The Best Student in Class

Not long ago, listening to a student who was caught in the midst of Stage Three frustration and angst, I had a sudden brainstorm when she said, "I'm such a lousy student. I'm never going to get this stuff!"

The truth was, she *wasn't* a lousy student. In actual and sober fact, she was the best student in the class.

What's the student's job?

Put in the simplest possible terms, the student's job is to learn. The students who learn the most are the best students. The ones who come to class already knowing, who don't have room to grow and change – they might be pleasant people and enjoyable to be around, and we might love having them in class because they are easy to work with, and we might enjoy seeing their beautiful targets, but they aren't learning much. By this measure, the best students are often the most challenging and sometimes the most frustrated – because the best students are the ones who *learn.*

It was in this sense that my struggling student was the best student in class that day. Even though she was frustrated with her shooting at that moment, her skill with the gun had progressed significantly from the beginning of the day. More than that, she had eagerly absorbed lecture material and actively participated in class discussions, adding her voice to the conversation in an appropriate way. Her insightful questions had sparked good questions from other students and had kicked off a lively conversation about what it means to stay safe in a dangerous world. A few minutes after that conversation, she experienced that wonderful moment when her physical skills finally began to come together, so that by the end of the day she expressed a great deal of confidence in her gunhandling and shooting. "Now I know how to shoot more accurately, how to manipulate my gun, and what I need to practice more," she told me at the end of the day. "I feel like I finally know how to do what I want to do with the gun and how to get better from here. This is huge!"

Indeed it was.

Students who come to class prepared to learn are a joy to teach. Even when they have a long way to go and are challenging because they don't yet know how to do the things we show them, well-prepared students make our jobs much easier to do and more rewarding in a thousand different ways. Seeing that kind of progress in an eager student makes up for a lot of hard work and long days.

How can we improve the odds that each of our students will become that kind of learner, the one who grabs on with passion to grow and become stronger, who eagerly listens and follows our coaching, who never distracts or derails class discussions but instead contributes to the learning experience for themselves and others? What can we do to help each student become the best student in class?

Let's start by exploring the characteristics of a good student. Once we have a clear picture of what a good student does, we may have a better idea of how we can help them do it.

Portrait of a good student

A good student is an active learner, not just a passive absorber. Good students come to class for the purpose of learning, not for any other reason, and they focus on improving their skills while they are there. A good student:

- Signs up for the right class – one that fits their skill level and experience.
- Prepares appropriately beforehand.
- Shows up on time or a few minutes early.
- Brings with them everything they will need: functional gear, the right amount of ammunition, lunch and beverages, and personal comfort items such as sunscreen or lip balm.
- Wears range- and weather-appropriate clothing.
- Displays a commitment to safety on and off the range.
- Stays alert throughout the day.
- Listens carefully to instructions.
- Takes notes when appropriate.
- Asks relevant questions.
- Stays entirely present throughout the entire class.
- Actively engages with the material.
- Comes with an open mind, prepared to hear new ideas and learn new ways of doing things, expecting to be exposed to things they don't already know.
- Works hard.
- Tries to do as coached (or challenges the coaching appropriately, for safety and/or a clearer understanding).
- Doesn't derail the class with ego, clowning around, bragging, goofy behavior, sucking up, or showing off.

From our very first contact with each student, we can help them become the type of learner we want to see in class: well-prepared, engaged, eager to expand their understanding and skillsets. Because our students are adults, the final steps will always be up to them. But there are many things we can do to help them along the way.

Pre-class communication

To make sure that every student who signs up has chosen an appropriate class that fits their current skill levels and needs, we can provide clear course descriptions in as much detail as seems reasonably possible. What should students come to class already knowing how to do? How familiar should they be with their firearms and other gear? Are you going to teach them to use a holster, or should they already have a well-developed drawstroke before they get to you? The answers to these questions and more should show up in all course descriptions, and the course description should be easy for prospective students to find.

More than that, if you expect your students to arrive with an existing skillset, will it matter to you if they come into class doing that skill "wrong" even though they have diligently practiced it beforehand and feel confident in the way they're doing it? Using the drawstroke as an example: If you teach a 4-count draw, will you be unhappy if some students use a different technique during your class? If this will matter to you, say so in your course description. When your advanced classes build on specific techniques you teach in earlier classes, then instead of simply telling students that they should be able to use a holster before class, you might list a prerequisite that include taking that earlier class directly from you. That way, all students will come to the advanced class not just able to draw from the holster, but able to draw from the holster *your way,* using the technique you most prefer to build upon. If the class is built on the idea that well-prepared students have already mastered specific techniques and not just generalized skills, it's probably unfair to list only the general skillsets on the course requirements. Set your students up for success by providing extremely clear descriptions of what they should know how to do before they sign up for the class.

When I teach lower-level classes, I generally do not want students to practice much before the class. Although the old saying tells us that practice makes perfect, that's not actually true. What is true: *practice makes permanent.* If the student practices doing something wrong 3,428 times, guess what? On their 3,429th time, they are going to do the wrong thing. There are a lot of old guys out there who have literally spent years practicing an inefficient reload or a dangerous holstering method, and who first have to erase the habits they've built up over many years before they can learn better shooting techniques and safer gun handling skills. We can work with those guys (and we do!) but oh, how much easier it is for both them and us when new students come to class as a clean slate, without those deeply-embedded bad habits. So when an eager new student asks me what they can do to prepare for class, I tell them to go over their gear beforehand so they are familiar with it, but avoid practice until we've met in person.

> "Good habits well learned stay with us for years. Bad habits seem to stay forever." – Bill Jordan

This dynamic changes in more advanced classes, especially those that require students to have mastered a specific set of techniques before the class even starts. For classes of that type, it's a good idea to give students an idea of what they should practice beforehand. If you will expect your students to pass a shooting test on the first day of class, the course description should include that course of fire so students can practice it ahead of time. If during the class your students will need to pass several different standards that test a variety of skills, make sure they know it – and make sure they also know which skillsets will most affect their ability to pass the standards. Set them up for success by telling them what they should practice before class.

Getting out to the range to work on specific skills before class does help students wring out the gear they will bring. This has obvious advantages for both them and us. There are few things more frustrating on the first day of class than trying to sort out a group of students who all have ridiculous gear problems – belts that don't fit the students, holsters that don't fit the gun or that are wildly unsafe in use, magazines without either pouches or pockets to hold them. (And let us not speak of students who come to class with a bone-dry, brand-new gun that has literally never been out of its box and will not run until someone applies the oil the student didn't bring and doesn't know the gun will need.) This challenge may be more acute at the lower levels, but advanced students sometimes fall prey to it as well. Call it an overconfidence thing. This is another place where a good course description or pre-class brief can help students understand what they need to do before class begins.

To help students arrive on time, make sure your pre-class communication includes both a map and clear instructions for what to do once they arrive at the facility. Remember that even repeat students aren't necessarily familiar with the range set up. Telling students to meet "in the clubhouse" is good; telling them to meet "in the clubhouse – that's the big tan building you will see to the right of the entrance as you pull in" is much better. If the range allows, you might post temporary signs with your company name, the name of the class, and an arrow pointing the right direction. There are few things more "fun" than trying to chase down a clump of wayward students who are wandering around a large facility when both you and they would rather be shooting.

If you will expect students to fill out paperwork before class begins, it's helpful to say so in the pre-class message: "Class starts promptly at 9 am. Please arrive a few minutes early so you will be able to complete your paperwork before we begin." This wording also helps them realize that "9 am" isn't a vague suggestion for when they should start wandering in if they feel like it; it's the time the class *will* start.

To help students arrive with everything they need, your pre-class message should include a very clear list of things they should bring with them. If you make a distinction between items that are absolutely needed for

the class from those that are simply nice to have, students will take the required-equipment list much more seriously – and so will you.

It's surprisingly easy to let the required-equipment list get out of control. If students should bring three magazines to class, we think, maybe six would be even better. That might be our preference, but is it *truly* the minimum number of magazines the student will need in order to complete the class? Will students actually need knee and elbow pads throughout your course of fire, or is that just a potential wish they might have at some point during the day? Do they honestly need a dummy gun, or will it only be easier for you if they bring one? As you compile your required-equipment list, think hard about what you're really asking of your prospective students. Many of them stretch their budgets to get into class, and then stretch a bit more to cover added expenses such as travel, babysitting or petsitting expenses, and time off work. When we add unnecessary cost to buy gear they don't strictly need, that can price many students out of training altogether.

Whether or not the students can afford it, they're likely to be offended at the waste of their resources when – following your instructions – they purchase gear they didn't need after all. Furthermore, given the number of gun owners who live with unenthusiastic, non-gun spouses, even those who can easily cover the financial costs might have to pay a high toll in relationship costs when they buy unneeded gear.

For various reasons, sometimes people who can't swing everything on a big list simply don't purchase everything that's on it. They shorten the list themselves, without knowing which items can safely be cut and which ones are truly essential. If students with limited resources must do without some things, having a two-part list that clearly identifies which items are *actually required* and which are just *nice to have* helps them prioritize their pre-class purchases.

This sense of proportion matters just as much when it comes to round counts. Before the Great Ammunition Drought of 2012 and the aftershocks that followed it, it was common for instructors to overstate and sometimes highly inflate the anticipated round count for their courses. Students would sometimes even judge the value of a class by how many rounds they would toss downrange, not understanding that the quality of the instruction they received before and after each shot would be a much better way to measure the course's worth. (Of course, the best measurement of all would be the degree to which each student's skill level improved by the end of class, but that's crazy talk right there.) For the most part, those days are past. Students now appreciate an accurate, non-inflated round count and it's worthwhile to work hard to give it to them.

A solid outline really helps here, by the way. You don't have to write out every single drill that you're going to do with your students in detail – it's *good* to flex around the needs of each group as you work with them – but it's definitely helpful to have an overall idea of how the class will flow and how much effort you're

willing to invest in each part of it. The more accurate your round count, the more your students will appreciate your honesty and respect for their investment in your class. This, in turn, helps them be fully invested in your material when they arrive.

> "The maximum effective range of an excuse is zero meters." – Claude Werner

One more word about how to help students prepare well for class: no matter which type of range you primarily use when you teach (indoor or outdoor), you will sometimes have students who have not used that type of range before. As you're thinking about the information you will include on your pre-class briefs, remember that students who haven't stood ankle-deep in squishy clay may not know that they should wear boots rather than tennis shoes to class when the weather forecast calls for rain. Students who usually shoot on outdoor ranges may not realize that not all indoor ranges have excellent heating, and so come unprepared to deal with freezing weather on an indoor range. On either type of range, naïve students may not know that they should wear a shirt that has a collar high enough to prevent stray brass from falling inside, or that closed-toe shoes are definitely a good idea for the same basic reason. We can help students avoid being distracted with discomfort by helping them understand what they need to bring in order to stay comfortable.

By providing students with clear expectations for how the class will go, accurate maps and directions what to do upon arrival, and a rigorous list of essentials that avoids overstating the must-haves, we improve the chances that every student will be well-prepared to learn when we meet them in person.

Beginning the day

The goal is to help each student become an eager learner, the kind of student who can best benefit from the work we do with them. What can we do, right at the beginning of the day, to make this more likely?

First of all, if we want students who are committed to safety, we can take safety seriously ourselves. You'll find several chapters devoted to this in a later section of the book, but here let me point out the crucial importance of good modeling. If we don't want our students handling guns off the line unless they are using a designated safety area, then *we* don't handle guns anywhere except on the line or at the designated safety areas. No excuses! If we want our students to consciously remain aware of their muzzle directions at all times, then we let them see us consciously watching our own muzzles.[21]

An excellent safety brief that does *not* simply skim quickly past the things "everybody knows, right?" can do a world of good here, too. If you're casual about the safety brief, your students may give themselves permission to be casual about safety.

---

[21] This one's tricky; after you've handled guns for a certain number of years, it's easy to lapse into relaxed, good habits that don't *look* consciously aware. But in order for students to internalize safety, they need to see external models of safety in the people around them. So you may need to exaggerate your own safety protocols beyond what comes naturally to you at your own stage of growth.

Throughout the day

Good students stay alert throughout the day. They listen carefully to instructions and remain fully present at all times. They even take notes! How does this happen?

Again, we can encourage a lot of good behavior through strong modeling. If we want our students to stay completely engaged with the class, then it's good for *us* to stay completely, visibly engaged with the class. Few things are more annoying than a student who's more interested in what's happening on Facebook than they are in what's happening with the deadly weapons around them – unless it might be an instructor who's more interested in pimping their next class on social media than they are in talking to the students right in front of them. Stay fully engaged with your students to the best of your ability; after all, they did pay for your time and personal attention, and deserve to receive it.

It also helps to start the day with clear expectations. Somewhere during your first class discussion, explain your phone and picture policy to them. If you want them to take pictures and check messages only during breaks, say so – and tell them approximately how often class breaks will happen.[22] Then flex the exact timing of each break based on what you see happening in the class.

To help students stay alert throughout the day, consider the importance of hydration and blood sugar. Give them (and yourself) enough down time that they can easily stay hydrated, and *tell* them to grab a drink of water when you announce each break. Remember that dehydration can happen on cold, wet, windy days just as easily as it can on hot, dry ones. It's actually even more likely in cold weather, because when the weather is cool, many people don't feel an urge to drink until it's too late. To help students manage their blood sugar levels, you don't have to provide them with snacks (though it helps to have an emergency protein stash and a jar of roasted peanuts in the range bag can be a lifesaver). But you can note when students look wilted so you can provide appropriate breaks for them to refuel. Be more interested in responding to your students' alertness cues than you are in sticking to a strict timeline.

At this point, chances are that at least one reader is thinking that I sound like someone's mom. These are adult students we're talking about, yes. And yes, they are responsible for their own bodies. No argument here! But we are talking about keep *your* class safe and making *your* day more pleasant with students who are prepared to learn – and that will happen most easily when your students are mentally alert. By watching for, and responding to, cues that indicate your students' levels of alertness, you give yourself the gift of a class that has the ability to stay engaged with your material throughout the entire day.

[22] My usual range schedule includes solid breaks at mid-morning, lunch, and mid-afternoon (with many shorter reprieves to repair targets, use the restroom, and refill magazines). In the classroom, we take a ten-minute break every 50 minutes.

The bigger picture

The small practical matters above can help students come prepared to class, take the safety protocols seriously, and remain alert throughout the day. But they don't address the bigger issues: how can we help students fully engage with our material? How can we help them ask relevant questions or bring an open mind with them to class? How can we encourage them to follow our coaching, or to challenge what we suggest in appropriate, useful, constructive ways so that they can maintain their own safety and capture the best possible learning experience?

> "I would rather have questions that can't be answered than answers that can't be questioned."
> – Richard Feynman

It starts with setting the tone for the class, and then maintaining that tone throughout the day. From our very first contact with our students to the last, we should work to give them an understanding of what learning looks like and what it means to learn. Many students come to class with a fixed mindset, fearful of making mistakes or being seen as less than perfect in any way. This attitude may be common, but it gets in the way of learning. So it's our job as instructors to help students find and maintain a growth mindset. We must create an environment where it's acceptable to try hard things and sometimes do them badly, because making mistakes and changing as a result of those mistakes is an integral part of the learning process. People who do everything perfectly usually do so because they aren't pushing their own limits, aren't learning new things, aren't exploring new territory. It's easy to be perfect as long as we stay within the confines of stuff we already know – but that's no way to grow.

As far as speaking up in class, remember this: the heart of self-defense is learning to set and enforce your own boundaries. This means that students growing into a self-defense mindset must stand up for themselves and their own safety, and we should encourage that to happen even when it affects us personally as their instructors. To encourage this mindset, we must build a place that allows students to feel comfortable asking us tough questions, challenging what we teach, or even arguing with us at times. This is especially important when the students believe their own safety is on the line – as it always is when we handle deadly weapons or discuss self-defense skills. This may not always be comfortable for us, but it's vitally important for our students' growth into a solid defensive mindset.

> *Vulcan Master:* Do you wish to be taught?
> *Tuvok:* I would question everything you say.
> *Vulcan Master:* You would not be a worthy pupil otherwise.
> – Star Trek: Voyager

At the beginning of the day, it helps to be very explicit about what students can expect both from the class and from you as the instructor. Students may need to hear that in your class, they will be expected to ask questions and challenge things that don't make sense. They may need permission to disagree and they may need to be told, explicitly, that you are completely on board with them standing up for their own safety at any point during the entire program. They need to know that you will

reward them for taking their own safety seriously and will thank them for letting you know if there's anything that makes them feel unsafe. They need to know that you will completely support them as they look for ways to protect themselves from criminal violence, which means that you will support them asking questions about and even challenging what you say about anything related to self-defense. Follow up on this by making a private commitment that you will never squelch a student who asks a question about the usefulness of your techniques in life-threatening circumstances, or who brings up a concern about one of your safety protocols during the class.[23]

If you want students who take notes, it may be helpful to tell them so – and to occasionally pause, slow down, or spell a word during your lecture times, which gives the note-takers a chance to catch up and sends a signal to the non-note-takers that maybe they should write this down. It also helps to suggest that students may want to bring their notepads out to the range with them, so they can jot notes during your short presentations or on the breaks.

In my own classes, I've found that students usually respond quite well to hearing that they will be encouraged to try *new* things, and that I'd like them to give each new technique or new idea a fair chance to work, based on the checkmark shape of the learning slope. When we tell them directly that they will be trying new things, this helps them set their minds to be willing to try the unexpected when they encounter it. It improves the opportunities they have to bring an open, active mind to the learning process.

To keep students very involved with and responsive to your material, you'll want to encourage questions and reward those who ask them. To encourage questions, ask for them! At the beginning of each segment, tell students to jot down their questions so that you can talk about them at the end of your lecture. Leave enough time in your programs to handle questions adequately. Avoid the impression that you're just rushing through questions like a checkmark at the end of your own material. Let them know that their thoughts and the things they wonder about are important to you.

At the end of each teaching block, say something like: "Okay, so who has the first question for me?" Notice that the assumption here is that of course they have questions, and more than one question at that. The more common alternative ("Are there any questions?") implies that they probably don't have questions, which means your less assertive students will never get the courage to ask. So instead use words such as, "Who has the first question?" or "What questions did that material bring up for you?"

If students don't offer you a question immediately, ask yourself one to break the ice: "Okay, a lot of times when we talk about reloads, students want to know if they're supposed to be looking at the gun. Let's talk about that…" You can also bring your students into a more general conversation by asking a question for

[23] Never squelch students who ask relevant questions, period. But take special care with those working through safety related issues, because those issues hit most closely to self-defense.

them to answer: “Let’s explore some alternatives. Can someone tell me another way we might do a reload?” This helps get them in the habit of talking to you at the end of your presentations, and makes room for other questions to come out in a more natural way.

To encourage students to fully engage with our material and bring an open, active mind to the learning process, we can set the tone for the class at the beginning of the day by telling students that they will be expected to ask questions and challenge things that don’t make sense. We can encourage students to ask questions by framing our requests for them in a way that expects a positive response: “Who has the first question?” We can reward students who engage with the material by providing time and space to take notes and by treating all questions, comments, issues, and concerns with our full attention.