

The Lecturer's Re-entry Plan: Designing an Encouraging First Week of Teaching

How to reopen a course, welcome a class full of anxious people, and rebuild momentum after a break

LECTURERS, TUTORS AND TEACHING FELLOWS

A practical week-by-week plan for returning to teaching after a break and welcoming an anxious class without embarrassing anyone.

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Your class is also restarting: what they are feeling

Open a course after a break and you will feel the gap personally. Your slides feel behind, your reading list feels like a novel, and the first email to the class feels like a first day. Now imagine the same week from the other side of the room.

Your students have not had a break. They have had a term. Between the last session and the first one there were three weeks of unstructured reading, a reading week most of them did not treat as a reading week, an exam period that cost some of them more sleep than it should have, and a summer job, a hospital admission, a visa appointment, a house move or a family crisis. The single most common finding in student feedback surveys about returning to a course is not difficulty with the content. It is not knowing what is expected of them.

Three things are true of almost every returning class.

They have lost the plot, not the ability. A student who sat an exam in June can still reason. What they cannot do, without help, is reconstruct the vocabulary, the assumed background and the shape of the course in their heads. A first session that rebuilds context does more for comprehension than any amount of extra content.

They are running on depleted attention. Most adults hold focused attention on a single complex narrative for somewhere between fifteen and twenty-five minutes before performance drops. A returning class has had weeks of short, fragmented, high-stakes attention. It arrives with a short fuse, which feels like rudeness but is usually fatigue and uncertainty.

They are performing for you. In week one, students are trying to work out what kind of lecturer you are, how strict you are, whether you notice them, and what will happen if they get it wrong. The quietness in the room is not indifference. It is caution. They are watching you for cues.

The class is not silent because it does not care. It is silent because it does not yet know what a contribution costs.

Here is how that shows up, and what it asks of you.

What the student is feeling	How it appears in the room	The move that helps
Unsure what is expected	Silent first week, no questions, everything waits for a deadline	State the next three deadlines out loud, in writing, in week one
Behind on reading	Blank faces at the start of the second session, no homework done	Set one small, completable task per week, not five
Anxious about being wrong	No eye contact, no questions, head down	Model your own error explicitly, once, early
Lonely	Arrive and leave alone, no study partner, no office hours visit	Build in a pair that repeats, not a one-off mingle
Oversubscribed with life	Late, absent at 09:00, coursework piled on other modules	Publish a deadline map; flag the heaviest week
Convinced they cannot do the subject	Asks permission to skip, avoids the hardest exercise	Put one achievable win in week one

The three questions worth asking before term

Do not guess at their state. Ask, cheaply, and use the answers.

1. **What was the last thing you remember from this course?** A free-text box, three lines, no marks. It tells you what survived the break.

2. **Which weeks of the course feel heaviest right now?** A multiple-choice grid over the term weeks. It tells you where to spread the load.
3. **What would make the first three sessions useful rather than stressful?** Free text. Read every answer before the first class meets.

Put these in a five-minute anonymous form. If your institution does not have a survey tool, use a shared document or a link to a one-question-per-line form; the format does not matter, the anonymity does. Ten to twenty responses will change your plan. Send it at least five days before the first session, and again after week three.

The re-entry problem is mostly a scaffolding problem

That means three concrete commitments:

- **Rebuild the map before the detail.** One slide, one diagram, one page: where this course came from, where it is going, and what sits between here and the final assessment.
- **Remove the first hurdle.** Do not start with a definition nobody has met. Start with a question they can answer.
- **Name the break out loud.** Say that you have been away, that the material has moved, and that the first sessions are for getting back up to speed. Students relax visibly when the new lecturer acknowledges the gap rather than pretending it does not exist.

Students forgive a lecturer who says I am still learning this alongside you. They do not forgive a lecturer who pretends they should already know everything.

The two weeks before: what to rebuild and what to change

The fortnight before teaching is the only period in the year when you have full, undivided attention. Use it for decisions, not for decoration.

Decide what you are actually going to change

Returning lecturers tend to over-change. You redesign every slide, rewrite every reading, restructure every assessment, then arrive in week one with nothing finished and a class that senses the churn. Aim the opposite. Rebuild the spine, keep the skin.

Sort every element of the course into three buckets, and be ruthless about the third.

- **Keep.** Anything that worked, that students use, and that you can explain in one sentence. In most courses this is 60 to 70 per cent.
- **Change.** Anything that depends on a dead assumption: a pre-requisite nobody teaches any more, an assessment format students hated, a schedule that assumed a week of preparation you now know does not exist.
- **Retire.** Anything kept from habit, guilt or because deleting it felt like admitting the course has no content. Delete it. A course with fifteen readings instead of twenty-five is a better course.

The rule for week one is specific: **no new required reading**. Students arrive with a reading backlog they did not choose. Start the term with material you know cold, then add the demanding reading from week three, once the class has settled.

The fourteen-day plan

Do this in order. Each day should take 60 to 90 minutes of actual work, most of it on a single screen.

Day	Task	Minutes	Output you keep
14	Audit the course against last year: what has to be rebuilt from scratch	90	A one-page list of broken elements
13	Write the one-paragraph course promise: what a student will be able to do by week 12 that they cannot do now	45	A single sentence used in week one
12	Rebuild the session skeleton for weeks 1 to 4: 90-minute sessions, minute by minute	90	Four session plans
11	Choose the three readings for week one and check each one is readable in under 40 minutes	60	A short reading set
10	Design the low-stakes diagnostic: 8 questions, 10 minutes, ungraded, no notes	60	A question set with answer key
9	Publish the deadline map: every assessment, every week, in one table	75	A single image or PDF the students can screenshot
8	Set up the feedback channels: where students post questions, where marks appear, office hours	45	Three links, all tested by you personally
7	Test the technology end to end: slides, audio, screen share, polls, recording	60	A tested run-through, plus a backup plan on paper
6	Write the first email to the class: short, warm, contains the three deadlines and one question	30	A sent email
5	Prepare the first session opener: a 90-second example of what the subject is for	60	A script, revised twice
4	Draft the group activity for session 2, with roles assigned on paper	60	A role sheet and a task sheet
3	Re-read one classic piece of your subject and note where students usually get lost	75	Three marked trouble spots for slides
2	Build the retrieval warm-up bank: 20 five-minute questions across the course	90	A reusable question bank
1	Walk the first four sessions aloud, timed, with a colleague if you can find one	90	A rehearsed week one

If you only do six of those days, do days 13, 12, 10, 9, 7 and 6. Everything else is improvement; those six are the course existing again.

The three artefacts you must have before students arrive

1. **The course promise.** One sentence, in the students' language, describing a capability. Not a topic. Not a discipline. A capability: you will be able to take a raw dataset and defend a claim about it in writing. It goes on the first slide and in the first email, unchanged.
2. **The deadline map.** One image, every assessment, every week of term, marked with weight and due date. This is the single most useful thing you can give an anxious class, because it converts an unbounded task into a finite list. Mark the two heaviest consecutive weeks and say, in writing, that you know it is heavy and have spread the load.
3. **The low-stakes diagnostic.** Eight questions, ten minutes, no marks, no notes allowed. It exists for three purposes: to tell you where the class actually is, to give students a win in their first ten minutes, and to give you a baseline to compare with the same eight questions in week six.

Rebuilding rather than starting over

After a long break you will feel the urge to redesign the entire course from first principles. Suppress it for the first year back. Rebuilding the spine is safe and visible; rebuilding the philosophy is neither.

Concrete rebuild steps:

- Take last year's slides and cut 30 per cent. If a slide has more than 60 words, cut it or split it.
- Find the one concept students always get wrong and give it twice the space you used to. Check your old feedback, your old exam comments, or ask a colleague who taught it last year.
- Replace the first 15 minutes of every session. Not the content. The opening. A retrieval question, a worked example, a poll, a puzzle.
- Rewrite the assessment brief so that it names the artefact and the standard, not the topic. Students comply with specifications; they flounder at essays titled A reflective essay on learning.

Designing a first week that does not humiliate anyone

The first week has one job: every student must leave it with a small, credible success. Not everyone. Every student. That is the bar.

Two designs fail this job most often. The first is the cold assessment: a hard test on day one, which tells anxious students that the course is a place where they lose. The second is the go-round-introductions: twenty students saying their name and their favourite film, with a lecturer trying to remember every name while the clock runs. Both feel reasonable and both damage the term.

A first session that embarrasses one student will cost you the quiet half of the room for six weeks.

The rules of the first week

- **No cold assessment.** Anything you use to learn about the class in week one must be low-stakes or ungraded, and must be announced as such.
- **No go-rounds of self-disclosure.** Use paired work, which lets a nervous student speak to one person rather than to a room.
- **No performative cold-calling in week one.** You will not get a fair response, and unfairness is what students remember.
- **Everyone writes something.** Quiet students must have a route into the conversation that does not require them to speak first.
- **No one is asked to explain their background.** Not your subject, not their school, not their career. Ask what they want from the course instead; it is always answerable.

A five-session first week

The shape below assumes a 90-minute session with a 10-minute break. If you teach 50-minute sessions, keep the same order and halve the middle blocks.

Session	Minutes	What happens	Purpose
1	0-10	The course promise, the deadline map, and the date map for the next three weeks	Remove uncertainty
1	10-25	Ungraded diagnostic: 8 questions, individually, then in pairs	Baseline plus a first win
1	25-35	Worked example of one real problem, from the messy original to the clean answer	Show what the subject is for
1	35-45	Break	Reset
1	45-65	Mini-lecture: the map of the course, 3 ideas, 3 anchors	Rebuild context
1	65-80	Think-pair-share on the anchor question, 4 minutes in pairs, 4 answers taken	Participation without exposure
1	80-90	What happens next: this week, next week, where to ask	Close the loop
2	0-10	Retrieval warm-up: 3 questions from session 1	Continuity
2	10-30	Mini-lecture on the first core concept, with one live example and one pause question	Teach
2	30-50	Small-group task: four students, one sheet, one deliverable, roles printed on it	Structured participation
2	50-70	Groups report back, one line each, no discussion unless invited	Equalise the airtime
2	70-90	Second micro-example worked in silence, then revealed	Practice
3	0-10	Retrieval warm-up	Continuity
3	10-40	Mini-lecture: the second core concept	Teach
3	40-75	Paired task: one difficult problem, both students must write	Depth without exposure
3	75-90	Marked sample answer compared with two student attempts	Feedback before marking
4	0-15	Retrieval warm-up plus a 5-minute reading quiz on the week one text	Continuity
4	15-45	Mini-lecture: applications, with two contrasting cases	Teach
4	45-70	Group task with assigned roles, roles rotate each session	Participation
4	70-90	The week one debrief: what surprised you, what is still unclear	Close the loop again
5	0-20	In-class low-stakes quiz, ungraded, marked by students against the answer key	Confidence
5	20-45	Mini-lecture: the third concept, using the quiz as a hook	Teach
5	45-80	Clinic: students bring one problem, work it in pairs, lecturer circulates	Support
5	80-90	Week two brief and the full-term deadline map revisited	Reduce load

Building the retrieval warm-up bank

The warm-up is the cheapest teaching tool in the course and the one students notice most. Keep a document of twenty of them, five minutes each, spread across the term.

1. Write a question that has a definite answer. If the answer is a matter of opinion, it becomes a discussion and consumes ten minutes you do not have.

2. Keep it to three questions per warm-up. Four is a lecture; two is a warm-up.
3. Take answers by hand raise or a poll, then correct in one sentence. Do not comment at length on each answer.
4. Return to the same idea across the term. Recall that fails is the point; it tells you where to go back.

The warm-up is not a test of the class. It is a test of the class, done in the open, so nobody is ever alone in not knowing.

What to do with the diagnostic results

Within 48 hours of session one, sort the responses into three piles: got it, nearly got it, not yet. Then:

- Rework session two to address the largest not-yet pile. One concept, one session. Do not cover everything.
- Tell the class what you found, in general terms, and what you changed because of it. This single act of transparency buys more trust than three perfect lectures.
- Set the baseline aside. You will repeat the same eight questions in week six and compare.

Lecturing to a class that has not met you

Students have no idea how you teach until the first five minutes of the first session. They will take their cues from you: whether you rush, whether you wait, whether a question is welcome, whether you praise specifically or vaguely, whether you look at the screen or at them.

The ten-minute skeleton that works

1. **0:00-1:00.** Name the session and its purpose in one sentence. Say what they will be able to do at 1:00 that they cannot do now.
2. **1:00-3:00.** State the structure: three parts, with the reason. Students tolerate any structure once they know it exists.
3. **3:00-4:00.** State the participation contract: how to interrupt, where questions go, that thinking time is protected.
4. **4:00-8:00.** The content. One idea, one example, one check.
5. **8:00-10:00.** The transition: how the next block connects, what they need in hand.

Do this every session with the same shape. Repetition of structure is a kindness.

The moves that make a class yours

Move	How to do it	What it buys you
Wait time	Ask, then stay silent for 5 to 8 seconds, then repeat the question	Answers get longer and more accurate; silence stops meaning refusal
Name-and-ask	Use a name, then a pause, then a full question: Maya, what would you try first?	Name recall grows; students begin to listen for their name
One idea per slide	Slide states a claim; the claim is discussed; the next slide tests it	Nobody is left reading instead of listening
Concrete example	Replace abstract exposition with one real case, one real artefact, one real number	Comprehension rises; the session stops feeling like a lecture about a lecture
Silent writing	Every key question gets 60 seconds of writing before any talking	Produces thinking, and gives shy students a contribution they can then share
Mistake modelling	Volunteer your own error once per week and diagnose it	Makes error a shared event; lowers the cost of being wrong
Signposting back	Say we said, so now	Makes the structure visible; students can locate themselves in the course
End with the next step	Name what they do before the next session	Converts a lecture into a loop

Silence is a diagnosis, not a personality

Diagnose before you change anything. Four common causes of silence:

- **They do not know the answer.** Ask a question you have already taught. If still silent, teach it again in a different shape.
- **They do not trust the answer to be right.** Give them permission: there is no wrong answer here, I want your reasoning.
- **They do not know the vocabulary of the answer.** Accept the phrase they use, then upgrade it. Write it on the board and say this is the term for that.
- **They do not think you will stop.** Offer written questions. Say that if you ask, you will stop and answer, always, even if it costs you time.

The slide deck is a support, not the lecture

If a student watches only the slides, they should still have the map. Put the map in the deck: the section title, the current point, and the next question. Keep the deck to what a student needs in hand.

- One claim per slide, in the slide title, not in a bulleted body.
- Under 60 words per slide; under 8 lines; under 30 words of yours per minute if you are reading it aloud, which is too many.
- Images that carry meaning, not decoration.
- The current position in the course visible in a corner or header on every slide.
- A handout version with the diagrams but not the bullets, so they can write on it.

Cold calling without injustice

You will need to call on people. In week one, call on people who have volunteered. From week two onwards, use a fair system and say that it exists.

1. Use a random picker that everyone can see. Randomness is defensible; selection by eye is not, and students read the difference immediately.
2. Allow pass. A genuine pass, no penalty, no follow-up. If nobody ever passes, the pass is fake and your system will not work.
3. Start with preparatory questions. Ask what you would try before asking what the answer is.
4. Follow up positively even when the answer is wrong: that is a good starting point, now what would rule it out.
5. Keep a visible record of who has been called on. It converts a random draw from a lottery into a system, and students accept it faster.

Assessment that students can actually use to learn

Assessment is a learning instrument or it is a tax. The test is simple: after receiving a mark and feedback, can the student name what they will do differently on the next piece of work? If not, the design is wrong.

The most common failure in a returning course is assessment designed for the marker rather than the student: an essay prompt of 2,000 words with no scaffold, a rubric that arrives after the deadline, a weight distribution of 100 per cent in the final fortnight.

Design rules for the first term back

- **Weight the early work low.** Put 10 to 20 per cent on the first assessment and make it small, quick and heavily scaffolded. A first assessment carries 10 per cent and returns useful feedback within ten days.
- **Publish the deadline map before the first session.** Students who plan are less anxious and perform better. This is the cheapest intervention available to you.
- **Publish the brief and the rubric together, at least two weeks before submission.** Students need both at the same time to plan. A rubric released after submission is a grade appeal waiting to happen.
- **Include a marked sample.** One sample answer, at the required standard, plus the rubric applied to it. This single artefact saves more office hours than any other single document.
- **Separate the work into two parts: a draft and a final.** A draft worth 5 per cent, worth 10 per cent if you submit it, feedback within a week. Even students who never submit a final get feedback, which is a large fraction of your class.
- **Cap the workload.** In the first fortnight of term, no single assessment should exceed 1,500 words or 6 hours of total effort across all modules. Count your own reading load across the whole course: if it exceeds 15 hours a week, it will not happen.

An assessment map that works

Task	Weight	What it assesses	Feedback method	Student effort	Returned by
Week 1 diagnostic quiz	0%	Baseline knowledge and vocabulary	Instant, self-marked against key, discussed in session	10 min	Day 2
Weekly warm-up	0%	Retention of the last two sessions	One sentence correction at the start of the next session	5 min	Next session
Draft plus final problem set	15% (5% draft, 10% final)	Method and reasoning	Annotated draft comments, 6 to 10 targeted remarks	2.5 h draft, 3 h final	7 days after each
Annotated reading response	15%	Close reading, evidence, argument	Model answer with three marked excerpts, plus 4 comments	3 h	10 days
Group analysis task	15%	Application to a new case, division of labour	Group report with individual reflection of 300 words	4 h group, 1 h individual	12 days
Mid-term individual problem	25%	Independent reasoning under time pressure	Marks with per-question method comments	4 h	14 days
Small project or case write-up	20%	Synthesis and communication	Rubric-marked, 5 comments, 2 strengths and 1 priority	8 h	14 days
Participation and peer feedback	10%	Preparation, contribution to group work, quality of peer review	Frequent, low-stakes, cumulative	Ongoing	Ongoing

Weights above total 100. Adjust by course; keep the shape.

Rubrics students can use

A rubric that names features the student can control is useful. A rubric that names qualities is decorative.

Weak: demonstrates understanding, shows insight, communicates well.

Strong: defines the term in their own words with one correct boundary condition; applies the method to a case not covered in class; justifies the choice of method with one specific reason from the case; identifies one limitation of the method and its effect on the result.

Three rules:

1. Four to six criteria, no more. Long rubrics get skimmed.
2. Each criterion describes the work, not the student. The student cannot act on thoughtful. They can act on omits the boundary condition.
3. Bands are described by what is present, not by what is missing. Three bands, with an honest note that the top band is rare.

Returning work fast enough to be useful

Marking faster than feedback loses it. The useful window is roughly seven to ten days for written work and two to three days for short activities. Beyond that, feedback is about the grade rather than the learning.

If you are behind, cut the workload rather than delaying. Mark ten of fifteen scripts properly instead of fifteen badly. Then tell the class what you cut and when the rest is coming, and keep that promise.

The diagnostic is not the first assessment

Keep the two apart. If the diagnostic counts, students will revise, which destroys its diagnostic value and hands you a class that has revised rather than one you have measured. Ungraded, anonymous and low-stakes is the design that gets you usable information.

Feedback that changes behaviour rather than feelings

Feedback has one job: to change what a student does next. Anything that only changes how a student feels about you is decoration, however well meant.

The distinction matters because generous feedback that praises without specifying is the most common form of feedback, and it is close to useless. The student leaves feeling good and doing the same thing.

Four kinds of feedback, in order of usefulness

1. **Feed-up.** Where does this work sit in the course, and what does the examiner or the next task demand? This answers the question students most want answered: is this what you wanted? Put it first, in one sentence.
2. **Feed-back.** The specific gap. Not you did not analyse enough. The method for handling the missing observation is absent, and without it the estimate is not interpretable.
3. **Feed-forward.** The specific next action. On your next problem set, state the assumption before using it. Put the assumption in a box at the top of your answer.
4. **Self-assessment.** What you noticed yourself doing, and what you will change. Make the student write it. A student who writes the next step acts on it far more often than one who is told.

Order matters: feed-up first, because students who do not know the goal cannot use the gap.

When to give it

Work type	When feedback arrives	Medium	Turnaround	What the student must do with it
Weekly warm-up	Next session	Spoken, 1 sentence each	24 hours	Correct the wrong answer in their notes
Draft	Within a week of submission	Annotated comments plus 5-minute voice note on tricky points	7 days	Write a 100-word plan addressing each comment
Final piece	After marking, before the next submission	Marked script plus published sample	10 to 14 days	Carry comments into the next task
Group task	Group report and individual reflection	Group marks in the session, individual comments in writing	10 days	Individual reflection, 300 words, no group input
Clinic question	Same session	Spoken	Immediate	Try again there and then
Mid-term	14 days	Written, per-question method comments	14 days	One-page remediation plan
Peer review	Before the final version	Written, structured template	7 days	Accept or reject each peer comment and justify

The language of useful comments

Instead of	Write	Why
This is not very clear	The reader cannot tell whether X or Y is the outcome here. State it in the first clause	Actionable
You did not show enough understanding	You applied the method but did not state why it applies to this case. Add one sentence of justification	Names the missing move
Interesting idea	The idea that the effect depends on volume, not price, is the one that makes your conclusion. Develop it	Praise that points at the thing to repeat
Try harder	Do one more pass checking units on every line	Gives a procedure, not a exhortation
Read the handbook	The handbook asks for the limit of your confidence, which you have not given. Add the range	Removes the vague reference
Good work	The structure of the third section is the clearest in the set. Use it as the model for section 1	Names the transferable feature

Supporting students who are struggling, and noticing

You will not catch every struggling student, and you are not expected to. You can catch most, and early. The skill is noticing signals and having a route ready when you notice them, so that acting on a signal takes five minutes rather than a decision you have to make under time pressure.

The signals, in order of reliability

1. **Attendance falls without explanation.** Two consecutive absences is a signal, not a diagnosis. Contact them the same day.

2. **Work stops arriving.** A missing submission where there were two is the most reliable single indicator that something has changed. Act on it.
3. **Quality collapses while attendance holds.** Small but consistent: less complete, less effortful, less revised. Often means the workload has got away from them or something else has.
4. **They participate but wrongly.** Asked for a wrong answer is a good sign. It means they are still trying.
5. **They stop participating.** This is the late signal. Do not wait for it.

An escalation route that is actually used

Write the route down before you need it, then tell the class it exists, without naming anyone. Knowing that support exists changes behaviour before anyone uses it.

Trigger	What you do	Within	Who is involved	What the student gets
One missed deadline	A short, friendly email naming the work and offering a specific date	24 hours	You only	A clear route back in, no penalty recorded
Two missed deadlines, or 2 weeks of low attendance	A short meeting, 15 minutes, at a time they choose	48 hours	You	A written plan they wrote, plus an adjusted task
A referral flag (say, another module reports concern, or a late-stage disclosure)	The institutions support route, whatever it is called: student support, wellbeing, disability, academic integrity	Same day	Support services	A named contact, a contact hour, and a framework around them
Repeated non-engagement after two contacts	Formal but kind: a documented check-in and a clear statement of what happens next	7 days	You plus the year or programme lead	Clarity about the consequences, and a door still open
A crisis disclosure	Do not solve it. Say you will get the right person involved today, and do it today	Same day	Support services	Immediate human contact

You are not obliged to solve a students problem. You are obliged to connect them to someone who can, on the day they tell you.

The check-in email, written once and reused

Keep it under 120 words. Warm, specific, low-admin, and it ends with a question that is easy to answer.

- Name the observation without a judgement: I noticed you have not submitted the two problem sets since the break.
- State that you are checking in, not chasing them: I am checking in because I would rather know early.
- Give two specific options with dates: you can come to the Wednesday clinic, or I can send you the worked solution and a shorter version of the task.
- Ask one question: is there something in the course or outside it making this hard this term?

Do not attach a formal warning to a first contact. It closes the conversation. Do not say let me know if you need any support, because nobody replies to that. Offer two concrete options and a time.

Building the noticing into the timetable

You cannot notice what you never see. Three habits:

1. **Attendance is not optional.** Take it, or use a check-in that takes eight seconds. In a 90-minute session, tally who is present while they are doing the warm-up.
2. **Use the warm-up as a scan.** Three questions a session, answered individually. Mark on a sheet in front of you. You will see who is missing, who is guessing, who is disengaged, and who got it.
3. **Keep a one-page tracker.** Name, attendance count out of, submissions out of, last contact, one note. It takes five minutes a week and it is the thing that saves a student.

The two-student rule

If two students in a group are doing all the work, the other members are not failing the group task, they are failing the course. Fix the group, not the individuals: give each member a specific deliverable with a name on it, and check the individual reflection.

The free material your course can be built on

There is a large body of genuinely free teaching material, openly licensed and stable enough to build a course on. This section names the main sources, says what each one actually holds, and says how you would use it. None of it requires a licence, a purchase, or a request for access.

Use this material to buy back preparation time, to give students a legitimate no-cost route, and to make your course more accessible to students who cannot buy books. It is also the fastest way to fill the gap between the last thing you taught and the first thing you are about to teach.

The sources and what they are good for

Source	What it actually holds	How to use it in a course	Licence to note
MIT OpenCourseWare	Complete course materials from thousands of MIT undergraduate and graduate courses: syllabi, lecture notes, assignments, exams and, in many cases, video	Use as a template for your own course structure, and as supplementary reading for the parts of a topic you do not teach	CC BY-NC-SA, varies by course, check the course page
OpenStax	Peer-reviewed open textbooks for high-enrolment subjects: maths, sciences, economics, business, nursing, humanities	Adopt as the required or optional course text where a mainstream textbook would normally sit	CC BY, some CC BY-NC-SA
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1. **Replace, do not pile on.** If you adopt an open textbook, drop the equivalent chapters from your reading list. An open textbook plus twenty other readings is a workload, not a saving.
2. **Check the licence and the currency yourself.** Some texts are dated in their examples even when the theory is current. A 2012 open textbook with a 2019 edition available elsewhere needs care.
3. **Mirror what you use.** Link directly to the specific chapter, not the homepage. Students who cannot find the right chapter are the most common reason an open text goes unread.
4. **Keep a local copy of your own slides and notes.** Do not rely on a live external page for the core of your session.
5. **Watch the file size and the format.** PDFs of 60 MB are a failure on a train; offer a low-bandwidth route and a text alternative.

Free material is not a compromise. For a student who cannot buy a 70-pound textbook, a well-chosen open text is the only textbook they will read.

A note on what free does and does not mean

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Group work, participation and the quiet half of the room

Some students will not speak. Some will not work with others. Some will take over. All three behaviours are ordinary and all three get worse if you handle them with exhortation.

Why groups fail

Group work fails when it is asked for, not designed for. Common causes:

- No deliverable. Everyone talks, nobody produces anything.
- No role. Two students do the work and two watch.
- No time structure. Twenty minutes of unstructured discussion produces conversation, not learning.
- No output. The group says something and it evaporates.

A group task that works

Every group task has a sheet with five things on it:

1. **The task**, in one sentence, with a verb that produces an artefact: rank these six options, diagnose which of these four explanations best fits the data, rewrite this paragraph so that the claim is supported.
2. **The time**: 15 or 20 minutes, with two checkpoints at the halfway mark and two minutes before the end.
3. **The roles**, written on the sheet, so nobody negotiates them: facilitator, recorder, checker, presenter. Rotate every session.
4. **The deliverable**: one sheet of paper, one slide, one paragraph. Hand it in or hold it up.
5. **The individual accountability**: two sentences each, written separately and handed in. This is what stops free-riding.

Structures that surface the quiet half

Structure	Group size	Time	What it produces	Why it works for quiet students
Think-pair-share	2	4 min think, 3 min pair, 3 min share	One answer per pair	Only one person must speak before the room does
Silent write, then pair, then share	2	2 min write, 4 min pair, 5 min share	A written contribution first	The student has written before being asked to speak
Jigsaw	4-6	20 min	Each group holds one piece of a whole	Every member is the only one who knows their piece
Numbered heads	Whole class	8 min	An ordered set of contributions	No shouting over each other; position is neutral
Expert pairs	2, then 4	20 min	A shared solution with two roles per pair	Roles can be chosen for comfort: the presenter can be the quiet student who prepared
Clinic	2-3	25 min	Solved problems	Students come to the lecturer with their problem, not their feelings

The quiet half, handled well

- **Do not call on them cold.** Ask for a written contribution first, then ask if they would like to read it.
- **Never make quietness a category.** Do not name the students who do not talk. Do not use their names as an example of someone who should try harder.
- **Rehearse first.** Give them the chance to say it in a pair, in a group, in writing, before you ask them to say it in a room of ninety.
- **Reward preparation over volume.** In your participation marks, credit arriving with the reading done and a contribution ready, not the number of times someone speaks. Say this in advance.

The overconfident half

The student who speaks first and best often sets the floor for everyone else. Three moves:

1. Set the norm in week one: we take one contribution per pair before we take a room answer.
2. Use the numbering and jigsaw structures above, so one voice cannot occupy the room.
3. In the plenary, use: thanks, and now I want the view of someone who has thought about this differently. Or: what would someone argue against that? This redirects without shaming.

When group work goes wrong in the room

It will, in week two or three. Have three responses ready, all calm:

1. **Redirect:** everyone writes for 90 seconds, then we take one answer per pair. This restores pace.
2. **Shrink:** the group becomes a pair, and the deliverable becomes one sentence. Momentum is easier to restart smaller.
3. **Salvage:** you stop the task, model the first step yourself, then hand it back. You lose ten minutes and save the session.

Do not let one group hold the room hostage for five minutes while you negotiate. Timeboxing is a kindness.

Individual accountability, in practice

The single most effective addition to group work is a short individual piece attached to it. Three options:

- A 200-word reflection: what I contributed, what I learned from the group, what we did badly.
- A 3-minute voice note or a one-page note: the part of the work that is mine.
- An individual restart: in the session, each member redoes one step alone, so you can see who has the understanding.

Mark the individual piece with the same rigour as the group product. If you mark only the group product, group work teaches students that group work is about the loudest member.

Managing your own energy across the term

Your energy is a teaching resource. Burn it in week two and you are coasting through weeks six to twelve, which is when the students who needed you most are still in the room.

Plan for the dip instead of discovering it.

The term shape and what each phase demands

Phase	Weeks	Your load	Your risk	What to do in advance
Rebuild	Before term	High	Over-designing; nothing finished	Ship the spine, keep the skin
Landing	1-2	Medium	Over-delivering on content	Teach less than you think, ask more
Trough	3-5	High	Marking pile plus low energy	Cut workload; hold office hours; protect one morning
Consolidation	6-9	Medium	Disengagement; students drift	Use the mid-term to reset expectations and re-pace
Assessment	10-12	Very high	Feedback delayed, marking resentment	Publish dates in week 1; ask for help early; triage honestly
Close	13-14	Medium	Burnout; reflexivity	Do the exit task; write the changes for next year while fresh

Ten protections worth taking

1. **Batch your marking.** Three fixed blocks a week rather than daily dribble. One block of 90 focused minutes beats five interrupted ones.
2. **Do not prepare in the session slot.** Prepare in the mornings or early evenings when your attention is highest, not in the two hours before you teach.
3. **Keep one hour a day that is not teaching.** It is the hour where research, marking and admin go. If it goes, the term goes with it.
4. **Say no to the request you can decline.** A late assignment extension request, an extra reading, a guest talk in week nine. Write the policy in week one and then apply it; inconsistent boundaries are what makes a course exhausting.
5. **Schedule the hard session early.** Teach the session you most want to avoid while you still have energy for it.
6. **Build a reusable slide spine.** Make 8 to 10 slides that work every year, with two new slides per session. You are not designing from nothing in week seven.

7. **Find one colleague.** Someone to email a four-sentence summary of a bad week. This is the single highest-value professional relationship in a first term back.
8. **Ask students for feedback early, twice.** Week three and week eight. Small, specific, five questions. It converts a vague sense that things are not working into a fixable item.
9. **Sleep before marking, not after.** Marks made after 9 pm are the marks you will regret.
10. **Plan the last week of term now.** Write the exit task, the reading, and the wrap-up in the same week you write the first session.

A four-week plan, week by week

This is the period most lecturers plan poorly, because they plan the content and not the sequence of recovery. The plan below assumes you have taught before and are returning, that the class meets 1 to 2 times a week, and that the term has 12 teaching weeks plus reading weeks.

Week	Teaching	Assessment	Student support	Your work	The one thing to get right
Before	None	Publish the deadline map	Post the pre-term survey	Days 14 to 1 of the prep plan	The course promise, the deadline map, the diagnostic
1	Sessions 1-2: context, diagnostic, worked example	Ungraded diagnostic	Post-term survey closed; opening the question channel	Teach less than prepared	Nobody leaves thinking they have failed
2	Sessions 3-4: first core concept, group task	Draft due (5% of grade), feedback in 7 days	15-minute check-ins with anyone flagged in week 1	Publish the week 3 warm-up bank	The draft is genuinely formative, not a formality
3	Sessions 5-6: second concept, application	Draft feedback returned; sample answer published	Pair check-in: every flagged student has had contact	Week 3 feedback survey; one change out loud	Feedback lands before the next submission, not after
4	Sessions 7-8: consolidation, mid-term walkthrough	Mid-term returned with per-question method comments	Clinic format; visible tracker updated	Restructure the mid-term for weak areas	The mid-term result is used to change the teaching, not just the grade
5	Sessions 9-10: application and case work	Group task, individual reflection returned	Three-way meetings for anyone with two flags	Trough management: cut one task	You still have energy on the Thursday of week 5
6	Sessions 11-12: synthesis, guest or case session	Re-run the week 1 diagnostic, compare	Mid-term remediation plan for the bottom quartile	Prepare the half-term consolidation	The diagnostic comparison is used to show growth, publicly and kindly
7	Sessions 13-14: new material with the corrected pace	Individual project brief published with rubric and sample	Week 8 survey: five questions	Reprioritise the marking queue	The brief is unambiguous: artefact, standard, length, deadline
8	Sessions 15-16: project clinic, guest session	Peer review pairs assigned	Peer feedback published as a resource	Peer review moderation	Peer review is structured, not an open comment box
9	Sessions 17-18: project clinic, project work	Individual project due in 2 weeks	Late-care contact: anyone who has gone quiet since week 6	Mid-term-grade project feedback drafted	Silence in week 9 is caught, not discovered in week 12
10	Sessions 19-20: final synthesis	Peer feedback returned	Escalations closed out	Full marking sprint, scheduled in blocks	Feedback out before the exam revision period starts
11	Sessions 21-22: revision, exam walkthrough	Peer feedback returned; project feedback returned	Exam anxiety drop-in, one hour	Second marking sprint	Students can use the feedback on a second attempt
12	Sessions 23-24: exam, close	Exam marked by week 13	Exit survey with three questions	Exit task: what worked, what to change	You write the changes for next year while it is still fresh

What to have ready at each weekly boundary

Prepare these on the Friday before, not on the Monday morning:

- The next session, in the shape of the 10-minute skeleton.
- The three warm-up questions.
- The one-line purpose of the session.
- The deadline map updated if anything moved.
- One question you intend to ask, and the patient silence that follows it.

Common mistakes and how to get out of them

Each mistake below is common, recoverable and usually visible to the students before it is visible to you.

1. Rebuilding the whole course

The symptom: week one arrives with slides written on Thursday night, a syllabus you have not read since July, and a feeling of being behind.

The fix: stop. Cut the course to what you will actually do. One concept, one assessment, one reading per week for the first three weeks. Everything else can arrive in week four when the class is stable. A small course delivered well beats a large course delivered at speed.

2. Cold assessments in week one

The symptom: students arrive silent and stay silent, and your diagnostic shows a class with no working memory for the subject.

The fix: make the diagnostic ungraded and announced. Tell them, before they sit it, that it carries no marks and that you will use it to change the teaching. That single sentence changes how the room behaves.

3. Lecturing for the record

The symptom: 45 minutes of exposition, 300 slides over the term, and a room that stops asking questions in week three.

The fix: halve the content and double the pauses. Set a timer for the talking, stop at 8 minutes, and ask a question with wait time. Count the number of student voices per session in week one, then in week four, then in week eight. If the number is falling, you are lecturing too much.

4. Feedback arriving after the next assessment

The symptom: students complain that feedback was useless, because it landed the week after they had already submitted the next piece of work.

The fix: set a feedback deadline before you set the next deadline. Drafts get feedback in 7 days, finals in 10 to 14. If you cannot hit it, reduce the number of assessments rather than the turnaround time.

5. Weighting everything at the end

The symptom: the whole class disengages in week 10 because everything depends on the last fortnight.

The fix: move 15 per cent of the grade into week two, as a small low-stakes task with fast feedback. It changes behaviour more than any motivational email.

6. Assuming silence means understanding

The symptom: you ask a question, get no answer, and continue. Half the class has not followed since week 2.

The fix: use the warm-up every session and read the answers. Do not ask the class a question whose answer you do not need. If you ask, wait, and then teach it again a different way.

7. Marking the effort instead of the standard

The symptom: bright students coast, and the students who improved most get no credit for it.

The fix: separate the criteria and comment on the improvement explicitly. Tell the class in week one that progress is commented on even when the grade is the same.

8. Freezing the class structure

The symptom: a student dominates every seminar for six weeks, and you feel unable to intervene without humiliating them.

The fix: change the structure, not the person. Numbered heads, one contribution per pair, rotating roles. Nobody is singled out; the structure simply stops allowing one voice.

9. Hiding your own uncertainty

The symptom: students ask a question you cannot answer, you bluff, and the class notices.

The fix: write down the questions you cannot answer and answer them within 48 hours. Say: I do not know, I will find out and email the class by Thursday. Then do it. You will be more credible than a lecturer who never says that sentence.

10. Spending all your goodwill in week one

The symptom: an inspiring first lecture, and a term where you have nothing left to give by week six.

The fix: hold 60 per cent back. A first week of 80 per cent intensity is followed by a long flat term. Aim for 70 per cent in week one, 60 per cent in week two, then build.

11. Never asking for feedback

The symptom: a course that drifts for a year, with a survey at the end that says it could have been better, but never says how.

The fix: five questions in week three and week eight, and one visible change out loud afterwards. If students do not see a change, they will stop answering next time.

12. Treating the quiet students as an absence of ability

The symptom: a capable student who never speaks, and a class that mistakes silence for lack of understanding.

The fix: build participation into the assessed work in a way that does not require public speech. Written contributions, pair work with a deliverable, group roles, individual reflections. Then look for what the quiet student produces on paper, and tell the class what they produced.

Final checklist

The weekend before, if you only have 30 minutes

If the whole fortnight has gone, this is the salvage version. Pick the row, not the whole table.

If you only have	Do this	You will have
5 minutes	Write the course promise on one line and put it on your first slide	A class that knows what it is for
10 minutes	List every assessment with a date and a weight, in order	The deadline map, which is the highest-value thing on this page
15 minutes	Cut the week one reading to three items and set a 40-minute limit on each	A week one nobody can fail
20 minutes	Write the 8-question diagnostic and its answer key	A baseline and a first win for students
30 minutes	Rehearse the first 10 minutes aloud, timed, twice	A first session that does not wobble
45 minutes	Build the 5-session first week from the table in section 3	A week one that does not depend on inspiration
60 minutes	Test slides, audio, poll, screen share, and write the paper backup	Technology that cannot ambush you
90 minutes	Send the pre-term email with the three deadlines and one question	A class that knows what is coming

Two weeks before

- ☐ Course promise written in one sentence, in student language.
- ☐ Audit done: keep, change, retire, decided for every element.
- ☐ No new required reading in week one.
- ☐ Deadline map published, with the two heaviest weeks marked.
- ☐ Low-stakes diagnostic written: 8 questions, 10 minutes, answer key ready.
- ☐ Week one session plans written, in the 10-minute skeleton shape.
- ☐ Warm-up bank started: 10 questions minimum.
- ☐ Technology tested end to end, with a paper backup.
- ☐ Feedback channels set up and tested by you personally.
- ☐ Draft feedback and final feedback turnaround dates agreed with yourself: 7 and 12 days.

Week one

- ☐ First 10 minutes: purpose, structure, participation contract, next step.
- ☐ Diagnostic announced as ungraded before it happens.
- ☐ Nothing cold-called; nobody asked to introduce their background.
- ☐ Every student has spoken, or written, or both.
- ☐ Two-week deadline map shared verbally and in writing.
- ☐ First email sent, with one question and one useful link.
- ☐ Tracker started: attendance, submissions, notes.
- ☐ The class told what you will change because of the diagnostic.

Weeks two to four

- ☐ Draft feedback returned within 7 days.
- ☐ Marked sample published alongside the rubric.
- ☐ Everyone flagged in week one contacted by the end of week two.

- [] Everyone silent for two weeks contacted by the end of week three.
- [] Week three feedback survey sent: five questions.
- [] One change made out loud, publicly, because of the survey.
- [] Mid-term used to change the teaching, not only to produce a grade.
- [] Week 1 diagnostic re-run in week six, and compared.
- [] Nothing in the first six weeks exceeds 1,500 words or 6 hours of student effort.

Across the term

- [] Weekly: session prepared, three warm-up questions, one question planned for the room.
- [] Weekly: tracker updated, five minutes.
- [] Weekly: 90 minutes of marking in a single block.
- [] Weekly: one hour protected that is not teaching.
- [] Term: participation assessed on preparation and contribution, not volume.
- [] Term: every group task has a deliverable, roles, a time limit and an individual piece.
- [] Term: support route written down and known to the class.
- [] Term: one escalation handled the same day it is raised.
- [] Term: energy trough at weeks 3 to 5 planned for in advance.
- [] End: exit survey with three questions, and a written list of what changes next time.

The last thing

A returning class does not need a brilliant lecturer in week one. It needs a lecturer who is organised, honest about the break, quick to give feedback, and visibly in the room. Everything above is logistics in service of those four things.

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out this guide

ide is written for lecturers, tutors, teaching fellows and graduate teaching assistants who are about to teach again after er, a research leave, a sick period, a move to a new institution, or a return from industry. It covers the two weeks before and the four weeks after, with concrete timings, marks, session plans and checklists. It also shows how to build a course ely free, openly licensed teaching material.

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