

How to Get Your Students to Come to Class Prepared

By Bob Gillette, PhD and Lynn Gillette, PhD

Imagine a world where students came to class prepared. Class time would be so much more productive and enjoyable for teachers and students alike. We would have informed class discussions and focus on students applying, analyzing, and evaluating the material under our expert guidance.

Prepared students are not a mirage. Students will come to class prepared, but it requires a different course design. Consider a course that uses class preparation assignments (CPAs) to inform and stimulate class discussion and a definitional grading system that makes being prepared for class non-negotiable.

The CPAs are reading assignments accompanied by informal writing assignments consisting of four to eight questions. The CPA questions serve as a guide to the students in their reading, prepares them for class, and serves as a basis for class discussion.

The CPAs are graded pass-fail only. Students bring two copies of their CPA answers to class—one that they place on the front desk as they come into class and the other that they keep for class discussion. To earn credit for a CPA, a student needs to show a good faith effort on their answers to each question and they need to attend class to contribute to class discussion.

In a definitional grading system the pedagogical assumption is that different categories of work are each important, and the teacher does not want one category to compensate for the other in any way. In the table below there are two distinct categories of work: the CPAs, and the exams and quizzes.

Course Grade	CPAs	Exams & Quizzes
A	Credit on $\geq 90\%$	A average
B	Credit $\geq 80\%$	B average
C	Credit $\geq 70\%$	C average
D	Credit $\geq 60\%$	D average
F	Credit $< 60\%$	F average

For a student to get a particular course grade, she must meet or exceed the standard for each category of work. If a student gets an A average on the exams and quizzes but earns credit for only 75 percent of the CPAs, she receives a C for her grade. If a student earns credit for 90 percent or more of the CPAs, but gets a C average on the exams and quizzes, she receives a C for her course grade. The definition of an A student is one who not only does A work on the exams and quizzes, but who also comes to class prepared at least 90 percent of the time.

If you adopt this course design, students will come to class prepared. Therefore, you won't have to lecture as if the students are seeing the material for the first time. Instead, you can engage the students with active learning strategies that go after higher-level learning and skill development.

Grading the CPAs is easy. By the end of class the students' CPA answers are dated, having been used and responded to in class. We simply scan the CPAs for whether the student showed a good faith effort.

The level of difficulty of the CPA questions has to be chosen with care. Make the questions too simple and the students will scan the reading for the answers. Make the questions too tough and the students will become frustrated and feel that the course design is unfair. Additionally, if the questions are too difficult, students will come to your office for help before class and you will lose the efficiency of the students working together on the harder aspects of the material in class and your ability to respond to their answers as a whole in class.

Pay attention to what you name the preparation assignments. We specifically chose not to call them homework assignments because students are accustomed to getting credit on homework assignments without coming to class. With our CPAs, students only get credit if they come to class.

Be sure to use the CPAs as the foundation for class discussion. Early in the semester, it is generally a good idea to cover the CPA questions in a linear fashion. But later, there can be magic in the classroom as the practice of preparation allows for the discussion of ideas in a non-linear fashion.

The CPA-definitional grading system design has worked well across different course levels from introductory courses to graduate courses, and across different institutions from large land-grant institutions to private liberal arts colleges. As we and others have learned, if you use this course design, students will come to class prepared and class time will be much more productive, dynamic, and fun for everyone.

A tenet of this course design is that students with specific assignments can acquire the basic understanding of the material themselves before coming to class and that they need help primarily with critically applying and evaluating the material. In addition, so often college students are lectured to and talked at. Using the CPAs allows time and space for informed student voices. In the words of the classic Aretha Franklin song, we think that it shows students R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

J. Robert (Bob) Gillette is an associate professor of economics at the University of Kentucky. Lynn Gillette is a former president of Sierra Nevada College.