, I had spent a day or two at a teaching orientation sponsored by the university, and I was enrolled in a graduate course called “Teaching Writing” that would meet weekly throughout the semester (though it hadn’t met yet). Despite these kindly (but flimsy) efforts by the