

The Teaching and Learning Unit Tutor Training Guide Series

This guide has been written for people who are new to tutoring in the Faculty of Economics and Commerce at the University of Melbourne. It is one of a number of teaching and related guides provided by the Teaching and Learning Unit (TLU).

The guide is intended to be a useful source of ideas and advice for good tutoring practice, based on sound educational principles and research.

For more information, advice and resources available to tutors, visit the TLU webpage <http://tlu.ecom.unimelb.edu.au/> or call the TLU directly on (03) 8344 4464.

Other guides in the series include:

- How to Structure and Teach a Tutorial
- Encouraging Student Participation in Tutorials
- Tutor Roles and Responsibilities
- Tutorial Questioning Technique
- Teaching International Students in Tutorials
- Assessment and Marking
- Evaluating Your Tutoring
- Activities to Use in Tutorials

How to Start the First Tutorial

1. How to dress

New university tutors often wonder how to dress for work. The University of Melbourne does not have a specific policy or rule on how academic staff should dress. However, many tutors would like guidance on what to wear – after all, most people know that first impressions count and it would be a shame to get off on the wrong foot with students over a relatively minor issue such as appearance.

The most important advice about dress is to be yourself. For example, if you normally wear quite dressy clothes and feel comfortable doing so, there is no reason to change before you teach. You might feel more comfortable in smart casual clothes. This too is fine. The usual broad professional expectations apply in the Faculty – you should be clean, neat and generally well-presented.

2. How to prepare for the first class

New tutors are prone to over-preparation for their first class. This is not necessarily a bad thing. If you do this, it means you will have well and truly researched the material you will be teaching and have thought through many of the possible questions your students will ask. You might not need everything you have prepared for the first class but you may well be able to use it later. Over-preparation is rarely wasted.

But what should you prepare? Well, this depends on several factors. For example, what sort of tutorial are you teaching? Is it a collaborative problem solving one or another kind? The preparation for different types of tutorials can be quite different. It can be helpful to look carefully at the subject outline and then put yourself in your students' shoes. What will they be expecting in this context? Will they expect some activities followed by a Q&A session or to have some instruction followed by a few exercises? If you decide to do something other than what you think students will be expecting, then think about how you will explain this to students, and the reasons (usually educational) that you will give.

Try to remember not only to think about the material or content for the class but also the way in which you will teach that particular material. Will you use a group discussion? A small group activity and report back? A mini-lecture? A request for questions from students? Or something else? It might be helpful to speak to a senior staff member in your department about what usually happens in the sort of class you are teaching. Don't be afraid to probe and ask lots of questions such as "What does 'go over' mean?" and "What do most tutors in this subject do in the first/second week?".

Although it sounds obvious, most new tutors will find notes a great help in their first class. It can be easy to get flustered and forget what you planned to do. Having some brief notes outlining your class plan can be helpful. See the Appendix for one example of a class plan proforma.

Below are some more detailed suggestions about the first class. In addition, you might like to consult other guides in the TLU Tutor Training Guide series.

3. Managing nerves

Nervousness, anxiety and worry are a common and perfectly healthy occurrence among new tutors. After all, you are doing something for the first time and while you're doing it, many people are going to be watching you – it would be unusual not to feel some trepidation about such a situation.

One of the best methods of managing nerves is to do adequate preparation. Ensuring you are fully prepared

gives you a sense of confidence and back up that is likely to be helpful in your first class. Even very experienced teachers and presenters ensure they prepare thoroughly. If you know the material and have thought about how you will share it with students, you are much less likely to feel nervous before or during your class.

Of course, even though it is likely to help to do so, adequate or even thorough preparation may not put you completely at ease. You may have to consciously manage your anxiety as the time for the first class approaches.

If you are feeling particularly anxious, before the class, take a minute or two to close your eyes and picture yourself out the front of the class you are about to teach. See yourself standing, relaxed and confident, in front of smiling students.

You might even like to visit the room where you will conduct your first class. Have a good look around, stand at the front and imagine the students in front of you, pace around, sit down – if the room is free for a while, do some reading or go over some of the notes you have prepared for the class. Relax, it's only a room. If you will be using overhead projectors or other technology, familiarise yourself with it before the class to reduce anxious fumbling in front of the class that will only make you more nervous.

Breathe deeply and slowly and carefully expel all the air from your lungs. This will provide much needed oxygen to your brain and you will need that organ to teach! Ensure you don't overdo the deep breathing and end up giddy! If you do feel dizzy, sit down and take a moment to recover.

Finally, go to the bathroom before the class – you may not feel you need to but once the class starts, you may change your mind. This also gives you an opportunity to check your appearance and reassure yourself that you look fine.

Remind yourself that you were employed to tutor in this subject because somebody with authority thought you were good enough to do so. Remember when you were a student? You usually assumed that the person teaching you had some idea of what they were doing; otherwise they wouldn't have been employed. You probably didn't even think about it, focused, as you were likely to have been, on the assessment for the subject and finding out when assignments were due.

Even if you feel temporarily that you don't know enough about the subject or topic, the students will have faith in you and your ability just because you are there. They will assume that you know what you are doing. Your students are unlikely to be watching you as closely as you are watching yourself – relax. If they are first year students, they may even be more nervous than you!

Feel better? Good. Now remember to assure your students that you intend to have a great semester with them.

4. How to start the first class

Take introductions seriously

It might sound completely obvious but the first thing you should do in the first class is introduce yourself. Give students your full name – “Hello, I'm John Smith” – and indicate to them how you would like to be addressed, “Please call me John”. Write your full name on the whiteboard or on a blank overhead projector transparency and then underline the name by which you would like to be addressed:

John Smith

While you're there, give them your office hours and your contact details and availability. For example:

John Smith.

Email: jsmith@unimelb.edu.au (allow 72 hours for reply)

Phone: (03) 8344 5555 (allow 72 hours for reply)

Office: Room 104, Economics and Commerce Building (Mondays 3–5.00pm)

The second thing you should do is introduce the students to each other. Barrington (1998) suggests it is important to construct activities that help students to get to know each other and you so that they are not expected to work with or speak in front of strangers. He adds that an icebreaker can help create an atmosphere conducive to student involvement, activity and learning.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary describes an icebreaker as “A boat used for breaking through ice” (1976:531). This is may not a good analogy for how a tutor should use any number of strategies available to help members of a group get to know each other! Perhaps icemelter is a better term to describe the gentle activities that can be used to help students to get to know each other and get to know you.

Well-constructed icemelters will also help lessen any tension or anxiety that may be present, especially in the first session. The small group will then begin its work for the semester with a friendly, positive tone. Some commonly used icemelters:

Partner interview

Invite students to briefly interview the student next to them (one-two minutes only) and find out their name and something about them. A summary of this information can then be relayed back to the group by the interviewer (students are often keener to talk about a partner than about themselves).

Group bonding

Ask students to form groups of three or four and spend a few minutes finding out what they have in common with each other. At the end of the allocated time they report to the other groups what they have discovered they have in common. This works extremely well in getting people relaxed and talking informally.

Talking about names

Ask everyone to introduce themselves and talk about their first name and how they view it; how their parents chose it; their feelings about it; corruptions of it; and whether they would have preferred another name. Because of the time this takes, it works best for smaller groups.

Sticky labels

Give each student a sticky label and on it get them to write their name and three facts about themselves (e.g. birth month, favourite subject etc). After attaching the label to themselves they then have to find someone in the room that has a label with some similarity to theirs. They can then tell each other a little about themselves, which may or may not be shared with the larger group.

Say something about assessment

Do you remember when you were a student? Do you remember the aspect of each subject that was your primary interest? If you're among the majority of undergraduate students, it was probably the assessment regime. Most students want to know fairly early on what the assessment tasks are and when they are due.

Acknowledge this by at least outlining the assessment tasks and asking them to note critical dates for assignments; the policy for extensions and/or special consideration and your availability outside the details given earlier (you may not be available outside these hours – make this clear to the students now). Encourage students to

start preparation for assignments and study for exams now and to ask questions and seek clarification early.

It is useful in the first session to briefly go over some of the essential assessment information that they need to know to successfully complete the subject. Specific aspects that are usually useful to discuss:

- The overall assessment schedule.
- Due dates for assignments.
- Issues around plagiarism.
- Departmental policy on, and process for getting extensions and/or special consideration.
- Weighting of assessment tasks.
- How students can access past exam papers.

Allow opportunities for students to ask questions about the assessment.

Set the ground rules

Most groups function better when there is a clear understanding of the rules. If this shared understanding is not established in a small group setting such as in a tutorial at university, students can become very confused and this can affect their decisions to participate.

Establishing clear ground rules or expectations for student behaviour for your small group is therefore very important, and may prevent problems from developing. It might even be possible to negotiate the ground rules with the group, although you may have some that are not negotiable. Discuss expectations about what will go on in the class. It is a good idea to record the ground rules agreed on so they can be referred to later, if necessary (Barrington, 1998).

Below are a few suggestions for ground rules/expectations – they are not exhaustive and you may prefer to develop your own for a particular group and subject. It will probably be fruitful to spend a few minutes discussing each with the students.

- Do some preparation for each tutorial.
- Contribute by speaking, listening and encouraging others to speak.
- Be conscious that some of us have better English language skills than others and encourage each other to develop these skills.
- Don't interrupt each other.
- Respect each other's points of view, even when we strongly disagree.
- Take risks and allow ourselves to be wrong at times.
- No put-downs of others (even as a joke).
- Try to be on time (5 minutes past the hour).

Ask for questions

Ask the students to share their concerns or questions at this point. See the TLU Tutor Training Guide *Tutorial Questioning Technique* for more advice on asking questions and handling student responses.

Be enthusiastic

Research demonstrates that higher education teachers who are enthusiastic about their subject matter can both enthuse students about the material and leave a lasting impression on the students. Think about your favourite university teacher – did he or she drag themselves in and drone on for an hour each week while staring at the back wall, never making eye contact with students, never mind actively involving them in the classes? Unlikely. More likely the best teacher you had was motivated, energetic and passionate – use that person as a role model for your tutoring.

5. Frequently Asked Questions

What if I don't know the answer to a question?

Every tutor has been asked many questions to which they do not know the answers. Try the following:

- Acknowledge that the question is a good one: smile and say, "Great question".
- Be honest – tell them that you do not know the answer: "I'm not sure about the answer to this one".
- Ask the other students for input: "Does anyone here know the answer?".
- Offer to find out the answer for next week: "I'll dig around and let you know next week".
- Suggest that both you and the students find the answer: "Let's all find out the answer to that question. We'll pool our answers at the beginning of next week and see what we come up with".
- Ensure you do attend to the question the following week.
- Make the point that many academic questions don't have satisfactory answers and that this is what makes academic work interesting, exciting and challenging. This is also why academic work is important, and students can be part of this process of discovery.

What if no-one does any preparation?

You should not expect every student (or even most students) to do all the required preparation every week but you can set an expectation that they will do, for example, *some* preparation *most* weeks. You might even set up a roster where specific students do the reading or preparation on certain weeks and not others and this is rotated so that everyone gets turns and breaks. Those who have undertaken preparation must then summarise the materials and present it in some manner to the other students.

Alternatively, you can explain that if some students choose to do little or no work between classes, they are likely to both learn less and do more poorly in assessment tasks than their colleagues. Ask them to commit to undertaking one hour of reading/preparation between this week and next so that the class can discuss/work on that material.

Ultimately, the responsibility for student learning lies with the student. As the tutor, your responsibilities are to: prepare and facilitate the best classes you possible can; provide engaging and interesting activities in tutorials; answer questions; provide feedback; and point students to useful references and other resources. A student's responsibilities are to: prepare for classes; participate actively in them; and reflect on and study the material provided for them. You cannot make a student prepare – you can only do your best to encourage them to do so. However, it is important not to punish those students who have made the effort to do the preparation by simply going through the material again. This wastes the time of those who have prepared and will discourage them from preparing again.

What if one student dominates?

Having one student who has an answer to nearly every question (even if it's not a very good answer) and who is keen to share their wisdom with others is sometimes a challenge for tutors. One subtle method of discouraging too many contributions from such students is to stand or sit beside or behind the person, and thereby make it difficult for them to make eye contact with you or otherwise indicate that they want to speak. Another method is to directly ask another student for a contribution when seeking student input.

Sometimes a more direct approach is needed:

"Thanks Derek, you've made a couple of very valuable contributions already, could we hear from someone we haven't heard from yet?"

"Does anyone besides Melissa have a comment to make at this point?"

Ensure you are polite and respectful and do not embarrass the dominant student – they are often unaware of

their dominating behaviour.

In the case of really aggressive students, you can use the drastic solution of appealing to the group to help subdue someone or pass them on to another tutorial (the lecturer's). These, however, are solutions of last resort. Try not to react defensively. Build on an aggressive student's contribution where you can, so that you do not risk stifling discussion. You may ask other students to react to an assertion or criticism, for example.

If there is a small group that dominates in some way, seek to break this up, for example, by spending part of the tutorial in small group work. Try to involve the others in the discussion by putting value on their contributions.

What if the students won't participate?

Student non-participation can turn the best-planned tutorial into a non-event. Preparation and setting expectations are important here. Ensure you have a balanced mix of student activities and talking head (yours) so that the tutorial does not become a mini-lecture where students adopt a passive approach. The issue of facilitating participation is covered in detail in the TLU Tutor Training Guide *Encouraging Student Participation*.

Many students are shy or passive. Try to pitch questions at a medium level so that all will be able to answer. Reassure the shy students that you value what they are saying by concentrating carefully on it, showing by your demeanour that you are listening, and using their ideas or phrases in the next question. Empower the passive student by building their confidence: keep openings for them, use other people's opinions to give a lead, ask an easy question to encourage them to continue once they have spoken.

You might use aids such as a quotation, or extract from an article or a text to help passive students contribute by having something in front of them. Or you might ask them to give a small précis of a text, which is less intimidating than requiring an opinion.

Very often students, particularly at first-year level, read passively and have difficulty translating their reading to the active plane. They have read the material but can't find the words to say something. Suggest that they jot a few headings down before each tutorial that will help their recall with the reading. Ask them to consider how they approach their reading. Do they approach it with a question? What were they looking for? Remind them to highlight key points and take notes. Suggest that they read twice, skimming the first time, concentrating the second.

What if international students don't contribute?

Sometimes international students and/or English as a Second Language (ESL) students are reluctant to speak because they fear their language or accent will lead them to be misunderstood or laughed at. Encourage all students to contribute through the ground rules and expectations you set. Ensure you learn your students' names and gently ask individual students for their opinion or contribution:

“Henry, what do you think of this issue?”

“Mai, what is your view on what Naomi has just said?”

Alternatively ask general questions to the group that the international students may be better able to answer:

“Can anyone give an example from another country or culture of where this concept applies?”

“Does anyone know of a country where this does not happen?”

Ensure you thank all (international, ESL and Australian) students for their input. See the TLU Tutor Training Guide *Teaching International Students in Tutorials*.

What if a student says something offensive?

This is best avoided by including something in your ground rules or expectations that proactively discourage such contributions. However, if a student does say something offensive, the best thing to do in this situation is to immediately make a statement that indicates you will not tolerate such comments. You must ensure that you do not engage in a debate with the student who has been offensive or in any other way that might further inflame the situation. Be polite but firm. Try something like:

“While you are entitled to your opinion, I cannot allow comments like that in this class as some people find them offensive. Please respect the views of all students when you make a comment.”

Move on quickly. If the student protests, tell them that you are happy to discuss this situation further after class but that you don't want to take class time away from his/her fellow students. Generally, such occurrences are very rare but it is best to be prepared in case you are confronted by one.

How do I know the students are following what I'm saying?

The simple answer to this question is: ask the students if they understand. However, as is the case with all seemingly simple answers, it is a little more complex than it seems. If you ask students bluntly, “Do you understand?”, you are likely to get polite nods, silence and averted eyes. Many students will not have the courage to tell you they have no idea what you've been talking about for the last 10 minutes, or for the last three weeks. Try these instead (and note that these all assume the students won't understand):

- “This is complex. What are your questions so far?”
- “OK, that's enough from me for now. Tell me what you are unclear about and we'll go over it before we move on.”
- “Most people find this concept difficult. Quickly write a question on a scrap of paper and throw it into this box. I'll pick a few out and we'll answer them together.”
- At the end of a class: “This was difficult material. Take a scrap of paper and write down the point you are most unclear about. We'll deal with these in next week's class”.
- Show that you too are struggling with an idea (even if it is, in reality, perfectly clear). Engage them in the process of assisting you. “I don't get it! Why is this the right answer?” Feigning lack of understanding makes them see that even those higher than them are learning too.

What if all the materials are covered and I have time to spare?

- Ask the students whether they have any questions. If they do, seek answers from the class, don't feel that you have to answer.
- You might review a difficult part of the topic.
- You could give them a quick quiz. For example you could go round the class asking each student to state one puzzle or question which they still have about the tutorial work. But whatever you do it is very important not to finish any tutorial early.

What if I run out of time for all the groups to report back?

With a bit of experience, this probably won't happen. Divide the tasks up between groups to ensure complex tasks are shared equally. It is important that all of the tasks given in a tutorial are covered. Some general advice:

- Push the students to complete tasks. “You now have 10 minutes left”, “Five minutes to go”, “I must have all work finished in two minutes. Make sure that every question is answered, even if only in dot points”. Walk around the room assisting and exerting subtle pressure.
- Set manageable tasks. It is important that students have a sense of accomplishment at each tutorial, and not a sense of being overwhelmed with the complexity of something. Bite-sized, incremental steps in their learning is critical. If you are finding that the task you set is proving too hard, change

- tack: “OK, I want everyone to concentrate only on problem three for now. We will do the rest later”.
- Ask them to divide up tasks within their groups: Person A answers the first part, Person B the second, etc. This can even be done with writing tasks: Person A completes a paragraph or two on the first part of the question, Person B edits and revises Person A’s work; Person C drafts a paragraph for the second part, and so on.

6. A final word

It is unusual for a first tutorial to go perfectly. More likely, your first tutoring experience will be a mixture of successes and imperfections that will improve with practice. Becoming an excellent tutor takes time. It also takes an individual commitment to engage in a continuous process of reflection, refinement and improvement. Successful university teachers will tell you that the rewards of teaching make this commitment worthwhile.

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Further reading

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Appendix

Tutorial plan proforma

Subject:

Week:

Topic:

Approximate time	Activity
10 mins 6.05 – 6.15pm	Welcome Complete follow-up on last week's questions Outline objective(s) of class Outline overview of class
5 mins 6.15 – 6.20pm	Orientation activity
10 mins 6.20 – 6.30pm	Q&A re readings this week
20 mins 6.30 – 6.50pm	Application activity
5 mins 6.50 – 6.55pm	Whole group session - groups share and general discussion
5 mins 6.55 – 7.00pm	Reminders for next week Wrap up

Handouts/reminders for next week:

Resources, advice and support for tutors

The Teaching and Learning Unit (TLU) provides a range of resources designed specifically for tutors in the Faculty of Economics and Commerce. Go to: <http://tlu.ecom.unimelb.edu.au/tutors/> to see what we offer.

The Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) also has a useful guide called *Tutoring and Demonstrating at the University of Melbourne* - <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/bookpages/contents.html>.

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