Once, the story goes, a first-year student hoping to snag a good seat in his calculus class showed up early. He got the room right, but he arrived while the previous class was still in session. As he took his seat, the lecture hall full of students fell silent.

The professor, chemist Gary Weisman, had been diagramming the molecular structure of aspirin on a blackboard. Smiling, he spoke up, his gentle baritone filling the room. “This is organic chemistry,” he told the mathematics student. “Do you really want to be here?” The class enjoyed a good-natured chuckle, of course, but the truth is that Weisman might have asked the same of anyone in the room. After all, isn’t organic chemistry the most feared of courses—a two-semester rite of passage that regularly leaves aspiring doctors and dentists strewn in the aisles?

According to Weisman’s students, no. “His enthusiasm is immeasurable,” says biochemistry major Logan Petit ’10. “He doesn’t lie and tell you it’s easy, but he calmly assures us that if we study and practice the material, we’ll be fine.”

As he talks, Weisman uses five sliding blackboards that he covers in chalk. He slides boards up and down to keep drawing the chemical structures and arrows that symbolize the movement of electron density in chemical reactions. He punctuates important points by reminding the class, “these aren’t small potatoes,” or “this is quantum mechanics, folks!”

Students who don’t yet grasp the material in class can regroup during Weisman’s weekly help sessions or one of his plentiful office hours. “He is the most accessible professor I’ve ever had. He wants you to succeed,” says Elizabeth Gold ’11.

“You learn by working with the material and testing yourself often.” — Gary Weisman

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“You learn by working with the material and testing yourself often,” says Weisman, who prefers giving quizzes nearly every week to offering only high-stakes exams. And it always helps when you show up to the right class.

— David Moore