

## Why Handouts?

Sometimes it's good to take stock of a common educational practice. Why use handouts?

**Teaching Objectives.** Handouts can be used to convey daily lecture or larger unit or chapter goals to students. Do not underestimate the importance of identifying for students what it is you expect them to know and be able to do.

**Information.** Handouts can accomplish three purposes related to information. You use them to ensure that all students share the same basic background on which you intended to build new, related, or more complex content. Second, handouts can be used to save time, containing content you don't have to present, and that leaves time for students to ask questions or for you to explore how well they are understanding. Handouts can relieve some of the tension students often feel when presented with large amounts of new information. With some of the key ideas, terms, equations, graphs, whatever on the handout, students don't have to get everything in their notes.

**Lecture Guide.** These are the handouts that guide students through difficult lecture material or help when the lecture may not be structured as clearly as it could be. Lecture outlines let students see the whole structure of the lecture and relieve them from having to figure out for themselves how one idea relates to another. How much detail? Think in terms of a skeleton outline; one with blank spaces, maybe sentences to complete or questions to answer.

**To Save Note-Taking.** Maybe some situations (like a field trip, or participation in a group activity) make it difficult for students to take notes. Handouts may be created or distributed after the fact, like some notes summarizing a discussion that occurred during the previous period. Think also of diagrammatic handouts in which students are given illustrations, possibly tables or graphs, so that these need not be laboriously replicated from your drawings or overheads.

**To Stimulate Thought.** Handouts containing questions, tests, or theoretical issues are useful to stimulate thought. To gain any benefit, though, students must use the questions and/or debate the issues on their own or with others.

**To Guide and Stimulate Reading.** Sometimes these handouts are reading lists; other times they give guidance as to the relative importance of a collection of readings. In still other circumstances, they assist with an individual reading assignment. Handouts with questions about individual readings can help draw student attention to important points within the reading. Some may object that handouts like these "spoonfeed" students. But if the spoon feeding teaches students that reading nourishes their performance in class, perhaps these handouts can be designed so that they serve some developmental purpose.

Based on an article from the book, *What's the Use of Lectures* by Donald Bligh, in *The Teaching Professor*, November, 1998.