

First Impressions: Activities for the First Day of Class

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The old expression that you never have a second chance to make a first impression is certainly true in the classroom. Early in my career, I tried several first-day-of-class strategies, ranging from briefly introducing the course and dismissing students early to spending the entire time reviewing policies and procedures, but I began to feel that I was missing an important opportunity. Students are never more attentive than they are on the first day of class, when they're eager to determine what kind of professor they're dealing with, and although it is tempting to delay the real work of teaching and learning until the class list has stabilized, it can be difficult to change even the subtle norms that are established during this initial class. Several years ago, I tried a new approach, and I've been using it with great success ever since.

As a freshman English teacher, I am one of the first professors students encounter in their university lives, so they tend to arrive in class feeling a little uncertain and inclined to keep to themselves. My goal for the course is not to simply acquaint them with a body of knowledge, but to teach them a set of practical skills they can use to analyze texts, organize their ideas, and revise their own writing. I can only succeed if they're willing to practice these skills, so I use the first class to help them feel less intimidated and to set the tone for participation.

Arrive early

I make a point to be the first one to arrive and then personally greet the students as soon as they choose their seats. Instead of standing at the front of the room and calling their names, I introduce myself and ask them to tell me who they are so that I can find them on my class list. This also gives me a chance to ask students their nicknames as I add them to my seating chart, conveying that I am not merely taking attendance but am planning to converse with them. Because I teach students from many different cultures, I often ask them to coach me in the pronunciation of their names, which reverses the usual dynamic by making me the student and them the teachers. As I work my way through the class, I inevitably end up chatting with students, which helps put everyone at ease before the class has even begun.

After I've greeted the students, I provide them with two handouts that reinforce the impressions they are forming about me and the course. The first is the course outline, which clearly and simply defines the course objectives, assignments, and schedule, while the second handout describes my teaching philosophy, provides a rationale for every component of the course, and contains practical information, such as what to do if they miss a quiz.

By the time I'm ready to begin the day's lesson, I've not only put my students at ease, but I've dealt with any first-day butterflies I might be experiencing myself. I begin by writing 10 words on the board, my carefully chosen "Top 10 in 10" list, which we cover in 10 minutes. Students already have pages of detailed course information that will answer any questions they might have, so rather than focusing on unacceptable behaviors such as texting, I use this opportunity to convey to my students that I genuinely love my job and to highlight the rationale behind the recent revisions I've made to the course. I then tell them that instead of merely talking about the course, we're going to actually dive into the material and that they'll be actively refining their skills in every class.

Work in pairs

I begin by teaching students a skill they can immediately use to start improving their own writing. After giving a five-minute introduction to comma rules, I ask students to work in pairs on a comma exercise while I move around the classroom lending a hand. I give each pair one copy of the handouts, which ensures that they work together, and I assign one sentence per desk, which speeds up the exercise. When everyone is finished, I ask each pair to explain which rules apply to their sentence. Because the students have time to prepare and to consult with me, if necessary, they aren't nervous about reporting their answers, and they begin to internalize the classroom norm that I expect them to participate each class.

Once the students have broken the ice by completing this simple exercise, they're more willing to discuss ideas with each other. In the final portion of the class, I give the pairs 10 minutes to answer some questions about an excerpt from the nonfiction article we'll be studying the next class, and I ask each one to report the most interesting part of their discussion. Rather than exclusively following the order of the tables in the rows, I encourage other students to chime in if they arrived at different answers to the questions, and we proceed in this manner until all pairs have had a chance to report, paving the way for less-structured class discussions. I cap

the unit by showing a sample analysis of the excerpt we've just discussed, which gives students a clear idea of the assignments we'll be working on in the first few weeks of class and helps assuage any anxieties they may have about their first paper.

I end the class by giving out a brief questionnaire, which includes a final slot for students to ask a question, mention a concern, or make a comment about the course. I've found that quite a few students use this space to remark that they can't wait for the next class, so perhaps the best part of my new strategy is that it gives my students a chance to make a great first impression on me too.

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