Since I teach undergraduate courses of different sorts (Latin, from the elementary through the advanced level; seminar-style courses and large lecture courses in Roman history) I do not have one teaching philosophy, or approach, that applies universally. Let me describe, then, what I attempt with my history classes.

In teaching about the ancient Romans, I first and foremost try to impress students with the fact that these people and their world, given what we can observe, were significantly different from us and our world, and in nearly every conceivable respect. The natural surroundings were (in our terms) very little understood, were hugely mysterious, dangerous, and hence, terrifying. There was no (pragmatic) concept whatsoever of human rights. Thus, populations of captured towns were regularly and systematically slaughtered and/or enslaved – often in batches of tens of thousands, or more; a miles-long swarm of prostitutes, slave-dealers, and peddlers was the satellite of any army, poised to scoop up profit. In the ‘private’ sphere, guests at dinner parties might be entertained by vicious (often physical) abuse of deformed or disabled persons – or of the guests themselves. The ‘constitution’ of the Roman state was never formally laid out; that task was first accomplished by scholars in the late 19th century. And so forth.

With such a perspective in the background, we always attempt then to grasp what the Romans arguably sought to make of their world – whether in the realm of social relations, law, politics, literature, or beyond. In other words, what did these Romans value, what did they desire from and for their world, and so, what shape(s) did they try to give their existence(s)? This questioning leads, of course, to an examination of how well they actually achieved a cosmos as they seemingly wanted it to be. In short, I try to bring the students to think as deeply as possible about a group of human beings living lives in many respects very very different from ours; about what these people hoped to make of their time in this world; and about how and why the Romans fared ill or well in this endeavor. And so, if they can be observed consistently torturing disabled individuals as an entertainment at dinner, and discussing this in an ultimately approving manner, we must presumably accept that the Romans generally valued this practice. Our question then becomes: Why? How, in their terms, could this practice make theirs a better world for them?

Then, there is the matter of the investigation as such. All of the above involves the formation of knowledge or opinions about the ancient Romans. That in turn involves us with the countless scraps of evidence that still connect us to those Romans. What were the concerns behind the creation of the evidence we have, and how, then, can we use that evidence so as to say anything cogent about ancient Rome? My students must go some way toward mastering this before they may hold any opinion about the Romans.

Assessment. In smaller classes, where I can assign papers, and myself read carefully everything written by every student, such written assignments tell the tale. In large lecture classes (say 160/200 students), the sheer numbers involved preclude written assessments that, to my mind, have much to say. Therefore, I myself rely more on the questions asked
by students during class, the responses in class to the questions I ask, and the conversations that I have with (invariably) a small group of truly interested students outside of class. If at least this group clearly thinks and learns, and profits by that, then I assume that some portion of this has rubbed off on the broader mass of students, who remain, quite unfortunately, relatively unknown to me.

I consistently advise students writing honors theses, or who want to do independent studies. Thus, for example, this year I am advising two students writing honors theses, and I did the same last year. I suppose this averages out to about one per year, over the course of time.