

## **Motivating Students: 8 Simple Rules**

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Some courses earn a reputation of being "hard and boring" by students. It is difficult to motivate students to invest the time and effort necessary to succeed in these courses. To meet this challenge, we have assembled a list of eight simple rules for keeping students focused and motivated. These rules are not original but they are broadly applicable.

### **Rule 1: Emphasize the most critical concepts continuously.**

Reiterate these concepts in lectures and assignments throughout the course. Include questions relating to these critical subjects on every exam, thus rewarding students for learning, retaining, and, hopefully, applying this knowledge in a variety of contexts.

### **Rule 2: Provide students with a "visual aid" when possible to explain abstract concepts.**

A significant proportion of today's students are visual learners. For these students, a simple diagram or flowchart truly can be more valuable than a thousand words in a text or a lecture.

### **Rule 3: Rely on logic when applicable.**

Point out to students which information is merely "fact" that must be memorized and which course material is based upon "logic." Show students how to employ logical thinking to learn and retain new information. For example, in the double-entry bookkeeping system, "debits" equal "credits," and debit entries cause assets to increase. These are "facts" or features of the system; they are not based on logic. However, once the student accepts the system, logic can be used to operate within the system. Continuing the example, if debit entries increase assets, it is logical that credit entries will cause assets to decrease.

### **Rule 4: Use in-class activities to reinforce newly presented material.**

After a new concept or subject has been presented via text reading, lecture, or class discussion, allow the students to put the concept into action by completing an in-class assignment. These assignments can be short, but they must be developed to ensure that the students understand the critical concepts underlying the new material. Typically, the most learning takes place when the students are permitted to work in small groups, to refer to their text and notes, and to ask questions of the instructor while completing the assignment. If these in-class assignments are part of the course-grading scheme, class attendance also improves.

### **Rule 5: Help students create a "link" when teaching something new.**

If the student can "link" the new material to something already learned, the odds of learning the new material are greatly increased. Examples of possible links include: prior material learned in this course (e.g., the critical concepts described in Rule 1), material learned in prerequisite courses, and "real-life" experiences of the students outside the classroom.

### **Rule 6: Recognize the importance of vocabulary in a course.**

Students often struggle with new vocabulary in many courses, especially introductory ones. To succeed in these courses, students must become comfortable with the new terminology. As subjects are presented, new and/or confusing terms should be identified and introduced to the students. Present "real-world" definitions and alternative terminology, in addition to textbook definitions. One way to

help students assimilate the course vocabulary is to create a "living" glossary on the instructor's website where new terminology is added, explained, and illustrated throughout the course.

**Rule 7: Treat students with respect.**

Patronizing behavior may be expected in primary school teachers, and "drill sergeant" strategies may be effective in military boot camps. However, most college students will not respond well to these techniques. Give students their dignity, and they will give you their best efforts.

**Rule 8: Hold students to a high standard.**

If students are not required to maintain a specified level of learning and performance, only the most highly motivated students will devote the time and effort necessary to learn. In contrast, maintaining high standards not only will motivate student learning, it will also be the source of student feelings of accomplishment when those standards are met.

Each of these rules can help motivate even the most lethargic student, but Rule 7 and 8 are the most important. If students are not treated with respect and held to a high standard, scrupulously following the first six rules will have much less impact and might end up being an exercise in futility.

**Additional reading from the library of the CTL:**

Barkley, E. F., Cross, K. P., & Major, C. H. (2005). *Collaborative learning techniques : a handbook for college faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

See chapter 7 in Erickson, B. L., Peters, C. B., & Strommer, D. W. (2006). *Teaching first-year college students*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass: 103 – 117.