

10 Tips for Teaching an Effective AP Economics Course

(This guide is adapted from the [Advanced Placement Economics Teacher Resource Manual](#) from the [National Council on Economic Education](#) and authored by John S. Morton. You can purchase a copy of [Advanced Placement Economics](#) on the [NCEE Store](#).)

If you were recently assigned to teach an AP Economics course, you know it's a daunting task! You're being asked to teach at a higher level than before, and the school administration will see the scores of your students.

And if you're a veteran teacher, you're always looking for ways to challenge your students and to keep your curriculum in top-notch shape.

Here are a few tips from expert AP Economics teachers that will help you be successful... and give your students the skills they need to take the AP Economics exams with confidence.

1. Order AP Publications from the College Board

You'll need to build a curriculum foundation for your AP Economics course. [The College Board](#) is your first stop for these 4 "must have" publications:

a. The [AP Economics Course Description](#) (Acorn Book) provides a detailed outline of content areas for the AP Microeconomics and AP Macroeconomics Examinations.

The percentage goals for the multiple-choice questions are very important. For example, if 8% to 12% of the Microeconomics Test is on basic economics questions and the exam has 60 questions, expect 5 to 7 questions on this topic. The Acorn Book also has sample multiple-choice and free-response questions.

Tip: You can purchase the [2005-2006 Acorn book](#) on the [College Board Store](#).

Bonus tip: You can download the Acorn book for free on the [AP Economics: Micro Course Page](#) and the [AP Economics: Macro Course Page](#). Just click on the "AP Economics Course Description" link under "Course Information."

b. The latest released exam has that exam's multiple-choice questions and answer key as well as the free-response questions with scoring rubrics, sample student responses and scoring commentary. There is also statistical information about student performance.

Tip: The sample exams are excellent practice for the real exams.

c. The Microeconomics and Macroeconomics Teacher's Guides have information on starting an AP Economics course, techniques and strategies for teaching the course, sample outlines for high school and college courses, and a bibliography of textbooks and other resources.

d. Each year the free-response questions, the scoring rubrics and sample answers are available through the College Board's regional offices or on the College Board Web site.

You'll find the latest on prices and how to order these College Board publications on the [College Board store](#).

2. Get Teacher Training

The College Board offers several [AP Economics workshops](#) that will provide you with professional development for teaching AP Economics courses, and are designed for both new and experienced teachers.

These workshops, ranging from one-day sessions to longer summer institutes, focus on the content covered on the AP Economics exams and an analysis of past multiple-choice and free-response questions. The summer institutes cover the content more comprehensively and demonstrate individual activities that teach this content.

The workshop leader, who may be an AP reader, will provide valuable information to improve student performance.

Tip: To find [AP Economics workshops and institutes](#), and search for “Economics: Macro” and “Economics: Micro” under course area.

Other Sources of Training...

[State Councils on Economic Education](#) and university-based Centers for Economic Education offer courses and workshops for AP Economics teachers. Some of these affiliates of the [National Council on Economic Education](#) can also provide advice to individual teachers.

Tip: Visit the [NCEE Network directory](#) to locate your nearest Council or Center.

3. Buy a Textbook You Can Live With

Probably the most common non-content related question for AP Economics is, “Which textbook should I use?”

Since most textbooks for the college principles of economics course are similar, make sure you choose a textbook that is compatible with your teaching style. Whichever textbook you choose, be sure to ask about ancillary materials including the student activities book, transparencies, teacher’s manual and test bank. Many test banks are on CDs to make the construction of your tests easier.

Tip: Be sure to stress with book representatives that because you teach AP economics you need a college-level text, and NOT a high school text. Then, make sure the textbook publisher sends you a sample copy so you can look it over.

Bonus Tip: For a review of textbooks and other instructional materials, go to the [Teachers’ Resources Center](#) on the [College Board AP Central Web site](#) and search for AP Macroeconomics and AP Microeconomics resources.

4. Organize the Course in Advance

To help organize your AP microeconomics and macroeconomics courses check out the [Advanced Placement Economics](#) Teacher Resource Manual (also called “The Morton Books,” after the principal author, John S. Morton) from the [National Council on Economic Education](#). You’ll find sample course outlines, sample unit plans and lesson plans that will be a reliable guidepost for teaching your AP Economics course.

If you’re a new teacher, you’ll find the day-by-day lesson plans extremely useful as you organize your courses to ensure that you cover all of the content before the AP Economics exams.

As experienced teachers will tell you, you probably don’t want to follow these units and lesson plans in a lock-step fashion, but you must be careful to allocate your time efficiently and stick to your schedule. If you drift off course and don’t finish the last unit, your students will be at a serious disadvantage when they take the test.

The samples in [Advanced Placement Economics](#) are based on 75 classes each semester, with each class period being 45 minutes long. Although some semesters have more classes than others, disruptions reduce the real seat time.

Tip: Use extra days for quizzes, review and additional instruction in areas in which your students are weak.

5. Quiz and Test Often

Economics builds one concept on top of another. If your students do not understand the earlier concepts, they will be lost as the course progresses. Therefore, the more feedback you can provide, the better off your students will be.

That’s why your students need frequent assessments. Make sure you give your students a brief multiple-choice quiz on every textbook chapter. Move your unit tests to a new level by including multiple-choice and free-response questions.

Tip: When possible, include past AP questions, and grade the questions according to the rubrics constructed by the AP readers.

Bonus tip: It is essential for you to use writing assignments or quick in-class exercises so your students will be comfortable answering free-response questions. Answering free-response questions in economics is very different from answering free-response questions in other social sciences. The required answers in AP Economics are very succinct.

6. Teach an Economic Way of Thinking

Content is very important in AP Economics, but a quality course goes beyond teaching a bundle of concepts. Economics is a unique way of thinking that offers insights into the seemingly chaotic confusion of human behavior in a world of different values, resources and cultures.

If your students think in an economic way, they will understand each concept better in your AP Economics course, and more importantly, understand how each concept relates to the others (remember Tip #5: if your students don’t understand earlier concepts, they’ll struggle). Even if

your students haven't studied a concept covered on the exam, they will be able to use techniques of economic thinking to draw the correct conclusion.

A good resource of ready-to-use lessons that reinforce the economic way of thinking is [Capstone: Exemplary Lessons for High School Economics](#) (New York: National Council on Economic Education, 2003).

Tip: For a free lesson plan on Economics Reasoning from Capstone, visit URL TBD.

7. Use Active Learning

In an AP Economics course, it's easy to fall into the trap of having the students memorize definitions, information and rules. Because there is so much information to cover in an AP Economics course, the lecture-discussion method seems the ideal way to teach your students those college-level economics concepts.

Efficiently presenting information is important, but economics can be more relevant and stimulating if the students are actively involved in the lessons. Make sure you use a variety of simulations and activities that use group decision making, problem solving, role-playing and group presentations skills to get your students involved in your class.

Your students should be doing... not just hearing and seeing. For active-learning activities that help your students understand concepts critical to their performing well on the AP Economics Exams, we recommend:

[Economics in Action: 14 Greatest Hits for High School Economics](#) (New York: National Council on Economic Education, 2003).

*Tip: For example, "A Market in Wheat" from [Economics in Action](#) illustrates the behavior behind supply, demand and equilibrium. After the students complete these hands-on activities, the concepts and graphs will make a lot more sense to them. When you teach AP Economics, begin by **illustrating** the behavior and then **analyze** it.*

8. Practice Makes Perfect

Many of the activities in the [Advanced Placement Economics](#) Student Activities Books focus on drill and practice. Your students are given multiple scenarios on supply, demand, perfect competition, monopoly, aggregate demand and supply, monetary policy and fiscal policy. The goal is not to cover every possible situation but to develop economic reasoning from constant practice. Practice is essential and is another form of active learning.

Tip: Buy an [Advanced Placement Economics](#) workbook for each of your students; they are available for both AP Microeconomics and AP Macroeconomics. You'll have a variety of activities to choose from that meet your needs and goals, and your students will have a handy reference guide to refer to while preparing for the exams.

9. Graph Early and Often

Your students must be able to perform graphical analysis to do well on the AP Economics Exams.

In Microeconomics, it is important that students understand and are able to draw graphs of the production possibilities curve, supply and demand, perfect competition, monopoly and factor markets. In Macroeconomics, your students need to master production possibilities, aggregate demand and aggregate supply, investment demand, the money market and exchange rates.

It is essential for the students to understand that they are graphing behavior. If they try to memorize the graphs, they will have trouble. Emphasize multiple shifts that cannot be memorized. Tell stories about changes in supply and demand, changes in aggregate supply and demand, or changes in a firm's revenues and costs. Then have the students graph the changes.

Finally, graphs must be clearly labeled. If the axes and lines are not labeled, the students will not receive credit for their graphs on the AP Economics Exams. When you correct your students' graphs, always point out labeling omissions.

10. Emphasize Historically Weak Areas

Each year the AP Economics Chief Faculty Consultant identifies areas in which students have done poorly. Because these areas will be covered again in future tests, it pays to get this letter from the College Board.

Here are excerpts from letters of past Chief Faculty Consultants that you may find useful.

- Your students must be able to do multiple time-period analysis. For example, in perfect competition, analyze the perfectly competitive firm's short-run and long-run equilibrium.
- In Macroeconomics, explain the short-run and long-run effects of a change in fiscal or monetary policy.
- Integrate international economics into the analysis of monetary and fiscal policies. For example, how does an easy money policy affect interest rates, the international value of the dollar and the balance of trade? How does it affect economic growth and the price level?
- Explain the process of policy interpretation. If a student says a tax cut will increase real GDP and the price level, he or she may receive a point on a free-response question.
- To do well, the students must explain how a tax cut affects aggregate demand and why. Then they must explain how aggregate demand affects the price level and real GDP and why. "Why" and "how" are important questions to ask your students.

11. Bonus Tip: For more tips and techniques on teaching AP Economics, join the NCEE Advanced Placement Economics email list. You'll receive brief emails with news, articles and tips on making the most of your AP Economics course. We value your privacy and won't rent, sell or barter your name.

To join, send an email with "Join AP" in the subject line to twhite@ncee.net.