When I began teaching as a graduate student the single best piece of advice I received was to "ease up instead of ratcheting down," meaning that it is always easier to ease back and enforce a policy less strictly than it is to suddenly clamp down later in the semester and enforce a policy with new fervor.

Instructors -- and especially young, relatively inexperienced instructors -- who try to be completely laid-back and overly friendly can easily lose control of their classes. When the instructor sees the class slipping in discipline or decorum and tries to clamp down, students are dismissive and the class frequently continues to spiral out of the instructor’s control. Inversely, if an instructor begins a class by enforcing policies and expectations immediately and consistently, students tend to begin policing themselves, and in most cases the instructor can become more relaxed over the course of a semester about enforcing the rules that sometimes feel capricious to students.

One of the keys to easing up instead of ratcheting down, and a good idea for instructors at all levels of collegiate instruction, is to distribute a course policy statement. My own philosophy is that such statements should be detailed and thorough, and presented to students on the first day of class. To avoid confusion, I go over my policies that day, often in painful detail, constantly asking for questions. A copy of the course policies is always available to my students online as well. My experience is that paper simply handed out to students, and for which there is no immediate accountability, frequently goes unread. So we go over the policies together. In some rare cases, I may even make the class collectively set a policy, which I then document on their behalf.

While having a long, thoroughly articulated course policy statement may feel like an exercise in bureaucracy, detailed policy statements protect both students and instructors. They protect students by informing them what the consequences for certain actions will be, and what the expectations for the course are. And, when it comes time to enforce course policies, a thorough and consistently enforced policy statement protects the instructor from claims of unfairness or capriciousness.

Some of your course policies will be dictated to you by your university, college, or department. You must live with such mandated policies, even if you disagree with them. You can certainly advocate for a policy change, within the proper channels, but students should never be put in the crossfire between an instructor and the department. Regardless of policies you inherit, though, you will likely need to make some policy decisions on your own. Here are some components of a comprehensive course policy statement to consider addressing explicitly.

- **Contact Information** – It’s a good idea to put your office location, e-mail address, and office hours not just in your course policies, but on every document you distribute in a course.
Prominently.  Never underestimate students’ ability to forget or misplace this critical information.

- **Course-Specific Information** – To avoid any possible confusion, I always list the current semester, course name, section number, meeting time, and meeting location on important course materials, such as the policy statement.

- **Required Texts/Materials** – I like to provide students with a comprehensive list of everything they might need to purchase for a course, so that they can price shop early, and so that they are prepared when a text comes into play in the course.

- **Attendance Policy** – Often attendance policies are set by departments, especially for widely offered service courses where there needs to be some assurance that students are receiving similar instruction (and quality of instruction) across sections. An attendance policy, if you’re going to have one, needs teeth, but shouldn’t be draconian either. Consider as well any work that you may be creating for yourself — a complex policy will simply create additional accounting work for you as the instructor of record.

- **Tardy Policy** – If you choose to have a tardy policy, its specifics need to be articulated.

- **Disability Statement** – Every university I’ve been associated with has required instructors to place, somewhere on their syllabus or policy statement, a verbatim section of prose stating the university’s willingness (indeed, legal obligation) to accommodate students and how to go about requesting appropriate accommodations.

- **Academic Honesty Policy** – Like the disability statement, this will often be a piece of boilerplate that instructors are required to place on syllabuses or in policy statements. At my own university, we are additionally required to list possible discretionary consequences for academic dishonesty (primarily cheating and plagiarism) and whether or not we will use electronic technologies to monitor for plagiarism. It’s a good idea to cover your bases here as thoroughly as possible.

- **Grades** – Pain and suffering, on your part and students’, can be avoided if you carefully list how grades will be accrued and calculated in your course. Most colleges require such a statement.

- **Cell Phone/Texting Policy** – Naively, I used to think that such policies were unnecessary overkill. Though I rarely enforce it, having a policy allows me to take action if a student’s phone usage becomes disruptive. Personally, I don’t much worry if a student misses course material because they’re engrossed in a phone, but I do mind if their actions distract other students.

- **Computer Policy** – Similar to the phone policy, if you have specific expectations for how students will, or will not, use laptops or other computing equipment in your class, the expectations need to be clearly explained.

- **Inclement Weather Policy** – Your university may provide this or you may have to provide your own. In my own case, because my university virtually never shuts down, but I live at the top of a steep, windy mountain road 15 miles away, I have to tell students how and when I will inform them of a snow or ice related class cancellation.

Depending on the nature of the program you teach in, additional topics may need to be covered, such as lab safety. Make sure that any disciplinary-specific policies are also outlined in detail. Then, simply enforce your policies consistently. There will always be times when you will need to make an exception to your own rules, and that’s fine too. Enforcing rules consistently does not mean enforcing them rigidly, and over time we all develop a sense of when and how we will allow or even help a student to break our own rules.
When I was a graduate instructor, my department had a six-absence policy for the class I was teaching. Students, we were repeatedly instructed, had to be failed if they reached six unexcused absences in the course. Sure enough, a solid B student in my class accumulated 5 absences with about 2 weeks left in the semester. I reminded him in person about the policy, telling him that I didn’t want to have to enforce it, but that I would, no matter how high his grade. Such was the instruction I had received from the department.

To my annoyance, the student missed the very next class. So, I failed him. Unfortunately, my department chair at that time didn’t back me up, even though I was simply enforcing a policy mandated by the department, and by her specifically. Weeks of e-mails and bickering ensued. And while the failing grade was eventually upheld, I should have just let the kid slide. Had I known that my chair would do such a lousy job of supporting me, I definitely would have let him slide. The lesson here, perhaps, is that it is worth the time and effort for new instructors to make a few tactful, quiet inquiries as to departmental cultural, in order to gauge whether or not they will be supported by departmental administration when enforcing various policies.

If you are a graduate student you will probably be required to submit your policies to a faculty member for review. If you’re not required to do so, or are a junior faculty member at a new institution, it’s still a very good idea to run your policy statement by a colleague, simply to make sure that you’re in step with departmental and university expectations, and that your policies are neither too strict nor too permissive. Enforce your policies consistently from the start, and you should be able to ease up in a few short weeks. None of us get into teaching in order to be disciplinarians, and a carefully crafted set of policies can cut down on disciplinary or logistical problems.

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