Designing a Successful First-Year Seminar

1. Foreground the goal of students’ cultivating a scholarly mindset. The First-Year Seminar instructor is often the first faculty member students meet; the FYS is the first class they attend. From Day One, encourage students to see your FYS as a space where they will learn what it means to be a scholar. Throughout the semester, be transparent about how skills, concepts, critical lenses, etc., will serve them not just in your course but across their four years at Bates. It is well worth spending some class time discussing scholarly habits faculty take for granted, such as critical reading skills, note-taking strategies, preparing for class, and making meaningful contributions to discussions.

2. Remember that these are first-year students. Entering students may not be as ready to dive into the material as you might think. The issue is not so much workload as it is the intellectual pace and complexity of your course. A successful course can be wonderfully creative, sophisticated, and ultimately complex, but starting students with complex theory or dense texts can create frustration. Ease them into the sophisticated material with readings they can grapple with more easily. Remember also that students will have varying levels of writing, research, and speaking skills and will need explicit guidance to raise their skills to meet our college-level expectations. For example, when researching, they generally don’t know where or how to find the most relevant scholarly information beyond basic web searches; before you ask them to find sources as part of an assignment, then, they must first understand our library’s resources and sound search strategies.

3. Be deliberate with content. Keep in mind that this is a 12-week course. Remember, too, that First-Year Seminars are intentionally not 100-level introductory courses in a discipline. You have designed an FYS around a topic about which you are passionate, and you understandably want to introduce students to as much knowledge in the field as possible. Still, the most successful First-Year Seminars use the content as a vehicle for improving students’ writing and critical thinking skills rather than as an end in itself. Class time devoted to a writing workshop, research activity, or quantitative exercise can reinforce material just as well as a lecture or class discussion: As students research, write, and talk about the subject matter, they learn it more deeply while simultaneously cultivating the critical thinking skills they need as they move forward as scholars.

4. Teach the process of writing, speaking, and research. For some students, the First-Year Seminar is their first experience with receiving close instruction on and feedback about their communication skills (a surprising number, for instance, will tell you that they never had a chance to revise an essay in high school because their teachers could not give individual feedback). And many might not have another class at Bates in which they are able to devote such substantial time to rethinking their ideas and refining these skills. Take advantage, then, of the opportunities the First-Year Seminar allows you and your students to focus on writing, speaking, and research: Build into your syllabus, and bring into conversations in class, the parts of the process of any scholarly endeavor, such as coming up with questions, gathering information, synthesizing sources, adjusting research strategies, drafting and revising based on feedback, rehearsing a presentation, and reflecting on a finished project. Class time can be used productively both to instruct students in how to do this work and to allow them to engage in some of this work with you present to answer questions and offer advice.
5. **Sequence assignments (writing, reading, speaking, research) carefully.** Try not to have course requirements bump into one another—for example, don’t assign a lengthy reading on the same day a paper is due. Build in spaces in your syllabus for students to process the material—and to process their assignments through reflection and self-evaluation. Allow reasonable amounts of time for the process of an assignment—consider, for example, how much time to expect between a writing assignment’s being given and the first draft; between the draft and conferences with your writing and speaking assistant or you; and between conferences and the final due date, allowing adequate time for revision. Just as with reading assignments, writing, research, and speaking assignments can increase in complexity as the course goes on; seminars frequently engage students in multifaceted projects which unfold over days and weeks, as opposed to isolated concepts or tasks that are performed once only to be left behind.

6. **Build connections among assignments where possible.** As you sequence individual assignments across the semester, also note the relationships between all of your assignments. For example, consider how assigned texts can complement writing skills being developed: Which texts might lend themselves to being summarized as a low-stakes writing assignment early in the semester? Which texts include the kind of analysis or argument you’d like to see students attempt in a later essay (and which thus would work well as models to break down during in-class discussion)? Thinking about which intellectual moves are being developed for a given unit of content might help you avoid assigning the amorphous “response paper” or free-form class discussion that doesn’t quite succeed.

7. **Encourage collaborative learning.** From one-to-one assignments like peer response, to full-blown group projects and presentations, students learn much not just about the content but about the give-and-take of scholarly conversation when they work closely with their classmates. Such projects need not be extended or formal (though they might be)—for example, structured group work in during class not only allows students to learn about subject matter from each other but also helps create a more positive and engaging class environment.

8. **Create a complete, reader-friendly syllabus.** The best syllabi are those that are narrative guides to the course. First-year seminars are complicated courses with many tasks and assignments. If students can turn to the syllabus to locate themselves, they might not feel lost so often. Some syllabi include such things as guides to readings and films, briefly orienting students to how they fit into the course. See “What to Include on the FYS Syllabus” for key logistical information to add.

9. **Call on the resources available to you and your students.** Draw on the expertise of Writing Specialists, Reference Librarians, the Writing and Speaking assistants, the Math and Statistics Workshop staff, the Imaging Center, and academic technologists. Consult with us as you create your syllabus and assignments, adapt handouts and other resources we can provide, and incorporate in-class workshops that fit with your course goals. Finally, introduce us to your students by including on your course schedule quick visits from support staff (or field trips to Coram or Ladd) during the first weeks of the fall semester.

Some ideas drawn from a similar document by St. Lawrence University’s First-Year Program; other ideas contributed by staff and faculty of Bates College.