

Common Concerns for First-Time Instructors

Preparing to teach in a university setting for the first time can feel daunting. This document describes concerns that are commonly voiced by first-time instructors and strategies to address them.

During the registration process, we asked you to indicate any concerns that you have about your upcoming teaching experiences. The topics below were those most commonly described by registrants. If you would like to talk in more detail about any of these concerns, or a different concern, please contact a member of The Teaching Center staff. More information on best teaching practices and other strategies can be found on our website (teachingcenter.wustl.edu) and the handouts in your folder.

1. I'm really nervous about being an instructor for the first time. How can I make sure I do a good job?

- One of the best ways to combat nervousness is to make sure that you are prepared for class, especially on the first day. Read the syllabus, understand the course goals, and know your role and responsibilities for the class setting.
- Before the semester begins, talk to the instructor of the course and graduate students who have served as AIs in previous semesters. Through these conversations you can learn more about student expectations from an AI and ways to encourage students' success throughout the semester.
- Throughout the semester, take time to reflect on your teaching and consider things about your approach that are working and ways to improve. Don't be afraid to ask your peers, the course instructor, or Teaching Center staff for help!

2. I'm concerned that I will be assigned to teach a course that is not in my dissertation field or I won't know the content very well. What can I do?

- When you receive your AI assignment reach out to the course instructor to discuss the course goals, your roles and responsibilities, and obtain access to any materials that you will need to be successful as an AI (this is a best practice for any AI assignment but is especially critical if you are concerned about the content you will be teaching).
- Devote time to learning the course material and ensuring that you are prepared to teach your class session. Setting aside the same time each week, with enough time to reach out to the course instructor or peers for clarification on material if needed, can be a useful strategy to make this part of your routine.
- Developing trust with your students is an important part of being an AI and being honest about when you know the answer to their question or do not is critical. See concern 4 for more details on handling student's questions.

3. This is the first time I will be teaching in a foreign language. What are some strategies I can use to teach well in English?

- It's a good idea to acknowledge to students early on that English is not your first language and to ask students to let you know if they don't understand something you've said. This will help you feel more confident of students' understanding and will signal to students that you intend to be a responsive instructor who will work with them through any language-related challenges.
- Similarly, don't be afraid to ask students to repeat themselves or to clarify if you are unsure of something that they've said. American students may talk fast and use slang that you are unfamiliar with. You can always rephrase their question back to them instead of asking them to repeat. For example: *Are you asking about what formula you need to solve number 7?*

- Remember to speak slowly and to make eye contact when possible so that you can observe students' responses and understanding.
- In addition to talking about them, write out key ideas on the board or on a PPT slide, particularly when you are unsure of a pronunciation.

4. I know the students I teach will ask me lots of questions. What if I don't know the answer or I answer their question incorrectly?

- One of the most important things that a new AI can do to develop trust with their students is to be honest about what you know and what you don't. In fact, being honest about not knowing an answer, and then taking the time to look it up and report back to the class demonstrates your commitment to learning and models the behavior that we hope to have from students.
- Before your meeting with students, think about the kinds of questions they might ask. Write down some notes about what parts of the content covered are particularly challenging. By preparing for questions ahead of time, you will be readier to respond.
- If you happen to answer a question wrong in class and you realize it later, be sure to follow up with students about it either by email or in your next meeting. Everyone makes mistakes, the critical thing is correcting them and making sure that students have the right answers.

5. I'm worried about being able to manage a large group of students and keep them engaged in the course material. How should I approach teaching to a large number of students?

- Setting ground rules for appropriate behavior, communication, and discussions is a critical step in managing a classroom. Have a conversation with your students on the first day of class to collectively identify what these ground rules will be. When moments of tension occur, enforce the ground rules that you have set as a class.
- Another critical piece of effective classroom management is ensuring that you and the students in your class share an understanding of expectations. Be sure to discuss your expectations for student success in your class and learn what your students expect from you.
- Consider how you can motivate students to engage with material in your class by fostering an inclusive and supportive environment. Students are more motivated to participate when they feel that they can succeed in a course and are supported by their instructor.
- Utilize active learning strategies to foster student engagement with the material and to give them ownership over their own learning. Active learning strategies that are cooperative (e.g. group work) can also help create a sense of community within your classroom.