



## Guidance for Faculty Teaching in the First-Year Seminar Program

### Program Objective

First-year seminars help students transition, intellectually and emotionally, to academic life at Harvard. The seminars should enable them to develop confidence, curiosity, and intellectual courage while learning new material. At their best, first-year seminars ignite students' passion for a field of study and facilitate a mentorship relationship between faculty and students.

More broadly, first-year seminars

Are a space for students to engage with questions, methods and evidence that scholars grapple with, at a level appropriate for their first year in college. First-year seminars are not introductory or survey courses. In them, faculty may cover a relatively focused set of concepts and issues, or take an interdisciplinary approach to a problem.

Help students adapt to expectations for college-level work. Thus, as part of introducing the type of assignments students may encounter in the future, projects and research in a first-year seminar may develop over a longer period, and require more feedback and scaffolding.

Help students learn effective ways to relate to professors as interlocutors and mentors invested in their success. A first-year seminar is a space to enable students to overcome shyness/fears, modeling how to engage with disagreement or criticism.

Familiarize students with resources on campus, and beyond. Direct encounters with libraries, museums, centers, labs, historical collections, and other scientific facilities (e.g., Harvard Forest, Arboretum) support their path of exploration and sets them up for success in their Harvard career, and beyond.

Promote community, effective collaboration, and intellectual generosity. First-year seminars are an optimal space to demonstrate why excellence and achievement need not entail competition and “winning.”

## Putting Principles into Practice

These guiding principles should influence syllabus design and assignments, classroom management and student interactions, and feedback on students' work. Some recommended practices include:

### Designing your Seminar

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- Be clear about expectations. The syllabus should explain how you expect students to engage with each other and the seminar material, and identify competencies, knowledge and skills to be acquired during the semester.
- Consider including explicit guidance in how students may engage with ideas different from their own, and where appropriate, please assign readings with a range of views, epistemologies, and methods (beyond your own work or work closely related to yours).
- Incorporate office hours into the seminar, with a clear explanation of how they are to be used. We ask you to consider making at least one office-hour visit mandatory.
- Aim for an average of six to ten hours per week of seminar engagement. Due to disciplinary differences, the number of pages of weekly readings may not be an indicator of the time spent. You are encouraged to think in terms of time on task, but our overall guidance is of ~80 pages a week.
- Consider including a capstone assignment, such as a research paper, a lab exercise, or a creative project accompanied by a reflection.
- Aim for frequent, low-stakes assignments that move students towards their capstone project. Ideally, a series of smaller assignments with feedback will each develop some element of the capstone assignment, so that coordination of all parts of the final project is not too daunting or difficult.
- Incorporate group work, with attention to the membership of small groups, supervised time to collaborate, and a chance for individual reflection and evaluation.

### In the Classroom

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- Build community. An initial icebreaker is helpful but not sufficient; ongoing interpersonal interactions (including repetition of names) is important. Try to ensure that students know something about each other's background and/or Harvard context.
- Consider engaging the class in creating shared norms. Some faculty find that a class discussion to construct seminar expectations yield higher levels of transparency, understanding, and student commitment than merely specifying them on a syllabus.

- Incorporate multiple modes of participation. Varying the forms by which students engage with seminar materials enable participation from students with different personalities, skills, or learning styles. In particular, [active learning strategies](#) give instructors feedback about student learning, help students gauge their understanding, and can effectively accommodate neurodiversity.
- Keep the focus on student learning, not faculty teaching. [As abundant research shows](#), for students to learn something, they must do more than simply receive information about it; they must make it their own by doing something with it and then evaluating what else they need to know in order to use relevant information or skill effectively.

## **Grading and Feedback**

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- Use the SAT/UNS grading system to help students focus on your feedback. Please take the opportunity to do more than summarize a student's accomplishments; instead, seek to show students how to build upon what they have been learning to engage with later assignments or courses.
- Give feedback early and often. Students benefit from multiple, low-stakes evaluation, especially when it provides concrete guidance pointing to success, as well as next steps.
- Encourage appropriate requests for help, and ask students what is, and is not, helping them to learn. Where possible, incorporate their comments into modifications of reading, discussion, or assignments. Where that is not possible or desirable, it is useful to explain why.
- If students' feedback reveals that they are struggling with academic work and/or mental health to a degree that feels beyond your capacity to help, please consult with resources such as the Academic Resource Center (ARC), Harvard College Writing Center (HCWC), and Counseling and Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

The senior staff at the [Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning](#) would be happy to work with faculty teaching first-year seminars on syllabus design and classroom practice.

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