1. **Create an open and safe environment.**
   For students to get the most out of active learning, it’s important for them to view the classroom as a welcoming space where they can reveal their confusion, make mistakes, and try out new approaches to learning. Instructors can foster this kind of environment by emphasizing the role of active learning as an effective tool, the value of hearing different voices and trying new approaches, and the role that mistakes play in learning. Kimberly Tanner and colleagues have identified the value of noncontent “Instructor Talk” for these purposes.

2. **Set a goal for the activity.**
   Perhaps the most important step in planning active learning is to identify your learning objective. Break your topic into bits, consider what pre-existing knowledge students bring to it, and identify what you want your students to learn and be able to do with the topic. Bloom’s taxonomy and associated verbs are very useful tools for thinking through your goals, and the boxes below show examples of learning objectives that instructors may use. Be sure to write down the goal and to use language that emphasizes what students need to be able to do.

3. **Choose the right exercise.**
   Your learning objective does a lot of the work of this for you: you’ve identified what you want students to be able to do, so your active learning exercise gives them a chance to lead up to or practice doing it. Nonetheless, there are several pieces to consider when making this choice.

   - **Consider your student population.** Are your students pre-professional? They may respond well to activities that connect to their future work. Are they in a general education course? They may respond well to activities that connect to their interests outside of school. If they are chatty, they may love informal group work, while if they’re quieter, they may value some solo thinking/writing time to precede discussion.
   - **Consider whether students will work in groups and how groups will function.** Groups of 2-4 tend to work best. For longer exercises, it can be valuable to assign roles. If groups form on the fly, be prepared to step in and assign students to groups rather than let them hang back and work individually.
   - **Consider what is most challenging for your students.** Design your active learning exercise to address what’s hard for them, not the easy stuff.
   - **Review your options!** There are many collections of active learning approaches, such as Angelo and Cross’s *Classroom Assessment Techniques*, Greg Smith’s categorization according to teaching challenge and Joe Bandy’s summary of discussion techniques. Some are super-simple (the mighty think-pair-share cannot be beat), others more complex, so there is a range to consider.

4. **Identify preparation for the exercise.**
   How do students— and you— need to do to be prepared?

5. **Consider links to other class elements.**
   How does this exercise fit within the class flow?

6. **Plan how you will introduce the activity.**
   How will you explain the rationale to students?

7. **Plan the logistics.**
   How long will it take? How will you monitor progress and ensure timely transitions?

8. **Consider how you will judge success.**
   What markers will you use, formal or informal?

9. **Just do it.**
   Active learning is productive and energizing for both students and instructors.

10. **Iterate and expand.**
    Use what works, make appropriate adjustments for what didn’t, and try again.
Words From the Wise

- Don’t do too much.
- Don’t try multiple techniques at once.
- Evaluate mid-term.
- Students sometimes don’t see big picture with the activity; help them.
- Use questions that are challenging but not too hard.

- Timing is hard; exercises often take longer than you expect, and groups may dislike not having time to share.
- Be sure to save time for questions.
- Don’t tell students what you can’t cover because of imperfect planning.
- The affective reaction may not equal the value of the activity; don’t conflate.
- Students sometimes fail; it’s okay. Learn from the experience.