

# First Day of Class Activity: The Interest Inventory

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August 13, 2018



The interest inventory is a simple tool to help you acquaint yourself with your students. Unlike the many icebreakers, the interest inventory is a paper-based activity and students do not have to give answers aloud in front of class. The interest inventory, therefore, helps you get to know your students privately and allows you to ask different questions than you would during oral introductions.

When creating your interest inventory, you need to consider what you need to know about your students in order to effectively teach them. The inventory is simply a list of questions about students' interests and backgrounds, but you decide which questions appear.

The questions should always include students' names and majors (or whether or not they have decided on a major). It is helpful to ask students their reasons for taking this course at this point in time, and what they would like to learn or get out of the class. These types of questions help you discover what their expectations are. Some fun icebreaker questions are valuable too. "What is the best book you've ever read?" "What kind of music is playing on your iPod?"

While the icebreaker questions might seem frivolous, they are helpful in building the classroom community and in establishing a warm, welcoming environment. Another strategy is to answer some of the icebreaker questions yourself. When you share information with students, it makes them more comfortable sharing information with you.

Keep in mind that although the interest inventory is private, you still want to use discretion with the questions. You don't want to ask anything very personal or anything embarrassing. In addition, the interest inventory also needs to include questions that will provide information about students' skills and preparedness. For example, you can have students solve some math problems or write a paragraph about a favorite book. This information will allow instructors to tailor lectures by addressing any general deficiencies or accelerating material if students are adequately prepared.

In creating your student interest inventory, ask questions that will not only help you get to know the student, but that also help you understand each student's interest and background in the subject.

## A Sample Interest Inventory

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**Get student background — name, major, year in school.** Sample questions: How does this class fit into your major? What do you plan to do after graduation?

**How do you learn best?** What have teachers and professors done in the past that helped you to learn?

How many hours do you study outside of class? Where and how do you study? (by yourself, in groups, etc.)

**Background in content.** In this section, write content specific questions. This includes math problems to solve, or writing a paragraph about the subject matter. For example: In this field, there are many theorists. Name a theorist you have studied and describe why you are influenced by his/her work.

**The fun questions that help us to get acquainted.** What is your very favorite meal? Which restaurant is your favorite? List one hobby. If you have a completely free Saturday afternoon, how would you like to spend it? If I gave you \$5,000 to spend on a trip, where would you go?

## If You Dare

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Also consider including "if you dare" questions in the interest inventory. These kinds of questions might require follow-up, so they are called "if you dare" questions because you need to be prepared for all kinds of answers and the work they might entail. However, these questions are intended to give you additional information that will help you maximize instructional efficacy.

For example, consider asking, "What did an instructor do last year that helped you learn?" Be prepared for mentions of instructors who provided exam review questions, three-hour review sessions, and pizza. You can also ask students what a teacher did that didn't help them learn. The answers to these questions will also help you understand your students' expectations of you.

Another valuable question is "What else do you want me to know about you?" Many times the answers will require that you take some kind of action. Some students might tell you that they

have Attention Deficit Disorder or a different learning disability, that they need to see written notes to understand material, or that they need extra time during exams.

You will have to determine how to respond to the answers they provide, but it often is far more useful to have the information at the start of class so that you can work with each student appropriately. Most schools have different rules and procedures to handle special accommodations for learning disabilities, but the questions allow you to have the necessary conversations with students and to direct them to available resources.

Again, be prepared for answers you have not encountered in the past. For example, a student may request unique conditions for taking exams. Knowing the information early affords the necessary time to respond to student requests prior to any exams.

Note: Be sure to bring enough copies of the interest inventory and even pencils for the first day. While the pencils may seem excessive for college-level teaching, it is important to ensure that everyone participates. You can use it as a teaching tool and tell students that you did extra work for them on the first day of class, but that the first day will be the only time you will provide them with basic tools, such as pencils, paper, or books. Let them know that you expect them to bring their materials from that point forward. Remember to state your expectations clearly; don't assume that your students know them.

*This article first appeared on Faculty Focus in 2015.*