

The First Day of Class: Getting Off to a Good Start

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Whether you have been teaching for years or are beginning to teach your very first semester, being prepared for the first day of class takes a fair amount of planning. No matter how hard you try to find your course notes from last semester, discover a new technique to remember your students' names, or begin using a new technology in the classroom, careful planning for the first day of class is critical to making that first impression on your students (and making you feel good about the class, too).

The following *First Day of Class: What Can/Should we do?* was developed by the Program for Instructional Innovation at the University of Oklahoma (2006). It is reprinted here with permission. Material in brackets [] has been provided for further explanation.

In addition to the information below, as you prepare for the first day or any day of teaching or presenting, try some techniques which have been used by professionals in theatre, film, and television and can help improve your own teaching techniques. Vocal warm-ups such as yawning, humming and warming up the tongue and jaw through some simple exercises by speaking to yourself, out loud, and slowly, such words as

*hello, away, until
buhdah guhdah, puhtah cuhtah*

or tongue twisters such as

A big black bug bit a big black bear, made a big black bear bleed blood
can help develop better voice intonation and performance in the classroom (Justice, 2006).

What can we do on the first day of class? What should we do?

One common answer is simply to start lecturing: "This is day one, here is lecture one, away we go!" Another possibility is: "Here is the syllabus, go buy your books and we will see you at the next scheduled class period." Neither of these two options seems desirable. But what are some other possibilities?

Several years ago a group of professors at the University of Oklahoma visited each other on the first day of class and then discussed what they saw each other doing. But the discussion quickly went from what they observed, to "**What might be done?**" They eventually identified **nine attractive possibilities**, as described below. Do not feel obliged to do all of these, but doing even one or several of them on the first day (or during the first week) would seem to accomplish a number of important tasks for getting a class started in the right way.

Involve students [in class] quickly.

1. Involve students quickly.

This can be done in a variety of ways:

- having students introduce themselves
- allowing students to think and write silently [why they have enrolled in the course; what skills, abilities they might be able to contribute to the course; expectations they have for the course]
- having a whole-class or a small-group discussion, etc.
- [asking students some pointed questions the first day can help break the ice and allow students to feel comfortable contributing to the class early on:

- *What have you heard about me as an instructor?*

- *What have you heard about this course?]*

But letting students know right from the outset that they will be active participants seems like a good approach.

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2. Identify the value and importance of the subject.

Not all students come to all classes with a clear idea of why this subject is important: You may need to help them understand the significance of the course. The sooner this is done, the sooner the students will be ready to invest time and energy in the task of learning the subject matter.

3. Set expectations.

This can involve such things as what you consider appropriate amounts of study time and homework for the class, the importance of turning homework in on time, expectations about in-class behavior, how you want to relate to students, and how much interaction among students is desired. The first day also offers an opportunity to find out what expectations the students have of you and of the class.

4. Establish rapport.

Almost any class will be more enjoyable for both the instructor and the students if they know each other a bit. This exchange can be started with introductions, sharing some background information, etc.

Justice (2006) states that even the way you walk into the classroom the first day can make an impression (or not) on your students. Read the following “scenarios” and decide for yourself which instructor you would rather have for a course:

Scenario A. The instructor rushes into the room a few minutes late while fidgeting with the messy stack of papers he is carrying, some of them falling to the floor. He keeps looking at his watch and begins the class by saying “I think we should begin with chapter one.”

Scenario B. The instructor confidently walks into the room, making eye contact with and smiling at the students, and says “Good morning/afternoon/evening.” She places her book bag on the table and, walking toward the students, asks, “How is everyone is today?”

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Establishing credibility can happen automatically, but at other times students need to know about your prior work experience, travel experience, or research and publications in an area.

Whatever classroom climate you want, you should try to establish this early and set the tone for the rest of the semester.

Remember that it is imperative that what you do on the first day is what you want the class to do the rest of the semester.

Scenario C. The instructor briskly walks into the room, carrying several large books which she neatly places on the corner of the desk, opens her PowerPoint presentation and, standing behind the podium, begins to read from the slides.

5. Reveal something about yourself.

Sometimes students can relate to you more productively if they can see you as something more than just an authority figure or subject matter expert. Sharing personal stories and being able to laugh at yourself can help this process.

6. Establish your own credibility.

Establishing credibility can happen automatically, but at other times students need to know about your prior work experience, travel experience, or research and publications in an area. Having this knowledge can help students gain confidence that “you” know what you are talking about.

7. Establish the "climate" for the class.

Different instructors prefer different classroom climates: intense, relaxed, formal, personal, humorous, serious, etc. Whatever classroom climate you want, you should try to establish this early and set the tone for the rest of the semester.

8. Provide administrative information.

This often takes the form of going through the syllabus, presuming you have a syllabus with this information in it: material the students will need

- what kind of homework will be involved
- what your office hours are
- where your office is located
- how the class grade will be determined
- what your policies are regarding attendance, late papers, make-up exams, etc..

9. Introduce the subject matter.

Generally this introduction will be facilitated by starting with some kind of overview of the subject.

- What is it?
- What are the parts of the subject?
- How is it connected to other kinds of knowledge?

Final Note:

Plan what you do on the first day of the semester to happen during the rest of the semester. If you want students to work in small groups during the semester, find something for them to do in small groups on the first day. Set the tone to better help students get a feel for the course.

References

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