



# Tools for Teaching

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## The First Day of Class

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The first day of class sets the tone for the rest of the term. It is natural for both students and instructors to feel anticipation, excitement, anxiety, and uncertainty. To pique students' interest and anticipation, convey your enthusiasm for the material and stimulate students' curiosity about topics that will be covered during the term. To reduce students' anxiety and uncertainty, try to create a relaxed, open classroom environment conducive to inquiry and participation, and let students know what you will expect from them and what they can expect from you and the course. The following suggestions, intended to help you get your class off to a good start, address the three important tasks of the first day: handling administrative matters, creating an open friendly classroom environment, and setting course expectations and standards.

**Visit the classroom before the first meeting.** Locate and figure out how to work the lights, the blinds, and the ventilation. Check any audiovisual equipment (microphone, slide or overhead projector) you will be using. Find out how to obtain help if a bulb burns out or a piece of equipment malfunctions. Get comfortable speaking in the room and see how well your voice carries. Make sure your handwriting on the chalkboard is legible from the back row. (Source: Johnson, 1988)

**Build a sense of community in the classroom.** In general, students learn more and work harder in classes that spark their intellectual curiosity and allow for active involvement and participation. For the first day, plan an activity that provides opportunities for students to speak to one another or solve problems. Students also tend to work harder and respond more positively if they believe the 'instructor views them as individuals rather than as anonymous faces in the crowd (Wolcowitz, 1984). From the start, then, make an effort to get to know your students and express your interest in working with them during the semester.

**Address students' concerns.** Students enter a new class with several questions: Is this the right course for me? Does the teacher seem competent and fair? How much work will be required? How will I be evaluated? Use the first day to help your students understand how the class will serve their needs, and demonstrate your commitment to help them learn.

**Set the tone for the rest of the semester.** Greet students when they enter the classroom. Start and finish class on time. Encourage questions, and give students the opportunity to talk. Stay after class to answer questions, or invite students to walk with you back to your office.

**Make the time worthwhile.** Once administrative tasks are completed, plunge into substantive material. This signals to students that you are serious about making their time worthwhile and that you expect progress to be made at each session.

**Expect some awkwardness.** All teachers, especially beginning instructors, feel a twinge of apprehension before the first class. Do your best to assume a confident attitude. Keep in mind that to your students your nervousness is likely to be perceived as energy and enthusiasm. Arriving early on the first day of class and talking informally to students may help you relax. (Source: Marincovich and Rusk, 1987)



## Taking Care of Administrative Tasks

**Write the course name and number on the board.** This message will alert any students who are in the wrong classroom to leave before you begin. (Source: Hilsen, 1988)

**Take attendance.** Call the roll or ask students to sign in. Have a contingency plan if more students than you can accommodate want to enroll. Check with your department to see whether policies exist for preferential enrollment. Some faculty give preference to graduating seniors. Others make certain that students have the prerequisites and then select enrollment by lottery. If your course is an elective, plan on admitting a few more students than you can comfortably accommodate; a small number will end up dropping your course.

**Mention department course policies.** Explain procedures for wait lists, adding and dropping courses, and so on. Know where to refer students who have problems in these areas.

**Explain the procedures for the course's sections.** If your course has sections, make sure that all students know which section they are enrolled in, who their graduate student instructor is, and when and where the section meets. Describe the relationship between the course and its sections and how sections will be run. Have the graduate student instructors introduce themselves.

**Review any prerequisites for the course.** Let students know what skills or knowledge they are expected to have and whether alternate experience or course work will be accepted. Is help available for those who do not have all the prerequisite skills? If computer work is part of the course, will training be provided?

**Define your expectations for student participation.** Besides turning in all written assignments and taking exams, what do you expect of students during class? See "Leading a Discussion."

**Tell students about campus policies on academic honesty.** State your expectations, and let students know what you regard as cheating and impermissible collaboration. See "Preventing Academic Dishonesty"

**Hand out and discuss the course syllabus.** One faculty member has students read the syllabus and then form groups to identify questions about the course or the instructor (Serey, 1989). Hearing these questions on the first day lets a professor know immediately what concerns are uppermost in students' minds.

**Invite students to attend your office hours.** Be sure students know where your office is and encourage them to stop by with questions and course-related problems. Make a special point of asking students who feel they may need academic accommodations for a physical or learning disability to see you so that appropriate arrangements can be made.

**Review safety precautions.** If your course requires lab work or fieldwork, review safe practices for using equipment and supplies and discuss emergency procedures. Show students how to use equipment safely and appropriately. (Source: Johnson, 1988)

**Review emergency procedures.** Let students know what to do in case of fire, tornado, earthquake, evacuation, or other emergency.

**Bring copies of the required texts to the first class meeting.** Know which stores besides the campus bookstore stock the texts. Are used copies available? Is the textbook on reserve in the library?

**Tape the session, if appropriate.** For students who miss the first day of class, make available a videotape or audiotape that they can review on their own. This way you do not have to keep repeating the material as new students join your class. If taping is impractical, ask students who enroll after the first day to obtain notes from someone who attended that session.



## Creating a Positive Classroom Environment

**Introduce yourself to your class.** In addition to telling students how you wish to be addressed, say something about your background: how you first became interested in the subject, how it has been important to you, and why you are teaching this course. Convey your enthusiasm for the field and the subject. For many students, the instructor's enthusiasm about the course material is a key motivator for learning. (Sources: "The First Day of Class," 1989; Wolcowitz, 1984)

**Ask students to fill out an introduction card.** Have students indicate their name, campus address, telephone number, electronic mail address, year in school, and major field. You might also ask them to list related courses they have taken, prerequisites they have completed, other courses they are taking this semester, their reasons for enrolling in your course, what they hope to learn in the course, tentative career plans, and something about their outside interests, hobbies, or current employment. Make sure that students who later enroll in the course complete an introduction card.

**Begin to learn student's names.** By learning your student's names, you can create a comfortable classroom environment that will encourage student interaction. Knowing your students' names also tells them that you are interested in them as individuals. As you call roll, ask for the correct pronunciation and how the student prefers to be addressed. If your course enrolls fewer than forty students, call the roll for several class meetings to help you learn names. During the term, call students by name when you return homework or quizzes, and use names frequently in class. Ask students who are not called upon by name to identify themselves. Here are a variety of other strategies for learning students' names:

*Photographs:* Consider grouping students for Polaroid pictures during the second week of class. In a single shot you may be able to photograph four or five people. The act of posing for a picture breaks the ice and creates an informal, relaxed environment. Circulate the photographs and have students write their name underneath their picture. If you do not have access to a camera, ask students to submit a small photograph of themselves (such as those taken in penny arcade photo booths or from their driver's license or student photo ID). Photocopies of photographs are fine. Place these photos on students' information sheets or introduction cards. Photographs are helpful in recalling a student before an appointment, or later on, when you are asked to write a recommendation for a student, you can refer back to the picture to jog your memory.

*Name cards:* For a seminar class, use the United Nations model of place cards in front of each student. In a studio or lab course, post students' names above their workstations.

*Seating chart:* Ask students to sit in the same seats for the first few weeks, and prepare a seating chart. Or block out on a piece of paper general locations within the room and write the names of students inside the appropriate blocks, instead of labeling exact seats. Try to memorize four or five names at each class session.

*Name game:* In small classes, ask the first person to give her name. The second person gives the name of the first person and his own name, and the third person gives the names of the first two people followed by her own name. The chain continues until it returns to the

first person, with the instructor preferably near the end. (Source: Scholl-Buckwald, 1985)

*Introductions:* For large lecture classes, at the beginning of each class period, ask six or eight students to introduce themselves.

**Give students an opportunity to meet each other.** Ask students to divide themselves into groups of three to five and introduce themselves. Or have students group themselves by residence halls or living groups so that they can identify nearby classmates to study with (Heine and others, 1981). Or go around the room and ask all students to respond to one question, such as "What's the one thing you really want to learn from this course?" or "What aspect of the course seems most appealing to you?" Such questions are more interesting than those about students' majors or year in college.

**Ask students to interview each other outside of class.** If your course has a writing component, you might ask students to write a brief description of their partner. The class could agree on the interview questions beforehand, or each student could devise his or her own items. (Source: Scholl-Buckwald, 1985)

**If your class is small, conduct a "people search."** Students receive a sheet of paper with five to ten statements and a space for a signature near each statement. The statements should be relevant to students in your class and can be a mix of personal and academic attributes: "Someone who works and goes to school," "Someone who has taken (a related course)," "Someone who has already purchased the textbooks," "Someone who is left-handed," "Someone who knows the order of the planets" (or other content-related question). Students are given ten minutes to obtain as many signatures as possible. You can spend a few minutes debriefing to generate a class profile. Or you can compile the information for distribution at the next class meeting so students have a written record about their classmates. (Sources: Erickson and Strommer, 1991; Weisz, 1990)

**Break students into small groups.** An English professor divides the class into groups of six and gives each member of the group one line of a six-line poem. Students are asked to reassemble the poem and discuss what the poem means. A sociology professor asks groups of students to come up with a list of the ten most important events (or people) in history. After ten or fifteen minutes, the groups' responses are placed on the board for discussion and interpretation. (Source: Erickson and Strommer, 1991)

**Encourage students to exchange phone numbers.** If all students agree, ask them to write their name, telephone number, and electronic mail address on a plain sheet of paper and make copies of this roster for them. Encourage students to call their classmates about missed classes, homework assignments, and study groups. Or have students complete 3" x 5" cards and exchange cards with two or three classmates. (Source: "The First Day of Class," 1989)



## Setting Course Expectations and Standards

**Discuss the objectives of the course.** As specifically as possible, tell your students what you wish to accomplish and why, but also ask for what they want to learn from you and what sorts of problems they would like to tackle. Be sure to acknowledge all contributions—your attentiveness to students' ideas will encourage student participation throughout the semester. (Source: McKeachie, 1986)

**Ask students to list the goals they hope to achieve by taking the course.** Have students, in small groups or individually, list three to five goals in the form of statements about knowledge, skills, appreciations, interests, or attitudes. Students can also rank their goals in terms of how difficult they may be to achieve. Use these lists to identify your class's interests and anticipated problem areas. (Source: Angelo and Cross, 1993)

**Describe how you propose to spend class time.** How will sessions be structured? How will discussions be organized? Will a specific time be set aside for questions, or may students ask questions as they arise? Should questions requiring a lengthy response be saved for office hours?

**Give your students ideas about how to study and prepare for class.** Study strategies are especially important in an introductory class. Give examples of questions students might wish to think about or strategies for approaching the material. Tell students how much time they will need to study for the course, and let them know about campus academic support services.

**If appropriate, give a brief diagnostic pretest.** Explain that this "test" will not be graded but is designed to give you information on topics students have mastered and areas in which they need additional review. You could present a list of key concepts, facts and figures, or major ideas and ask students to indicate their familiarity with each. In a writing course you might assign a short essay that will allow you to identify students' strengths and weaknesses.

**Ask students to do a group exercise.** Select a key word from the course title and have students generate word associations or related ideas. Put their responses on the board and use the list to give a thematic overview of the course. (Source: Wright, 1989)

**Work through a problem or piece of material that illustrates the course content.** Begin to teach students how to participate in your class. Engaging students in actual work during the first class session gives them an idea of what your class will be like. You might make a brief presentation of a core idea, pose a typical problem, or ask students to form working subgroups. (Source: Scholl-Buckwald, 1985)

**Give an assignment for the next class session.** By moving immediately into the first topic, you are indicating to students that the course is worthwhile, well organized, and well paced. Make sure that the assignment is ungraded, however, because students may be adding or dropping your course during the first week or so. (Sources: Johnson, 1988; Povlacs, 1986)

**Ask students to write their reactions to the first day.** Take two minutes at the end of class to have students jot down unsigned comments about what went well and what questions they have about the course. (Source: McKeachie, 1986)



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