SOME SUGGESTIONS for DOING YOUR BEST on the TEACH TEST

These ideas come from many years of watching students take TEACH Tests. They are suggestions, not rules. In every case, you are the teacher, so use your own best judgment.

PLANNING FOR THE TEST

1. Be realistic in the amount of material you can complete. The teaching portion of the exam is designed to last only 5-10 minutes. If the topic your department gives you is very long and complicated, you may want to discuss only part of it.

2. Plan and organize your material before you come in to take the test. Even the most experienced teacher has to organize a lecture beforehand. Know what specific information you want to communicate, and know what must come first, second, etc.

3. Keep your notes simple and easy to read. Make just one or two sheets of paper or a few cards with large, clear writing. Your notes should just remind you of your points with a word or phrase; you can fill in the complete sentences as you talk. It’s really not helpful to write every word of your lecture on paper, and it may hurt your presentation—you need to be able to glance down quickly and see what you’ve finished and what you want to do next.

4. Aim your lesson at lower level undergraduates, and assume they have no prior knowledge of your field of study. Remember that the purpose of this test is to see how well you can communicate with students in lower–level classes, since those are the classes TA’s normally assist in and teach. Don’t make your lesson more complicated than it needs to be, and don’t use this test as an opportunity to impress your professor. This test is not a Ph.D. exam, and it is not a test of your knowledge in your field.

5. Avoid doing research for this test; concentrate instead on a clear presentation. We are not judging your knowledge in your field and we don’t expect you to need any background material beyond what we enclose in the envelope. If no material is enclosed, your department assumes you have basic knowledge of the topic and does not expect you to do research. If the test topics are truly so far out of your experience that you absolutely cannot speak about one of them for five minutes, then notify the EAP office on the day that you pick up your envelope.

6. Be prepared to support your general statements with specifics. Even though the lesson is short, it should communicate genuine information.

7. Make sure you can give examples if necessary. Depending on your specific topic, you may find it most practical to use one large example and keep referring to it, or you may need different examples for different parts of your lesson.

8. Think about possible questions students might ask—are there any words, concepts, or processes that might be unfamiliar to first- or second-year students?

9. If there is difficult vocabulary, make sure you know how to pronounce and spell it.

10. Don’t memorize your lecture; instead, be as familiar as you can with the main ideas and specifics of your material. The panelists will interrupt you and ask you questions which may take you away from your original train of thought. If you know the material, you will be comfortable making small changes in your presentation to accommodate your listeners. But if you are dependent upon memorizing every word, questions and interruptions will make you nervous and may make you forget your material.

DURING THE TEACH TEST
1. **Speak loudly and clearly.** If you speak softly, people in the back of the room can’t hear you, even if your pronunciation is excellent. If your pronunciation isn’t excellent, mumbling or speaking softly makes you harder, not easier, to understand. The TEACH Panel is not counting how many mistakes you make; we are judging whether we can understand what you are teaching. So even when you don’t feel perfectly confident about your ideas or your English, it’s better to make a mistake loudly and clearly than to mumble and guarantee that we can’t understand you at all! Be sure your voice reaches the back of the room, and keep in mind that most classrooms have poor sound qualities.

2. **Introduce yourself and your topic.** Some of the panelists may have no background in your subject; some may not even know what department you are from.

3. **Don’t worry about the time,** and don’t worry about whether you can finish presenting everything you’ve planned. When you are preparing for the test, estimate as well as you can how much material you should cover. But when you get into the test, we may interrupt you with questions, ask you to continue, or even stop you in the middle of your talk. So please let us worry about the time.

4. **Don’t rush** in order to fit a lot of material into a short time. First of all, rushing will affect how clearly you speak, and this is a communication test. Second, even if you speak clearly, people need time to understand and absorb what you are teaching them. We don’t worry about whether you finish the lesson.

5. **Use the board to help you.** Use it to organize difficult material. Use it to communicate main ideas (usually you don’t need to write whole sentences). Use it to write down new or difficult words or words someone asks you about. If the board gets filled up, erase what you don’t need and keep going. When you write on the board, make sure what you write is clear and correct. Remember that students get a great deal of information from the board.

6. **Don’t talk into the board** for more than a few seconds while you’re writing. If you face the board consistently while you talk, you’ll be difficult to understand. You’ll also be boring. If you have a lot of material to write, take a moment or two to face the board and write it. Then turn around and continue your explanation.

7. **Look at your students’ faces while you’re talking to them.** You’ll engage their interest, and you’ll be able to see whether they understand you.

8. **Don’t adopt an angry, sharp, or authoritarian attitude towards the students.** Try to be friendly and pleasant.

9. **If someone asks you to repeat a word or phrase, or if they tell you they didn’t understand what you said, write the word or phrase on the board.** Don’t simply keep repeating the word or phrase—obviously there’s some pronunciation difference. If you immediately write down the phrase, the problem disappears. And take time to make sure you know which particular word or phrase they are having trouble with.

10. **Don’t spend a lot of time preparing visual aids;** we want to watch you! Overhead transparencies are not permitted, although you can bring a simple handout if you really need it. The best way to spend the brief time before the test is not to make complicated handouts, but to plan your talk and practice presenting it clearly.

**TIPS FOR ANSWERING QUESTIONS**

1. **Make absolutely sure you understand the question.** If you aren’t sure, ask the student to repeat it. If you still aren’t sure, discuss it with the student. If necessary, restate the question in your own words and ask the student if your understanding is correct. If you don’t understand a word or phrase the student is
using, ask him or her to explain it or repeat it. Don’t start answering until you find out as well as you can what the student wants to know.

2. Here are some sample questions and the first few words of the answer. Note how the first part of the answer depends on how the question is structured.

   a. Is the earth round?
   “Yes…” (This kind of question needs “Yes” or “No” first. You can follow with more information.)

   b. Why is the earth round?
   “Because…” (This kind of question needs an explanation of cause and effect.

   c. What shape is the earth?
   “It’s round.” (This kind of question needs a specific answer first. You can follow with more information.)

   d. Is the earth round or flat?
   “It’s round.” (This kind of question needs an answer that specifically names one of the two alternatives, or else a statement that neither--or both--of the alternatives is correct. You can follow with more information.)

3. When you finish answering, it’s useful to say something like, “Have I answered your question?” or, “Is that clear?” Watch what the students say and how they look; you’ll know if they understand.

4. If you don’t know the answer to a question, tell the students you don’t know. If you’re not sure, say you’re not sure. You can offer to discuss the question later in your office or to find out the answer and tell the student in the next class. But don’t pretend to know the answer if you don’t know it, and don’t ever make up information. The point is that students believe what a teacher tells them; if you tell them something incorrect, they’ll learn the incorrect information. It’s much better to be honest. No one expects you to know everything.

5. If you need to think about the answer to a question, you can wait for a moment or two before answering. A few seconds of silence is fine. But it’s necessary for you to signal the students that you understood the question and are thinking about the answer. You can say something like, “Let me think about that a minute.” Or you can use an appropriate non-verbal gesture if you know one.

6. Don’t criticize students who ask questions by suggesting that a question is foolish or that the student should already know the information. Students don’t learn well if they are afraid to ask questions. There might be some occasions in a class when you don’t want to spend time on information you’ve already covered or when the answer is in the homework that the student should have read. But even then, it’s best not to embarrass or criticize students or to react angrily to questions. Invite them to your office for help.

7. There may be some occasions when you feel that a question is genuinely off the subject you are discussing. If there is a quick answer, you might want to answer anyway. If the answer is long and complicated, you may prefer to ask the student to discuss it with you outside of class. Use your judgment.

8. In general, don’t answer a question with information that is more complicated than necessary. When someone is confused, usually the best strategy is to explain something with simple words and clear examples, rather than with high-level terminology and formulas. You may have occasion to present complicated information in response to a complicated question. But it’s useful for you to decide whether someone is confused and needs a simple answer, or whether someone understands the simple material and wants more (and higher level) information.
Finally, always keep in mind the purpose and priorities of the test. We are testing your ability to communicate with undergraduates. We want to know if you can:

- Speak clear, understandable English.
- Understand and answer questions.
- Carry on conversation.
- Interact successfully with students.
- Present information in a clear, organized way.

Your task in the TEACH Test is to demonstrate to us that you can do these things.

GOOD LUCK!