

Three Focusing Activities to Engage Students in the First Five Minutes of Class

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In the previous two articles, I shared ideas to address [student accountability](#) and [student preparation](#) in the flipped classroom. Based on your feedback and emails, getting students to come to class prepared is an ongoing challenge for many of us! In this article, I'd like to keep the conversation going by zeroing in on the importance of the first five minutes of class.

When I teach workshops about designing the flipped classroom, I always encourage faculty to think carefully about the first five minutes of class. In my lesson plan template, one of the first tasks we discuss when planning in-class time is to prepare what I call a "focusing activity." A focusing activity is designed to immediately focus students' attention as soon as they walk in (or log in) to the classroom. When used in conjunction with flipped and active learning classroom models, focusing activities allow you to minimize distractions, maintain momentum between pre-class and in-class activities, and maximize the amount of class time you have to engage students in learning.

Most focusing activities take fewer than five minutes of class time and are highly flexible. Focusing activities may include collaborative activities to connect students, generate discussion, and compare ideas; individual activities where students work on their own by reading, reflecting, or writing; or a brief quiz or some other type of assessment. You can also use a focusing activity to introduce a new idea or to set the stage for what's to come during class. Finally, focusing activities can be high-tech, low-tech, or no tech.

And, as a bonus, when you use a focusing activity in the first five minutes of class, you will set the expectation that students come to class and start working immediately. When you establish this routine in your class, your students are more likely to do the pre-class work because now they see how their work is used during class.

So, let's get to it. There are many ways to start class with a focusing activity. Some require an up-front investment of time to plan and prepare, while others require very little advance work. Here are three activities with varying degrees of prep work.

Focus with a looping slide deck. This one takes a high level of prep time.

When you go to the movies, you may have noticed how the theaters use a slide deck featuring a mixture of advertisements, movie facts, and trivia questions. I used this model for a focusing activity at a new student orientation a few years ago, and it was a huge success. The slide deck featured interesting facts about the university, popular trivia questions, answers to students' most frequently asked questions, announcements about upcoming events in the nearby community, and pictures of campus landmarks.

As students arrived for the orientation, the slide deck provided a continuous loop of the same 20–25 slides. It was a great way for these new students to start conversations with others, learn more about the campus, and focus on the topic of orientation.

Why not take this approach and create a focusing activity for your class? Prepare a deck of 5–10 slides featuring content related to the course material for the day. You can post multiple-choice questions, quotes from the reading, fill-in-the-blank sentences, and so on. Enlarge a photo and ask "What is this?" to spark conversations among students when they arrive to class. Post important announcements for upcoming deadlines (e.g., "Your first draft is due Friday!") so you aren't taking up valuable class time with these types of reminders. After class, post the slide

deck to the course website as an additional resource for students to reference as needed.

Focus with an ordering exercise. This one takes a medium level of prep time.

If you have a list of processes or procedures that must be completed in a certain order, you might want to try this focusing activity. Post the list of steps or procedures on the screen and make sure the list is out of order. As students come in, ask them to start putting the list in the correct sequence based on established criteria. You can use this strategy for almost any kind of list or categories in your course. Think about criteria such as short to long, weak to strong, light to heavy, old to new, warm to cold, high to low, and so on.

Focus with drawing. This one takes a low level of prep time.

Prompt your students to draw a process, create a diagram, or illustrate a main point from the course material. A drawing might include creating a mind map of the main points of the course material so you can see how students organize information, a graph of a set of data points collected from a survey, or their interpretation of what's happening in the story or what a character might be feeling. Here are a few examples:

- Draw the cycle of how blood flows through the heart.
- Diagram the bones of the hand.
- Draw a comic strip illustrating the main character's journey.
- Color code the map to show the boundaries between counties.
- Draw the perfect phone and diagram the features.

Alternatively, you can show an existing illustration or drawing and ask students to relate it to the course material, diagram it, or analyze parts of it.

Now it's your turn. What types of focusing activities have you used in your classes?

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