

Focus Your Lectures with the 'One-Sentence Lesson Plan'

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Professors tend to cover a lot of content over the course of one class session. Yet students will probably forget most of it by the end of the semester. Why? One reason is that we focus too much on *teaching*, and not enough on *learning*. Students, therefore, don't really get to grapple with the topic you just lectured about. They're too busy taking notes. And most times, they don't see a point to learning all this "stuff."

Enter the **one-sentence lesson plan**.

The one-sentence lesson plan helps professors focus on *learning*—rather than on *teaching*—by answering three simple things: The *what*, the *how*, and the *why*.

The *what*

First, *what* do you want your students to know (or be able to do) by the end of class? Here, you identify the skill or the content to be learned.

For example, I want students to be able to *evaluate the credibility of sources*. That's a skill. Another example is: *Students will be able to explain and apply Piaget's four stages of cognitive development*. That's content.

More importantly, identifying your *what* forces you to narrow your teaching. This is the hardest part for most professors. Even if you have more than one *what*, this exercise still pushes you to prioritize. I recommend you "niche" your lecture topic down to one major concept.

The *how*

Next, *how* will students reach this goal?

In other words, what method, strategy, tool, or activity will you employ to make sure they know what they're supposed to know or gain the skill they're supposed to gain? This is the hands-on part, where students grapple with the content.

Building on the first example, I might write: *Students will be able to evaluate the credibility of sources by "triangulating" information*. That's *how* students will be able to evaluate sources—the strategy. However, there are other ways to learn this skill. I could just have easily stated:

Students will be able to evaluate the credibility of sources by discussing in groups the pros and cons of each source.

In this case, the *how* is an activity or method.

The *why*

Finally, *why* are students learning this?

This is the “so what?”—why do students need to know or do this? What’s in it for them? How do they benefit? It’s about understanding your audience. Usually, the *why* starts with the prompt, “so that . . .”

Continuing with the evaluating sources example, I might state:

*Students will evaluate the credibility of sources by “triangulating” information, **so that they make better buying decisions.***

The *why* is the most important part of the one-sentence lesson plan. As teachers, however, most of us overlook it. Yet this is the part students care about. When they know the purpose, they will absorb the topic more deeply (1). Yet too often we just assume students know why they’re learning a particular concept. Will students really know why they’re evaluating sources? Not necessarily.

Another reason to articulate the *why* is because it can help you open your lesson. For example, if “making better decisions” is one of the reasons we learn to evaluate the credibility of sources, then I can use that as a jumping off point. I might start the class by posing the following:

Class, say you want to buy a new flash drive. You want to make sure it has enough space to hold not just your school work but also your media, whether it’s pictures, videos, whatever. Also, the flash drive has to be reliable, because your last one died and you lost your paper! Finally, the flash drive has to be affordable, right?

I want you to take your phone right now and Google the words “best flash drive.” Which specific sites do you visit and why? Jot down your thoughts and reasons.

Now, students are making decisions about what to buy, as well as activating prior experiences related to buying. This will motivate them to learn about your content; in this case, how to evaluate the credibility of sources.

Compare that opening with a more mundane, typical way one might start his/her lecture: “Today we’re going to learn how to evaluate the credibility of sources . . .”

Professors do this all the time—we introduce the content up front: “Let’s start by going over Piaget’s four stages of cognitive development . . .”

When we start with the content first, rather than with the *why*, we rob students of the opportunity to contextualize the topic. Asking students about their experiences buying a new flash drive will help them relate to the potentially dull topic of “evaluating the credibility of sources.” Research such as those by Ambrose et al. (2010) suggest that anchoring new topics to something familiar helps students learn more effectively (2).

Based on my one-sentence lesson plan, here’s a simple breakdown of my lecture:

Opening: Ask students their experiences searching information on the Internet

Mini-lesson: Teach them how to triangulate information (or better yet, start by asking them *better* ways to find information)

Guided practice: Model your “think-aloud” as you demonstrate with a new topic (e.g., evaluating the credibility of sources related to climate change)

Activity: Students apply the triangulating strategy (using their smartphone)

Closing: Discuss why good judgement is important in the information age

All that from a one-sentence lesson plan.

According to marketing consultant Simon Sinek, the *why* drives behavior. In his bestselling book, *Start with Why*, Sinek argues that successful organizations understand that people won’t buy into whatever is being sold unless they understand why they’re doing it. Former Apple CEO Steve Jobs, for instance, didn’t just market computers (i.e., the *what*). He marketed the idea to challenge the status quo—to “think different” (the *why*).

Similarly, in education the *why* drives the desire to learn. Wouldn’t it be great if you had the answer to the age-old student complaint, “Why do we have to learn this?” With the one-sentence lesson plan, you’ll have the answer.

Here is the template:

In this class, students will be able to [accomplish Outcome X] by [using Method Y], so that [they will be helped in Z way].

Is this like a learning objective?

One question professors often ask me is: *Isn’t the one-sentence lesson plan really just a learning or behavioral objective?*

Not quite. Learning or behavioral objectives may articulate the *what*, but they don’t always define the *how*. More importantly, typical objectives never define the *why*. The one-sentence lesson plan prioritizes the purpose (the *why*) as well as the method of learning (the *how*), which makes it more learner-centered. Furthermore, the one-sentence lesson plan leads into powerful lesson openings (and closings) that traditional objectives do not do.

I realize that the *why* isn’t always easy to find. Why, for instance, do students need to identify the slope of a line in math? You have to get creative. Maybe to help them understand the rate of change? The key is to make the concept concrete, like looking at how money can grow over time. Students will want to know about that.

So, when you plan, start with the *what*. It’s the easiest. But when you teach, start with the *why*.

With a one-sentence lesson plan, I can go in each day with a clear idea of *what* I want to teach, *how* I’m going to teach, and *why* I am teaching it. That means everything to a busy professor—and the overwhelmed student.

(1) Yeager, D. S., Henderson, M., Paunesku, D., Walton, G., Spitzer, B., D’Mello, S., & Duckworth, A. L. (2014). Boring but important: A self-transcendent purpose for learning fosters academic self-regulation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *107*, 559-580.

(2) Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., & Norman, M. K. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Norman Eng, EdD, is the founder of EDUCATIONxDESIGN, Inc., which helps new professors teach more effectively through a system focused on students, rather than on content. Download your free quick start-guide, "7 Proven Steps to Planning, Teaching, and Engaging Your Students," at NormanEng.org.

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