

Leak Your Geek

How to teach what you love and addict other people!

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The Society for Creative Anachronism is a volunteer-run educational group, which means that, with rare exception, the people teaching classes at moots and events are fellow members of the SCA who are eager to share their knowledge and experience with you. Other than the willingness to get up and do it, there really is no other criteria for being a teacher. This class is a primer on how to teach in a way that is effective and satisfying both for the instructor and the students.

Choosing a topic

Before offering to teach, you must actually have a topic that you would like to teach other people about. This works best if it is a topic that you are both well familiar with and are excited to share with others. While it is possible to teach a class on a subject you are yourself just learning, it is very difficult to do so well. It is almost always worth spending the extra time solidifying your skills and showing people one-on-one until you are truly comfortable with a topic before delving into a class-based format. The excitement is helpful because it can help you get over any stage fright you may have and makes you a more engaging teacher for your students.

When picking a topic, it is also important to consider the scope of the class. Lecture classes on a topic can wander all over time and space, as long as there is a guiding theme, but it is somewhat harder to cover twenty embroidery stitches in an hour. Consider your level of knowledge and the amount of time you will have and set the scope of the class appropriately.

It also can be helpful to pick a topic that has not already been well-covered, or to save a very basic class for a newcomer's class or similar venue, since if the same or similar classes are taught too often or too close together, they can seem repetitive, even if it is the first time *you* are teaching it. On the other hand, if the topic you are really excited about is very obscure, it is possible that few others will be interested. Teaching a class and getting other people hooked on your cool thing is a rewarding experience and a great way to leak your geek on people, but do keep things in perspective. If you don't get a lot of people in your class on Left Handed Pictish Widgets, the interest base may just not be deep enough where you are – consider expanding the topic or offering it again at a larger regional event or even at a war.

Think about:

What am I most interested in/excited by right now?

How well do I know the topic/technique?

How much material do I have? Is there enough for a class or should I expand/contract it?

Have I taught/explained/talked about this to other people already? How did that go?

Does anyone else in the area teach this topic? How recently was a similar class offered?

What is the scope of the class? Is there enough interest in the skill/topic to support it?

Am I more interested in the history/theory of the topic or the hands-on application?

Can the materials for the class be transported to/used at an event? What kind of site do I need for the class to be successful?

Choosing a format

Not all subjects translate well to a group class! Think carefully about the topic you would like to teach. If it is a very complicated, hands-on technique or one that requires a lot of background knowledge or safety equipment, or really anything else that is extremely time-intensive, consider offering the topic as a one-on-one class or as a demonstration of the skill, rather than a participatory class.

Once you are certain that it is a topic that you can teach to at least three people at a go, think about the specifics of *HOW* you want to teach it more carefully. If your class is predominantly about imparting knowledge *about* a topic, a lecture format is best. On the other hand, if you want to teach people how to *do* a new skill or technique, a hands-on class is often a better bet. Also, think about the level you are teaching – is it beginner, intermediate, or advanced? – since this determines how much background info you need to cover. It is important to specify what skills you expect the students to have in advance, if any, to avoid disappointment. If the class involves a technique that requires careful observation, think about how long it takes to demonstrate key steps one-on-one and plan your class limits appropriately. Also consider the age of your students - there may be age limits on the class, either because of attention level or legal reasons. Lastly, consider the materials you will use in the class as well as the ones that the students will take home. Consider the total costs and how much of those costs you want to pass on to the students. The SCA generally does not allow for a “tuition fee” for teaching classes, but class fees meant to cover the expenses of the class are allowed.

Think about:

Is this better as a one-on-one, hands-on, or a lecture-style class?

If hands-on, how many people can I practically teach by myself? Can I recruit teacher’s aids? How will I handle a student who struggles with the technique?

If lecture, will it be pure lecture, or will I be demoing techniques/showing visual aids?

What restrictions will there be on the class? (Age, experience, class limits, fees, etc.)

What supplies will I need? (handouts, hands-on materials, visual aids, chalkboards, etc.)

What costs will be associated with the class? (Handouts, materials, tools, etc.)

Choosing a venue

What you teach and *how* you teach it are important, but so is *WHERE* you teach it. A class on needlework is likely to get lost at a fighter-focused event and a trip to Calontir may not be the best time to offer a class on Elizabethan ruffs. Also, some classes are better suited to some sites than others. Dyeing is great fun, but much better to teach at an outdoor site than one in a school with carpeted rooms. A brewing class may be of interest, but you may have to limit yourself to a lecture class at a dry site. Carefully consider what facilities you need for the class to be a success and make sure the event can accommodate those needs. Using a venue’s restrictions can also work in your favor – if you have a new class and are nervous about it, consider teaching it for the first time at a very small event.

Think about:

Who will be at the event? Is this the right demographic?

How many people at this event are likely to come to the class? Is that too many/too few?

Does the class have any special needs? (Space, messy, time, indoors, outdoors, noise, equipment, etc.)

Is it particularly well-suited to a specific time of year? (i.e., a camping class in the spring)

Writing a handout

Not every class lends itself to an extensive handout, but every class should provide at least something for the students to take with them. At minimum, you should have a card that includes the class name or topic, your name, and your contact information. For lecture handouts, it is also really helpful to include at least an outline of what you will discuss, a bibliography, and related websites. For an hands-on class, it is a good idea to include a short description of the skill or technique taught or even step-by-step instructions, a bibliography, relevant websites, and a list of suppliers, particularly if the class involves materials one could not just pick up from the local big box store. Pictures of the process are really very helpful for hands-on classes, but are not always possible to either take/draw or economically reproduce. However, there are many, many crafting techniques demonstrated on the internet. Take a look and see if you can find webpage or YouTube links that illustrate the concept. Remember, your handout is the way people jog their memories about your class, contact you to clarify questions or problems, and share your cool thing with other people. Make it a useful tool!

Think about:

- Have I included my basic contact information? Do it!
- For lecture classes, did I include an outline, bibliography, and websites?
- For hands-on classes, did I include a description/instructions, a materials source list, a bibliography, and links or pictures?
- If there is any legal or safety concern, have I addressed it in writing in the handout?
- Read the completed handout aloud, looking for awkward spots
- Have a friend unfamiliar with the topic read the handout and give me feedback
- For the love of all that's holy, have I spell-checked it?
- How many people do I expect in my class? How many copies should I make?

Writing the description and get it on the schedule

This is it! You're doing it! Now you have to entice people to come to your fabulous class! Write a title that is engaging, that makes the reader want to know more. Your course description should be a concise description of the topic – it should give the general thrust of the class, but not go into excruciating detail, devolve into a list of the topics covered, or simply repeat the class title. This is also where you set out your expectations for your students about class restrictions (age, enrollment caps, etc.), requirements (protective clothing needed, previous experience expected), and costs (for handouts and/or materials).

Contact the autocrat or class coordinator of the event you want to teach at early and inquire about teaching at their event. Get your class on the schedule as early as possible – the more time people have to plan for it, the more people you are likely to have. If possible, have the class schedule include your contact information so that if anyone has questions there is an easy way to contact you.

Think about:

- Is my title interesting or engaging?
- Is my description clear and concise?
- Does my description include any information the students need to know? (age limits, class limits, clothing requirements, previous experience requirements, costs, etc.)

Presenting the class

Actually giving the class is usually the shortest portion of the teaching process, but for some it can be the most stressful portion of the experience. If this is a stumbling point for you, the important thing to remember is that you are teaching this class because you are EXCITED and want to SHARE this topic that you know so well. Channel that joy into your presentation and focus on the idea that you are sharing with your friends, rather than thinking of it as being a formal teacher-student relationship. Practicing the class is an excellent way to ensure a smooth teaching experience and to polish your timing. Role-play the class all the way through. Are there places where you stumble? Do you have trouble remembering key dates or facts? Consider writing yourself an outline and teaching from that instead of a block of text in your handout.

Relax! It can be hard to do, but mindfully approach the class in a relaxed way. Schedule your day so you can collect your materials and arrive at your classroom in an un-rushed manner. If your class requires specific facilities or you are uncertain of the location, strongly consider scoping it out in advance and testing facilities like projectors and sinks. If you have a lot of things to prep or set up for the class, make sure you budget time to do so, but be respectful of the other teachers and students in the area. Before class starts – go pee, even if you “don’t have to.” Have a beverage on hand, ideally water, so you can sip if your mouth becomes dry, if you begin to cough, or even if you want to cover a momentary lapse.

Whether your class is hands-on or lecture, you will be doing A LOT of talking. Try to maintain a relaxed and moderate speed of speech. Make sure you are speaking loudly enough to be heard by all the students, particularly when there are other activities in the vicinity that can make it difficult to hear (fighting, loud classes) or if the venue is acoustically difficult (all-cement buildings). Watch for students who are leaning toward you or asking you to repeat yourself. If you are unsure about your speed or volume, simply ask your students, they will be happy to give you feedback. Pay attention to your body language during the class too. Look up from your notes frequently, engage each of the students visually, and take a posture that is open to the class. You can move around, even in a lecture class, if that helps alleviate your nerves.

Students themselves can present interesting challenges - here are the two most common ones: *The Know-It-All* – that guy who keeps interrupting your class with “information.” Invite them to discuss the topic in depth *after class* – and then firmly continue with your prepared material. *The Struggling Student* – the student that does not catch on to a concept or technique, despite your patient attempts to help them through the problem spot. You need to be mindful of your time and its effects on the other students – quietly offer them a private lesson at a later time.

If this is your first teaching experience, consider asking an experienced teacher to come to your class to give you honest feedback. Remember that teaching is itself a learning experience – you’ll improve with practice and getting some constructive criticism of your progress can be very helpful! Lastly, remember that this is a volunteer organization and you are a volunteer teacher. If you do not know something or are unsure, say so! Have a pen and paper at the class so you can write down any questions that come up and student’s information so you can get back to them when you find the answer.

Think about:

Do I have all my class materials? (handouts, materials, water glass, pen/paper, etc)

Do I know where my class is and how the room is laid out? Do the facilities work?

Remember to bring a sense of excitement and wonder about my topic!

Congratulations! You’re a teacher! Get out there and Leak Your Geek!