

# Undergraduate Teaching Handbook

Economics Department  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

## Table of Contents<sup>1</sup>

1. Introduction
2. Course Objectives
3. Textbook and Supplements
4. Tests and Other Work
5. Grading
6. Syllabus
7. Class Preparation
8. Teaching Tips
9. Student Feedback

## 1 Introduction

Teaching an undergraduate college course is a big challenge. The most proven way to excel at teaching is to practice. For new instructors, there is no practice or experience to rely upon. The purpose of this “Teacher’s Handbook” is to provide new teachers, particularly graduate student instructors, some helpful advice. Hopefully, the information will enable new instructors to approach their first class with a bit more confidence and preparation. Confidence is important, for undergraduates are quick to smell fear in their instructor, but as quick to respect confidence. The Economics Department selects instructors who are highly qualified to teach undergraduates, and each dedicated instructor can look forward to a successful teaching experience.

---

<sup>1</sup>prepared by Scott Gilbert, August 2008

## 2 Course Objectives

The first step, in preparing to teach an undergraduate course, is to identify the objectives for the course. What should students be able to do, upon successful completion of the course? Some general objectives, which the Economics Department expects its undergraduate majors to accomplish during their course of study, are:

- comprehend and discuss the meaning and construction of economic data
- use graphs as a tool for economic analysis
- explain economic theories and apply them to real-world problems
- communicate about economics coherently and effectively
- perform statistical analysis of economic data

Specific undergraduate courses work toward some of these general objectives, and will also have more specialized objectives appropriate to the subject matter. To determine an appropriate set of learning objectives, a useful starting point is to read carefully the Course Description in the SIUC Undergraduate Catalog. Completion of learning objectives should enable the student to master the material as described in the Catalog. Another valuable resource is the set of past course syllabi: instructors usually state objectives on the syllabus.<sup>2</sup> Also, course textbooks commonly include statements of learning objectives. So, as you set about putting together a list of learning objectives, start with a careful review of all relevant information specific to your course.

## 3 Textbook and Supplements

You are the most valuable resource for your students. Your teaching is the most important resource they need, in order to fulfill the course objectives. Appropriately, your pay is much higher than the price of the course textbook and supplementary materials. You do not exist as a tour guide, to lead them page-by-page through a textbook or its PowerPoint slides. Instead, you command the course, setting the content, style, tone and pace of the lectures. You lecture out of your own prepared notes, based on your advanced knowledge of the subject.<sup>3</sup> Students want to learn from you how an economist thinks, and how such thinking can be used to accomplish the course objectives.

The proper role of a textbook is to provide a standardized set of facts and learning activities, relevant to the course. Inspired textbook writers will also succeed in adding some excitement, and good story-telling, to the text. Real-world examples, and contemporary applications, are also included in many texts. Digital media, including tables and figures

---

<sup>2</sup>Syllabi for past courses are available to instructors from the Economics Department Staff.

<sup>3</sup>You are well-qualified to do this, and have been selected for this purpose by the Economics Department.

from the book, as well as pre-packaged slide (PowerPoint) presentations are extra material that, when used judiciously, can add valuable content to lectures.

Regular reading assignments, from a textbook, are a very appropriate learning activity for undergraduates. In some cases a textbook can be replaced by a course “reader” – a selection of readings or notes, but this involves additional preparation best suited to experienced instructors. An essential task, for the instructor, is to read the textbook thoroughly and carefully, before the start of classes. Make detailed notes on the content and organization, and acquaint yourself with the range of supplementary resources that come with the textbook.

Today’s textbooks often come with online learning activities: web-based practice problems and homework. These online resources provide students valuable practice, and can be graded automatically by the computer. Online resources require the instructor to become expert in the relevant technologies, so if you choose to use them be prepared to spend training time before the start of classes. Also, during the course, the instructor should complete each online assignment before it is assigned to students, to foresee and correct any technical problems.

## 4 Tests and Other Work

Tests, homework, quizzes, group activities, and term projects allow the instructor to measure students’ success in achieving course objectives. The choice of learning measure(s) is often course-specific. Introductory economics courses usually include tests and, resources permitting, some additional work. For introductory courses, getting the majority of students to show up on a regular basis can be a challenge. A solution is to assign credit to attendance and/or in-class quizzes: this boosts attendance and also raises the perceived value of the course to the average student.<sup>4</sup>

A well-designed test should fairly and accurately reflect the material covered in the course, and should serve as a good measure of students’ ability to accomplish course objectives. You have creative control over the test content and design. As a starting point, make sure the test is easy to read, and free of errors. Take the test yourself before having copies printed for students.

For introductory courses with many enrolled students, tests usually include multiple-choice questions. Students can answer these questions by filling out a “Scantron” or “bubble” sheet, with their name and ID (SIUC DawgTag) number written on the sheet<sup>5</sup>. You provide the answer sheets to students. You can get sheets at the Office for Instructional Support Services<sup>6</sup>, and return the sheets to that Office for grading. Before you turn in answer sheets for grading, review the questions and students’ responses. Do you see some questions missed by many students? If so, it is possible that one or more questions have a credible answer that differs from the one that you had originally thought to be correct, in which case you

---

<sup>4</sup>A near-empty classroom gives students a poor impression about the course and instructor.

<sup>5</sup>in letters, with “bubbles” filled in under the letters.

<sup>6</sup>Currently located in the Northwest Annex.

can revise your answer key and even assign credit to two or more distinct answers.

In addition to multiple-choice questions, it is usually good to include some “fill-in the blank”, “matching,” and/or “short-answer” questions. These have to be graded “by hand,” but a few such questions need not make your grading work much harder, and they measure students’ ability to communicate their understanding of the subject matter.

## 5 Grading

Course grades, for each student, are usually letter grades (A, B, C, D, F). If a student can not complete a course he/she may request an “Incomplete,” and if you approve this request the student can receive an I grade. Course grades are hand-written, by instructors, on grade sheets supplied by the central administrative office.<sup>7</sup> For undergraduate courses, the range of grades assigned to students varies from one course to another, and from one semester to another. A “straight” grading scale assigns an “A” grade to students who have scored a 90 percent or above, on course work, assigns a “B” grade to scores between 80 and 89 percent, etcetera. You must use your own best judgment on whether to use a straight scale or instead “curve” the scores somehow. For each student, how well as he/she done in accomplishing the course objectives? If the answer is: excellent, give an A grade. If good but not excellent, give B; if satisfactory but not good, give C; if poor but not failing give D; otherwise, give F.

Instructors who seek to earn students’ praise may be tempted to offer artificially high grades to them. However, while students want good grades they also want to learn the material that has been advertised to enhance their future careers. So, grade “inflation” can give students the idea that the course is too easy, and weak, reflecting poorly on the instructor. If most students receive poor grades (D or F), this too can reflect poorly on you: students rely on you to facilitate a generally successful learning experience. Strive to give grades that are fair and accurate as indicators of students’ work and accomplishment.

The amount of grade weight assigned to tests, quizzes, homework, attendance, etc., is up to the instructor. If you require attendance but only give 5 percent grade weight to it, students may feel little incentive to show up for class.<sup>8</sup> In terms of point totals, a simple grading allocation is to assign a specific number of points to different components, as in the following example:

---

<sup>7</sup>Instructors receive grade sheets via campus mail, before the end of classes.

<sup>8</sup>Instead, try 10 or 15 percent.

component	points
test 1	100
test 2	100
test 3	100
homework	50
quizzes	50
attendance	50
total	450

You may be tempted to give some redemption to students by allowing end-of-semester “extra credit” activities that can lift students grades. You will likely find some students asking for such extra credit work, nearing the end of the semester, often prefaced by the statement: “I need an A in this course...” However, most students view such redemption activities as just another graded course component, more work with less substance. At all costs, avoid giving extra credit opportunities privately to select students at the end of the semester: this is grossly unfair to the rest of the students, and will land you in trouble.

During the semester, students like to monitor their progress, and for this you can post their scores online, via the campus course management system. This system is currently called “Blackboard.” Before the start of classes, train yourself in the use of the Blackboard system.<sup>9</sup> You can also use Blackboard to administer online homework, and provide interactive group activities.

## 6 Syllabus

The syllabus is the student’s roadmap for the course. It is the law by which they live, during the semester. As instructor, a completed syllabus is your first major production, and should include information about you<sup>10</sup>, the course content (description and objectives), required reading and supplements, and all of your rules and policies. Your list of rules should cover the following topics: student work (tests, homework, etc.), conduct, academic dishonesty, and campus security. In terms of grading, you should have a rule about late or missed work: a simple policy is to allow no late or makeup work, but to allow students with excused and documented absences to drop some missed work from their course grade. You should also tell students how to gain access to any supplemental materials, such as Blackboard homework assignments or online information.

Be very detailed, in writing your syllabus. Best is to include a table of the planned week-by-week topics, assignments, and events for the course, including assigned reading chapters, due dates of homework, test dates, etc. Students appreciate this kind of structure, and will think better of you for it. Also, with this detailed blueprint, you have more confidence in delivering the course, and less hassle in terms of week-by-week preparation.

---

<sup>9</sup>Blackboard is available at [www.mycourses.siuc.edu](http://www.mycourses.siuc.edu).

<sup>10</sup>your office location, phone number, e-mail address, and schedule of office hours

Concerning tests, tell students (on the syllabus) whether the final exam is “cumulative,” or not. Likewise, tell them whether or not the final is optional. The final test is ordinarily scheduled during the official final exam period. You will be informed of the date and time of the final exam, for your course, before the start of the semester. Near the end of the semester you will likely have some students asking to take the final early: this is strongly discouraged, so on your syllabus it is best to state that the final can not be taken early.

Concerning conduct, students should behave with respect toward each other and the instructor. They should come to class on time, and they should not leave early unless they have obtained permission from you to do so.<sup>11</sup> They should not read non-assigned materials, like the campus newspaper, during lecture. They should not carry on conversations with each other, or talk on cell phones. The typical student will praise you for enforcing discipline in class. If instead you try to be “nice” to disruptive students, expect to receive as reward more bad behavior, and generally low morale among students. It pays to be firm: you are the leader, and must earn the respect of students.

## 7 Class Preparation

Before each class period, make sure to have at least 30 minutes available to prepare. During this time, carefully review your prepared notes, reading materials, and scheduled course assignments and announcements. It is best to prepare your notes at least a day before lecture. Also, all reading materials should be studied thoroughly before the start of the semester: before each lecture you can then review the relevant portions of text and any notes you made on them. You may realize, in preparing for a given lecture, that you do not understand a particular topic or problem quite as well as you thought: if so, try to spend more time on it then, or postpone presenting it to class. Students have great instinct in spotting a fake, so don't try to teach them something that you haven't mastered.

## 8 Teaching Tips

Teaching is a performance art, with a live audience. Students respond positively to an enthusiastic, well-spoken, organized, intelligent teacher. They are bored by a passive or tentative speaker, so show students that you care about the subject matter and the presence of students in the room. Be on time. Dress well. Be cheerful. Encourage questions and discussion. Speak to the audience, not the chalkboard or computer. Look at the students, at their facial expressions, at their gestures and activities. Are students asleep? Are they highlighting passages from the textbook, trying to track your lecture? If so your lecture is missing originality and energy. Most students should be watching you with interest, most of

---

<sup>11</sup>Unfortunately there is a tendency for some students to leave early, particularly during the last half of the semester. To avoid this, state in your syllabus that students may not leave early (without excuse), and remind them of this during the semester.

the time, and taking written notes. If they are deathly quiet, you need to make them feel more comfortable asking questions. Try making a joke, perhaps at your expense.<sup>12</sup>

Students like to take notes, so provide organized written information to them, for note-taking purposes. You can write on the chalk board, or present information on an electronic projector screen. The information should be based on your own prepared notes, but can also refer to other information, such as tables, graphs, or PowerPoint slides.

Some classrooms have projector screens, computers, and other technology available. To make use of these, schedule an appointment with the technical staff in that building, before the start of classes. Arrive 10 minutes before each class, to make sure the equipment is working. If not, notify the technical staff, they should be able to make it work.

When presenting economic theories, give examples to illustrate the theories. Textbooks usually contain some examples, and you can embellish these or create your own. As much as possible, make the examples relevant to your students. Current economic issues, or news, is usually full of relevant examples for your lectures.

Keep track of time during your lecture. Do not run overtime, as this creates problems for students who need to get to their next class. Also, do not end classes more than 5 minutes early, unless there is some important reason to do so. If you need to be absent for a lecture, you must find a qualified substitute.

Make sure to be present and available to your students during office hours. If you need to cancel an office hour, notify students about this, in class, prior to the event. Concerning e-mail, generally respond to student e-mails within 24 hours.

## 9 Student Feedback

The Economics Department invites students to evaluate the instructor and course at the end of the semester. Ask a student or assistant to administer these Course Evaluations. You will need to get Evaluation forms from the Office of Supplemental Instruction, before the end of the semester.

As instructor, you want to have positive teaching evaluations. You can expect students to rate you (and your course) highly if the students have accepted the course objectives as important for their future careers, and if they feel they have been given an excellent opportunity to meet those objectives. It is up to you to convince them that what they are learning is important for their future. The subject of economics is applied in all areas of commerce. It forms the basis for government policies. It is a constant issue in legal cases, and is central to the legal system. Economists are well-paid because economics is an important subject. The economics major is a “hot” major because starting salaries are high for students graduating with this degree. Be a good salesperson, throughout the semester, convince your students that learning economics is worth their time.

At the mid-point of the semester, it is helpful to get feedback from students about how the course is going. Ask them to write for you (the instructor) what they like most about

---

<sup>12</sup>Never make fun of students.

the course, and what most needs improvement.<sup>13</sup> You may be surprised by the responses. They may tell you that your handwriting is bad, or that they can not hear or understand you. If so, do your best to correct these problems. They may ask for clearer explanations, or more compelling examples. By making corrections at mid-semester, you can improve your prospects for a positive teaching evaluation at the end of the semester.

Good luck!

---

<sup>13</sup>This feedback should be anonymous.