

CHAPTER

2



Getting Ready

Preparing the Course

I wrote the syllabus the other day, and tried to make sure that I included the complete list of threats and warnings (you'll find a copy at the end of the book, page 233). It's a list that gets longer from year to year as new technology gives bad students new opportunities for deception. In the days when I was a graduate teaching assistant, even plagiarists had to do a certain minimum of work. They had to go to the library and find a book to copy from, or go to their fraternity's file of tried and true papers. No such exertion is required today. Instead, without leaving their rooms, they can browse the Web and find something suitable in a matter of minutes, often from sites with names like College Sucks that were designed to help them cheat.

On the syllabus this time, after writing my name, office number, office hours, e-mail address, and phone number, I write, "Please do not call me at home." Otherwise some of the students will call me, especially

ones I least want to hear from. One of the sorrows of being a college teacher is that there is an inverse correlation between your willingness to see or talk to students and the actual time you spend with them. The good ones, the ones who do their work well, try hard, understand the readings, and write stimulating papers, would be a pleasure to entertain. They rarely phone or drop in during office hours, however, because they have no need to—I keep giving them good grades and they keep feeling thoroughly satisfied. Some are scrupulous too and don't want to look like brownnosers. Now and again there's a mournful pleasure to be had from talking with the obsessive types, students who are so thorough and meticulous that their work is already fine, but whose self-confidence doesn't match to their ability. They come by with four or five drafts of a paper, each more magnificent than the last, and agonize over word choice and the sequence of ideas while I murmur soothing phrases. By contrast, the ones who won't do the work or can't get the point seem to spend hours with me, explaining themselves.

Next on the syllabus comes, "No eating, drinking, or wearing hats in class." Isn't it dreadful to be addressing a group of people while one of them is trying to unwrap a sandwich? It's particularly horrible if he is trying to do it quietly, which simply has the effect of prolonging the torment. Not that I like the brazen ones either, who boldly set about their lunches as though the classroom were the perfect setting for a hearty meal. I used to be a bit more permissive and said nothing about the cans of Diet Coke. But I've stiffened up in recent years—the popping of the cans is annoying and the spillages are awful. It's usually some well-meaning character who, having spilled her can while trying to take notes on a folding table much too small for the job, self-consciously cleans up the mess. She borrows Kleenex from her friends, gets down on all fours, and noisily mops the floor, drawing the interested glances of all around her.

What about the hats? You might think I'm high-handed in requiring hats off in class. I am. The baseball caps have always been an affliction. It was bad enough when they were worn with the bill facing forward. Students had an artful way of slumping down in their chairs so that their eyes gradually disappeared from view. Were the eyes open? I would suddenly ask someone a difficult question, singling him out by name. Usually this had the effect of causing a sudden flurry of alarm and a great

deal of muttering. Sometimes the student requested that I repeat the question; occasionally his silence confirmed that sleep had descended. Then came the trend, starting around 1994, to wear the hats backward, with the bill sticking out behind and the adjustable plastic tabs defining a semicircle of forehead. The reversed student hat makes a statement about its wearer, something like, "I am dull."

One day a year or two ago a woman in class protested when I asked her to take off her hat. She said, "I thought that was just for the men." I said, "Don't you believe in gender equality?" She answered, "Not with something like this!" I walked over to her desk, asked her to give me her hat, then sent her to the front of the room. I pulled the hat down over my eyes and sagged into her chair, then said: "Now, I want you to talk to the whole class on a subject about which you care deeply and which you know to be complex and difficult. Watch me closely as you speak, and try to gauge how well I am grasping the subject matter." Her blush was one of the reddest I've ever witnessed.

Am I encroaching on students' rights by asking them to take off their hats? It's a fine point. No one has yet downright refused to do it, but I've had a few mutinous stares and plenty of questions. Sometimes one of them asks something like, "Isn't it up to us, as students who have paid the fees, to listen or not listen as we choose, and to do it dressed as we please and in the physical position we choose?" To which I respond, "I can't make you listen but I can at least require you to look as though you might be listening, rather than accepting the aggressive detachment implied by eating, drinking, and the hat! I want you to regard the classroom as somewhere special, set aside for teaching and learning, and free from as many of the contaminations of the outside world as possible. Whatever you do beyond the classroom is your own business, but so long as you are here, I am going to assume that you came here with the intention of learning. I am the teacher, and I am doing everything I can to put you in a position conducive to learning." We go round and round like that and I am usually able to prevail, though not on the strength of my arguments. It is because I have influence over them: the influence of grades. Only the most temerarious student would deliberately and repeatedly antagonize the person from whom they wanted a good grade.

Another prohibition on the list these days is against cell phones and beepers. The cell-phone plague also began in the 1990s. They're bad

enough out on the street or in the quadrangle. There seems to be an inverse relation between having something to say and using the cell phone in public. Have you noticed how many users are saying things like, "Now I'm on Main Street and I'm walking toward Grove," or "So I said, like, whatever, and she said, like, no way, and I, like, freaked out."? Somewhere around 1996 students' bags began beeping and trilling during class. By now ownership of phones is so common that when one rings, nearly everyone starts fumbling with his or her bag to see if they're the guilty party. Only once has a student actually taken the call during a class I was teaching, and even then it was in a whisper. Indignant, I told her to stop. She said it was a very important call. I said it was a very important class. She left the room and did not return that day. Next time I saw her I made her promise that she would turn the phone off before she entered the room. These days I begin every class with the general declaration: "Cell phones and beepers off? Then we can begin!"

Among the demands on the syllabus is that the students must not be late. There was a time when senior professors used to station their teaching assistants (TAs) at the door to bar latecomers from entering the classroom at all. When I was a grad student at Berkeley, legends about those autocrats used to circulate, with the implication that their conduct was a disgrace. To myself I used to say, "Those were the great days!" In every class of forty there are two or three perpetually tardy students. After they have done it once or twice, I ask them to stay behind after class for a moment, and I say to them: "Look at the reading list. It actually says that you must not be late, and yet you come in late every time. As a result you always miss the assignments that I give out at the beginning of class, and what's worse, you disrupt the class by coming in late, opening and closing the door, squeezing past others' desks, and then rustling your bags and papers as you prepare to take notes. Will you please promise not to be late again?" I rarely get promises. Instead I get excuses, about overcrowded parking lots, having come a long way from the previous class, having overslept, or having had to cover for someone at a job. The list of excuses is long; some of them are quite persuasive. All the more reason not to accept them, especially from the chronic villains. I answer, "Don't tell me the reasons for your lateness. Just stop being late, if necessary by changing the other things you do on the day of our class." Off

they go, muttering words like “uptight” when they think they are out of range.

Our professor of Brazilian history, Jeff Lesser, told me that when he taught at Connecticut College he used to lock the door when the hour for starting class arrived. When someone tried the handle and couldn't get in, he'd ask the class to vote on whether to admit the latecomer. At first, he says, they'd vote yes, but after a while they'd get sick of the way the stragglers interrupted the rhythm of the class, and begin to vote no. If only Emory's doors had locks, and if only it weren't so vexing to the fire marshal! The closest to democracy I ever get on this issue is to say to everyone who's already there, “Does any of you have a watch that says it's not yet ten o'clock?” If the answer is no, then it is ten o'clock and we begin.

The syllabus's second paragraph has a long and detailed warning about plagiarism, a subject I'll talk about later on. Then there's a passage about how to do the reading assignments: “Read them [the assigned books] carefully, so that you are able to discuss them intelligently.” History classes always come as a shock to students who are concentrating on sciences and mathematics, because we ask them to read plenty every week. For freshmen I assign 100 to 150 pages a week and for upper division students 200 to 250 pages a week. When discussion begins, it doesn't take long to discover who has read the work seriously, who has skimmed it, and who has done nothing at all. There are always those who join in eagerly right at the beginning of discussion and summarize the first three or four pages of the reading, hoping to convince me that they took the assignment seriously. After that they fall silent, and if, later in the class, I ask one of them to summarize an issue that came up on page 50, they are nonplussed.

At the beginning of every semester I say to students, “I will be calling on you by name during discussion and I will expect you to be able to talk about these works on the basis of a careful reading. Don't try to read all of an assignment in one sitting or at the last minute. Work on it a chapter at a time throughout the week, and keep notes on what you read.” There can't be many who follow this advice. I admit, moreover, that the night before a discussion class I too can be found frantically working through the book in question. While the students, scattered around campus, are asking, “Oh, why did he assign so much?” I am

sitting in my office or at home, asking, “Oh, why did I assign so much?” It seemed obvious on that distant day when I was drawing up the syllabus that they must read all these chapters to grasp adequately the author's main themes, but it doesn't seem quite so necessary now!

My paragraph on the reading assignments also tells them to use a dictionary, to look up every word they do not know, and to keep a notebook of the words they have learned during the semester. When class begins I draw their attention to this passage and emphasize how much I mean it. I've often had the experience of asking a student to explain a central concept in one of the readings, only to discover that he or she didn't know the key word and didn't bother to look it up. Last term in my environmental history class, for example, I said to one, “What does *lacustrine* mean?” She said, “I don't know.” “What definition did your dictionary give?” “I guess I didn't look it up.” “Have you got a dictionary?” “Oh, yes.” “Why didn't you look it up?” “I guess I just got a general idea of the word and went with that.” “Tell me about the general idea.” “Er . . . I don't really know.” I've also endured generations of student writers who won't pause to use the dictionary when they don't know how to spell a word. In about 1993, one student handed in a paper which had sixteen spelling mistakes on one page. When I returned it with each of them circled in red, he said, “You know, professor, the problem is I don't have spell-check on my computer.” I said, “Do you have a dictionary?” Unfazed, he answered, “No, I don't have a dictionary either,” in a tone that implied: here are two ways in which fate has dealt me a tough hand!

Last term, in a freshman seminar on the history of the American west, I began giving vocabulary tests, drawing words from the assigned readings. For the first test, which came unannounced after a couple of weeks in which I'd been stressing the importance of the dictionary, I wrote a list of ten words on the blackboard, all taken from assigned readings, when there were about ten minutes left in class time. Each student had to write out the definitions, and could leave when they were done. The words were *riverine*, *isohyet*, *bovine*, *meridian*, *vigilantism*, *preemptive*, *cooper*, *forbs*, *transhumance*, and *fifth column*. Several of the students left almost at once because, as they admitted, they couldn't get any of the words. A few stayed long enough to write one or two definitions, and then a couple of the conscientious types lingered and agonized until

long after class time had finished, and were finally forced from the room by the arrival of the next class. The best grade (from a class of fifteen freshmen) was two out of ten, but the most common grade was zero. I admit the words were a challenge, but since I'd been nagging them about discovering and learning the definitions, and since these were words necessary to an understanding of that week's assignment, I had hoped for someone to get maybe a grade of four or five.

There was a wonderful sequel to this test, however; several of the students, learning of their low scores, did get notebooks and begin to keep lists of new words and their definitions. The next week I got a panicky e-mail from a student who said he'd looked in three different dictionaries but couldn't find the definition of the strange word *Picassoesque*. Knowing nothing about the artist, he'd assumed it had something to do with *pica*, for which he had found the definition: "an abnormal craving to eat substances not fit for food. as clay, paint, etc."

The Books

I assign different books every term, even though the titles of the classes tend to stay the same. It's a good way of keeping up with new books coming out, and it makes sure you never get stale while teaching the same course over again. I've also discovered through the years that if I do reassign a book, I don't have the confidence *not* to reread it before class, so I spend just as long going over it again without really learning anything new. There's no question, incidentally, that the person who learns the most from a class is the teacher, because he or she is so much more conscientious than anyone else in preparing for it.

One of my rules for teaching undergraduate classes is: don't assign many books by academic historians. It is sad but true that most academic historians, especially of the last twenty or thirty years, have been bad writers, and their overspecialized, jargon-heavy, laborious prose sends most undergraduates into a deep sleep. If the students decide to become professional historians later on, they are going to have to get used to it, but I know that the majority of history majors (let alone the miscellaneous non specialists in an introductory course like this one) won't be able to deal with it.

There are several things I try to keep in mind when assigning the

books. First, I assign good historical narratives by journalists or professional writers, and plenty of primary sources. Students love to read biographies, autobiographies, fiction, and eyewitness accounts, and they're willing sometimes to read works in an unfamiliar idiom, like the text of legal decisions, provided they are not too long. Even the conscientious students won't read overly long assignments carefully to the end. One hundred pages by an academic historian is the limit in an introductory class, or 200 pages by an author more alert to the audience's sensibilities. With a page-turning novel, maybe 250 pages once or twice in the term will succeed.

Memoirs are ideal. This time I'm using Theodore Roosevelt's book *The Rough Riders* (1899), about the troop he raised to fight in the Spanish-American war in 1898, recruiting partly among his old Harvard classmates, partly among his New York and Washington political friends, and partly among his cowboy friends from the Dakotas, where he had been a rancher in the 1880s. They go into battle and he writes a gripping account of the Battle of San Juan Hill, the bravery of his men, the high casualties they suffered, and the strangeness of beholding the dead bodies of men to whom you were talking moments before. It's a great book for the introductory course because TR's personality and attitudes come blazing out on every page. Nearly all his attitudes are wrong by our standards; he's virtually the personification of all that is *not* politically correct. He's lovable and admirable anyway, or at least it's possible to imagine why he was lovable and admirable to many members of his generation. The students and I have the chance, therefore, to go over passages of the book together and unravel his attitudes, why he holds them, how he applies them, and why it should be that we now think so differently.

Also this term we'll be reading volume 1 of Emma Goldman's autobiography *Living My Life*. She and TR were contemporaries, more or less, but it's hard to think of two people more different. Like him, however, she's a lovable crackpot. I'm hoping the contrast will work well and serve as a reminder that at any one time, widely different people and attitudes are abroad in the world. A third memoir on the list is *Black Elk Speaks*, as written down by the poet and amateur anthropologist John Neihardt. Black Elk was also a contemporary of the other two but he was a Sioux Indian. He describes his family's traditional way of life, how

it was brought to an end by the arrival of the whites, how as a teenage boy he fought at the Little Big Horn and later at Wounded Knee, and how he toured Europe as part of Buffalo Bill's "Wild West" exhibition. Historians aren't sure how much of it is his own words and how much the words of Neihardt, who interviewed him as an old man, but as a glimpse of the Plains Indians' last independent days it's ideal for this course.

In addition to history, memoirs, and historical journalism, I often assign novels that have something to say about a particular historical time or place. We'll be using two novels this term: Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* and Tim O'Brien's Vietnam story *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. You've got to be careful with assigning novels. Occasionally the students don't realize that they are fictional. Once, in a course on U.S. religious history, I assigned John Hersey's *The Call*, a terrific novel loosely based on Hersey's parents' lives as missionaries to China in the early twentieth century. During discussion in class, one student referred admiringly to Hersey's invented characters and to how he blends them seamlessly with actual historical characters. Another student gave a sudden sharp intake of breath and said, "You mean it's not all true?!" She had been completely taken in by the pseudodocumentary style and was only now discovering her mistake. I realized while talking with her later that she never read fiction. An experienced reader would have known just from the book's cover, not to mention dozens of other internal clues, that it was a novel.

It's striking to see how many students do not even know what the word *novel* means. Many use the word as a synonym for *book*. Students' papers will often include phrases like this: "Perry Miller, in his novel *The New England Mind* . . ." I said to a student last term: "Do you know what a novel is?" "Like, the books we read in class every week." "Is this one a novel?" I asked, holding up Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. "Sure," she replied. "Is it possible for a book not to be a novel?" "Oh yes, you know, like, the book of instructions for a washing machine—that's not a novel." When I explained her mistake, she was surprised but admitted, on further questioning, that she never read fiction.

Most students today do not read much and many have gone through school hardly ever reading voluntarily. There has been a lot of discussion during the culture wars of the last decade or two about what books we

should assign to students and what (if anything) we should regard as part of the canon. What makes the debate so intense is perhaps the participants' awareness that the *assigned* books in school and college are often almost the *only* books many of the students are ever going to read. If it's a choice of just one, then reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* really will make you come out a bit different than reading just Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. I would like students to read both (and a lot more besides) but I know that unless I and other professors use our authority on the point, the vast majority of them will never read any.

As a novice teacher in the late 1970s and early 1980s I used to say, "Do you remember that brilliant passage in *Middlemarch* where . . . ?" Everybody gave me a blank look. Then I began to put it this way: "Has any of you read Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*?" One or two hands would go up and I'd explain to the others the incident from that book that struck me as a useful analogy. Nowadays I say, "I hope you'll all read *Moby-Dick* one day. You'll come across a passage that will make you think of this issue, where . . ." The students do have a fund of ready references, however. If I want to make a comparison with something they know about, I can rely on it. "Do you all remember the episode of *Seinfeld* where George's father decides to abandon Christmas and hold his own celebration, Festivus, instead?" To a question like that, seven out of every eight know what I mean, and similarly with *The Simpsons*, *Friends*, and other popular shows or movies. Or I can say, "Remember that Chevy Trucks commercial during the Superbowl?" and then the answer is a confident yes.

Many professors blame the schools for the fact that students are not well read by the time they get to college. The schools certainly haven't done a good job of teaching them to write, but surely we should blame the students' *families* for the great reading deficit. Or maybe blame is the wrong way of thinking about it. I wish students would read more books. It would help them in finding their way around in the world, give them an immense fund of moral education, and captivate their imaginations. If they have not read many books, it is probably because their parents did not read many either, making the idea of a reading as an activity altogether distant.

Now and again good students tell me that they've kept a record of the books I have mentioned during the semester and that they plan to

read them later. This is gratifying, and I am even more gratified when, a year or two later, they drop by my office to report on having read a book they first heard about from me. They don't always like my suggestions (the other day an ex-student told me he'd found it impossible to progress through Norman Mailer's *Of a Fire on the Moon*), but at least they're getting used to the idea that reading can be a pleasure as well as a duty. When all is said and done, the students who read a lot are going to become the best educated. When they hear about a topic or a book on a particular issue, they should follow up by reading it or reading about it. If they don't, their knowledge will always be scanty. Teachers can do a lot but students who rely mainly on their teachers are never going to shine. They must learn (from the teachers, I hope) to rely on themselves.

For this course I am not going to assign a textbook, even though dozens are available on today's market. My reasons are partly that textbooks are far too expensive, partly that they are far duller than the assigned books I've already mentioned, and partly that their tone jars against some of the things I want the students to learn. These days, college-level textbooks on recent American history are unremittingly gloomy and doomy. They hammer away at examples of injustice, prejudice, discrimination, and repression, as if designed to induce in readers a sense of shame and regret. From them you could easily get the impression that no one in America had ever had any enjoyment, any justified sense of purpose, or any pride in their nation, their lives, and their accomplishments.

The textbooks are fragmentary, too, because their authors have learned not to "privilege" any one group over all others. Therefore they have to deal with a growing list of previously neglected citizens. Pick up any of them and you will find that a general passage on the Great Depression and the politics of the New Deal (for example) is followed by one on how the Depression affected women, how it affected African Americans, how it affected Hispanic Americans, how it affected Native Americans, and how it affected the disabled. As the number of interest groups vying for attention in the contemporary world keeps growing, so does the number of little passages in the textbooks that must be devoted to their predecessors. No one has succeeded, so far, in combining these little bits into a satisfactory overall narrative.

I don't want to imply that America has *not* been the scene of injustice,

prejudice, discrimination, and repression, or that the history of many particular groups in the past is unworthy of study. There certainly is plenty in American history about which citizens today have good cause to feel shame and regret. But that's only half of the story. There is also much about which they and their children should feel pride and gratitude. For example, there has never been a powerful nation in the history of the world so generous, so idealistic, and so dedicated to the principles of democracy and human equality. The glum textbooks unwittingly bear witness to this point. Their authors sound disappointed because they *share* these high ideals, and feel shocked at how far short of them America has fallen in practice. Still, historians—with what ought to be a deeply anti-utopian view of the world—should know better. If they compare American experience not against their ideals (by which it looks rather shoddy) but against the experience of other societies in world history, it comes out looking pretty good.

CHAPTER

3



Early Class Meetings

First Day of Class (Wednesday)

Off we go to meet the class itself. This semester it's a Monday-Wednesday-Friday class with a good midmorning time (10:40–11:30), when the students should all be alert, cheerful, and talkative. Class times are much disputed among faculty members. If you teach at 8:30 A.M. you'll be lucky to get enough students to forestall cancellation of the course. Even 9:30 is no cinch, and for any pre-noon class you can see prodigious yawning and hear students discussing how they weren't in bed before dawn and "isn't it *early!*!" Not to me: I used to be just like them, but now, with a child to get to school, I'm up by 6:00. At 10:40 I'm deep into the day's work. As a department we've discussed at faculty meetings the possibility of switching all the graduate seminars to morning times, on the grounds that the grad students are more of a captive audience and will just have to put up with it. The other big issue, among teachers and students equally, is the matter of which days their classes will meet.

Most professors covet the Tuesday-Thursday schedule because it means fewer class meetings in all and a spacious four-day weekend. I'm not immune to these allurements, admittedly, but I don't think longer classes are so good in terms of getting the students to actually learn. Their eyelids seem to gain weight after a while and they can't stop looking at the clock. I once had a student who told me, "My sociology class is a real MEGO!" "What?" I asked. "You know: my eyes glaze over." I usually spend the last fifteen minutes of those Tuesday-Thursday eighty minute classes showing slides or getting students to draw diagrams on the blackboard, so that they can look at things and move around a little. Anyway, this term it's three fifty-minute sessions per week, which is really the best option.

I go to the room slightly ahead of time and find about thirty-five students already waiting. I have brought along a carousel with fifteen slides that I plan to show in the second half of this first meeting. I hand out syllabi and give each student a note card on which to write name, phone number, and e-mail address. While they're doing that I try to make the motorized projection screen descend, but it won't. To my dismay I find I'm in a classroom that's had a high-tech makeover. They even call it a "smart classroom." I'm a low-tech person, so the auguries are bad. I have to dash across to the audio-visual headquarters, which luckily are just next door, and find out how to make the screen work. Returning, I'm just in time to catch the stragglers, get the screen working, and begin punctually.

The great challenge in the first few meetings of any new course is to learn the students' names. The more there are, the harder the job. This time there are thirty nine. I always hated being in a class where I knew the teacher didn't know my name, and I assume it's the same with everyone else. I require attendance and I call the roll each time. Repeating the names out loud is an aid to learning them, and as students answer to my call I give them a hard stare and try to remember them, putting faces to the names. I'm not great at it, but I've usually got all the names down by the sixth or seventh class meeting and it makes everything run more smoothly thereafter. Before long the students are calling each other by name in discussion, too, which helps take the impersonal edge off it (though there are always a few who point and say, "what she said . . . what he said . . .")

Every new class is unattractive. Teachers who've looked out over any particular sea of faces for the first time will agree, as will students who have found themselves sitting in the middle of a crowd of previously unknown people. Sure enough, this lot conforms to the pattern by looking pretty awful. But I know from years of experience that they won't remain that way. With the passage of each week in the semester they will become more of a pleasure to behold, until, at the end of term, I'll think of them almost as eerily radiant. Why does it always happen this way? Because most of us don't look so great at first glance—we have to become familiar to one another (only in Hollywood classroom scenes is everyone handsome or pretty straight away). And when we're doing something for the first time we're anxious. Once we get to know one another, our habitual speech, smiles, idioms, and moods, we will seem less alien and less threatening.

Teaching has always made me nervous, especially teaching a new, unfamiliar, and unattractive group. The first time I did it, back in 1979, I was almost sick with anxiety, and the class must have been nearly as grueling for the students as it was for me. By now I've got my feelings under control. Even so, I always have butterflies of anxious anticipation, which I try to overcome by preparing carefully. This term Regina, one of our graduate students, has been appointed as my teaching assistant. She will sit in on all the classes, participate in grading some of the quizzes, papers, and exams, and later in the semester give a couple of guest lectures. She frankly admits that she's terrified at the prospect, and I sympathize because I still remember how it felt.

The first few times you try lecturing, you discover that your body does things over which you have no control. In the early days I used to have a rather acute sway, backward and forward and from side to side. The effect brought to onlookers' minds the old song "What shall we do with the drunken sailor?" Mrs. Allitt caught sight of it once and brought it to a hasty stop. Then for a while my left arm used to curl itself strangely so that the top joints of my hand were folded against the front of my left shoulder. Meanwhile my right hand took excursions across the top of my head, giving audiences the impression that I was actually holding my head in place. Occasionally the haze of lecturing anxiety would clear sufficiently to let me know about this state of affairs, and I'd try to rearrange my extremities into more conventional positions, but

then a verbal stumble would distract me and the limbs would take off on their own once more.

One effect of nervousness which has never abated is getting a hot head. I'm not hot headed as a rule, I think, but somehow an hour of lecturing brings massive quantities of blood to the head, and as class ends I find it boiling hot. A cooling-off period needs to follow, so students who stay behind for a moment to ask questions find me strangely warm, with radiator-like face and neck.

My father was a teacher and he used to say that he didn't like teachers who had mannerisms and gestures. He himself, when speaking in public, was effective, but only because of his mannerisms and gestures, of which he had an immense and varied repertoire. When my brother and I pointed this out to him he flatly denied it and said he just spoke straightforwardly, and without affectation. We've all got mannerisms and gestures, of course; the issue is to make reasonable ones and to know what you're doing. Sometimes now when I teach seminars or training sessions to beginning teachers, I spend quite a lot of time on anxiety management and physical self-control. To the arm wavers I sometimes say, "repeat that sentence without moving your arms or hands at all." They find it physically difficult at first but gradually learn that it can be done.

We work on verbal tics too. Nothing is easier than to fill up every empty space with an "er" or an "um." Once students latch on to the tic they'll sometimes count. A statistics-minded student told me last summer that one of my colleagues, when he taught her, had "ummed" 104 times in half an hour. Worse is getting into the habit of "sort of," "you know," "kind of," or (the great devil word of the new millennium) "like." Sometimes an entire class will utter almost no word except *like* for minutes on end, and the temptation to give up and join in is powerful. Resist it! It's the verbal equivalent of the reversed baseball cap.

I experimented last semester with actually prohibiting *like* altogether during discussions in a freshman seminar. Students for whom it had become a crutch became speechless, or had to fumble along so slowly, carefully, and artificially, that they forgot the point they were trying to make. I'd love to have carried on with the experiment but after a few minutes a visitor would have thought the class was made up of adult literacy students who were slowly and methodically sounding out their

first written words. Half-annoyed with myself, I relaxed the rule and *like* came flooding back, never to depart again. I can bully my own child about it but bullying entire classes, especially when I actually want them to be talkative on the subject of the course, is more difficult. Just after this failed experiment I saw a cartoon in the *New Yorker* that showed two middle-aged men talking at a bar. One says to the other: “I, like, wonder how she, like, knew that I was, like, having an affair with, like, a college girl.”

Teaching gets easier with practice. I’ve been through the cycle enough times by now that unpleasant surprises come up less often. Dismaying circumstances these days bring to mind *other* dismaying circumstances from years gone by and, usually, an idea of what to do about them. There’s no quick fix for nerves, but experience helps a lot. In fact one of the advantages of being middle-aged is that it creates plenty of distance between you and the students around you. There’s no question now that I’m very different from them. We’re not far from being members of different species (in their view), and the roles each has to play are clear.

This matter of distance is central to teaching. Let the students know by verbal and body language that you’re the teacher and they’re the students, and that the relationship creates a space between the two. The classroom situation underlines this message. They’ve come to this room to learn from somebody. You are that person. The students attribute to the teacher all the relevant knowledge of the subject and regard him or her as quite different from themselves. Most teachers never feel quite ready to take on the assignment; we’re always aware of how much we don’t know about the subject. But from the students’ point of view we’re omniscient—their assurance that we know what we’re talking about helps to maintain the distance. Don’t let this sense of distance and difference break down; it’s your ally in nearly everything you do.

As the class begins, I summarize the difference between high school and college-level history courses, like this: “In high school you were probably asked in history classes to learn who did what, where, and when. Those things are still important—without them you can’t get far in history at all. But now we are introducing a second set of questions. *Why* did these events take place? Usually, historians find that events and trends can be explained in different ways, and that the evidence they are trying to interpret is ambiguous. For example, we are picking up the

story of American history just after the Civil War. Everyone agreed that the Union had won, but there were lots of opinions then, and there are still lots of opinions now, about why they had won. Was it because they had more people? Or because their armies were better led? Or because their soldiers were more motivated? Or because their soldiers were better fed, armed, and transported, thanks to the North’s superior railroad network? Or is it because, deep down, the Southerners knew they were defending an unjust system and therefore could not fight for it heart and soul? Or was it a combination of these factors, and if so, in what proportions? These examples are just a few of the ones offered by intelligent and persuasive historians, and the question continues to be investigated.

“Here’s another thing we have to do,” my speech continues. “We have to get back into the frame of mind of people living in different times and places, and try to think, at least provisionally, in the same way that they thought. We need to remember, for example, that people living in 1862 did not know how the Civil War was going to turn out. It’s easy for us to assume that just because it did turn out in a certain way, it was *bound* to turn out that way. In fact, of course they didn’t know that, any more than we know the important events of the twenty-first century.

“Harder still, we have to take seriously their beliefs, even when those beliefs are quite different from our own. It’s easy to fall in with them when they think more or less what we think. The challenge of doing history well is to accept that they were sincere in their beliefs, even when we disagree with those beliefs completely. We will not be able to understand them if we are unable to think their thoughts along with them, at least provisionally. That doesn’t mean that we have to regard them as right. In the end we can certainly judge them harshly if we want to. But our main job as historians is to understand, and if we’re too quick to judge, our judgment will get in the way of our understanding.

“Even with issues like slavery, we need to understand that many slave-owners did not think they were acting wrongly. In 1877 (our course’s official starting date), the South was full of people nurturing a burning sense of injustice about the recent loss of their slaves and the defeat of the Confederacy. They didn’t feel ashamed of their beliefs; they felt proud of their convictions, and now we need to struggle to understand them. On the whole.” I say in conclusion, “you should try to keep your moral opinions far in the background while trying to understand

history. It's OK once you have understood someone to judge them, but first you must understand them in all their strangeness and difference from our own world."

After that rather abstract passage I come down to earth and talk about America in the 1870s. I tell them about what sort of things Americans read. I ask one student, Simon, whose name I have chosen at random off my list, "What was the most widely read book in America during the 1870s?" He gives me a look of stark horror and can't even bring himself to say "I don't know." I encourage him, "Here's a clue: it was the most widely read book in every decade of American history up to that point." Somebody else blurts out, "the Bible," getting him off the hook, and I say, "Yes, the Bible." I ask Simon, "Do you ever read the Bible?" and he answers: "No, I'm Jewish" (!). "But at least three-quarters of the Bible was written by Jews. Have you never read any of it?" "Well, yes, I guess so," he says, in such a way that it's clear he's trying to placate me with the answer he thinks I want to hear, rather than with the truth.

Students are quirky about religion. Normally, their teachers don't raise the point and there seems to be a tacit First Amendment agreement to leave it alone. Now the subject is coming from an unexpected source: the history professor. I tell them, "One of the best ways to get started with American history is to read the Bible, because it's the book that generations of Americans knew far better than any other, and it shaped their view of what the world was like. They got their kids' names from it, and used examples from scripture to justify their moral conduct. They compared themselves and others to its characters. When Lincoln freed the slaves many of them compared him to Moses, who led the Children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. When he was assassinated many Northerners compared him to Christ, dying for the sins of others."

In a typical class at Emory nearly everyone has a nominal religious allegiance of some kind, with almost a third being Jewish. The Protestants and Catholics are vague about what it is that keeps them apart, except for the handful of evangelicals who've got a keen grasp of doctrine but an equally keen grasp of the fact that it's bad manners to discuss your religion with others, let alone advocate it to them. I want them to discuss it but they're reluctant.

I finish this first meeting by showing the slides. I get students to come to the screen and describe what they can see in the pictures, again draw-

ing names off my list at random. Their comments are straightforward, but that's OK for the moment. The process gets them accustomed to the fact that I'm going to be calling on them by name and that they must try to be ready with something to say. It's amazing how much some of them cannot see in a picture. Sometimes a big object is right there, like a cow or a horse, but if I ask, "What is in the picture?" they seem unable to perceive it. Or the picture might be a great, didactic image of benevolent Abraham Lincoln freeing the slaves, but they can't recognize him or grasp the artist's message. These aren't dull students either; they got 1300 or more on their combined SAT, but they're unequipped for this kind of work because they've never done art appreciation and no one ever has asked them to stand in front of thirty-nine others and be perceptive about old photographs.

One of my favorite first-day-of-class slides is a mid-nineteenth-century advertisement for a telegraph company. It shows an angelic female form, scantily but strategically clad, floating in midair. Coiled in her arm is a loop of wire, and as she floats from right to left across the picture the wire trails out behind her, being attached neatly to successive telegraph poles. The right side of the picture, from which she has come, is light and bright. There's a city, ships, trains, sunshine, and bustle. The left side of the picture, by contrast, is dark and gloomy. Into the darkness run a group of American Indians and a handful of buffalo. In the middle of the picture, around the ethereal figure, come farmers with plows and covered wagons, all like her facing left. It's the single best Manifest Destiny picture I know of, in which the dawning of American civilization pushes away the darkness of savagery further and further to the west. To new students, however, its meaning is obscure. They don't notice the wire, for example, or don't get the point of the light-dark contrast, or can't understand why everyone's moving in the same direction. Some think it's all about time zones, others think it's an expression of sympathy for the poor displaced Indians, and others again are just stumped by the whole thing. "What's this picture all about?" "It's just a woman floating in the air." "What compass bearing is she following, do you think?" I ask. "I haven't the faintest idea . . . north?" By the end of the semester, if nothing else, they'll know what to make of a picture like this.