



TERRY MCLAUGHLIN FOR THE CHRONICLE

*If It  
Pleases  
the Class*

**I**N AN ESSAY titled “Let Me Edutain You,” which recently appeared in the pages of *The New York Times*, Glenn Altschuler, of Cornell University, bemoaned “the extent to which every class has become a show and every instructor a personality.” Instead of regretting such a development, we wholeheartedly embrace it. We believe that junior professors in particular must make teaching entertaining if they are to survive these perilous times in the world of academe.

That said, we acknowledge, of course, that the problem of effective teaching varies dramatically, depending on the character of one’s institution. At large research universities, teaching often plays a minor role at the time of tenure review. Indeed, success and popularity in the classroom may even be a liability, an indication of an absence of serious scholarly purpose. At small liberal-arts colleges, by contrast, teaching is taken seriously, and poor evaluations from students can be the kiss of death. Our forthcoming book, *Teaching to Win*, provides a useful guide for the perplexed academician. What follows is but a small sampling of the useful “dos” and “don’ts” to be found in its pages.

### *Attitude*

**Don’t** let students know that you have no idea what you are talking about. Studies regularly show that students respond negatively to candid confessions of ignorance. Never forget that they are consumers, and that what they are consuming is your knowledge. If they so much as sense that the product has been adulterated—cut with ignorance, as it were—they will demand a refund.

**Do** make your students feel good about themselves. If students continue to trail into the classroom 15 minutes late, thank them for interrupting their busy sexual and athletic schedules for your class. If they are unable to answer even the most rudimentary questions about the material, remind them that there is power in silence. If their response bears no discernible relation to the question, remind them that there’s no such thing as a right or wrong answer. And if they should snarl, thank them for having shown up and remained conscious. Remember, they’ll like you if you like them.

### *Dress*

**Don’t** dress down to your students. Baseball caps, cargo pants, and facial piercings are definitely to be avoided: Students will suspect you of pandering to them, which will earn their disrespect.

**Do:** There is none. Every mode of dress enacts its own figuration of power and domination, so proceed with extreme caution.

### *Lectures*

**Don’t** lecture for more than seven minutes at a time. Remember, your students have spent more of their lives channel surfing than reading; they are not capable of absorbing more than commercial-length packets of information. Research demonstrates that even the most engaging lecturer will lose 50 per cent of his audience after 10 minutes of straight exposition; at 15 minutes, most students will begin to experience cognitive shut-down and the onset of hostility.

**Do** punctuate your lectures with “product placements”: For instance, illustrate the effect of gravity by dropping a Timberland boot. That will serve to focus students’ attention. Additionally, an increasing number of professors are successfully signing lucrative merchandising agreements with manufacturers of everything from acne medicine to software. Should you, for some reason, harbor an antiquated distrust of capitalism, we suggest that you “interrupt your broadcast” to tell students jokes or stories about your childhood. Consider hiring a work-study student with an infectious laugh who can rouse the class at your punch lines. But remember not to overdo that, either; after 90 seconds or so, segue back into your lecture for seven more minutes of concentrated instruction.

### *Presentation*

**Don’t** make allusions to famous events in antiquity. Likewise, presume absolutely no knowledge of any great literature; otherwise, you will at best fail to connect, and at worst alienate students with your respect for dead white males.

**Do** refer to things that students know and are interested in—for instance, the cool rock groups of the moment. *Caution: Be extremely careful when attempting to demonstrate your knowledge of contemporary culture. Comments such as “It’s just like what Peter Frampton was talking about when he sang . . .” can permanently cripple your credibility.*

### *Clock Management*

**Don’t** continue lecturing past the end of a meeting. Remember, your students are exhausted and bored. They have done you a favor by showing up. Don’t abuse their trust.

**Do** cancel class several times per term; always do so with effusive apologies and expressions of deep regret. That will win you an enormous reserve of sympathy, as the students will find touching your inability to fathom the depths of their glee at their premature release. Our experiences suggest that three unannounced cancellations per semester will maximize student goodwill without arousing departmental suspicion.

### *Office Hours*

**Don't** post *New Yorker* cartoons on your office door, no matter how clever or appropriate; ditto for fortunes from fortune cookies. Never permit a student to disrobe fully in your office.

**Do** adorn your door with post cards that create post-modern juxtapositions: Cindy Sherman and Fred Flintstone; Lucille Ball and R. Crumb. Tell your students that you are available to see them at any time of the day or night, with only 20 minutes' notice. If possible, hand out your beeper number. Remember: They can access the Web and turn on the TV at any hour of the day. Likewise, you must be at their immediate beck and call.

### *Reading*

**Don't** assign any. Consider substituting cereal boxes or bus-shelter advertisements. If you find you must assign books, remember the following: Select texts with plenty of cartoons, illustrations, and multi-colored inserts to break up the monotony of the printed page.

**Do** remind students that texts aren't the only things that can be read. Culture, films, clothing, rap styles, beverages, detergent ads, and hairstyles are all waiting to be "read." Encourage your students to give their hermeneutic impulses free rein.

### *Grading*

**Don't** fail to be guided by two cardinal rules: (1) Never forget that all student work is, by definition, above average. (2) Never forget that a B+ is a below-average grade.

**Do** make it appear as if you have spent a lot of time reading students' papers. Underline copiously and fill the margins with bold and inscrutable notations—for example, #!, \*&\$, and § + + œ! Concluding comments should be no more than two sentences long, and should always begin by noting the positive—"Much that is good here . . . ," "Brave and bold . . . ," "I really like your font . . ." While we strongly counsel against giving honest grades, we also warn against grading too high too soon. Instead, we recommend that a professor grade low—but not so low as to invite violence—at the beginning of the term and gradually increase to A's as the semester progresses, regardless of any objective improvement.

*Lawrence Douglas is an assistant professor of law, jurisprudence, and social thought, and Alexander George is an associate professor of philosophy, at Amherst College. They are regular contributors to The Chronicle.*