Designing Courses Backwards
A "Forward-Looking" Approach to Effective Teaching!

You've got your calendar in one hand and your content in the other... you are ready to design your course! "What will I cover?"
But wait...that is forward thinking... and the most successful courses are designed backward. "What should they learn?" Or even more boldly, what should they remember next quarter, or next year?

Step 1: Consider your own rationale for teaching this class. What is important to you about the material? About the way you plan to teach the material? About how the students interact with the content?

Step 2: Skip directly to the end of the course. Distill five (or fewer!) major learning outcomes. (If this number is too small for comfort, you can add more later if you really must... but stick with 5 or less now... this is the way to get to the underlying, often unifying, themes of your course.) Think broadly about these outcomes... content or foundational knowledge is but one broad category in which you might have specific goals. For other ideas, turn to the back of this page!

Step 3: Work Backwards. What skills will demonstrate achievement of the learning goals? What content is required to support those skills?

Why bother? Some of the best payoffs include:
- The outcome goals will be threaded throughout the course. They provide unifying themes and context for the material you cover.
- These choices define the skills embedded in homework, projects, exams, etc. Students who have met the learning goals will be able to do what? Student work becomes more obviously relevant to the topic, exam questions or projects become more authentic.
- This process helps distill the huge content "problem." Cutting content is always painful, but we know we have to do it... working backwards establishes priorities.
CTL Course Design Worksheet
Thinking about Your Course Goals

The following questions will help you figure out what you want your students to know and be able to do at the end of your course.

1. What are the most important concepts (ideas, methods, theories, approaches, perspectives, and other broad themes of your field, etc.) that students should be able to understand, identify, or define at the end of your course? What would constitute a firm understanding, a good identification, etc., and how would you assess this?

What lower-level facts or information would students need to have mastered and retained as part of their larger conceptual structure of the material?

What questions should your students be able to answer at the end of the course?

2. What are the most important skills that students should develop and be able to apply in and after your course (quantitative analyses, problem-solving, close reading, analytical writing, critical thinking, asking questions, knowing how to learn, etc.)? How will you help the students build these skills and how will you help them test their mastery of these skills?

3. Do you have any affective goals for the course, such as students developing a love for the field?