

Precepts – The Undergraduate Perspective

Prepared for TIPS Orientation 2001 by Eszter Hargittai

The following are some suggestions for making the precepting experience more enjoyable for both preceptors and students. In addition to drawing on my own experiences, I have consulted some undergraduate students for information. -Eszter

A) Scheduling

Thursday is big party night so avoid Friday precepts, because you cannot expect the usual performance from students that day. Saturday is also a party night but that has less effect on the workweek.



Scheduling review sessions and other important meetings outside of class time will be tricky as there are many schedules that need to be coordinated. Keep in mind that

1. athletes usually cannot meet between 4pm and 7:30pm
2. actors will have conflicts at 8pm or 9pm
3. a capella singers will have problems after 10pm

Of course, that leaves few options (as I am sure no one wants to wake up really early in the morning either). Athletes tend to dominate (about 50% of the student body is on an intercollegiate team) so their conflict may be the most important to avoid.



Dean's Date is the day all written work is due at the end of the semester (for the Fall semester that's after the holiday break). This semester's Dean's Date is *January 15, 2002*. Students should have all of their written assignments (e.g. papers) done by then so they can concentrate on exams from then on.



JPs are due on *January 8, 2002*. What are JPs? Every junior is required to work on an independent project both semesters. The product of this independent work is the Junior Paper = JP. If you have juniors in your classes, this is an important date to keep in mind as their world sometimes seems to revolve around their JPs. (The same thing can be said for senior theses, which becomes an issue mostly in the Spring semester.)



Spring dates:

Senior Theses due – May 6, 2001 (some departments may have earlier deadlines)

JPs due – May 6, 2001

Dean's Date – May 14, 2001



For more information about important dates, see the Current Academic Calendar at

<http://ntigger.princeton.edu/registrar/acad/current/current.htm>.

B) Precept Purpose and Expectations

Purpose

Make sure that you take some time to explain the purpose of the precept. As an undergrad friend of mine put it “Preceptors need to explain the purpose, the *raison d’etre*, of the precept... why are we in this room? Too often this is overlooked, as preceptors just want to start in on stuff or play name/major games.”

Attendance Requirements

Be clear about your attendance requirements. It is not enough to tell students that you would like them to show up or that it would be nice if they tried to show up every time. Students want to hear the incentives for showing up (don’t be naïve by thinking that they will all want to show up for the sheer enjoyment of expanding their minds).



Clarify the following:

Do they get points taken off if they don’t show up?

Do they get extra credit if they do?

Is there a precept grade component of their final course grade? If yes, how much of that precept grade depends on mere attendance? (You may need to spell out to them that the only way they can participate in precept discussions is if they show up. Contributions to discussions are often part of the grade and serve as a good incentive for showing up.)

By clarifying these in the beginning, your students will know that there are serious repercussions of skipping precept (assuming there is some penalty system in place for those who do/reward system for those who show up).

Grading

Students would like to know about grading procedures. What are they graded on? It is especially appreciated if you can demonstrate how you come up with grades on papers and exams.

Finally, be sure to coordinate grading with other preceptors and the professor so that everyone grades similarly. It is not fair for a student to get a lower grade just because s/he happens to have the tougher grader as preceptor.

C) Why should you care?

- Everyone will get more out of the precepts if expectations are made clear in the beginning.
- In the end, the point of teaching is to have students learn which may be better achieved with realistic expectations and procedures (e.g. schedules that fit the larger Princeton schedule culture, clear set of guidelines for evaluating work).
- Students write evaluations at the end of the course that may be part of your file when you apply for jobs.
- Students also write evaluations in the Course Guide, and although these tend to focus on professors, they may mention preceptors and who doesn’t like to have a good reputation?

D) Using the Web to Organize Your Precepting Duties

Set up a Web page with basic information that you pass out in the beginning of the semester (office hours, precept assignments/expectations) so if your students contact you for these later, you can just point them to the page instead of rewriting the same email over and over again.

Look for more tips on handling precepts and using technology in teaching in our Workshop Series this semester!