

# The Last Class Session: How to Make It Count

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Maryellen Weimer, PhD

“First and last class sessions are the bookends that hold a course together.” I heard or read that somewhere—apologies to the source I can’t acknowledge. It’s a nice way to think about first and last class sessions. In general, teachers probably do better with the first class. There’s the excitement that comes with a new beginning. A colleague said it this way: “Nothing bad has happened yet.” Most of us work hard to make good first impressions. But by the time the last class rolls around, everyone is tired, everything is due, and the course sputters to an end amid an array of last-minute details. Here are a few ideas that might help us finish the semester with the same energy and focus we mustered for the first class.

**Integrate the Content**—Bring it all together. You could integrate things for your students, but it’s better if they do it themselves. In the interest of time, you’ll want to identify the pieces: the major concepts, important ideas, and a few significant supporting details. Then turn it over to the class and have students (individually or in groups) create a mind map that lays out the content terrain. Mind maps are a freer, more flexible format than concept maps. A whole-class review of some of these maps is beneficial so that map “accuracy” can be discussed and maybe corrected. If the course has several learning objectives, let each one be mapped by a different group.

**Review for the Final**—Make the students do the work. (See the [January 23, 2016, blog post](#) for ideas and activities.) Students are often at a loss when it comes to knowing how to study for comprehensive finals. Their method of choice is cramming. Consider devoting some time to working with them to develop a study game plan. How much time should they spend studying across how many days? What’s the best way to review notes? (Hint: it’s not to “go over them,” as in your eyes lightly touch the words on the page.) If they study together, what are some good ways to study with a partner or group? What strategies work when there’s lots of text material to review?

**Get and Give Useful Feedback**—Although institutions have all moved toward online, official course evaluations, why not use this last class to get and give feedback of a different sort?

- **Activity 1:** Create a “stop, start, continue” structure that lists every assignment students completed during the semester. Ask students to offer feedback on the features of each of those assignments in terms of what you should stop, start, or continue doing. Be clear that it isn’t about what they “like” but the ability of the assignment to help them develop learning skills and master the material.
- **Activity 2:** Working in pairs, have one student read the following prompt to his or her partner: “You’ve got an interview for your dream job. The interviewer, who may become your boss, is looking at your transcript and says, ‘Oh, I see you took INSERT COURSE NAME. Tell me what you learned in that course.’” The partner answers. Then the two talk about how that answer could be improved, which segues to a whole-class discussion.
- **Activity 3:** Give students feedback on how you experienced the course. Share five things you’ll remember about this class and one thing about teaching you’ve learned from these students.

**Bookend Activities**—Tie the end to the beginning.

- **Activity 1:** On the first day of class, give students a worksheet that they fill out (either in class or online). Make it a quiz that everybody gets full credit for completing. Use prompts like these: What do you know about INSERT COURSE TITLE? (No credit if you answer, “Nothing.”) What reasons justify making this a required class? (You don’t have to think they’re good reasons.) Are there skills that will you be needing as a professional that you hope to develop in this course? How many people do you know in this class? (List them

by name.) Pass out the same sheet on the last day, give students time to complete it, and then return the one they filled out the first day. Have a brief discussion about the differences and similarities of the two sheets.

- **Activity 2:** Pass out a problem set on the first day. Give bonus points for answers and for work that shows the student spent some time searching for the solution. Calm students' fears by indicating that they'll see these problems throughout the course. Pass out the same problem set on the last day and watch for smiles.

**Celebrate**—It's been a long semester. The class has a history; things have happened. Get everybody on their feet, walking around, talking, telling stories, and sharing memories. Be part of the crowd. Shake hands; pose for selfies. Bring snacks or invite students to contribute snacks. This is an absolutely unique collection of individuals who will never again be together with you and the course content. End with applause and say "Thank you" if it's a class that's made you thankful.