



# Preparing and Structuring Lecture Notes **1**

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How do I structure a lecture?

How do I encourage feedback from my students?

How do I engage my audience?

In order to prevent last-minute stress and oversights you need time to arrange your lecture's main points, choose and develop pertinent examples, write definitions, solve equations, and pace the delivery of your ideas and themes without losing your students' attention. Some faculty prepare their lectures well in advance and revise them during the semester to take into account students' reactions to previous lectures. Others prefer to prepare a lecture immediately after class, when the experience of what worked and what didn't is still fresh. Typically, novice lecturers complete the bulk of preparatory reading before the course starts and then keep about one or two weeks ahead of their students.

A general strategy for the preparation of good lectures includes three steps:

- Plan carefully both content and format of your lecture.
- The lecture's structure should clearly point to the objectives and key ideas that are presented.
- Budget your time: allow time for feedback from your students.

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## Lecture Preparation

Read selectively, as needed, and jot down notes on important ideas and organizational structure; try to anticipate questions that students may ask.

- Jot down words, facts, ideas and questions as they come to you.

Experiment with different formats for your lecture notes. Some formats are more suited to certain disciplines or subjects than others:

- An outline is especially useful in organizing a lecture and providing an overview of general structure, subordinate points and transitions.
- A list of major points highlights the lecture's key ideas or issues to be covered; this format requires a speaker who knows the material well.
- A tree diagram (e.g. a flowchart) provides a system of pathways through important points with optional stopovers, tangents, useful illustrations, or examples.

Use visual cues and notes to aid your delivery:

- Color code your notes with highlighters to identify difficult points or distinctions between major examples.
- Include notations in bold type indicating time to pause, ask questions, raise your voice.

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- Allow for wide margins for notations such as “Write this on board,” “Have students jot down their responses at their seats,” “If less than ten minutes left, skip to point seven.”
- Examples boxed in red could mean “Use only if students seem uncertain about my point.”

Prepare your lecture for the ear, not the eye:

- Avoid lecturing verbatim from a script; use short simple words and informal diction, including personal pronouns; speak succinctly in short sentences.
- Offer signposts for transitions and structure: “the third objection;” “let’s look at this case from a different perspective;” “now we can turn to...”
- Restate and periodically summarize key points.
- Rehearse your lecture.

### Structuring a Lecture

- Begin the lecture by making a connection to the previous day’s topic: students want the direction of the course to be apparent as they proceed.
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- Identify your key points (what you most want your students to remember about the topic), specify the main topic or topics, and outline clear objectives for your lecture (an objective is an aim that guides action).

Structure the lecture to suit your audience and the subject matter:

- Structure the lecture in outline form and flesh it out with examples and illustrations.
- Design your lectures in ten- to fifteen-minute blocks.
  - Each block should cover a single point with examples and end with a brief summary and transition to the next section.
  - Define or explain unfamiliar terminology.
  - Use concrete examples, such as study findings or current issues, to frame questions for students and elicit discussion.
  - If you find yourself running out of time, cut an entire block or shorten the middle section of a block rather than rush the lecture’s summary.
- Prepare a one-page sketch of the lecture.



Provide a logical progression for the material – for example:

- A chronological or sequential approach.
- Move from the general principle to specific instances.
- Build up from the parts to the whole.
- Trace one idea across time or space.
- Describe a problem and then illustrate its solution.
- Present a two-sided discussion of a given topic; then provide the “Pro-Con” aspects for each side.
- Announce your thesis, then step back to provide evidence for your argument.

Plan your lecture so that the main points come at a time when students are most attentive (the first 15-minute block in a 50-minute class). Include the following elements:

- Attention-getting introduction.
- Brief overview of main points to be covered.
- Quick statement of background or context.
- Detailed explanation of no more than three major points – the most important first – with a change of pace every ten or fifteen minutes.
- Concluding summary of main points to reinforce key ideas/themes.

Budget time for questions:

- Leave time for students to ask you to repeat material or to supply additional explanations.
- Ask for questions at the beginning of the class and list these on the board to be answered during the hour.
- Encourage student participation and discussion, but summarize the arguments made by students, placing them in a larger theoretical/philosophical context and bringing their ideas back to the main topic of the lecture.

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Begin and end with a summary statement.

- Continuity and closure are important: to bring your points home, use different words and examples in your opening and closing summaries. Students will see how each new topic relates to what they have already learned, in addition to what they will be learning in the coming week.

### Solicit Feedback

Observe students' non-verbal communication: note-taking, response to questions, eye contact, seating patterns, response to humor (are they "with" you?).

Use the "minute-paper" (or other assessment techniques): ask students to respond in one or two sentences to the following questions:

- What stood out as most important in today's lecture?
- What are you confused about?

Give mid-semester teaching evaluations or, during the semester, ask the students for suggestions or comments.

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