8 Points for Succeeding in the Undergraduate U.S. Classroom Culture (at Cal)

The purpose of these eight points are to give you a sense of what to expect during your studies at Cal and to provide advice, in the form of specific tips and techniques, on how to succeed while you’re here.

**Topic I: Classroom Culture in the United States and at Cal**

**Point 1:** Classes at Cal are organized around an active learning approach to education. You are not expected to be a passive recipient of the knowledge and information your professors and GSIs will convey. On the contrary, you are expected to become an agent in the process of learning and discovery; that is, to be actively engaged in building a conversation with your professors, GSIs, and your peers.

**Point 2:**
Classes at Cal apply this model through a three step process. First, there are lectures where the professor presents and discusses the material for the course. Second, there are sections. Sections are small groups of students, generally 15-20, that meet regularly with a graduate student working as a teaching assistant for the course (GSI) in order to discuss the material. This is where active learning really comes to life because you have the opportunity to express your views and doubts about the material you’re studying. Finally, there is active, independent work on your behalf. In-class assignments and homework are continuous throughout the semester and can take the form of quizzes, reading responses, papers, group projects, and exams.

**Topic II: How to Succeed in Lecture**

**Point 3:** To succeed in lecture you have to attend lecture. This may sound like an obvious point, but there are important reasons for mentioning it. First, at Cal you have the opportunity to take classes with the foremost specialists in many fields. You would be doing a disservice to yourself and the efforts you made to get here by failing to attend section. Second, in lecture professors provide important information that you will not find anywhere else. They’ll explain why certain material has been assigned, provide you a framework for approaching the material, and lay out what they expect you to take away from the readings.

**Point 4:** To succeed in lecture you have to take notes intelligently. Good lecture notes will help you navigate the readings and provide an invaluable resource as you write papers and prepare for exams. Remember that good lecture notes strike a balance between an accurate representation of the material and putting the ideas into your own words so that you understand them at later stages in the semester. Develop a system of abbreviations and shortcuts so that you don’t have to write every single word the professor mentions. And don’t worry about spelling and grammar. These notes are for you only.
Topic III: How to Succeed in Section

Point 5: In order to succeed in section you have to attend section.

Point 6: In order to succeed in section you have to participate in section. For those of you who are shy, it will be important that you push yourself to share your thoughts with the rest of the class. Articulating your thoughts out loud is in itself a learning process that allows you to clarify your views and hone in on important issues or misunderstandings. Furthermore, if you’ve spent time studying, failing to speak up in section will deprive others of the insights you may have gained about the material. For those of you who are confident and feel comfortable speaking in a group, your challenge is to develop the capacity to listen. You should make others feel comfortable expressing their views and make efforts to bring them into the conversation (e.g. “My view is that... But I’d love to hear what the rest of you think about this piece.”). You can ask anything in section, but do so in a way that reflects that you have done the work. This is an example of a poor intervention: “I don’t understand what the author is saying.” This is an example of an effective intervention: “The author is trying to argue that ‘x,’ but I don’t understand how she moves from point ‘a’ to point ‘b’ in the first part of this piece.” Finally, be mindful of the diversity of your classroom setting and use appropriate language accordingly. “Police officer” is a better term than “policeman.” The former is gender neutral while the latter is a gendered word.

Topic IV: Managing Your Workload

Point 7: In order to manage your workload effectively you have to learn to read with a purpose. Rather the reading a piece word by word from front to back, learn to ask key questions as you move through the analysis. What is the author’s central argument? How are they trying to convince me of their claim? What evidence are they presenting? How could they have made a more compelling case? A good way to approach a reading is to first scan and scope the text. Carefully read the introduction, conclusion, and perhaps a few paragraphs from the body of the text. Get a sense of what they author’s project is and figure out some potential answers to the questions above. You can also use your lecture notes for guidance. Then, go back and carefully read the parts that seem important and move quickly through those that don’t. Highlight, annotate, and summarize as you move through the reading.

Point 8: Build study groups in order to share the load of reading and studying and to capitalize on your strengths and those of your peers. Perhaps you feel particularly confident about your understanding of a given reading, but less so about that of another. Share your insights about the readings you feel confident about and have others share theirs with you. In this way, you’ll be contributing to a supportive learning community.
Remember, the time you invest in your studies will be equivalent to the rewards you reap. Doing well at Cal will help you in other aspects of your life as well. If you have any questions or want advice on these or other issues related to building a successful undergraduate experience, feel free to contact me.

Michel Estefan
mestefan@berkeley.edu