How to Teach Literature to College Students

Teaching a college literature course for the first time can be intimidating. However, if you are well-prepared, the idea of teaching college literature class should start to sound fun and exciting. To teach literature to college students,...

Part 1 of 4:

Teaching at the College Level

1. 

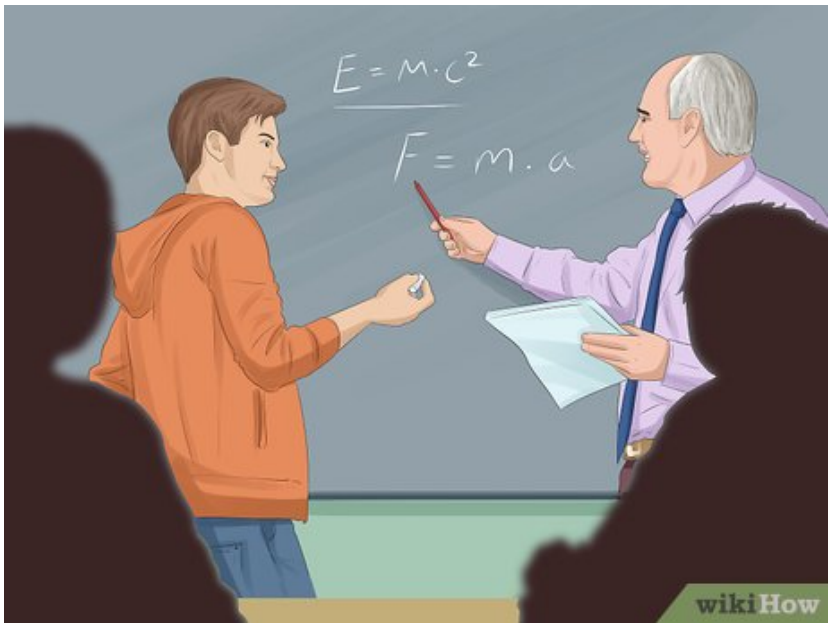
Motivate students to do the reading with quizzes. One of the biggest challenges of teaching college literature is getting your students to come to class prepared. One way to motivate your students to do the readings and come to class ready to discuss them is to give daily reading quizzes.[1]

1. You can either create simple short answer quizzes or assign writing prompts that will test your students' knowledge of the reading. Give these quizzes at the beginning of every class. You may even incorporate the quizzes into your class discussions, such as by asking students to share their answers.
2. Make sure that you give an adequate amount of points for the quizzes and responses. For example, if the quizzes for the entire semester are only worth 5% of the overall grade, then some students may not see these as worthy of their time and effort. Instead, consider making the quizzes worth around 20 to 30% of the total grade.

2. 

Require students to come to class with questions. Another option to motivate students to do the assigned readings is to require students to come to class with questions about the reading. You can then use your students' questions to kick off the class discussion.

1. For example, you might require your students to bring in a set of three discussion questions per class and invite students to ask questions at random. Then, you could also collect the questions at the end of the class and give points to students who completed the questions.
2. Make sure that you explain how to write a good discussion question before you start requiring your students to bring in questions. Explain to students that good discussion questions should be open-ended. They should not result in a yes or no answer, or a single answer, such as 'What was the name of Mrs. Dalloway's visitor?' Instead, a good question might be something like, 'What is the significance of the lines from Shakespeare's Cymbeline that Mrs. Dalloway reads? Do these lines seem to have importance to anyone else but her? Why or why not?'

3. 

Provide participation opportunities within lectures. If you give a lecture, make sure that you include a participation opportunity about every seven to 10 minutes. These opportunities should allow your students to respond, discuss, or ask questions about the material. Some good strategies that you might use include:

1. Asking questions. For example, while reading Mrs. Dalloway, you might ask your students something like, 'What is the purpose of an internal dialogue?'
2. Having students share a similar experience with a neighbor. While reading Mrs. Dalloway, you could encourage students to identify something that they have in common with Clarissa, or another character.
3. Requesting that students paraphrase a concept that was just described. If you introduce a theoretical concept that sheds light on the text you are reading, then you might request that your students break into pairs or small groups and attempt to put the concept into their own words.
4. 

Incorporate theory. At the college level, students should be exposed to literary theory. If your department has a specific course meant to introduce students to theory, then you may be able to request that students incorporate theory into papers or presentations. If not, then you may need to provide some instruction to help students understand and use literary theory.

1. For example, you could require students to craft discussion questions that incorporate a specific type of literary theory, such as feminist, psychoanalytic, or Marxist theory. Or, you could assign different schools of literary theory to individual students or small groups and require them to develop an analysis of a text using that theory.

5. 

Discuss specific passages with your students. Close reading is essential when teaching literature at the college level, so make sure that you devote plenty of class time to close reading. Try to pick one passage per class or invite a student to pick one passage per class and focus on it for 15 to 20 minutes.

1. For example, you might invite one student per class to read a favorite paragraph aloud and invite the rest of the class to discuss that paragraph.[2]
2. You can also ask other students to point to other areas of the text that connect with the first student's chosen paragraph as a way to deepen the conversation.

6. 

Turn in-class discussions into in-class writing assignments. Some passages may be too difficult for students to develop a response on the spot. In these situations, you can always direct your students to free write to help them generate ideas.

1. For example, if you notice that students are struggling to comment on a passage or that the discussion is limited to only a handful of students, give them five to 10 minutes to free write about

the passage.

2. Avoid filling the silence with your voice. Keep in mind that there will be times when your students are silent, but it is usually because they are struggling with a question or concept. Allow them some time to struggle silently rather than giving them your answers.

7. 

Include group activities. Some students will not feel comfortable speaking up in class, at least early on. Therefore, it is helpful to include small group activities into your classes so that all students have the opportunity to contribute to class discussions. Including group activities, or cooperative learning, in your classroom can also benefit students by providing them with the opportunity to learn from their peers.[3]

1. You might begin some of your classes by dividing your students into groups and assigning them a question about the day's reading. Or, you might ask students to focus on a particular passage or chapter and develop some ideas and/or questions to add to the class discussion.
2. For example, if you are reading Mrs. Dalloway, then you might start the class by asking students, 'How does Virginia Woolf transition from one character's point of view to another? Find an example from the text to support your answer.'

Part 2 of 4:

Creating a Positive Class Environment

1. 

Use scaffolding to teach difficult skills. Scaffolding is when you teach students to do something that is one level beyond their abilities and then support them through the task. The students should develop mastery over the skill after practicing it a few times and then you can remove the support.[4]

1. For example, you might introduce close reading by guiding your students through a close reading of a passage during one class, then provide your students with chances to do the same during class time. Then, you might ask your students to do a close reading of a passage outside of class and write about it in a paper.

2. 

Model skills and strategies in the classroom. Your students will often observe you and emulate the skills that you model for them in your class. Therefore, it is important that you model the types of skills that you want your students to learn.[5]

1. For example, you might model good questions for your students with the questions that you ask in class. Or, you might model good writing for your students by showing your students a paper that

you wrote while you were a student.

3. 

Ask questions. Asking questions can help students to connect what they have read with their own knowledge and experiences. It is especially important to ask questions that will help your students make connections between the readings and their own lives.[6] Make sure that you ask your students some thoughtful questions during classes to help them find effective ways to enter the conversation.

1. Focus on open answer questions, rather than yes, no, and other single answer questions. Ask questions that start with 'Why' and 'How.' If you do ask any single answer questions, then make sure that you invite students to say more by asking 'Why' and 'How' questions.
2. For example, if you have just finished reading Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf, then you might ask your students something like, 'How does Woolf tell the story?' and 'What does this format reveal about the way we narrate our own lives?'

4. 

Use visual aids. Using images, films, and other visual aids can be quite beneficial for students who are more visual learners. No matter what your preferred form of teaching, you should consider incorporating some kind of visual aid into your classes. This can range from high-tech, such as a PowerPoint, to low-tech, such as notes and doodles on the whiteboard.

1. For example, creating a PowerPoint that pairs difficult concepts with images may help some students to gain understanding of a book that a spoken lecture might not.
2. Films can also be helpful aids to include. For example, you might use a film to provide a compliment to a complicated scene in a book, or as a point of comparison after the class has finished reading a book.

5. 

Encourage your students. To maintain a positive environment in your literature class, you will have to offer your students encouragement for contributing to the discussion. This can just be a simple, 'Thanks for bringing that up,' after a student finishes a comment or question. Or, you can offer more personal responses. For example, you might say something like, 'I wondered the same thing when I first read Mrs. Dalloway.'

1. Thank your students at the end of each class for their participation as well. For example, you might say something like, 'I really enjoyed our discussion today. Thank you all for contributing such excellent ideas.'
2. Avoid criticizing your students' interpretations or shutting them down if something is unclear. If something that a student says is unclear, then you can prompt the student to clarify by asking something like, 'That is an interesting thought. Why do you say that?' Or, 'It seems like you are wrestling with a difficult concept. Do you want to expand or open up the topic to the rest of the class?'
3. Avoid praising the quality of a question. Saying that you think a question is 'good' might lead others to think that their questions are not good. Therefore, try to avoid this type of praise. Instead, stick to remarks that will encourage students. You can even use non-verbal encouragement, such as smiling, nodding your head, or giving a thumbs up.

Part 3 of 4:

Developing Your Strategy

1. 

Work with a mentor. Some departments may assign you a mentor to help you as you begin to teach. If your department does not assign you a mentor, then you might consider choosing someone for yourself. Choose someone who you think is well-suited to help you develop your teaching skills.

1. For example, if you are a medievalist, then you might ask another medievalist in your department if he or she would be willing to serve as your mentor. However, having the same scholarly interests is not a requirement for a good mentor. You might simply choose someone who you think would make a good mentor because of his or her personality and experience.[7]

2. 

Develop your knowledge of pedagogy. You can improve your knowledge of pedagogy and what works for teaching literature by attending conferences and by reading articles about teaching literature. Try to view presentations and read articles that connect with the texts you are teaching.

1. For example, if you are teaching Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, you can read journal articles about the most successful pedagogical strategies for teaching this work. Or, if you attend an author specific conference, such as a Virginia Woolf conference, then you might try to attend pedagogy presentations that discuss teaching Woolf in general or a specific text, such as *The Waves* or *Orlando*.

3. 

Reflect on your favorite professors. Think back to the professors that taught your favorite college literature courses to start getting some ideas for teaching strategies. Some questions you might ask yourself include:

1. What teaching methods did your favorite professors use in class?
2. What did you like about these teaching methods?
3. How did these methods help you to understand and discuss difficult texts?
4. What (if anything) would you change about these methods if you decide to use them in your class?

4. 

Identify your strengths. Based on past teaching experiences, you may already have a sense of what you excel at in the classroom. For example, you might be really good at making and giving PowerPoint presentations, or facilitating class discussions, or developing interesting group activities.

1. Make a list of your strengths in the classroom as well as any other personal strengths that you think might lead you towards some effective teaching strategies.

5. 

Ask colleagues for suggestions. Your more experienced colleagues are excellent resources for learning about teaching strategies and getting lesson plan ideas. Whether you are a graduate assistant who is just starting to teach or a tenure track professor, you can learn something new from a more experienced member of your department.

1. Try setting up a meeting with someone who also teaches literature in your department. Ask for suggestions on what works, feedback on your current ideas, resources that might help you, and general advice.
2. Consider asking to observe other literature classes to see how other teachers encourage discussion.

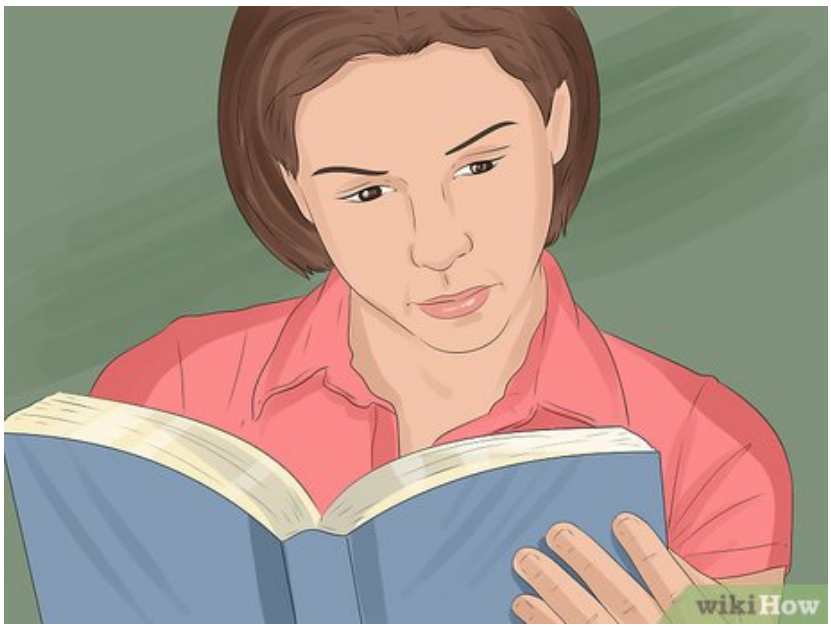
6. 

Write out your teaching philosophy. A teaching philosophy communicates your goals and values as a teacher. Creating a teaching philosophy may even help you to develop your teaching skills, so it is a good idea to write out your teaching philosophy even if you do not need to. Most teaching philosophies include: [8]

1. your ideas about teaching and learning
2. a description of the strategies that you use to teach
3. an explanation of why you teach the way that you do

Part 4 of 4:

Designing a Course

1. 

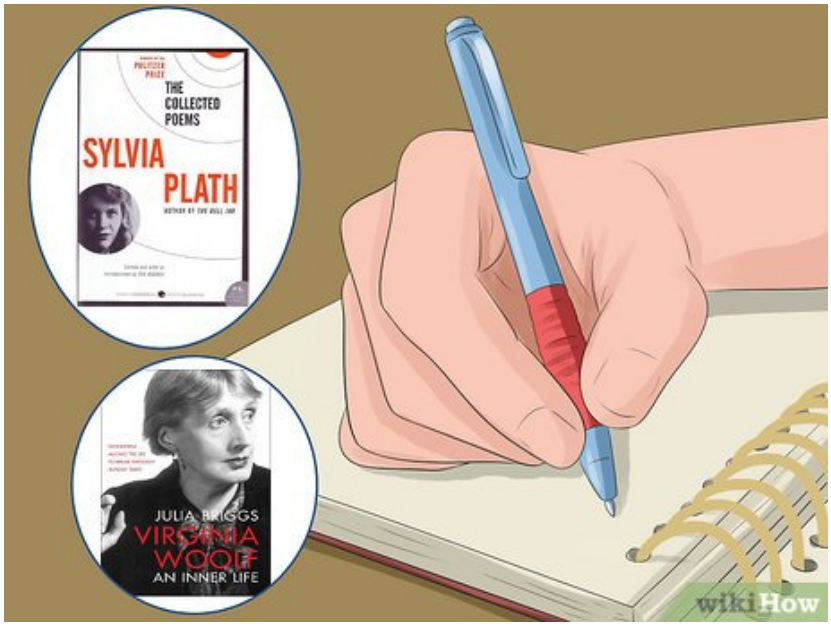
Check the departmental requirements. Your English department might have specific guidelines for the course you are teaching, so it is important to check before you start designing your course. For example, you might be required to teach specific texts, give certain assignments, or incorporate specific concepts.

1. Ask your department chair or another supervisor if you can see other professors' syllabi to get ideas about how your course should look. Use these syllabi to help you determine how you can meet the department's requirements for the course.

2. 

Consider choosing a theme. If you are teaching a special course for your department, then you may already have a theme. However, you can always add a theme for even more focus. If the course does not have a theme, then you may find it easier to identify readings and craft assignments by choosing a theme. Some common literature course themes include:[9]

1. African American literature
2. Author courses, such as Shakespeare, Chaucer, or Dickens
3. Family
4. Food
5. Gender
6. Myth
7. Rural or Urban literature
8. Symbolism
9. Time periods, such as the 20th century, the Enlightenment, or the Renaissance
10. Types of literature, such as poetry, short stories, drama, or novels
11. Utopian or dystopian literature
12. Women writers

3. 

Make a list of books and other texts. Once you have identified your theme, start listing potential texts that you could teach for that course. This list may include far more books or other works than you could realistically teach. Just keep in mind that you can narrow down your list later on.

1. You can also ask colleagues for suggestions. Someone who has taught for a long time might be able to suggest texts that work really well for the course you are teaching.
2. For example, if you wanted to teach a course that focuses on women writers, then you might include on your list works by Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison, and Zora Neale Hurston.

4. 

Develop a reading schedule. Once you have decided on the works that you will include in your course, you will need to develop a reading schedule. First, decide what order you would like your students to read the texts. Then you can devise a schedule for how much of each text you will read each week.

1. Consider the length of the texts as you develop your reading schedule. For books and other long works, you will need to break the readings into manageable sections. For short works, such as

poems or short stories, you may be able to read the entire piece for one class.

5. 

Choose assignments. Most literature classes require students to write at least one paper, but you can also include different types of assignments. For example, you might also include presentations, discussion leading activities, or quizzes and exams.

1. Make sure that you check the course requirements to determine what (if any) assignments are required by your department.