


First Assignment Helps Establish Expectations

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There is a lot to cover on the first day of class. You establish procedures and convey expectations. You review the syllabus and, if you're teaching a lab, safety protocol. You also spend some time teaching some material. While you might not make an assignment for the first day, you still should use some time on the first day to talk about your expectations for students' work and how you assign grades.

Be very clear. Establish criteria for each assignment and put them in writing. That is, you must clearly tell students what you expect them to do and how the assignment should look when they turn it in. Some instructors communicate exactly how long each assignment is supposed to be and even go so far as to indicate what font and spacing students should use.

You must also communicate to students how their work will be graded. One option is to prepare a criteria sheet that lists expectations and points associated with assignments. Another option is to have a rubric with criteria on one side and quality indicators across. It might seem like excessive hand-holding to some instructors, but many students appreciate knowing exactly what they need to do and against which standards their work will be measured. Conveying this information on the first day allows students to plan their time and prioritize their various obligations.

Many students also appreciate a thorough explanation of how final grades will be calculated. A grade-calculation worksheet is a simple tool that allows students to track and monitor their performance over the course of the term. At any given moment, they can know exactly where

they stand, what grades are possible, whether they need to spend more time on this course, or whether they can reprioritize to dedicate more effort to another course. In most cases, the math on the worksheet is simple and can vastly minimize stress for students, since it eliminates any uncertainty over how they are performing.

Ultimately, clear expectations and consistent application of consequences will sustain the efficient yet friendly classroom environment that you wish to create. They will also ease stress and should encourage more active student participation.

Note: Although you explain grading on the first day, expect to review it again when you return the first assignments, papers, and exams. Once students have their graded papers in hand, you can walk them through the syllabus and how the material relates to it. You can explain how you applied your grading criteria and made final determinations about the quality of students' work. You can also help them enter their grades on their worksheet to begin to track their performance and progress.

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