



# Chapter 1

## An Introduction to Introductory Psychology

A survey of university faculty's views about the chief hindrances in teaching the introductory psychology course elicited the following responses:

inconveniently large classes . . . lack of assistance . . . lack of equipment or inconvenience in quarters . . . students ill-prepared . . . the mixed and uneven character of the classes . . . lack of a first rate text book.

You might feel the same, and if so, you have company, and you have had company for a long time. The survey was conducted in 1910 as part of the first American Psychological Association (APA) report evaluating the “first course in psychology” (Sanford, 1910, p. 60).

Many of the issues and concerns faced by instructors of the “first course” in psychology remain—and are revisited by every new teacher of the course. So, in an attempt not to have to “reinvent the course,” this book addresses the persistent issues and conflicts involved in teaching introductory psychology and provides as many resources, teaching tips, and information as possible. Hopefully both new instructors and veteran instructors looking for a fresh perspective will find value in this book.

Because this is a very personal book, I think it is important that I present my credentials from the very beginning:



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- I have taught introductory psychology for over 30 years.
- I earned a teaching certificate—I took all of those “how to teach” courses.
- I went back to graduate school after teaching introductory psychology for 6 years at two different community colleges.
- I earned my Ph.D. in Educational Psychology with an emphasis on “teacher behavior.”
- I codeloped and present every year the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign Psychology Department’s new teaching assistants’ orientation.
- I supervise advanced graduate students teaching the introductory course, and have done so for more than 20 years.
- I love to teach. I like working with first-year college students—helping them adjust to college life and expectations. I like to work with graduate students—both those who immediately resonate to teaching and those who need a bit more guidance and nurturing. I’ve received teaching awards from an undergraduate organization, a graduate student organization, my college, and my campus.

I want to share with you all of the things I have learned in my 30-year teaching career. This book emphasizes the concepts I think are important, the techniques I’ve used to help teach the concepts, and the resources I have discovered to aid in my teaching. Obviously, the way I teach the introductory course has evolved, both as I’ve matured as a teacher and as the content of the course has shifted and expanded. And equally obvious is the fact that you can’t teach it all. So I hope you will view this book as a smorgasbord of ideas and information, not a comprehensive “to-do-list.”

### What is Introductory Psychology?

In 1908, APA appointed the first committee, the Committee on Methods of Teaching Psychology, to investigate the “first course in psychology” (Goodwin, 1992; Wolfle, 1942). They called it the “first course” because there was debate over whether the first course should be an introductory (i.e. survey) course or an elementary principles course. The report, discussed at the 1909 APA meeting and published in a monograph in 1910, cautioned instructors to focus on psychology as a science, not as philosophy. Although they did not





outline a “standard” curriculum, something many instructors of the first course requested, the committee did recommend a “survey” course: “A little from each of all aspects of psychology and much from a few” (Seashore, 1910, p. 83).

Twenty years later, Albert Poffenberger (1929) reported that over 100 people attended a 1928 APA round table to discuss the “first course.” However, the results were disappointing as “the contributions were limited mainly to an account of how different individuals teach the first course, with no progress in the direction of a ‘one best way,’ if such there can ever be” (p. 342).

Today we continue to grapple with many of the same questions about introductory psychology that have been dealt with over the years at APA round tables and conferences—*what* content to cover, *how much* content to cover (the depth vs. breadth issue), *how to teach* the course (e.g., what is the best mixture of lecture and active learning?), *who* should teach the course, and what the *student’s role* should be. There are obviously no final answers to these questions, but I hope that this book will provide the background and resources that will help you to answer them in a way that is best for you and your introductory psychology students.

## What Do I Teach?

### The depth versus breadth question

One of the first decisions a teacher makes is *what* to include in their course—the pervasive “depth” vs. “breadth” question. Given that the “knowledge base” in psychology has grown astronomically in the last few decades, how can we cover it all in an introductory psychology survey course? Bob Hendersen and I have been presenting an introductory psychology workshop at the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP) for over 10 years; and every year, no matter what the advertised topic, we have a discussion about whether it is best to teach the entire “standard” course or whether it is better to concentrate on certain areas.

There is no correct answer to this question. You will need to decide for yourself, based on the demands that are placed on the introductory course in your institution as well as your personal philosophy. If instructors of upper-class courses base their course development on the assumption that introductory psychology students



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likely previewed, and perhaps even learned, the basic ideas they will present in their courses, then you must cover those ideas in some format. If your institution views introductory psychology as primarily a general education course, then you are freer to concentrate on areas that are of interest to you or that you find to be critical for the course.

I come down on the side of “teaching it all.” This view reflects, in part, the way the introductory course fits into the curriculum at my university. But it also partly reflects the fact that I truly do not know what to leave out. I’ve seen too many courses that opt out of teaching biology or sensation and perception, and I think that narrows students’ ideas of what psychology is all about. So I cover every chapter in the textbook, and I spend more time on topics that I think will be most difficult for students. For example, I spend considerable time discussing classical conditioning and less time discussing operant conditioning. In my experience, students quickly pick up on the concepts in operant conditioning but have a difficult time understanding the classical conditioning paradigm.

Others disagree with me. They argue that a few core concepts should be taught well. And they might choose to teach concepts that are “most useful” to the students, rather than those that are “most difficult.” Whether you prefer to “teach it all” or “teach core concepts,” don’t worry; this book is organized so that you may focus on chapters of material and topics within those chapters that you deem essential.

##### The topics of introductory psychology

In 1946 Claude Buxton wrote an article for *American Psychologist* entitled “Planning the introductory psychology course.” His outline of a “typical” introductory psychology course divided 45 class meetings as follows:

- Orientation—Course details (1 meeting); Difficult problems for the psychology student;
- Correction of misbeliefs, psychology vocabulary, scientific method, learning for transfer (3 meetings);
- Individual differences—Psychological measurement, statistics (2 meetings);
- Exam 1 & Review of Exam 1 (1 meeting);
- Abilities—Intellectual (4 meetings);





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- Growth and development of behavior—heredity—environment, maturation process, maturation and learning (3 meetings);
- Motivation—Drives, components of motive, incentive & performance, cultural determiners of motivation (4 meetings);
- Exam 2 and Review of Exam 2 (2 meetings);
- Learning and Memory—including cultural factors and social learning (7 meetings);
- Thinking—Problem-solving (3 meetings);
- Exam 3 & Review of Exam 3 (2 meetings);
- Sensing and Perceiving (6 meetings);
- Personality and adjustment (7 meetings);
- Final exam. (Buxton, 1946, pp. 309–310)

Note that his outline includes no discussion of biological psychology, social psychology, consciousness, emotion, stress and coping, health psychology, or other topics typically covered in today's textbooks and courses.

Today, most instructors of introductory psychology take their cue on what topics to teach from the introductory textbook they are using. However, topics covered in introductory texts have changed over the years as well. When Wayne Weiten and Randall Wight (1992) compared texts from the turn of the century to texts from the 1990s, they found that the amount of text devoted to sensation/perception, language/thought, and motivation/emotion had decreased. Coverage of history, methods, introductory material, biological bases, learning, memory, and personality remained about the same, but there was greater coverage of development, psychological testing/intelligence, psychopathology/psychotherapy, and social psychology.

Many veteran instructors argue that current introductory textbooks are essentially clones of each other and lack diversity. A survey conducted among introductory psychology instructors in 1998 found uniformity within the introductory courses, that most courses were indeed centered around the textbook, and that most textbooks included most of the same topics (Miller & Gentile, 1998). A “typical” current textbook covers the topics of history and approaches to psychology; research methods; elementary statistics; development; biological psychology; sensation; perception; consciousness; learning; memory; cognition and language; cognitive abilities (intelligence); motivation and emotion; stress, health, and coping; personality; psychological disorders; treatment of psychological disorders; and social psychology. Not all textbooks cover the material



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in the same manner or order, but these topics have emerged as the “core” curriculum.

However, we can also argue that textbooks are somewhat diverse. A survey of the glossaries of 44 current introductory psychology textbooks revealed only 14 terms common to every one of the textbooks. Indeed, they found that 93% of the total glossary terms do not appear in even 50% of the textbooks (Griggs, Bujak-Johnson, & Proctor, 2004). Interestingly, the core concepts come almost exclusively from the learning and biology units.

Even back in the 1940s, psychology instructors were commenting that:

there is one field which students usually consider both uninteresting and unimportant and which deserves special attention—the anatomical and physiological description of the nervous system and sense organs. In these attitudes the students are supported by some of their instructors . . . tradition is not enough to justify us in continuing to teach a diluted, and sometimes obsolete, neural and sensory anatomy. The time devoted to this field in the reviewer’s own course is just long enough to refer interested students to the appropriate texts in elementary physiology and neurology. (Wolfe, 1942, pp. 696–697, n. 1)

This view is still prevalent. Many students today do not find biological psychology inherently interesting, and many instructors feel they lack sufficient background and/or interest in this area to teach it well. Accordingly, I have included in this book many suggestions for making biological material more interesting for students to learn and easier for you to teach.

### The organization of content in introductory psychology

Beyond deciding *what* topics should be presented, you will have to decide about the sequence in which they should be taught. This question, too, has been under discussion for many years. Harry Ruja (1948) noted, for example, that

the problem of order of topics is how to get our students started and, once started, how to keep them going. To accomplish this objective, we need to exploit their readiness for a given topic at a given time . . . from the practical to the theoretical, the familiar to the strange, the concrete to the abstract, the larger context to the detail. (Ruja, 1948, p. 201)



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When he polled the authors of introductory psychology textbooks, Ruja found many different preferred topic sequences. He did, however identify two main themes: (a) that the order should promote increasing student understanding (e.g., later chapters should build on early ones); and (b) that the order should “capitalize on the student’s current, perhaps superficial, interests in leading him on to broader, more mature ones” (p. 200). But Ruja was also quick to point out that these two themes may be incompatible.

You will need to think about the way that introductory psychology makes sense to you and try to find a way to teach that encourages students to see psychology as a whole, rather than as discrete units. You will need to find an organization that works for you, and re-examine it every few years.

I have not found a textbook that “unfolds” psychology the way I see it, so I assign chapters out of order. Many instructors, especially those who are new to teaching, see the sequence of textbook chapters as “gospel,” and thus they teach the course in a sequence that might not actually make the most sense to them.

I begin my own course with the history of psychology, the subfields of psychology, and an overview of the major approaches in psychology. As an undergraduate history major, I truly believe that you “can’t know where you are going until you know where you have been.” Thus I emphasize that psychology is a relatively new science, and that it has roots in philosophy. I talk about the cultural relevance of psychology and the new impetus for cross-cultural studies.

I often begin by asking students these stimulus questions: “A psychologist gets up in the morning and heads to work. Where does she work? What does she do?” Then I use their answers to illustrate the subfields of psychology. It also allows many students to see that their view of psychology is narrow—many will know about clinical psychology, but few will be aware of quantitative psychology or engineering psychology, for example.

The second day of my course involves an emphasis on research methods and statistics. I find that students are more sophisticated today in terms of statistical background. Consequently, I don’t have to spend much time defining and illustrating concepts such as mean, median, and mode. I provide students with a general outline of research methods. I then give examples of research questions and ask them to decide which method would be best for that particular question. I also provide a statistics exercise—giving statistical information about two attractive jobs and having students justify their



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choice by explaining the statistical concepts. This encourages them to understand the importance of a standard deviation, without having to figure out how to compute one (which I believe is beyond the scope of introductory psychology).

I teach the first couple of days in the same order as the textbook—simply because most textbooks begin with an introductory chapter covering history, subfields, and approaches. Some texts have a separate chapter on research methods, whereas others incorporate that topic into the introductory chapter.

Many textbooks then move into biological psychology. Although I understand the reasoning, to start with a single cell and then progress to social interaction, I have to agree with Buxton (1946) who commented, “A course opening with the nervous system, sensation, and perception could well strike a blow to student morale from which it would never recover” (p. 305). This is exactly what happened when I moved from introductory concepts straight into biological concepts—many of my students’ eyes glazed over. So I decided I would teach development before the biological psychology chapter. Why development? Well, a couple of reasons. First, I really like teaching that material—so why not start out teaching in your strong area? Second, the material in development is “catchy” for students and not as unfamiliar as, say, neuroanatomy. As such, students get a relatively easy content chapter “under their belts” before they encounter more difficult material. (I’m speaking in generalities, of course. Some students, especially those majoring in biology, have no difficulty with the biological psychology chapter.)

After development, I move back to a more “traditional” organization—biological psychology, sensation, and perception. After these topics, however, I teach the consciousness chapter. In reality, I think you could teach the consciousness chapter in conjunction with many different units. However, for me, it makes sense to move from the idea of perception—of making meaning from information in the environment—to an internal “perception” or consciousness. Talking about the mind—brain distinction, sleeping, dreaming, hypnosis, and psychoactive drugs fits with my outline. I also take the opportunity to refer repeatedly to concepts in biological psychology when discussing psychoactive drugs.

I then move on to the “cognitive unit” (learning, memory, cognition, and cognitive abilities). It is usually easy for students to see how learning contributes to memory and how memory contributes to thinking, which leads to cognitive abilities. Perhaps more than



any other four chapters in your textbook, these units are easy to integrate.

Next I teach motivation and emotion and then the chapter on health, stress, and coping. You can integrate these chapters in many different ways, but I like to use the topics raised in motivation, emotion, stress, and coping to help introduce theories of personality, which is the next unit I cover. Students often find some cohesion in the personality, psychological disorder, and treatment of psychological disorders units because the underlying “approaches” provide a common unifying thread. I end my course with a discussion of social psychology. This is a nice ending point: because we have spent most of the course discussing individual development and differences, it’s good to talk in a more “molar” manner about individuals interacting with each other.

My ordering of topics has come from personal trial and error. However, this book will present the topics without presuming any particular content order. The instructor of the course should make the decision about which material to present; and the order of presentation should reflect the personal goals of the instructor and the institution (Fuch, 2000).

#### Goals and course objectives in introductory psychology

In 1942, Dael Wolfle, who compiled a history of the “first course in psychology,” gave advice to the introductory psychology teacher that is still valid today:

The first task of the beginning instructor of elementary psychology, and indeed, of any instructor who has not already done it, is to write out specifically the objectives of his course—the changes which he expects to develop in, and the benefits which he expects to be gained by, the students. (Wolfle, 1942, p. 706)

Wolfle integrated several previous versions of goals for the introductory psychology course and came up with five:

- teach facts and principles of psychology;
- develop scientific method or habits of critical thought;
- provide better ability in making personal adjustments;
- prepare students for later courses, or interest them in psychology;
- and



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- teach what psychology is and is not, or eliminate popular superstitions. (Wolfe, 1942, p. 687)

Twenty-five years later, Edward Walker and Wilbert McKeachie (1967) stressed critical thinking as a goal, although they pointed out that there was not general agreement about what actual skills were involved or how to “foster” its development. They paraphrased Roger Heyns, who was then Chancellor at the University of California at Berkeley, as saying:

the primary goal is to develop learners—individuals who will learn not just in college but throughout life. College instructors, he says, as experts in the learning of their own areas, have two functions: (1) helping students develop skills in learning the discipline, and (2) communicating to students the excitement and satisfaction of learning that discipline so that they may develop long-term motivation to learn. (Walker & McKeachie, 1967, p. 5)

If we modernize Wolfe’s (1942) goals, they are an excellent guide for introductory psychology instructors. If we can teach the facts about psychology, encourage students to engage in critical and scientific thinking, help students apply psychological principles to their everyday lives, get students interested in psychology—perhaps motivating them to take more advanced psychology courses—and help students see the common misconceptions surrounding psychology, then I think we are on the right track.

However, it is also important not to lose sight of the fact that our goals are personal ones. As Walker and McKeachie (1967) said:

What is really important is that the instructor formulate a set of goals or objectives he wishes to meet. Only then can a consideration of the tools and techniques available to him yield the best match between task and tool. (p. 11)

But it is sometimes difficult to sit down and list your personal course goals. That is why I suggest that you complete the Teaching Goals Inventory (TGI), which is available in print (Angelo & Cross, 1993), or online at <http://www.uiowa.edu/~centeach/tgi/>. The TGI lists 53 skills, abilities, and other student accomplishments, and gives you the opportunity to rate the importance of each of them for your introductory course.

Once you have information from the TGI, you should construct your course to meet your goals. For example, if you think it is





important for your students to develop critical thinking skills, you will probably plan a course that gives them the opportunity to critique and debate the validity of research results or use critical thinking in evaluating “psychological claims” in the popular media. If you value collaborative learning skills, you will most likely have students work in teams to summarize research articles, solve course-related problems, or carry out other projects. And if you simply want to assure that students can define the terms and identify the concepts presented in the course, you will probably create exams and class activities that test these skills.

You must also take into account the role your course plays in your department and on your campus. Most introductory courses are a prerequisite for all other psychology courses. Knowing what your department, or college, expects students to know when they finish your course will help you decide what material to cover (and not cover), and what level of detail is appropriate. Are students expected to leave your course with a detailed knowledge of particular units, with a general appreciation of the major themes in psychology, with improved skills at problem solving, critical thinking, writing, studying, or what?

Keep in mind that it is not enough just to develop course goals or objectives; we also need to “emphasize the course objectives and show the student how the material taught serves to achieve these objectives. In this way students will know from the beginning what they are supposed to learn” (Wolfe, 1942, p. 692).

## How Do I Teach?

### Teaching techniques

The role of the teacher has changed in introductory psychology, as well as in education in general. Although it may sound trite, the idea that the teacher is no longer the “sage on the stage” but is now a “guide on the side” is a good way of summing up the changes. Lecturing is no longer enough. And it probably never was. Nearly a century ago, Carl Seashore (1910) talked about problems of using only the lecture method.

There are three common sources of error in a teacher’s evaluation of the lecture method: (1) the warmth which the lecturer feels over having made things clear; (2) the pleasure in freedom of expression





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and in hearing himself, and (3) the failure to note that he has done the thinking so well that the student gladly accepts his ready made portion without thinking. In the elementary course in psychology the mere information lecture should be tabooed. (Seashore, 1910, p. 86)

Seashore went on to urge instructors to use what we call today active learning. “Keep the student doing things, instead of merely listening, reading, or seeing them done . . . Even if he is to be entertained in the course, let it be most frequently by his own activity” (1910, p. 83). He went on to advocate the use of “the class experiment,” specifying that every student should have an active and responsible part and that “each step of the experiment shall be explained and interpreted in print” (p. 87). Over 50 years later, Walker and McKeachie (1967) provided practical guidelines to encourage students to become active participants. These included setting the expectation for student participation during the first meeting of the course, explaining why student involvement is important, continuing efforts to encourage discussion throughout the semester, calling students by name, and rewarding student participation.

Today, there is much emphasis on all types of active learning, techniques that keep learners involved with their own learning and not as passive recipients of information (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; see also Bonwell’s Active Learning Web Site\*). I agree with this approach. Consequently, this book contains many classroom demonstrations and experiments to help students understand a concept by actually experiencing it in some way.

Seashore also mentioned the discussion method, noting that:

With the teacher who has the genius to handle it, this is one of the most effective methods of teaching classes of not more than twenty-five; but with the average teacher and the average class, it often becomes a waste of time—an abuse of privilege. An undeserved opprobrium [sic] rests upon this method, because instructors who lack resourcefulness usually fall back upon it. Incidental discussion should be strongly encouraged. (Seashore, 1910, p. 88)

(I had to look up opprobrium, too. According to the Oxford English Dictionary it means, “An occasion, object, or cause of reproach, criticism, shame, or disgrace; shameful or disgraceful conduct. Now *rare*.”) To help you avoid opprobrium, this book provides a list of stimulus questions, devised to help you start a successful discussion in your class.





In reality, most instructors incorporate an eclectic mix of teaching strategies, including lecture, some discussion, brief writing opportunities, and classroom demonstrations. Integrating these various methods with each topic in the introductory course takes some practice, and one of the goals of this book is to help you choose the appropriate activity for the appropriate topic.

#### Teaching outside your major area

Teaching introductory psychology means we are teaching out of our specialty area most of the time. Because of this, the first time that you teach introductory psychology, you may feel a little anxious. However, once you have experience teaching the course, you likely will find that teaching material with which you are less familiar is almost easier than teaching material from your area of expertise. This is because we are often tempted to provide more details and research on topics we know very well—which often minimizes the time we have to teach other topics. Moreover, we have difficulty with the “compromises” in our field, and we want students to understand the complexities of the material.

To alleviate some of your anxiety, I have provided background resources for all of the course topics. Thus, if you are teaching in an unfamiliar area, you should be able to use those resources to gain an understanding of the material and to make a decision about the topics you will want to include in your course.

#### A word about teaching technology

What technology to use, and when and how to use it, should be individual teaching decisions. As an old-fashioned teacher who “grew up as a teacher” using the blackboard and overhead, I have not converted to using PowerPoint, although most of the graduate students and new faculty teaching with me do so. For me, the advantages of using Power Point presentations are outweighed by the advantages of using the blackboard. I use the blackboard to slow myself down (I’m a fast talker and the students are taking notes) and to maintain maximum flexibility with regard to content and order of content that I present in class. I’ve seen excellent teaching with PowerPoint slides, and I’ve seen awful teaching with PowerPoint slides. There is a tendency for those using PowerPoint to move so incredibly quickly that students have trouble both listening and taking





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notes. And I've seen far too many teachers use the "as is" PowerPoint presentations that accompany a textbook without modification to reflect their goals and ideas.

Nevertheless, I do believe that technology has greatly aided teaching. I cannot imagine talking about the brain and its structures without showing an overhead (with matching handouts for the students) of the brain and its divisions. When I show my students a video clip of schizophrenic patients being interviewed, they develop a deeper understanding of schizophrenia than they would have by merely reading about the disorder in the textbook. Perceptual processes make more sense when you actually see the illusions. Ultimately, technology has to help you be a better teacher—it cannot be the teacher. Technology should enhance the learning experience, not dictate the learning experience. So choose the technology that makes you a good teacher—and make it a conscious choice, not a default.

### Characteristics of effective teachers

The success of an introductory psychology course depends partly on teaching techniques but also on the personal characteristics and classroom behavior of the teacher. When a group of National Merit Scholars were polled about the characteristics of instructors who contributed most to their desire to learn, they listed the following characteristics: allowing time for class discussion, modifying course content to meet students' needs and interests, treating students as colleagues, and taking a personal interest in students (Walker & McKeachie, 1967). Research seems to verify that. Harry Murray's (1997) meta-analysis of research on the relation between teaching and student outcomes found three aspects of teacher behavior that were positively correlated with student learning: enthusiasm, clarity, and the ability to have good rapport with students. Perhaps Peter Seldin's summary of the characteristics of effective instructors is most apt.

Treating students with respect; providing the relevance of information to be learned; using active, hands-on student learning; varying instructional methods; providing frequent feedback to students on their performance; offering real-world, practical examples; drawing inferences from models and using analogies; providing clear expectations for assignments; creating a class environment which is comfortable for students; communicating to the level of their students; presenting





themselves in a class as “real people”; using feedback from students and others to assess and improve their teaching; reflecting on their own classroom performance in order to improve it. (Seldin, 1997, p. 3)

I want to end this section with some words of wisdom for introductory psychology instructors given by two psychologists in 1934.

The student has a tendency to reflect the attitude of the teacher in any course. If the teacher is vibrant with genuine enthusiasm the student bids fair to share this enthusiasm. If the teacher fails to grasp the vital elements in his subject he cannot impart vitality to his students. . . . The introductory course in psychology will become vital to the student in proportion to the vitality which the instructor himself discovers in the course. (Winter, 1934, p. 258)

and

The instructor’s understanding of his own behavior is a *sine qua non* of successful teaching in any field. For example no student interest is possible where the instructor indulges in certain forms of sadistic control. No class discussion is likely where the teacher does not encourage freedom of expression. Regularity of preparation can not be expected where the instructor’s own presentation is unsystematic or disjointed. . . . And how can notebook work, tests, and attendance be generally satisfactory where the student is not led to perceive the objectives of the course? (Krout, 1934, p. 257)

I truly believe that teaching introductory psychology can be invigorating for us as instructors. As Wilbert McKeachie so eloquently put it:

When you are teaching Introductory, almost everything that you read is relevant. I get a wide variety of journals, and when I’m teaching Introductory, every journal seems to offer me ideas to bring into class. It’s a great thing for one’s own education. (Halonen, 1992, p. 236)

### Who Are Your Introductory Psychology Students?

Walker and McKeachie (1967) answered this question when they stated, “I think it is fair to say that for most of us, your students are virtually every student in college” (p. 2). In addition, Scheirer and Rogers (1985) stated:





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A better feeling for the size of the introductory course can be obtained by considering that about 27% of all full-time students (18% of all full-time and part-time students) take introductory psychology in any given year. Multiplying this figure across four years, it is clear that a vast majority of the students at any given institution take the introductory course. (p. 13)

According to Miller and Gentile (1998) a “conservative estimate suggests that over one million students take introductory psychology every year in North America” (p. 90).

Although, decades ago, students in psychology mirrored students in higher education in general, being male and upper-class, almost from the very beginning, psychology attracted students from many different backgrounds and interests (Morawski, 1992).

Students’ motivation for attending college has changed, as well. For many decades, students went to college primarily to gain knowledge. Today most students attend college to gain the qualifications for a particular job (Astin, Parrott, Korn, & Sax, 1997). Wilbert McKeachie lamented this trend in an interview, noting that

it is disturbing that students are so grade oriented and job oriented, materialistic, which I attribute to the state of the economy. It is realistic that when jobs are scarce, people are more concerned about what is needed in order to get a good job. I’m not, in a sense, critical of them, but it does make it more difficult in teaching where you are trying to get students interested in learning for its own sake and they say, “Is this going to be on the test?” (Halonen, 1992, p. 234)

Nevertheless, I believe that introductory students are still the most fun to teach. At my institution, the Fall semester enrollment is almost 80% first semester students, and I love teaching these people, many of whom are new to the university and new to our curriculum. Or as McKeachie said, “psychology is fresh and new to them . . . And I like freshmen. They aren’t jaded” (Halonen, 1992, p. 236).

Statistically speaking, you would likely find great diversity among students taking the introductory psychology course. Most are not psychology majors, nor will they become psychology majors. In 1946, Buxton estimated that 5–8% of the students enrolled in the course were psychology majors, a percentage that is probably about the same today. Many students will take only one course in psychology and thus that course has to be





a coherent experience... [and] cannot depend for their meaning on later course work in psychology. For many students there are no future courses to build on the early foundations, and there are no later epiphanies to transform bewildering experiences into visions. (Kulik, 1973, p. 16)

Although many students are taking introductory psychology because it is a required course in their curriculum, it is important not to jump to conclusions. Take the time to learn about the students enrolled in your course. Don't assume that they don't care about the subject or are unmotivated to learn it just because it is required (Zakrajsek 2004). Remember that your expectations can become self-fulfilling prophecies, so don't let negative assumptions lead you to presume that students lack interest. The enthusiasm of a teacher of introductory psychology who obviously loves and cares about the discipline and about teaching it well can infect even nonmajors.

When teaching the introductory psychology course, you will encounter students who represent a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, abilities and disabilities, interests, motivations, and expectations. Some will be diffident and frightened; others will be overconfident and unrealistically optimistic. Whether they are full-time or part-time students, many will be trying to fulfill academic obligations while dealing with a job, financial pressures, family responsibilities, relationship problems, and other stressors. Preparing to deal with the diversity of today's students is one dimension of the task you will eventually face as a psychology instructor (Goss Lucas & Bernstein, 2005).

## Using This Book

The goals of this book are twofold: to help first-time introductory psychology instructors teach the course well and to provide new resources, information, and ideas for those who have been teaching the course for many years.

I designed the first chapter to introduce you to the special challenges you will encounter as a teacher of introductory psychology. The second chapter will address general teaching issues such as organizing the course, syllabus construction, classroom management issues, evaluation within the course, and the importance of the first day of each class. The final chapter is devoted to helping you reflect





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on your teaching, end your course well, and provide guidance for any course revisions you may decide to make.

The remaining chapters are devoted to providing you with outlines of course material that is typically taught in introductory psychology and providing you with the resources to prepare and teach well. My hope is that you will be able to pick any topic in general psychology, locate it within this book, and find the resources I provide helpful in preparing to teach it effectively. Thus each chapter has a standard organization.

Chapters 3–13 are organized in the following way: (a) an introduction to the unit, pointing out special concerns or overriding issues; (b) my personal outline for each unit; (c) topics that are typically included in the unit(s) taught; (d) suggestions for ways to organize the concepts; (e) topics that students may find difficult; (f) other important topics to cover; (g) stimulus questions designed to “hook” students on a topic; (h) classroom learning activities that help to illustrate the concepts; (i) possible mini-assignment; and (j) handouts. By using this “outline” organization for each chapter, I hope you will find more information and less verbiage.

### Getting started

*Introduction and important issues in this unit.* In this section, I identify some issues that are unique to a particular unit so you can think through these issues. For example, in the biological psychology unit, I note that many students have a difficult time seeing the relevance of the unit, and I provide some suggestions for making the unit more interesting and active.

*My outline for teaching (# days).* These include day-by-day outlines for teaching the material. These outlines are the result of my attempts to maximally organize the material and to structure information so that students can see the connection between topics and concepts. Note, however, that these outlines are constantly evolving and changing to keep pace with changes in content and with changes in student interests. Also note that the times allowed for each topic are approximate and will vary based on your interest in the topic and the number of students in your class. I also discuss where in the course I include a particular unit of information I am describing. Again, this order will vary based on your preferences. In my outlines,



I often refer to mini-assignments that will be listed towards the end of the chapter. In some outlines I also include an item I call “summer reading.” This refers to books or articles that pertain to the topic we will be discussing that day and that I believe are accessible to the students. I tell my students that I call it “summer reading” because there is so much reading that I *have* to do, I seldom have time to read the things I *want* to read until the summer. And I encourage them to note the resource if it is a topic in which they are interested.

*My transitions.* This explains my reasoning for the placement of the content into the structure of the course. In this section, I talk about why I chose to teach the content at this point in the course. I also provide segues from the previous content and to the next content.

*Topics typically included in this unit.* This is an encyclopedic listing of topics that *could* be included in this unit. I have tried to be as inclusive as possible—noting that instructors differ in their emphases and orientation. However, this is *not* a list of all topics that you *must* present. There is no realistic way to teach all of these topics. You should review the topics listed and decide which topics to include in your course. The topics that you choose to present will be influenced by the textbook you use, whether you are teaching as part of a multisection course, or the dictates of your institution.

*Some options for organizing the concepts.* In this section I discuss different ways to organize the material. Thus one way of teaching a particular unit might be by a timeline (development, for example), whereas another might be by approach to the content.

### Teaching the content

*Topics that many students will find difficult.* I’ve tried to help you identify the topics with which many students will struggle. I’ve also identified resources to help you teach those topics more effectively. My philosophy is to use class time to teach the concepts that students tend to find the most difficult. Thus I often concentrate on these topics, knowing that the textbook will help students learn other, less challenging, material.





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*Other important topics.* There are other important topics that most students will not find difficult. I also identify resources to help you teach this material.

### Classroom tips

*Stimulus questions for discussion.* These questions will help you begin a classroom discussion on a relevant topic. You can use these questions in many different ways. You can just ask them during the class period in which you will cover this material, or you could prime your students for discussion by posing the questions at the class session prior to the discussion. In either case, you can have students write their thoughts about these questions. I have found that students are more likely to participate in a discussion if they have had time to think about the question and have something in writing to which they can refer.

*Some suggested classroom learning activities.* As I stated previously, active learning is important for students to take “ownership” of their own learning. I have suggested classroom demonstrations and experiments to help students understand and apply the important concepts in each unit. Although I have provided an estimate of how long each activity will take, the actual amount of time will vary based on your class size and the way you conduct the activity. (Note that the ^ symbol means that a printable version of this activity is available at the web site. And the \* symbol means that the URL is available at the web site.)

*Possible mini-assignments (written or groups).* Writing is another essential means through which students can demonstrate their grasp of the material. I like to use mini-assignments that take only a few minutes to grade or comment on. I provide five mini-assignments that might be useful. Because some of these writing assignments actually work well as a group project, I often provide directions for both individual and group work.

*Handouts* For some units, I provide handouts that my teaching colleagues or I have developed. We use these handouts to help students understand and organize course material.





### Additional suggested resources for instructors

These are additional resources that I have found helpful in my course preparation. You won't necessarily need or want to use all of these resources, but if you feel a "weakness" in a particular area, they should help you to be better prepared.

### In Summary

I think Buxton (1946) may have gotten it right when he said, "also be warned that teaching introductory psychology is a job which calls for compromises of many kinds plus a surprising amount of high-grade clerical work" (p. 303). Aside from the "clerical work," Buxton was correct in stating that teaching introductory psychology involves compromise. We are charged with teaching the basic concepts of the entire field in the introductory course. Unfortunately, it is impossible to include the nuances of every subject. Moreover, because of time constraints, we often have to present prototypes of concepts. And we have to pick and choose the content (as did our predecessors) to present. As a fellow introductory psychology instructor once remarked to me, "Teaching introductory psychology involves a series of white lies." We have to get the basics clear—and we can't dwell on the particulars.

It is my hope that this book will provide the resources and guidelines that will help you develop the type of introductory course that meets your course objectives. By providing a list of potential topics, I hope that you will be able to choose wisely the concepts you teach. By providing many different active learning activities, I hope that you will feel comfortable using such techniques.

I would love to hear from you—both how you were able to use the book and what you wished the book included, but didn't. You can email me at [gossluca@uiuc.edu](mailto:gossluca@uiuc.edu).

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