

Large Class FAQ: Attendance

1. How can I encourage greater attendance in my class?

- Interact with students regularly; learn some names. When a familiar face disappears for several classes in a row, send that person an e-mail note just to say you've missed him or her; word spreads quickly among students that you notice when they aren't there.
- Make the class informative, interesting, and relevant to students' lives. Add variety/entertainment to lectures (animations, slide shows, demos, video clips, music, guest speakers, etc.).
- Bring some small class routines (e.g., filling out index cards with personal info.) to large classes.
- Give credit for small group activities performed in class.
- Put outlines up on your course Web page, so that students know what to expect and can use them as a guide for taking notes.
- Use lots of supplemental illustrations/examples.
- Give lots of exam-directed problems in class.
- Count participation toward the final grade.
- Give students a topic to think about for the next class discussion.
- Give regular quizzes. These should count towards the final grade. They can be pop quizzes or announced. They can be given at the beginning of class and to get feedback on assigned reading or at the end to test comprehension of material just covered.
- Jim Eisenstein (Political Science) offers a variation of the previous technique: "An interesting alternative to the individual quiz is the 'group' quiz. Allow small groups to discuss quiz questions before the individuals in these groups submit their answers. (Establishing permanent small groups in large class sections can help mitigate student alienation and encourage attendance.) To cut down on grading, one can randomly select sections whose quizzes will count on a particular day."
- Give more scheduled exams covering less material.
- Michael Morse (Kinesiology) suggests, "Invite guest speakers to address topics of interest in applied fields. Create some final exam questions based on their presentations."
- Dorothy Blair (Nutrition) says, "Give weekly in-class assignments that can be done in 20-30 minutes and that give students the chance to apply what they have learned. Students can work individually or in pairs. Give students credit for completing assignments, but don't grade them. Doing this one day a week creates esprit de corps and can raise attendance on other days as well."
- Mark Latash (Kinesiology) recommends a similar technique: "Collect homework assignments, and give students credit for handing it in. You do not have to do this every day to encourage attendance. You can reduce your workload by collecting a subset from different students each day."
- Shannon Nichols (English) reminds us that taking attendance offers the opportunity for even greater benefits: "As a general comment, I would say that straight attendance taking seems like a waste of an opportunity to get feedback from the students or to encourage

them to keep up with the material. Although grading quizzes and homeworks can be time consuming, I would much rather do this than simply mark 'here' in my record book."

- Reinhard Graetzer (Physics) uses the following technique to *sample* attendance in order to *encourage* attendance: "Text problems are assigned and due at lecture. Problems are collected at the end of lecture from several (3 or 4) recitation sections selected randomly. Problems are quickly graded by a hired undergraduate--0 points for no effort; 1 point for demonstrated effort; 2 points for some success (not necessarily complete or correct). Lecture-homework counts 16% of semester grade--collected every lecture except the first week and weeks of evening exams. The assigned homework deals with material *to be* covered in lecture. Observations: Lecture attendance seems higher; questions asked reflect some acquaintance with material; no complaints about additional work."
- Convince students that exam success depends on attendance. (One faculty member gathered data from previous classes to prove it and presented these data to his students.)
- If you provide an outline of the class in advance, wait to fill in the details during class.
- Establish a policy that grades will be lowered according to the number of sessions missed. Some faculty report that having attendance count for as little as 3-5% of the final grade still has a significant impact on attendance.
- Use several short (one question, computer-graded) quizzes to take occasional attendance and to assess the level of student's understanding. Full credit may be given for attempting an answer whereas no credit is given for a missing quiz.
- Finally, one faculty member encourages us to keep in mind the most fundamental principle of attendance: make it worth their while to be there!

2. How can I take attendance easily and quickly in a large class?

- Have students sign in at the door.
- Students are assigned numbered seats and sign a seating chart when it is passed.
- Jim Rodgers (Economics) suggests the following method for facilitating the use of seating chart: "Where assigned seating is practical, cut the seating chart into segments and circulate segments so that each student can print last name and last four digits of social security number in the rectangle that represents his or her seat. TA(s) can then mark empty seats on the chart during class. Such charts already exist for classrooms in the Forum; for rooms in other buildings, the chart may have to be created."
- TA marks absences on seating chart.
- Some instructors take attendance at the end of the session rather than at the beginning, so as to discourage students from signing in or being signed in and then leaving.
- Taking attendance at irregular intervals may suffice, especially if there is a clear policy for lowering grades when absences are excessive.
- One particularly innovative system for monitoring who attends class is to pass out coded scan sheets on which students answer feedback questions that the instructor writes on the board. The scan forms are coded with a series of punches that varies each time, and they are counted out by TAs so that students cannot take more than one. Students' responses to feedback questions give the instructor a good sense of their progress. This system requires very little of the instructor's time, since the forms can be scored by Scanning Operations.
- Peter Gold (Chemistry) and Jack Stevens (Management and Organization) both proposed the following solution: "The University could purchase computers with electronic scanners to read identification cards as students enter the classroom. This has been done in at least

one classroom at Montana State University. It would help in classrooms where seat assignments are impractical or TA support minimal. Would such a system raise concerns about student privacy?"

- A number of instructors suggested methods of monitoring attendance at least periodically, if not daily, including:
 - Take attendance at random via coded scan sheets.
 - Collect written "exercises" periodically (and make them the basis of discussion).
 - Give a practice exam problem at end of lecture on scan sheets. This is both a way to take attendance and to test students' ability to apply key concepts.
 - Collect homework one week and return another; students must be present both times to get credit.
 - Post alphabetical lists of names on the walls of the classroom at various locations and have students sign in. Announce at the beginning that students can sign in only for themselves and that by signing they are committing to stay the entire period. Those who need to leave early must notify the instructor ahead via e-mail.

3. How can I keep students in class until the end?

- John Lowe (Chemistry) and Allen Phillips (Biochemistry and Molecular Biology) both offered this technique: "Pose a problem to be solved by the next class period. Collect student solutions at the beginning of the next class to get feedback and check attendance. Going over the problem can increase interaction with students. If you have TA support, the collected solutions can be graded."
- Shannon Nichols (English) suggests, "Assign a question about readings for the next session. Ask students to write several paragraphs in response. This helps generate better questions and comments for discussion at the next class session. Collect all, some, or none depending on how much time you have to look over them."
- Michael Morse (Kinesiology) volunteered two techniques: "'Question of the day': Without announcing ahead, have students write a question at the end of class based on that day's discussion. The student whose question is selected gets to 'bank the point.' A similar feature is the 'Story of the day.' Subject-related stories are popular, and students do not like to miss them."
- Linda Trevino (Management and Organization) has recommended "Study tips": "End each class by putting a short list of study tips on the overhead. Let students know from the beginning of the semester that class will always end on time and with this feature. Select tips that will help students understand the material and do better on exams. Students always copy the tips before leaving."
- John Lowe (Chemistry) has used a "Multipurpose minute paper": "Get feedback on a particular class session by asking students to write the most important thing they learned and a related question they would like answered. These may or may not be: signed to check attendance, pre-announced, counted for credit, collected from every student, returned to students."

Note: Some data on patterns of student attendance were collected via a Penn State Pulse survey in 1996.