

## Transitioning to the Quarter System

If you are used to a semester-based university, coming to a quarter-based university presents some time-related challenges. This short article provides a few ideas for making the transition. Just to be clear, a quarter is comprised of 10 weeks of instruction followed by 1 week of final exams. By contrast, a semester is 15 weeks of instruction followed by 1 week of final exams.

Some benefits of quarters vs semesters are:

- They are less tiring because they're shorter.
- Because quarters are short, they are exciting and fun. It's like a sprint vs a 1500-meter.
- In a 2-quarter sequence, you can do just a little more than in a 1-semester course.
- If your class is going badly for some reason, it'll be over soon!
- Your colleagues at other universities are lamenting that classes start in the 3rd week of August and you still have 4 weeks of summer left.

Some disadvantages of quarters are:

- They're more expensive administratively.
- They end just as everyone is really getting into things.
- Although it seems like you should be able to cover 66% of the material you can cover in a semester, it's more like 50-55%, given the ramp-up and review time required.
- You have to write final exams and give final grades more often.
- Your colleagues elsewhere are talking about graduation and you still have 4 weeks of classes.

Many things you would do when preparing to teach at a new semester-based university are the same for a new quarter-based university: Ask for the department's previous syllabi for your classes. Ask if any course topics or learning outcomes are required. Check with other faculty in the department to see how many major projects, exams, etc., they assign and when those come in the quarter, so that you can be reasonably in line with them. Ask about the culture surrounding exams, assignments, etc. Ask all the questions concerning expectations and departmental policies that you would ask at any university. Get your time management strategies ready. All that's the same. What's different?

### Preparing Courses

Remind yourself often that you can realistically accomplish less than 2/3 of the content that a semester will contain. According to one very experienced faculty member who has taught a wide variety of classes in both quarters and semesters, counting on about 50% is better. You have to let go of about 50% of the content you were going to cover. You can cut down on either topics or depth, and the choice needs to depend upon your course learning outcomes.

You will need to consider the design of major assignments. If you have a good assignment that takes a semester, re-think how it can work in less than 2/3 the time, both for your students and for you. Don't cut the educationally effective activities such as giving feedback on drafts. Instead, reduce the number of issues the assignment covers. Or, change an aspect of the assignment; perhaps a concept map of the issues would make a good precursor assignment since creating concept maps takes less time than academic writing. Again, course learning outcomes are the best guide for these decisions.

I've suggested a lot of reliance on learning outcomes. If the course learning outcomes are not well-articulated, or seem wrong for a quarter, spend time on them. Creating excellent course learning outcomes is too big a topic for this short article, so check other resources, such as:

- "Self-Directed Guide to Course Design" at <http://www.deefinkandassociates.com/resources.html>
- "Backwards Course Design," at <http://spire.isl.unc.edu/files/Ed%20Neal.pdf>

- “Tools for Teaching” at <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/prepare.html>
- “Understanding by Design,” which is a book for K-12, but an excellent resource.

Remind yourself often of the 50% content guideline.

### **Starting early**

Because quarters are like sprints, everyone has to start fast. One of Cal Poly Pomona’s recent new faculty members suggests using the first three or four weeks of the quarter to get a jump on the rest of the quarter. During these weeks you will have less meetings and less assignments to grade. Use that time to write exams and do scholarly or creative work.

Encourage your students to start early too, especially if you have first-year students. Encourage them, and yourself, to begin work early and not procrastinate. One good tactic is to have students turn in something short by the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of class and get it back to them by the end of the week, sending the message that there’s no time to waste. Remind your students often of where they should be in their work for your class.

Good time management practices are even more important with the quarter system because the starts and ends come more often. There is less wiggle-room for procrastination of any degree. Some of my favorite time management resources are:

- “Getting Things Done,” by David Allen.
- “The Ph.D. of Productivity” at <http://www.meggjin.com/>.
- “Robert Boice’s Principles for Low-Stress Productivity” at [http://www.uky.edu/TASC/ED/boices\\_principles.php](http://www.uky.edu/TASC/ED/boices_principles.php).

### **Deciding what to do**

The new faculty member mentioned above also describes how hard it is to go from having a course release to having a full teaching schedule. If you have a course release in your first quarter, you will still feel overwhelmed because the tenure track is overwhelming – but when the course release disappears in the second quarter, you will feel absolutely drowned. Get ready for this.

Do not agree to a lot of responsibilities based on your time availability in a quarter that you have a course release. Use your first quarter course release to find your feet at Cal Poly Pomona. Find resources, cultivate relationships, look around, plan for the future, finish up work from your previous institution. Talk to your department chair and accept only limited service responsibilities the first quarter even if it seems like you should be able to do more. The responsibilities last all year, but the course release does not.

### **In conclusion**

I personally like quarters better. Semesters drag. Quarters are more challenging because they demand quicker responses, but I like the fun and excitement.

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