In examining the class I’ve taken and the professors I’ve been taught by over the past three years, I am able to distinguish which classes were truly demanding and engaging and which classes were “easy A’s.” I’ve found that demanding classes, no matter what the subject matter was, involved much time outside of class spent on critical reading and independent learning. Those were the classes in which the professor did not hand us the material on a platter; I had to come prepared to each class with, at minimum, a baseline understanding of what would be taught that day. Preparing ahead of time for the class was not only helpful but also essential to comprehending, partaking in, and remembering the material discussed. For instance, in one of my science courses in which we had power point slides supplemented with the professor’s lecture, the slides would often have only the bare minimum of information on them. Coming to class unprepared and without reading the chapter left me feeling lost during lecture. Once I learned to read the material prior to coming to class, I found the lecture to be much more coherent and interesting. The lecture itself was more a review of the material I had already gone over rather than my first exposure to it.

I recall two instances of general requirement courses that I found to be both demanding and very engaging. There was an extensive amount of required reading for each class period, but the material was thoroughly interesting and easily allowed for arguments/discussions among peers. Both classes also involved much writing based on the readings; these assignments helped reinforce the topics in our memories while at the same time giving us the freedom to critically reflect on the material. Being able to first discuss and analyze the subject and then to provide my own opinions on it was extremely helpful in retaining the information.
As I mentioned earlier, in-class discussions are very important factors in identifying engaging classes. Especially in the social sciences, discussion allows for others’ opinions to be heard; this is what I enjoyed and valued the most about discussions. It gave ample opportunities to see how different people can view the same topic in many different lights; I was often challenged to rethink or refine my own convictions after hearing what others had to say. These classes have taught me to listen more to others’ views and learn from them. In addition to allowing room for discussion and personal opinion, I found that the classes I viewed as engaging would constantly offer demonstrations of concepts and ideas. This is especially true in my science classes where seeing a phenomenon happen visually often pushed my understanding of the concept from vague to strong. Other forms of relevant visual aid (i.e. movies, documentaries, guest speakers, etc.) further buttressed my ability to understand and analyze the information at hand.

Some common mistakes in teaching methods that I’ve encountered include the professor expecting students to be able to apply a concept before fully/properly teaching the concept to us. Although students are expected to come prepared to class by reading, etc., the professor should not expect students to have a thorough understanding of what they read. The lecture should take what the student had access to (i.e. textbook, course packets, etc.) and build on the material presented in the literature. Offering examples or demonstrations of concepts are also, as mentioned earlier, helpful to teaching them. Once this has been accomplished, the student can then be challenged to take what they learned in class and through their readings and apply it, whether it is in writing a paper or working on math problems or what have you. Another mistake I’ve come across is when a professor will incite discussion in the class but will too often let it veer off-course. When learning about such broad, debatable topics such as sociology, theology,
politics, etc., conversations can go off in all sorts of direction and last forever. Because we are limited to a time constraint while in class, it is important that these discussions remain focused and that they don’t retract from or ignore the material being taught. It takes a very skilled professor to be able to control the direction of the class’s discussions, but this is crucial if course objectives are to be attained.

I feel that the major motivation for students to do their work is to have a genuine interest in the material. The purpose of taking a class needs to go beyond fulfilling a requirement. When I’ve had classes that have had relevance for my life, goals, and relationships outside of the classroom, I have been more motivated to work hard, whether the amount of work I put in for the class that week was 2 hours or 20 hours. When students cannot see the point of what they’re learning and are not able to apply what they learn to some aspect of their lives in a positive way, this lack of need leads to a lack of want to do the work.

In closing I’d like to point out that although the professor has a duty to constantly motivate and engage the student, the student also has a duty to recognize the purpose of their taking a class, or on a broader scale, of attending a university. It’s not all about studying for an exam and passing the class in order to graduate. All classes are meant to teach skills, concepts, and even values that will be carried on throughout the student’s life, and a few good classes and professors are able to accomplish this. Academic rigor is not defined by the amount of work a student must do for a class; rather it is defined by how much the student can be challenged both intellectually and emotionally as they encounter different classes, teaching styles, and stresses. It is up to the student and professor to work together and recognize each other’s styles and abilities to allow for a successful class experience.