

Strategies for Getting Students to Prepare for Class



Here are some ideas for helping ensure that students come prepared for class. They are divided into two sections, Grade-based Strategies, the Soft Incentives.

Grade-based Incentives

Pre-class assessments. Have students submit a low-stakes assessment before class. Set the deadline far enough before class to give yourself time to look over the results.

Examples:

1. **Online quizzes.** Using Sakai or a commercial homework system, give students opportunities to practice thinking through problems dependent on their having prepared for class. Avoid questions that students can easily find answers to without actually doing the reading. The more question types you can use that are automatically graded, the more questions you can give them. You may also consider a mix of automatically-graded questions and essay or open-ended questions.
2. **Just-in-Time Teaching.** Students respond electronically to carefully constructed web-based assignments due shortly before class. The instructor reads the student submissions "just-in-time" to adjust the classroom lesson to suit the students' needs. The heart of JiTT is the "feedback loop" formed by the students' outside-of-class preparation that fundamentally affects what happens during the subsequent in-class time together. More at: <http://jittdl.physics.iupui.edu/jitt/>
3. **Posting questions online.** Using your Sakai course discussion forums, post several questions which will also be discussed in next class. As part of participation grade, have each student post at least two more original questions, due 24 hours before class begins. The questions might be used in several ways:
 - The instructor can combine his/her questions with those of students, for use in class. In a discussion section, students can be divided into groups to address several questions, and then report back to the class.
 - Before class, have each student post answers to a minimum of two questions, whether from instructor or peers.
4. **Preparation log.** Have students keep a log of how much time they spend preparing for class and how productively that time was spent.
5. **Give students tasks to accomplish as they read.** Examples:
 - Ask students to respond in writing before class to several thought provoking questions. To insure they respond thoughtfully, ask students to email their responses to you the day before class, or have several of them post their responses on a web site where all the students are asked to read them prior to class. Consider having them bring a copy. Grade them as pass/fail.

- Give students an empty or partially completed outline or matrix to complete.
- Have students take notes on “survival cards,” or 3x5 cards that they turn in to you on the day the reading assignment is due, and return the cards for use on the day of a quiz or exam.
- Ask students to write potential test questions based on the reading; have students compose a summary (or abstract) and/or reflection of the reading that highlights how the reading expands upon what they have learned.

Beginning-of-class assessments. At the beginning of class, give students a low-stakes assessment, group assignment, or discussion question that is dependent on them having prepared for class.

6. **Poll questions.** Quick and effective way to gauge student understanding of assigned material.
7. **Memory matrix.** Give students a matrix, a table with row and column headings filled in – and have them fill in the blank cells, based on the material they read for class.
8. **Minute paper.** Give student two or three minutes at the beginning of the class to answer two questions: “What is the most important thing you learned from the assignment?” and “What important questions remain unanswered?” Collect and

Soft Incentives

Communicate Your Expectations about Preparation

9. **Start with the syllabus.** One of the common causes of under-preparation for class is that students are unsure of your expectations. Clearly stating your expectations in class and on your syllabus is the first step.
10. **Assess preparation early.** On the first day of class, inform students that during the next class meeting there will be an activity (such as a quiz, an informal assessment measure, or group activity) dependent on completion of an assignment. This should help them get into a routine of being prepared for class.
11. **Avoid reading for your students.** If students believe you will cover what was important in the reading during lecture, then they have no reason to do the reading themselves. Make it clear that class time will be used to work with and not review the material.

Give Students Guidance on Reading Assignments

12. **Provide students with reading or study questions in advance of reading assignments.** These will help students focus their attention on what is most important.
13. **Offer students effective textbook study practices.** Because many college students don’t read college-level material well, they need to be introduced to effective study strategies such as rereading, asking for help, and asking questions in class. Make it clear that textbook reading requires effort.

Make the Relevance of Assignments Explicit

14. **Stress the importance of preparation.** If assignments do not seem relevant to the class, students will quickly decide that preparation is not essential. Deliberately state how an assignment relates to material, what skills they will be practicing, what knowledge they will gain, and/or how it will help them in the discipline.
15. **Relate assignments to students' interests and experiences.** Include students in planning and choosing appropriate and interesting assignments.
16. **Be a good role model.** Let your students know that you read—not only the course texts but other texts and books.

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