

# Authority in the classroom

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

A summary of a research-supported model of instructor authority.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

You can compare your teaching practice to the framework provided, to better understand your predominant sources of authority in the classroom and consider alternatives that may be more effective. For assistance, please [contact CET](http://cet.usc.edu/).

### Five sources of instructor authority

Research supports a model proposing that instructor authority (or power) is derived from five distinct sources:

* REWARD POWER – student perceptions that the instructor can reward them points, positive feedback, etc.
* COERCIVE POWER – student perceptions that the instructor can punish them with grade deductions, disciplinary measures, public criticism, etc.
* LEGITIMATE POWER – student recognition of instructor’s right to direct the actions of students through setting standards, assigning work, etc.
* REFERENT POWER – student positive regard or admiration for the instructor
* EXPERT POWER – student recognition of the instructor’s knowledge or expertise

Note that instructor power is dependent on student perceptions, rather than actual characteristics of the instructor. For example, students may perceive an instructor’s expertise as more or less than their actual expertise.

### Prosocial and antisocial forms of power

The five sources of instructor authority impact student instruction differently. Specifically, the five sources can be categorized as either social or antisocial.

#### Prosocial forms of power– reward, referent, and expert

* Positively associated with cognitive and affective learning outcomes
* Positively associated with student motivation
* Positively associated with student evaluation of the instructor

#### Antisocial forms of power – coercive and legitimate

* Negatively associated with cognitive and affective learning outcomes
* Negatively associated with student motivation
* Negatively associated with student evaluation of the instructor
* While coercive power promotes an antagonistic climate, legitimate power promotes reason-based trust.

### Recommendations

Instructor power can be leveraged to improve student learning outcomes through the following strategies.

* Minimize the stress on coercive and legitimate power in your courses, even though they cannot be completely eliminated within the USC educational model.
* Maximize reward power by focusing on students earning points (rather than losing points) and providing positive and constructive feedback to students.
* Maximize referent power by being personable, compassionate, and professionally humorous with students.
* Maximize expert power by ensuring that students are aware of your professional qualifications and knowledge. Always plan and be prepared for class, which can be interpreted as competence by students.

### Resources

Hofmann, Eva et al. “Authorities’ Coercive and Legitimate Power: The Impact on Cognitions Underlying Cooperation.” Frontiers in Psychology 8 (2017): 5. PMC. Web. 18 Oct. 2017.

Schrodt, Paul, et al. "Reconsidering the Measurement of Teacher Power Use in the College Classroom." Communication Education 56 (July 2007): 3, pp. 308-332 and references therein.