Summary of Answers to Frequently Asked Questions
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I’m here to teach physics. I like teaching physics. I also like teaching people how to do better at taking physics classes. I like watching the lights go on when insight strikes. I really like watching the satisfaction that comes from the extra effort which turns into excellent performance and good grades. However, there are things I don’t like. I don’t like talking to whining people who are unhappy with their grades, but haven’t done the work to earn good grades. I don’t like dealing with excuses that sound child-like, or are probably lies. I like it when I can treat students like adults and when I can I am happy to go above and beyond the call of duty to help. In this document I’ve tried to answer some of the most frequently asked questions students have had over the semesters. Please read it all. I’ll expect you to have read it when you come to ask questions; that’s what responsible adults do.

Typical questions and answers:

“Should I be taking this course?”

If you have strong algebra, trigonometry and calculus skills you are in great shape. How can you tell? If you can finish the math quizzes quickly and easily then you should be all set. However, many students in this class are grossly under-prepared mathematically and really struggle with them. If you don’t know how to differentiate and integrate, my advice to you is: DROP NOW (well… either that or get LOTS OF HELP). Just because you passed trigonometry, algebra and calculus does not mean you will do well. In this class it is ASSUMED that you are good at algebra and trigonometry. This doesn’t mean, “I took it and passed it.” It means that you can solve the problems easily. You can take this course and calculus concurrently, but I have to tell you that if you don’t have strong math skills you are going to really struggle. If you are struggling with the math in the first week or on the math quizzes, that’s a REALLY bad sign. You can try and catch up by spending a lot of time on the math quizzes. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a person struggle on the math quizzes and get an A, but I have seen them pass. If you aren’t going to be able to get through the math quizzes early in the semester, get help or save yourself the aggravation and drop now.

“I took calculus in high school. Is that good enough?”

It’s good enough to get INTO the course. However, the TAKING of calculus is irrelevant to how well you will do or whether you should be taking the course. The real question is: “Can you DO the calculus problems on the math quizzes?”
“What are the kinds of things I can do in this course to insure I get a good grade?”

This boils down to being a better “problem solver” which means doing better on the homework, exams, quizzes and labs. Do the following (most of these should be obvious):

1) Come to all the lectures and take/turn in all the exams, homework’s, quizzes and labs **on time**.
2) Read and understand the syllabus. Do the reading before lecture.
3) Do all the homework problems by yourself and only get help after you have really struggled for awhile (a half an hour per problem isn’t too much).
4) If you can’t work the problems after having diligently having tried by yourself, get help from TA’s, instructional hours, supplemental instruction sections, office hours, and/or friends. See my web page for links on these. Most of these are FREE!
5) Keep re-doing the homework problems until they are easy enough for you to do them quickly, correctly and without looking at any notes (but NOT from memory).
6) Do the same for the example problems in the text and from lecture.
7) Do the homework quizzes and mini-practice exams on WebCT.
8) Do extra problems at the back of the chapter which look similar to those on the homework.
9) Teach another student who is having trouble.

“Are there any pitfalls I should know about?”

1) **Doing well on the first exam:** Don’t be lulled into thinking you can coast now that you did well on the first exam. Many students can coast on their high school preparation for *a little while*, but it WILL catch up with you. I promise. This is especially true if you are re-taking the course.
2) **Doing well in Lab/Technical Writing:** Don’t be lulled into thinking that strong grades on homework/labs/quizzes will carry you. Almost everyone gets strong grades on labs, quizzes and homework’s. What matters most is how well you do on the exams.

One of the drawbacks of this course is that most of the points for the semester are at the end. The people who get the A’s and B’s are the ones who, after having done well on the first exam (and on the labs and quizzes), do well on the 2nd and 3rd exams and the final.
“I will miss a Lecture Quiz/Recitation Quiz/Lab for such-and-such good, verifiable reason on the following future date (examples: engineering common exam, job interview, jury duty, death or illness in the family, schedule surgery etc.). Is there anything I can do to make it up?”

I’m going to start with a bit of a tangent here, but bear with me. I can be very flexible on this kind of stuff. Understanding my philosophy will, I hope, answer most questions like this. It is:

“Act like an adult and I’ll treat you like an adult;
Act like a child and I’ll treat you like a child.”

Adults look for the way to do the right thing. They take responsibility for their actions and let people know as soon as they can, usually in advance, if there is a problem or conflict, and always come prepared to accept the consequences of their actions. Children look for ways to get out of things. They expect that they can always get a grown up to fix their messes and/or try to find a way to talk their way out of problems of their own doing. That being said, the answer is yes. Send me email in advance to toback@tamu.edu, and we’ll set up something. A warning: I haven’t met a student yet who has done well on a make-up exam.

“How am I doing in this class? How can I do better?”

Your grades are posted on WebCT. If you need to chat more, send an email and/or come to my office hours and we’ll talk. I’m always happy to give feedback since that helps students figure out how to learn better.

“I had a good verifiable emergency (family crisis, medical emergency etc.) So I missed a Lecture Quiz/Recitation Quiz/Lab. What can I do?”

Send me an email ASAP. Bring me an official letter of excuse. We’ll set up something. I’ll do my best to make it as easy as possible for you, I promise.

“My alarm didn’t go off (my car broke down etc.) and class/recitation/lab has already started. What should I do?”

Send email or call and leave a message on my voice mail (845-1179) ASAP (it’s much better if you do it before class ends). Then go to class no matter how late. Then come find me. Go to a different recitation/lab section if need be, then come find me and we’ll discuss it.
“I’ve missed some number of the Lecture Quizzes/Recitation Quizzes/Labs for no good verifiable reason. How can I make them up?”

You can make up one lab near the end of the semester. That’s it. A better question might be, “can we come up with some way so that I attend lecture/recitation/lab more regularly?”

“I did worse than I wanted to on the last quiz/exam/lab. Is there a make up?”

There are no make-ups for poor performance.

“I think I deserve more points on this exam question”

My policy is that I don’t discuss exams on the day they are handed back. You can come find me 24 hours later, after you’ve had time to think carefully about the grading. I urge you to be thoughtful about how you approach me. You better be sure you got the question right. A more adult like question would be “I can’t figure out what I did wrong on this problem. Can you help me understand what I did wrong so I can get it right on the final?” I’m always happy with those questions.

“When are the lecture quizzes?”

Most often they are right at the beginning of class, but not always.

“Can I come see you?”

Of course you can. My office hours are on the syllabus and by appointment.

“Where can I find a copy of the syllabus and/or other class materials?”

All can be found on my course web page, which is: http://faculty.physics.tamu.edu/toback/218/

“I’m getting a B in this course. Should I Q-drop it?”

I’m not in the business of advising students about dropping courses. See your academic advisor. I’m happy to talk about other related questions like “can you help me figure out why I’m not doing well in the course?” “Should I be physics major?”

“I’m failing. Should I Q-drop?”

You can come to talk to me about your likelihood of passing, but ultimately this is between you and your advisor.
“I have a scholarship and I need a certain grade to keep it.”

Mentioning a scholarship to a professor is almost always a bad idea when talking about grades. Doing so is usually extremely manipulative. It does a great job of angering professors. Your scholarship is irrelevant to the grade you earn; therefore it cannot have an effect on the grade you receive. In fact, most professors think that if you have a scholarship, and you bring it up as a reason you should get a better grade, then perhaps you don’t deserve the scholarship in the first place. Either that or you should be graded more harshly since you are already getting scholarship help. I’m not either type, but it is true I really don’t want to hear about it.

“It’s just after the final grades have been posted. I missed getting the letter grade I really wanted by only 1 point. I wanted to discuss with you getting it changed. I really need a A/B/C/D because of (insert any reason here...doesn’t matter what...it’s still irrelevant)”

I’m always willing to listen to emails that tell me that a problem was mis-graded or that grades were mis-entered. Please find the place where we didn’t properly give you the points you deserved and we’ll fix it. I’m eager to get those fixed right away and get you the grade you earned. However, you should know to be very careful here otherwise. This is when some students cross the line because they are upset or angry about final grades. I spend a great deal of time deciding where to set the grades. As I mentioned before, I won’t stand being manipulated and if you don’t like where I set the grade cutoffs, or you are on the border, I’m sorry. Do not ask for your numbers to be rounded up or ask for the thresholds to be stretched for you. I take any insinuation that I should do so as a personal affront. Again “needing” a certain grade is irrelevant and in my opinion should never be mentioned except when we are discussing this during the semester and trying to figure out how to get your performance to a point where you earn the grade you would like.

“I’m doing really well in this course and I was thinking of becoming physics major. What should I do?”

Sounds great! Come see me. We can talk about it. I’d be happy to get you started.

“I’m doing really well in this course, and I heard about some challenge exam where you can win money?”

Yes, there is a Physics 218 Challenge Exam at the end of the semester, and students who perform well on it can win money, textbooks and/or be named Mechanics Scholars. There will be a formal announcement at the end of the semester, but you can see my webpage for last semester’s announcement. Students in my class typically do much better than students in other sections since we work harder.

“I’ve got a really funny joke, picture or video you might like to show for class. What should I do with it?”

Send it to me via email as soon as possible.
A Few Student Case Studies:

1) Went to all the recitations and did all the homework problems and quizzes on time. Turned in all the labs on time. Worked the mini-practice exams as well as extra problems in the chapters until solving the homework problems became second nature. Result: A.

2) Was fastidious about turning in all their labs and going to all the recitations. Didn’t really finish all the homework problems until just before the final, and with help from a friend. Hoped that not really understanding how to do the “hard” homework problems wouldn’t hurt them too much since they “did everything” and had high lab/quiz grades. Result: C, but surprised they didn’t get a B.

3) Had a strong high school background. Had seen all the homework problems before so solving the homework problems was easy. Made sure they could do the problems, but blew off the “irrelevant stuff” such as turning in labs, and lecture quizzes. Result: Got a B, but could have gotten an A.

4) Had a good high school background and did most of the homework problems by themselves but had some others help them turn them in. Blew off “irrelevant” stuff and didn’t turn in a few labs. Result: C but could have gotten a B.

5) Had a good high school background, but wasn’t very strong in math. Made sure they turned in everything in on time, did the math quizzes early, and got extra help when they couldn’t figure out how to do a problem. Result: A.

6) Tried to memorize the formulas rather than understand how to use the concepts. Result: C

7) Got upset when they couldn’t “plug and chug” using numbers like they did in high school. Stayed upset, blamed professor …didn’t adapt. Result: C

8) Fastidious about labs and quizzes, worked hard to address serious high school math skill deficiencies. Result: B

9) Didn’t show up for all the exams. Blew off quizzes and didn’t turn in labs repeatedly. Worked really hard to fail. Result: F.

10) Didn’t really know what to expect on the first exam and did very poorly. Changed the way they studied and learned how to solve problems. Result: B.

11) Didn’t turn in four labs, took the make-up lab. Result: Incomplete.

12) Blew off the homework, but studied for the exams and did ok on them. Result: Incomplete.

13) Did an example of each problem once. Didn’t know how to deal with small changes in the example problems. After each exam was quoted as saying “I remember seeing each one of those problems before in class, but I didn’t really know how to solve them.” Result: C

14) Went to all the classes and recitations, but waited until the night before the exam to turn in the problems. Result: C

15) Was quoted by saying “I understand the concepts; I just can’t do the problems.” Result: C.