

The First Day of Class

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Every time we think we are on top of our teaching, even briefly, a host of pedagogical issues nibble at our consciousness – course content, method of presentation, critical thinking, writing across the curriculum and others. Only the first day of class seems comparatively luxurious. Show up – distribute course materials – answer questions – and leave early. At least this is one class meeting we don't have to worry about or spend a lot of time on. Wrong!

The first class meeting is critically important to the entire course to follow (does the primacy effect ring a bell?), deserves careful consideration, and is full of pitfalls. During your first class meeting you want to be interesting, organized and well prepared, clear, enthusiastic, and create a favorable climate for positive interpersonal relations. You want to structure the first class meeting to your students' benefit and to your own.

In this column, we review a variety of issues and ideas for you to consider as you prepare for your next first class periods. Do not use them all, but pick and choose those that will serve your students well.

Questions to Consider

In your first class meeting you are communicating a great deal of critical information about yourself and the course in what you cover and how you behave. It is not unusual for teachers, especially new teachers, to be nervous and excited on the first day, just like the students are. Our advice is to plan the first class meeting carefully and then *teach deliberately*. Put your feet up for a few minutes and consider the following questions.

- What are your goals during a first class meeting and have you budgeted sufficient time to achieve them?
- What tone do you want to set – laid back and informal, organized and content oriented, or some of both?
- Assuming some of the first day is devoted to “housekeeping” tasks, what do you cover and what do you save for a later class?
- What can you do to draw students into the intellectual realm of the course?
- What should you tell students about yourself, your teaching style, and why you teach that way?
- What can you tell students about how to do well in your class?
- What do you tell students about academic honesty?
- What can you do to ease students' concerns?
- What do you do so that students with several first classes beginning on the same day will retain the important material about your course?
- How can you have students participate and what level of participation should you expect?

Objectives/Purposes of the First Class Meeting

A first class meeting has multiple objectives. Do you see the first class meeting as mostly “housekeeping,” drawing students into the intellectual realm of the course, emphasizing the affective, beginning your coverage of course material, or all of these? Your goals should fit not only who you are and what you value as a faculty member, but also should fit the level and size of the course. You will be explicit and belabor the obvious in an introductory course with primarily first-year students more than in a senior course for majors. For example, not all first-year students may understand what a syllabus is and they can benefit from an explanation of how it functions as an informal “contract.” Regardless of your specific objectives for the first class meeting, consider the following suggestions.

Create Rapport

Be patient. Beginnings of semesters can be difficult for students. Be calm. Be respectful of your students! Tell students about your teaching career, your academic interests, why the present course is important to you and why you like it. Many students never really get to know their teachers. View the first day as a chance to begin a relationship with your students. Depending on class size, call each student by name from a class list, and get to know students by asking for a show of hands for majors, minors, and so forth. You also have an opportunity to gather information about them that will help build this relationship. It does not take long to read 50 index cards with students’ year, number of psychology credits, major, reasons for taking the class, hobbies, and the like. Such information will help you get to know them.

Communicate the Nature and Content of Your Course

This gives you an opportunity to explain why students should take your course and how they will profit from it.

Emphasize Important Aspects of the Course

If something is important, overtly cover the details. Be sure to stress elements that may be idiosyncratic or differ somewhat from more “boilerplate” courses.

Use What You Know About Psychology

Present critical information first or last in the class meeting. Assume that students will not retain all of the details presented during the first class, and repeat crucial information later. This is especially important for first year students.

Prepare for the First Day

There is much that you cannot control during first class meetings, but prepare as best you can. In addition to decisions on tone (see below) and time spent on first day tasks, other preparations should include the following:

- Visit the classroom if you have not taught there before to learn how to use the lights, sound system, computer equipment, etc. Do you need chalk, or a marker for a whiteboard?
- Decide on seating arrangements and lighting, music or silence before you begin.

- Write and update handouts and the syllabus, and have sufficient copies printed. Bring these materials to subsequent class meetings for students who miss the first day. Make sure you also bring copies of all required texts and materials.
- Check with the bookstore to make sure the required texts have arrived and that there are a sufficient number of copies.

The First Day

Once again, implementing all of the following suggestions would take more time than is available in most first class meetings. Consider what you are doing now, and make changes based on those ideas that seem most helpful.

Arrive Early and Dress Professionally

Arriving early allows you to make sure the class door is unlocked, the room is laid out the way you want, and to kibitz with students as they arrive. Dress professionally. Many sources recommend this, and you can always dress down later. Be prepared to stay late to answer questions.

Start Slowly and Cover the Basics

The biggest mistake most faculty make on the first day is to cover too many topics. Students often have several *first* classes in one day and are absorbing a great deal of information all at once. Take care of basics. Make sure all students belong in the course. Ask if anyone wants to *add* the class, and before doing anything else either sign them in, start a waiting list, or tell them you are sorry, but they cannot be added to the class. Identify the course number, title, number of credits, when and where the course meets, where exams are held, course prerequisites, and so forth (if included in syllabus, review it). Obtain student e-mail addresses if you will be contacting them via e-mail or will have an electronic course bulletin board. Some faculty identify important drop dates. Introduce your teaching assistants if you are using them, and explain their role.

You have another important decision. You need to help students settle down and focus. Whether you do this by simply introducing yourself and telling students what the first day will entail after everyone is quiet, or by doing something “dramatic” to get their attention, is up to you.

Introduce Yourself

Spend a few minutes talking about yourself. Tell students your name and title, office hours, e-mail address, phone, and web page address. Tell students your office location and provide them a map if it is difficult to locate. Describe your policy on phone calls to your home. Tell students how you wish to be addressed (e.g., Dr. Smith, Professor Smith, Ms. Smith, the Grand Guru Smith, the Great and Powerful Oz, or just plain Joe). Talk about your educational background and professional experience and interests, particularly as they relate to this course, and include whatever personal information you want students to know. Students, and especially juniors and seniors, really are interested in who you are, how you got into the profession, how you came to be teaching at your college or university, and for how long.

Texts and Other Materials

Students need to know the text title, edition, author, and date. State which texts are *required* or *recommended* and why. Tell students why you chose this text (e.g., author's credentials, readability). Tell students to buy the book and ask if they are available in the bookstore. Provide the location(s) of other assigned materials (e.g., reserved reading desk at library, web) and whether they can be purchased or are on reserve. If you are using electronic materials be clear how and when you will assist students in accessing them. If there are other required materials such as calculators, identify them.

Course Description and Requirements

Students need basic information regarding what the course is about. Do not assume they have opened the text; most have not. Inform students what the course's place is in the curriculum, why they should take this course (general education, major requirement), and whether the course is primarily lecture, discussion, small group work or some combination of all. Briefly review course objectives. Such objectives are becoming more important with increased emphasis on assessment. Identify your course's extra costs such as lab fees or required or elective out-of-class opportunities such as field trips.

Distribute and review your syllabus. Briefly! We know at least one faculty member who gives a quiz on his syllabus the second week of the course. He wants students to read it! Emphasize the following course requirements:

- Exactly what a student is expected to do.
- Important dates in the syllabus (e.g., assignments, reviews for exams, tests, guest speakers).
- Required reading not included in lectures.
- The student work load (how much time and preparation the course will require).
- Reading assignments (where listed, how much, and so forth).
- Attendance policy.
- Number and type of tests or laboratory exercises.
- Study aids (practice exam questions or outlines).
- How changes will be communicated for dates of exams and other required in-class assignments.
- If films and videos are used, are students tested on their content? Repeat this information when they are shown.
- Number and type of papers, expected content. Hand out a model paper, or place copies on reserve or on the web. Delay the detailed information on what contributes to a paper's grade (e.g., intellectual level, quality of writing, level of referenced material read) to a later class meeting. If you use a *scoring grid* for papers, distribute it when you discuss the papers in depth.
- Class participation (e.g., in-class, e-mail bulletin board), oral presentations, or group work.
- Grading.

Grading Procedures

Decide what to emphasize, such as how you grade (curve, absolute standard), policy on incomplete grades, penalties for late work, and extra credit opportunities, and consider presenting grade distributions from previous classes. If attendance is required, what is its percentage of the final grade? What is the percent each exam, quiz, paper, and assignment counts toward the final grade? Do you give multiple choice, short answer, matching, or essay exams?

Sometime in the next week or two present detailed information on your grading system (e.g., letter grades, total points across the semester, or some other approach), urge students to highlight this information on the syllabus, and if relevant, briefly describe how you grade group work. Explain your policy on exams or assignments missed because of weather, athletics, ill children, etc. What is your makeup policy and what happens if an exam is not made up? Do students fail the course, or pass the course but receive an F on that assignment? Directly before your first exam discuss whether students can drop an item or contest items, and rules for exams (e.g., picture ID, sit every other seat). Be prepared to explain grading again and again throughout the course.

Academic Honesty Policy and Cheating

Review the academic dishonesty policy statement in your syllabus. Define how cheating is defined in the course including crib notes, plagiarism on papers, turning in someone else's work as your own, and purchasing term papers; and talk about your efforts to minimize cheating and why doing so is important. Many faculty stress their responsibility to general society to emphasize moral behavior. Tell students you reserve the right to meet with them about their assignments/exams and behavior, and will do so in private.

Course Rules

Often course rules can wait for the next class meeting. Can students tape record lectures or bring food to class? What class decorum issues need discussing, especially in a large class? Do you assign seating? If you have a small class meeting in a larger classroom do you want students to sit near the front of the class? If you are teaching a laboratory course, review safety rules for students, explain use of equipment and other rules, and give a tour if needed.

How To Do Well

- Spend a few minutes offering advice on how to do well in your course.
- Distribute or read letters in which students from the same course in past semesters offer advice on how to do well.
- Emphasize that most learning occurs out of class.
- Give advice on how many times students should read each chapter, how they can best prepare for each class, and use of a study guide, if available.
- Emphasize the importance of coming to class, reviewing lecture notes, and asking questions.
- If you value discussion and questions, show students you mean this by entertaining questions and listening carefully the first day.
- Talk about how students might obtain a tutor. You will cover this material individually with some students later in the semester, but most students make the mistake of waiting too long to obtain a tutor.
- Encourage students to form study groups, and to study with academically strong peers. Give them your estimate for expected time devoted to your class (rule of thumb is two or three hours out of class for each class hour).
- Invite students with special needs such as older students returning to school, foreign students, and transfer students to meet with you early in the semester.
- Provide a printed list of important and relevant campus resources (e.g., counseling center [test

anxiety]), reading/study center, writing center).

- Ask students to gather names, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses of two or three classmates to be used for obtaining lecture notes, or anything missed when absent.

Setting the Tone

By now you have already done a great deal to set the tone for the course in your patience, clarity, and organized style, or in your impatience, distance, and preoccupation with your needs and not theirs. But there is more you can do. If you want to stress course content, begin lecturing or conduct a class discussion. You can make an assignment for the next class, but ensure that it is relevant and important. If you want to emphasize the relevancy of the course to students' lives or general society, develop a relevancy exercise. If you want to learn what your students know, give a pre-test of some kind.

Ask students what they have heard about the class and dispel myths about the course. This may be an opportunity to lighten the tone a bit and to ease student anxiety. Use humor (instructor receives 10 percent of all chocolate brought to class, or I received my PhD from Michigan State University, bonus points for wearing MSU apparel). Ask what their first day rituals are or what they are feeling the first day of class, and then share what you are feeling. If you emphasize writing, have students write something.

Save Time for Questions

Students often are extremely quiet during the first day of class. This reluctance may be due to not knowing the instructor. Some students want the class to be dismissed as soon as possible and asking questions keeps them in class longer. To increase participation try to ask questions that students can/will answer. If questions are not forthcoming provide important information on questions you know students need answers to: How difficult is the course (*can I do the work?*)? Is the course *fair*? Will you help students?

Conclusion

Thought and attention to the first class meeting benefits your students greatly. You want to demonstrate concern for what they need to know, and for the anxieties most students have as they begin a course. The tone you set is one you can build on throughout the entire semester. By carefully structuring the first day, you will have grown as a teacher, given some thought to the art and craft of what we do, and shown students that starting a course well is critically important to what follows. We wish you, a good first day!