Just as muscles grow only when challenged, students learn only when required to accomplish intellectually demanding tasks. This belief pervades my teaching. I strive to teach students content in subjects that are intellectually challenging, to teach them how to think like social scientists, and to teach them some skills they will need in their post-graduate lives. I apply three methods to achieve my objectives: extensive comments on assignments, being a tough but fair grader, and having the students learn by doing.

Teaching content requires two things: getting the students excited about the material and presenting it in a way that they can learn it. In some respects, generating enthusiasm for the material easy because I truly enjoy studying international politics and sharing my knowledge with others, and I think this enthusiasm rubs off on the students. Sometimes, however, say at 8 am on a Monday morning, not every student is thrilled about having to learn, say the difference between a public and a private good. Lectures do not always succeed in generating the needed interest, and I have found that alternative ways of presenting content, such as games, simulations, discussions, or group exercises are sometimes significantly more effective. Finally, students buy into what I am teaching a whole lot more because I am also able to relate to them in an informal manner. The second challenge of successfully teaching content, presenting the material in a way that students can readily digest it, is to me the most fun intellectual challenge of teaching. I really enjoy taking concepts that are difficult or especially abstract, and breaking them down systematically to present them to students in terms they can understand.

From my experience, one of the things students are least able to do is to think logically. This may sound horrible, but logical thinking about analytically complex issues is difficult. One aspect of political science that makes me especially passionate about teaching the subject is that discipline has a great deal to offer the student in training him or her to think logically. The emphasis on identifying observable implications can help them learn to consider the implications of concepts: If X is true, what else logically follows? Teaching students a scientific approach to studying international relations also helps reinforce a logical thought process. These are things I stress in my teaching.

Initially, I emphasized the importance of building students’ written and oral communication skills. However, as I have taught more and more classes, including expository writing this year as a Teaching Fellow, I have come to realize that the primary obstacle that prevents students from demonstrating good writing skills is muddled thinking. Learning how to think is much more difficult than learning how to write. In fact, writing is fairly easy when the student has everything figured out or the writing assignment presents little analytical difficulty. Nonetheless, writing is probably the most important skill that political science students will acquire while in college. An improved ability to write may also allow the student to express analytically more complex arguments. For these reasons, I focus heavily on writing, requiring the students to write essays on exams and to complete short paper assignments.

Turning to teaching methods, commenting on student exams and papers is critical to helping students learn. It is important to precisely identify what the student did wrong and explain why it was wrong so that he or she can learn from the mistake and avoid the error in the future. At the same time, it is also important to identify what the student did right and explain why it is right, so he or she understands why he or she was successful. Like many teachers, I give students detailed, typed comments on every writing assignment, and I am able to do so
efficiently. Because students often make common mistakes on papers and exams, I am able to type up a separate comment for each mistake that suggests how the student might have answered the question more effectively. Since I have the basic comments saved as macros, I can pull up each comment in two keystrokes. I then personalize the comments for each student. This technique permits me to balance the need to give students effective feedback with my need for time to complete my research projects.

As for assigning grades, I am tough grader, but I grade fairly. I am not sure that every student loves this approach, but many recognize its importance in helping them to learn. I also always encourage students to talk with me about their grades and if they have questions to inquire about why I assigned them a particular grade. This follows from my belief that unless students understand what they did wrong, they will not learn.

My final method is getting the students to learn by doing. Aside from the obvious learning by doing strategies of requiring students to write papers and give oral presentations, I also have them complete lab assignments in which they conduct rudimentary statistical tests of some of the hypotheses we study in the class. In one such assignment, for example, I had students write down and then test the relationship between central bank independence and inflation. These assignments help students understand the hypotheses and give them the sense that applying the scientific approach to international relations often involves establishing the accuracy of a generalization across a lot of cases.

My enthusiasm for teaching makes it easier for me (and the students) to accomplish these tasks.