

Make the Most of the First Day of Class

Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence at Carnegie Mellon University

The first day of class always creates some nervousness, even for seasoned instructors. It helps to have a mental checklist of objectives to accomplish so that you and your students come away with the impression that the course is off to a good start.

The first class meeting should serve at least two basic purposes:

- To clarify all reasonable questions students might have relative to the course objectives, as well as your expectations for their performance in class. As students leave the first meeting, they should believe in your competence to teach the course, be able to predict the nature of your instruction, and know what you will require of them.
- To give you an understanding of who is taking your course and what their expectations are.

These two basic purposes expand into a set of eight concrete objectives:

1. [Orchestrate positive first impressions](#)
2. [Introduce yourself effectively](#)
3. [Clarify learning objectives and expectations](#)
4. [Help students learn about each other](#)
5. [Set the tone for the course](#)
6. [Collect baseline data on students' knowledge and motivation](#)
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1. Orchestrate positive first impressions

First impressions can be long-lasting, and they are usually based on a thin slice of behavior. Before you even start teaching, your students will have already made some decisions about you, so it is important to understand what those impressions are based on and how to manage them.

- **Your attire.** Research shows that clothing affects several kinds of judgments people make, including but not limited to, credibility, likability, dominance, kindness, and empathy (Raiscot, 1986; Morris et al., 1996). More formal attire communicates expertise and confidence, less formal attire communicates approachability. Usually, it is easier to relax a more formal impression into a more relaxed one than the other way around. These considerations are likely to be particularly relevant for young instructors who are concerned about establishing themselves as authoritative.
- **The physical environment.** Students can make decisions about what kind of course yours will be by the way the chairs are arranged. Rows signify a more formal environment, while circles or u-shapes imply a more informal atmosphere, with more expectations of student participation. The words on the board also indicate how

interesting the course is likely to be. In addition to the course information, consider having a thought-provoking question displayed as they arrive.

- **Your use of the few minutes before class.** Greeting the students as they enter the classroom communicates approachability. Frantically arriving right on time or even late communicates disorganization, and so on.

2. Introduce yourself effectively

Your introduction should be succinct, but make sure to cover certain key areas. These questions should help you decide what to say:

- **What characteristics do you want to convey about yourself?**
Among other things, you probably want the students to get a sense of your qualifications for teaching the course, how formal/informal you want to be, and how available you will be to the students.
- **What will you need to say to convey those characteristics?**
Consider talking about your research interests as they relate to the course, in order to establish yourself as an authority, and to make the course more relevant. Talk about the best ways to reach you (e.g., phone, email) and your office hour preference (e.g., set hours, open door, make an appointment).
- **What do you think students are trying to figure out about you?**
In addition to the categories above, students are likely trying to determine whether you are a harsh or easy grader, and how flexible you will be with deadlines. You don't need to cater to their agenda, but you might want to say something about your policies (more on this in the next objective).
- **What should you be careful not to say?**
Students do not need to know everything about you. In particular, it is not helpful to say you've never taught the course before, or that it is your least favorite course to teach, or to disclose any irrelevant personal information that can undermine you in the eyes of your students.

3. Clarify learning objectives and your expectations

This is probably the most important objective. Clearly laying out expectations starts to orient students toward the kind of effort, learning, performance and classroom behaviors you expect from them, and it helps them use their time productively. It will also help those students who are shopping around in deciding whether to take your course or not.

- **Describe the prerequisites** so that students will know if they are ready to take your course.
- **Highlight main aspects of the syllabus.**
If you followed the [course design process](#), you should have an effective structure for the course. Communicate that structure to the students so they will understand the decisions you made for the course and the reasons why you made them. In particular, make sure to highlight the learning objectives, the alignment with the assessments – including the

grading criteria – and the instructional strategies, the course policies, and the rationale for the structure and the policies, and the reasons for choosing the textbook or other reading materials.

- **Consider a quiz on the syllabus.**

To reinforce the point that understanding expectations is crucial for success in the course some professors require students to take a quiz on the syllabus and get all answers right before they go on with the course content. Blackboard can be used for that purpose.

- **Explain your expectations for student behavior** (if they are not included in the syllabus) including expectations for:
 - punctuality
 - seeking help when needed
 - offering feedback when appropriate
 - preferences for student participation (e.g., raising hands and waiting to be called on vs. jumping in the discussion)
- **Communicate your commitment to the students' learning experience.**
Share some advice for success in your course (e.g., attendance, participation, keeping up with the readings) and let them know you are confident in their success as long as they put in the required effort.

4. Help students learn about each other

The classroom is a social environment, so it is helpful to start the social dynamics in a productive way.

- **Icebreakers raise the energy levels and get students comfortable** so that they will be ready to focus on the material, especially if you want to foster a collaborative environment where students will have to work in groups or dialogue with each other.
 - Make sure that the icebreaker is appropriate for the course.
 - Icebreakers work even better when they allow students to get to know each other in the context of the course material.
 - Provitera McGlynn (2001) provide a variety of social icebreakers some of which can be tailored to course content.

5. Set the tone for the course

The way you engage students on the first day sends powerful messages about the level of involvement and interaction you expect from them.

Inexperienced instructors sometimes make the mistake of lecturing at the students for a few weeks, then try to have a discussion when the first big unit of the course is finished, only to be surprised at the lack of student participation. This is because students have already been socialized to just listen in the course.

The following strategies will help you set a productive tone:

- **Whatever you plan to do during the semester, do it on the first day.** For instance, if you plan to use discussions, have students start talking on the first day. If you plan to use groups frequently, put students in groups on the first day. If you plan to use extensive writing, have some kind of short reflective writing activity. If you want the students to be in charge of their own learning, start with an activity where they are the experts, and cannot rely on you for information. For instance, in a psychology course on myths about human behavior, the instructor starts with a brainstorming of myths about student behaviors in dorms.
- **Consider a “Homework 0” voluntary-mandatory office hour.** The assignment is simply to make an appointment with you at a convenient time, find your office and visit you there before the next class or two. This gets students to your office, breaks the ice with a short one-on-one interaction, and makes it much more likely that the students will come back for help when they need it.
- **Establish a culture of feedback.** Let students know you are interested in how they experience the course and in any suggestions they have. Let them know you will do formal early course evaluations, but that they should feel free to give you constructive feedback, even anonymously. You might not adopt every suggestion they have but you will listen and consider them. This starts to create a partnership in learning.

6. Collect baseline data on students’ knowledge and motivation

This objective stems directly from the second overarching goal for the first day of class.

- **Collect data about baseline knowledge.** This can take several forms:
 - Check that students have taken relevant courses in a sequence.
 - Give students an ungraded pretest that assesses knowledge and skills necessary for the course.
 - Also rely on students’ self-reports about how confident they feel about particular knowledge and their ability to apply it.
 - More information on several forms of pre-assessment.
- **Get a sense of students’ motivation in the course.** Collect data about:
 - why students are taking your course
 - what they expect to get out of it, and
 - what challenges they anticipate
- **Decide what to do about different/inadequate prior knowledge.** Depending on how many students are lacking certain knowledge or skills, you might choose to:
 - tell them they cannot take the course
 - tell them how they can bridge the gap on their own
 - decide to devote one or two classes to a review of important foundational material
 - defer that to a review session ran by your TA

7. Whet students' appetites for course content

Some instructors simply hand out the syllabus and dismiss class figuring that the enrollment has not yet stabilized and it does not make sense to cover material. While there is truth to that argument, the first day of class is a great chance to stimulate interest about the course and to activate relevant prior knowledge students have about the material. Here are some suggestions for activities that orient students to the content:

- **Directed reading-thinking activity.** Lyons et al. (2003, p. 87) suggest the following exercise:
 1. On your own, list everything you can think of that might be in a book entitled [your textbook, or the name of the course if you don't have a textbook].
 2. Get with a partner, share your ideas, and then put the ideas you both generated for step 1 into categories.
 3. Give each category a name.
 4. Get with another pair and together combine your ideas. Then arrange the categories as a table of contents for this book and write it on the chart paper each group has been given.

This activity gets students talking to each other, makes them realize they bring relevant knowledge to bear, and it makes them think about a possible overarching structure for that knowledge. If that structure is appropriate, you can capitalize on that, otherwise this exercise will expose some of the misconceptions students possess, giving you a chance to correct them. The activity typically takes about half an hour.

- **Collect data from the students about issues related to course content.** This exercise gives you knowledge about the students and is relevant in social science courses that involve research. A statistics instructor always collects data on the first day and uses the survey and the students' responses to illustrate points about survey sampling.
- **Have students generate hypothesis about a typical problem in your course.** This exercise can be used to foreshadow different positions and camps in your discipline. When appropriate, you can push the students to think about how they would test their hypotheses, getting deeper into methods of inquiry appropriate for the discipline.
- **Connect course content to current events.** Bring in newspaper or magazine clips that relate to your course. Whenever you can connect your field to current events, or pop culture, or student interests, you demonstrate relevance, which increases student motivation.
- **Common sense inventory.** Nilson (2003) describes a "Common Sense Inventory" where students need to determine whether 15 statements related to the course content are true or false (e.g., in a social psychology course, "Suicide is more likely among women than men," or "Over half of all marriages occur between persons who live within 20 blocks of each other"). After paired or small group discussions, you can reveal the right answer. This works particularly well in courses where students bring in a lot of misconceptions (e.g., Introductory Physics).

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8. Inform students of logistics

Students are also looking for answers to questions such as:

- “Will I be able to get in this course that I really need?”
- “I have a conflict, is it possible to switch sections?”

You might want to provide information about the following categories:

- caps on enrollment and waitlists
- drop-add dates
- rules about course sections
- safety procedures
- other relevant administrative or logistic procedures

While this may seem like a lot of information to consider for one class, remember that the first day of class sets the tone for the entire course. Time upfront will pay off in the long run.

References

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