

Planning Your Discussion Section

If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up someplace else.
- Yogi Berra

What It Is

Determining the objectives, activities, and assessments that will accomplish course goals.

Why It's Important

Gives purpose and structure to the session so that:

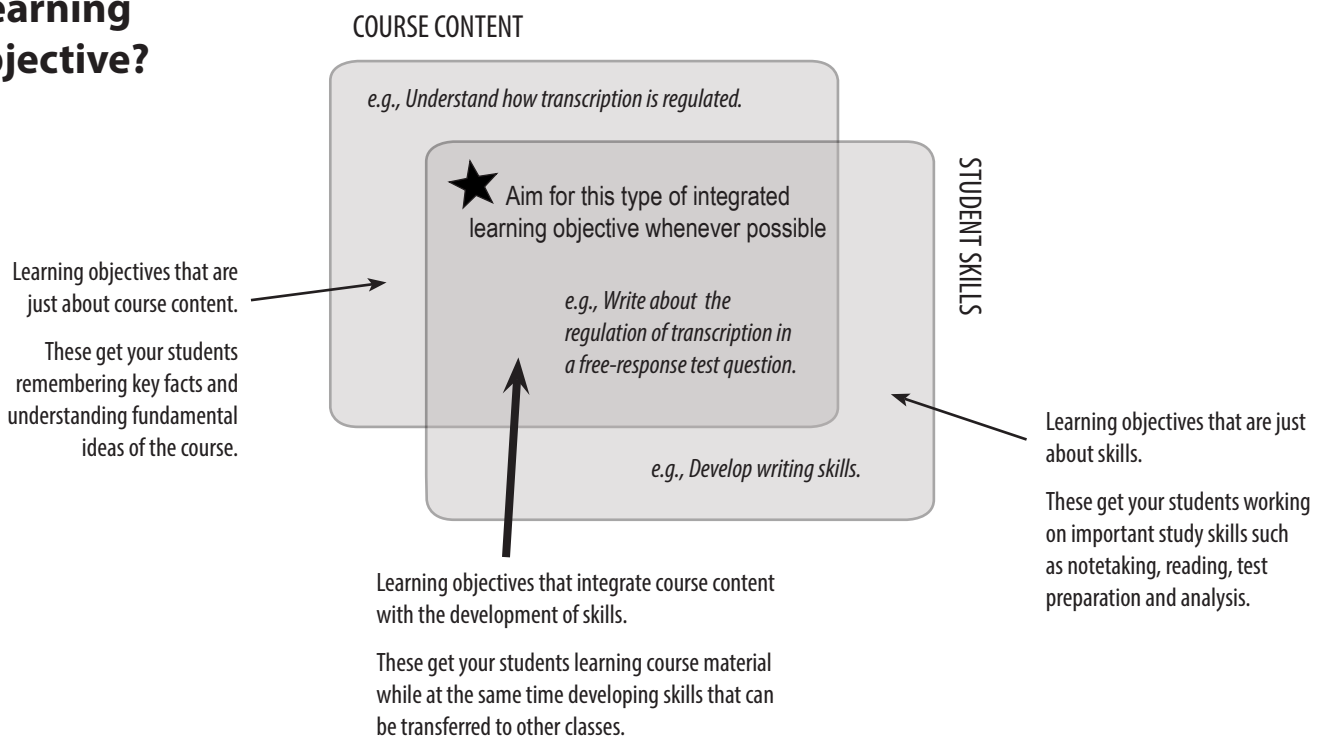
- Students know where the class is going and what to expect.
- TA feels and appears more confident.
- Course goals are more likely to be accomplished.
- Challenges are anticipated and contingencies built-in.

Plan your discussion section by answering the following three questions:

1

What is my learning objective?

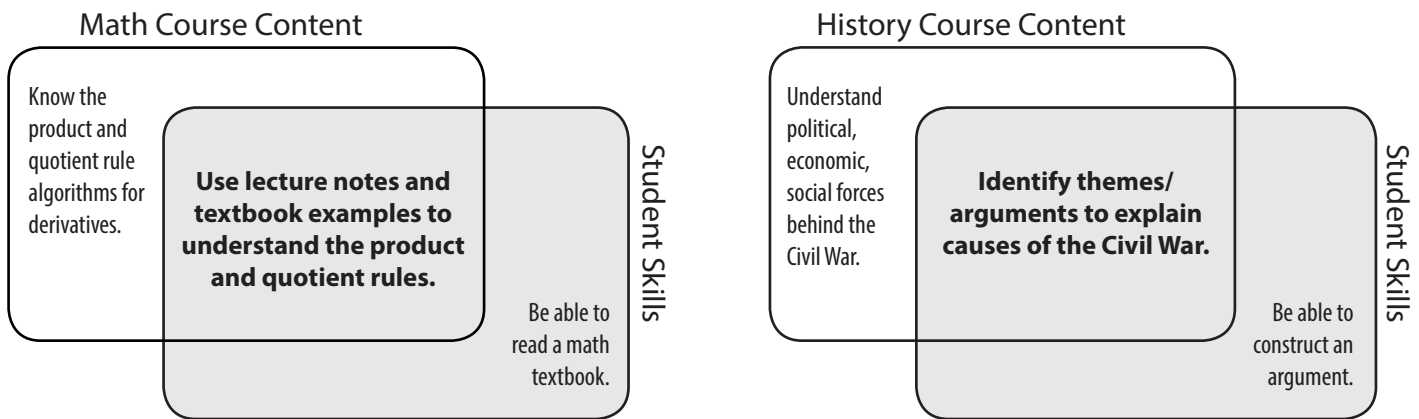
Think about what your students need to *know*, *understand*, or be *able to do* in order to receive a good grade in the course. Course content will likely be on your mind, but also include skills you may expect the students to bring to class (writing papers, studying for tests, managing their time, etc). Integrating the student skills with the course content into a learning objective helps students practice skills they may be deficient in while simultaneously covering the academic material.



Now choose one or two of these to be your learning objective(s) for the day. Be sure they are:

- Addressing course content, or student skills, or an integration of the two** (see above).
- Relevant to the syllabus:** What graded assignments are coming up soon? How will students be evaluated? What skills or knowledge are most critical in order to successfully complete these requirements?
- Aligned with the professor's goals and concerns:** What skills or knowledge have students historically struggled with in this course?
- Addressing students' actual needs:** Of all the things the students need to know, understand, or be able to do, which ones are they finding most challenging right now?

More examples of learning objectives:



2

How will I get all students practicing?

Now work out the details and logistics of *how* your plan will be implemented in the classroom. What tasks/activities will get all students working toward the learning objective(s) you identified? This is where your creativity really comes into play.

Keep in mind that to be most successful, the activities should have a few important features:

- All students get a chance to use the content/skills you identified in the learning objective(s).
- Students have the opportunity to share their work (with TA/peers).
- Students receive feedback on their performance (from TA/peers).

For activity ideas, please see some of our other handouts (e.g., *Small Group Activities*, *Developing Your Students as Self-Directed Learning*, and *Facilitating Large Group Discussion*).

3

How will I know if they're "getting it"?

This is the part of a discussion section that is most often overlooked. You may have planned some great activities that *you hope* accomplish the learning objective(s) you have set. But if you don't have a way to **assess** whether your plan is working, how do you know for sure?

A good assessment will:

- Allow *you* to understand what worked and what didn't work, so you can better plan future discussions sections, or alter the trajectory of the current one.
- Help students identify areas for improvement, focus their study efforts, and understand the value of participating in discussion.
- Be another opportunity to use the content/skills or knowledge.

Assessments don't have to be stand-alone activities. In fact, a particularly well-designed activity will have assessment built in. For ideas on how to assess your students, please refer to our handout on *Assessing Learning in the Classroom*.

Now what? Communicate your plan

Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential.
- Winston Churchill

- **Write out** your plan (you may want to use our *Lesson Plan Template* as a guide). Collect your lesson plans throughout the semester for later reference. You never know when they might come in handy.
- **Communicate** your plan—and the reasoning behind it—to your students. They will be much more likely to participate if they know where they're going and why.
- Be flexible and **allow the plan to unfold naturally**. It may not go exactly the way you intended, but stay grounded in your learning objective(s) for the day.
- **Take note of what did and didn't work** (you may want to use our *Semester Planning Chart* as a tool).

