

High-Impact First Day Strategies

Why is the First Day of Class so Important?

The first day of class sets the tone for the rest of the semester. It is your chance to introduce yourself and present your vision for the course to your students and that first impression can make an impact on the entire semester. The first day of class can be stressful, even for faculty who have been teaching for several years, and it can be stressful for students, too, who are trying to finalize their schedules and balance new expectations and workloads.

Creating a Welcoming Environment

One of the primary purposes of the first day of class is to introduce yourself – but it's also the first opportunity to introduce students to the classroom and to each other. Take some time to introduce yourself, sharing your educational and teaching background, and perhaps some personal background such as hobbies and place of birth. Allow the students to introduce themselves, and consider what information would be helpful for you to know, such as their major or why they're taking the course. You could also ask students to let you know if they have a preferred pronoun, nickname, and whether you've pronounced their name correctly again to begin to create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere. Consider the classroom itself and the seating arrangement, lighting, and glare and how the features of your room might be optimized to create a more welcoming atmosphere.

Communicating Course Expectations and Requirements

The second primary purpose of the first day of class is introducing students to your course and communicating your course expectations. You might consider modeling your course format on the first day of class. For example, if you primarily use group activities, you could create a brief group activity for the first day. Clearly state the learning objectives for the course as well as what students will need to do to be successful. Before the first day, consider what you will want students to gain after they take your course, not just at the end of the semester, but one or five years down the road. What core pieces of information or ways of looking at the world do you want them to remember? Convey the importance of your class to your students and why the subject matters and connect these long-range goals to your learning objectives. Also consider having students communicate what they *think* they know about the course and have a discussion about how their expectations fit with the reality of the course. Finally, as you review the course syllabus, consider your student's perspective and highlight your expectations regarding course logistics such as communication (do you prefer emails or telephone calls?), late work policies, textbook (do students need to bring it to class?), electronic devices policy, and office hours (do you prefer appointments or drop ins?).

References

These ideas and strategies have been adapted from the following sources:

Northern Illinois University, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center. *Strategies for starting the semester well.*

<https://www.niu.edu/facdev/resources/teaching/startsem.shtml>

Vanderbilt University, Center for Teaching. *First day of class.*

<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/first-day-of-class/>

Carnegie Mellon University, Eberly Center, Teaching Excellence and Educational Innovation. *Design and teach a course: Make the most of the first day of class.*

<https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/firstday.html>

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Office of Graduate Studies. *101 things you can do in the first three weeks of class.*

<http://www.unl.edu/gradstudies/current/teaching/first-3-weeks>

Further Reading

Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Nilson, L. (2003). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors* (2nd ed.). Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.

Weimer, M. (2013). *First day of class activities that create a climate for learning.*

<http://www.facultyfocus.com/article/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/>

Make a Great First Impression

Arrive early to class. Greet students as they enter the class and convey a sense of approachability and organization.

Consider your attire. Is there a type of attire that is typical of your department? Do you want the atmosphere in your class to be more formal or informal? It's often easier to start more formal and become more relaxed than the other way around.

Post a message on the board to get students thinking about the subject. Consider posting a thought-provoking question or quote. Convey the message that you want students to think critically in your course.

Establish your credibility. Share your research background and how you've contributed to your discipline.

Involve Students

Have students introduce themselves to each other. Rather than putting students on the spot, pair students and have them find out their partner's name, major, hobbies, why they're in the course, etc. and then have students introduce their partners to the class.

Find common ground. Consider ways for students to find commonalities with their classmates, such as asking them where they're from and marking the location on a map, asking for their favorite song and creating a class playlist, etc.

Find out what students "know" about your subject. Give students a questionnaire or survey about their expectations or experience with your subject. What pre-conceptions do they have?

Design an activity that asks students to be the experts. Consider your learning objectives and have students address an issue or answer a question and then take time to discuss what other information they need or address common myths and misconceptions. You might revisit the same activity at the end of the semester to see how their answers might have changed.

Give a quiz on the course syllabus. This should be low-stakes or zero points, but offers an opportunity for them to be clear about course expectations.

Have students share characteristics of their best and worst classes. On one section of the board, write "The best class I've ever had" and on another, "The worst class I've ever had." Under each category, write "What the teacher did" and "What the students did" and give students an opportunity to share their experiences while you fill in the categories based on their answers.

Show Why Your Course Matters

Connect the course to current events. Have students find a news story related to your course subject, or discuss a news story you provide and how it relates to the course.

Common sense inventory. Create a quiz where students need to determine whether 15 statements related to the course content, such as common misconceptions, are true or false and then discuss their answers in pairs or small groups.

Provide a list of unsolved problems in your discipline, and/or problems that were recently solved, new discoveries, etc. Make it clear that the subject is still being shaped and is relevant in today's world.

Have students generate hypothesis about a typical problem in your course. Discuss with students how they would test their hypothesis.

Design an activity where students consider what knowledge they bring to the class. Have students list everything they think would be in a textbook about your subject, then find a partner and combine ideas and work together to create categories, giving each category a name. Then have students work with another pair of students to combine ideas and arrange their categories as a table of contents for a book.