

## **Stand and Deliver:**

# Crafting and Presenting Effective Lectures

For most graduate students, lecturing is a fundamental skill, especially if you are a teaching assistant or plan to teach after you get your degree. Even full-time researchers are expected to communicate effectively their findings to various audiences. But there are many different variables in any equation for an effective lecture – from the complexity of your topic to the background of your audience to the organization of your content – so follow these tips for keeping students attentive and learning.

### **Why Lecture?**

Lecturing is just one of many methods you can use to deliver organized information in the classroom. Why choose it over other options? As much as educators like to encourage student creativity and participation, there are times when you simply need to deliver a large amount of information in a small amount of time. For that, the lecture is the most effective format. Secondly, a well-delivered lecture can boost your credibility with students: it shows that you have necessary information and know how to organize and communicate it. That can be important when you're dealing with undergraduates who may be very close to your own age.

Lectures have weaknesses, though, too. They don't create as much interaction as discussions or group activities, and there is certainly something to be said for students learning by doing. Ultimately, you must ask yourself: What is my goal for this class session or topic? If you need to deliver a large amount of information, lecture. If it's important for students to experience something first-hand, choose another format.

### **Prepare for the Obstacles**

A lecture is essentially a speech, a bit more interactive than the typical political speech, for example, but a speech nonetheless. And virtually every speech will present a set of obstacles you must overcome.

The first obstacle is complexity. Two things will make a topic seem complex to students: vocabulary they don't know and a lack of personal experience or connection to the topic.

Any personal experience with a topic reduces the level of complexity for students. So, as you prepare your lecture, ask your-self: "Will this topic seem complex to my students? Are they familiar with the vocabulary? Have they in any way experienced what I'm going to talk about?" Then look for ways to reduce the complexity, such as defining important terms, referencing current events or popular culture or using analogies that compare the topic to something with which students are likely familiar.

The second obstacle is cultural history. There is always a good chance that students will have heard or talked about something related to the topic on which you're lecturing, which means that they already have associations, opinions, and preconceptions, about the material. For example, if you are delivering a lecture on evolution in Georgia, some of your students may have experienced heated debate about the topic in their secondary school systems. Identify the preconceptions students are likely to have about a topic and consider whether you need to do some extra work to disabuse them of incorrect notions.

Finally, you are an obstacle, too. You may think of physics, for example, as the indisputable laws of nature, but, for students, that knowledge is coming directly from you. Your credibility affects the credibility with which they'll view the material you're teaching. Unfortunately, some undergraduates will think of you as less knowledgeable than a professor or more interested in getting your degree than in teaching. On the other hand, some students will like having someone closer to their own age, who is also taking classes and therefore may be more understanding of their concerns, teaching them complicated material.

### **Prepare for Your Audience**

Any time you lecture to a group of UGA undergraduates, you can make certain assumptions about the characteristics of your audience. Generally speaking, most are 18 to 22 years old, majority female, likely to be bright given the increasing competition for admission, and likely to be from relatively affluent families from suburban Atlanta or elsewhere in Georgia.

More specifically, today's undergraduates represent the first generation whose academic careers have been significantly shaped by continuous standardized testing and pressure to perform well on those tests. They are also among the first generation that has grown up with very organized leisure time, participating in league sports and multiple extra-curricular activities from a very early age, and they tend to remain insanely busy throughout their college careers. For these reasons, most undergraduates view their education through a goal-oriented lens, as a series of tasks to be achieved. They want expectations for every course to be laid out explicitly early on.

### Three Strategies for Better Lectures

**Structure:** Because students view their educational experience as a series of tasks to be achieved, they are thrilled by structure; it lets them know what is important. In oral communication, unlike written communication, repetition is a good thing. Begin a lecture by telling students what you're going to tell them, then tell them, and afterwards, summarize what you've just told them. Connect each lecture to previous lectures and let them know what you'll be talking about next time. That way, students begin to piece together the "big picture" of the course. Present information in a chronological or problem-solution format.

**Show rather than tell:** Use concrete examples and link them to students' own experiences, current events or

popular culture. This gets them mentally participating in the lecture. When useful, use photos, graphics or video in a lecture. When the audience can see what you're talking about, they start to care about it. Also, most people can think about one topic for 25 to 30 minutes at a time, so use a brief video or group activity, or organize your material into three sub-topics, to break up the lecture.

**Include:** Even though you're the one doing the talking, think about ways to include your audience. Move around the classroom or lecture stage. When people see movement, they are more comfortable sitting still. Movement also signals energy and enthusiasm for the material. Make eye contact; audiences can tell when you are looking over their heads. Keep your body open to the entire room. Write on the board quickly so that your back is not turned to the audience for long. All that eye contact and moving around means your lecture will need to be in a keyword outline that you glance at from time to time, rather than a script you read. ■

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*Based on the Graduate School seminar "Presentation Skills for Graduate Students" by John Murphy, Department of Speech Communication. To view this seminar in full, visit <http://www.grad.uga.edu>.*

### Love the Job: A Few Final Tips

Start a class session by giving students a three-minute writing assignment. Ask them a question or have them write down everything they associate with a given topic. You don't have to grade or collect the assignments, but students will feel more free to participate in a lecture or discussion if they have something down on paper that they have thought about.

Use music or show a short video clip at the beginning of a lecture to pique students' attention. Assign one student each day to begin class with a short presentation on a current event or something else relevant to the topic.

Finally, if you are passionate about both teaching and the subject, your enthusiasm will be contagious. You have to care about history, or find chemistry utterly fascinating, and don't be afraid to show it.