

# The First Day of Class

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## The First Day of Class: Advice & Ideas

Adapted from Community College of Rhode Island. "THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS: ADVICE AND IDEAS." [http://www.ccri.edu/acadaffairs/faculty/first\\_day.html](http://www.ccri.edu/acadaffairs/faculty/first_day.html) (Oct. 18, 2013)

Most faculty members realize the importance of the first day of class. Students (and teachers) form impressions quickly, and those initial observations color interactions for the rest of the semester.

In previous issues of *The Teaching Professor*, we've mentioned a variety of ideas relevant to the first day of class, but we've never actually set down a list of advice and ideas that might help you prepare for this all-important day.

### **I. Prepare for the day**

- a. All too often we take the first day for granted. "I'll just do the usual: pass out the syllabus, go through it, make the first assignment, maybe introduce the first topic, answer any questions and probably let them out early." There's nothing wrong with this approach but don't let the routine of organizational activities lull you into thinking there's no need to prepare.
- b. Think about the course, why it's important, what you'll say about the syllabus, how you'll describe the course content, and your role in presenting it to students. This is a beginning, the start of something new. You want your students to be excited, filled with anticipation. The stakes are too high to risk a boring, lackluster introduction.

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## 2. Try a little selling

- . Too often on the first day we focus on the course "do's and don'ts." We describe, often in much detail, our policies and procedures. We outline what we expect from the students. We spend a lot of time going over the grading policy. Students are very interested in what we have to say on this topic, and most of us have learned the hard way that every jot and tittle needs to be clarified in the beginning. We should not avoid discussions of procedures, policies, expectations and grading. Students need directions and priorities from the beginning.
  - a. But the question is one of focus, of balance. Avoid emphasizing the procedural matters. Unless you're giving away grades, these matters are not what will motivate and captivate students. Your content does that.
  - b. Deal with the fundamental questions: Why is this course interesting? Why are you pleased to be teaching it? What will students know and be able to do at the end of the course?
  - c. Make this as concrete as possible. Put a difficult equation on the board or ask some tough questions or provide a brief analysis of some problem, as a way of demonstrating what skills and information students will acquire. Put simply; give them the necessary guidelines, set pragmatic goals, and be openly enthusiastic and optimistic about the course.

## 3. Don't be afraid of a little showmanship

- . A song-and-dance routine is not required; in most cases it's not even, desirable. But something a bit out of the ordinary, unusual or special seems in order, since this first meeting sets the stage for the rest of the term.
  - a. Maybe short but powerful slide sequence that introduces the content. Maybe panels of students from a previous class describing the value of the content in terms of its relevance to later courses. Maybe some sort of a experimental show-and-tell. Do whatever it takes to make students realize the potential value and intrinsic interest of the course material. Remember: the effort spent preparing something-special lets the students' know-subtly, but effectively-you care about them and the course.

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## 4. Share something about yourself

- . Students are interested in their teachers. In fact, we're far more important figures in their lives than we often realize. Who are you? Why are you teaching this course? What knowledge and experience do you have with the content? Why do you teach college students? The personal information need not be highly revealing. Tell students whatever you feel comfortable having them know.

## 5. Find out something about your students

- . You need to know who's taking the course and what they might bring to it. There are several methods of doing this.
  - a. You can give them five minutes to write a short paragraph summarizing what they'd like you to know about them, maybe including some of their fears and expectations about the course. If the class is large you can ask for a show of hands in response to a series of questions: How many of you had a design course in high school? Who went to high schools with more than 2,000 students? How many of you are living on campus? How many have read such-and-such a book?
  - b. Another instructor we know combines finding out about students and sharing information about himself. "How many of you are from Monterey Park?" he'll ask. "Really? That's where I grew up." "How many of you play an instrument?" "That is my favorite hobby, and I know some great musicians." "How many of you like desserts?" "So do I. In fact it's my favorite food."
  - c. Exchanging personal information "humanizes" the classroom environment. We're not just a teacher and students who share the quest for knowledge; we're human beings, individuals who deserve recognition and respect from each other.

## 6. Encourage your students to meet

- . This is also an effective way to impact positively on the learning environment. If students know each other, they tend to listen to each other more closely. They are also less likely to disrupt the environment, because they must face the displeasure not only of the professor but of their peers as well.

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- a. Some faculty distribute two 3x5 cards to their students and have them write their names, addresses and phone numbers for faculty to keep on file.

### **7. Think: actions speak louder than words**

- . The first day may be the most important of the semester-but that doesn't mean students will read the syllabus or listen closely when you go through it. The syllabus describes in words what will happen in class. Students are waiting for the action.
  - a. Will late papers actually be marked down? Will the reading really have to be done before class? Will, in fact, the content be covered as it is scheduled on the calendar? As you go through your introduction, remember that, right from the start, your actions are already speaking just as loudly as-if not louder than-your words. So, say what you mean, and mean what you say!
  - b. Remember also that your students usually have other classes the first day, with other teachers and policies and procedures. They're generally overwhelmed with input, and often figure everything will settle out in time. They may not recall all the details and they may lose the course outline, but that's all words. What matter is what actually happens.

### **8. Design a first class that pleases you and fairly sets the course**

- . The bottom line: there is no required set of activities or duties to perform, no matter what you may assume after observing a hundred first classes. Teachers can and should approach planning for this period creatively. Whatever happens, it ought to satisfy your sense of what needs to occur, how a class ought to get started, and create appropriate expectations for students. If the day is all show and little substance or all substance with no show, students may be confused when the "normal" classroom activities begin.