

General Teaching Suggestions

1. It can be extremely difficult to avoid musical vocabulary that your students don't yet know, especially when using it would allow you to express yourself much more efficiently. Meticulous lesson plans can help you suppress your reflexes.
2. Time yourself beforehand, keeping in mind that student input (both questions and answers) can slow you down significantly. It takes a *lot* of experience to estimate class time accurately.
3. Practice writing on the chalkboard in advance. Write fairly quickly (as you will have to in class), then step back and make sure your notation is legible from the back of the room. Also, be forewarned that writing music on the board can be surprisingly disorienting. (For instance, it's difficult to see parallel fifths when the voices are on opposite sides of your head.) If you become confused, simply take a few steps back from the board and things will begin to make sense again.
4. Set up the room in a way that suits you. Erase the board, leave chalk and erasers in strategic locations, rotate the piano, etc. Think about your likely movement around the room so that you don't trip over the piano bench, for instance.
5. Speak up! It's very unusual for students to find their teacher too loud, and it's common for beginning teachers to be too quiet.
6. Make a concerted effort to seem pleasantly energetic and cheerful. Your demeanor can significantly affect how much your students participate and how they interpret any offhand remarks. Consider the fact that the exact same words could convey either humor or criticism depending on the speaker's facial expression.
7. Make eye contact with students, and try not to focus just on one area of the room. You may need to walk to different points of the room so that students on the edges aren't left out.
8. Avoid facing away from the class while you talk. When you write on the chalkboard, make a conscious effort to turn around before speaking.
9. Be careful to use technical terms absolutely correctly; if students misuse terms, you need to correct them right away. Corrections can be overt ("Careful, you mean *root*, not *tonic*"), but sometimes it's better just to paraphrase a student's contribution in such a way that the correct vocabulary is reinforced ("Jim has noticed a significant problem: our chord is missing its *root* right now").
10. Never say "F" when you mean "F#," and don't let your students ignore sharps and flats, either. A student who spells casually will often, for instance, treat perfect fifths from diminished fifths in an equivalent manner — obviously with disastrous consequences for part-writing!
11. Students who smile and nod as you lecture do not necessarily understand what you are saying. The only way to be sure is to ask them questions.
12. When you ask a question, be sure to allow plenty of time for students to answer. If you panic after a few seconds of silence and answer your own question, students may get into the habit of not participating. Remember that silences feel much longer to you than to your students. (This shouldn't be a major issue during your model teaching, since your "students" already know the answers.)

13. Poor participation may indicate that your questions are too difficult or, paradoxically, too easy. Very easy questions can sound like some kind of a trick, or students may simply be a little embarrassed to answer them. Judiciously prefacing questions with remarks like “Let’s start with an easy question” or “We haven’t talked about this yet, so it’s okay to take an educated guess” can help a lot.
14. If a student asks a question that you plan to address in an upcoming class, it may be best to say, “Great question — we’ll begin with it tomorrow,” or “The short answer is yes, and the reasons will make a lot more sense on Friday.” This is a particularly good strategy if you are pressed for time, if the question would be impossible to answer without more background information, or if you don’t have sufficient experience to veer from your original lesson plans with confidence. On the other hand, an experienced teacher who isn’t pressed for time might welcome an opportunity to lead into the next topic smoothly and with student motivation.
15. Plan out your use of the chalkboard. If you will want to refer back to a diagram, place it in a location where you won’t need to erase it prematurely. Leave enough space around illustrations to add more detailed information later, if appropriate.
16. If you need to clear some space on the board midway through class, erase at least one section completely. Don’t leave partial words or exercises behind; they tend to be distracting. Squeezing extra information onto a full chalkboard is generally a bad idea, especially if the material isn’t directly related.
17. Try not to lose track of the chalk during class. It’s very easy to pick up a piece, unwittingly carry it over to the piano, put it down, and walk back to the board empty handed.
18. Be careful not to block anyone’s view of the board more than necessary. After writing something on the board, step to the side. Make sure that your gestures aren’t obscuring the very material you’re trying to point out. (This is particularly likely if you’re holding papers in your hand!)
19. Remember that when you gesture from left to right, your students see it from right to left. Thus, a motion that might be intended to convey a phrase moving toward a cadence might actually be suggesting backward motion. Try to train yourself to gesture with your audience in mind. (Obviously it takes some time for this to become automatic.)
20. Referring to notes is fine; reading from them is usually a very bad idea. Your notes can serve as a good reminder of the vocabulary you want to cover, the exercise you want to put on the board, and so on; if you need your notes to give you answers, however, you are not adequately in command of the material.
21. If your classroom has an upright piano oriented so that the back of the piano faces the students, you will need to play rather softly. Be aware that the sound is much louder to them than it is to you, and your playing may be unpleasantly loud and harsh. (Unfortunately, most students would rather suffer in silence than report this easily correctable problem to the teacher. It’s wise to ask occasionally whether your volume is appropriate.)
22. Practice playing musical examples on the piano before you come to class. If you don’t play the piano well, figure out a way around it: play a reduction of your musical example, use another suitable instrument, make a recording, have students sing, etc. Obviously, neither fumbling nor avoiding musical examples is a viable solution to this problem!