



TIPSHEET

THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS – SURVIVAL TIPS

Prior to the first day of class

- Visit your classroom prior to the first day; familiarize yourself with the room and the audiovisual equipment.
- Ensure that your course outlines are prepared, photocopied and ready to hand out at the first class.
- Ensure that required texts have been ordered or placed on reserve. If you have an opportunity, check that they're appropriately placed and labeled at the bookstore.
- Obtain a copy of the class list.
- Familiarize yourself with administrative policy regarding prerequisites, waiting lists, late enrollment, add/drop dates.
- Meet with your TA/lab assistant to go over the course content, your expectations for their work, office hours, and other relevant issues (see the associated OTA/TATP tip sheet, Working with TAs).

The first day – Setting the tone

Your first class can accomplish a number of things. It's an opportunity to introduce the topic to students, to describe your goals and expectations for the course, and to allow students to gauge whether they are adequately prepared for the course. It's also an opportunity for you to establish the "tone" of the class: You might consider using your first class to introduce not only or even first the expectations and policies of the course, but instead the big questions the course will consider. According to award-winning U of T English professor Nick Mount, the first class is an opportunity to model scholarly curiosity in your discipline - perhaps through a specific example that would allow you to move from the particular to the general. For instance:

- A professor of physics enters class and displays a tennis ball. He claims that, in 20 minutes, he will throw the tennis ball *through* the wall. He spends 20 minutes providing a lecture that details specific concepts from physics that prove that it is indeed possible to throw an object through a solid wall. At the end of 20 minutes, he throws the tennis ball at the wall. It does not, of course, go through – but in that 20 minutes, he has described some of the counter-intuitive and mysterious properties of matter, an idea that will help to frame students' understanding of course topics throughout the semester.

You can also introduce these big questions by talking about major assumptions made about the topic, its relationship to other fields of study, the relationship between the course topic and current events, or introduce some quotes or relevant but surprising facts about the topic.

A word of caution - although jokes can help to break the ice, be careful of how you use humour in the classroom.

Introducing course details and policies

The first day is also an opportunity to draw student attention to course details, expectations, and policies. At some point during the first class, it is usually beneficial to provide:

- Some information about yourself, including your professional background and academic interests, as well as the best ways to contact you.
- Some details about the course, including its format (e.g. the relationship between lectures and tutorials or labs); prerequisites (or expected previous knowledge); an introduction to the course topic and goals; major assignments or tests; and the texts or materials you have selected, including where students can find them.
- An overview of relevant policies and support resources. Policies might address issues like academic integrity, attendance, the submission of late work, or lab safety procedures. You might also draw student attention to relevant support resources like writing and study centres, counseling and accessibility services, or useful study guides or resources.

Students

When setting the tone, it's also important to think about students' expectations about the topic or about university in general (especially for first-year students). If interactive learning activities will be part of your course, this is also a good time to introduce the students to the kind of participation you will expect of them throughout the semester. You can also use the first class to help you get to know students, and to get students to know each other, in order to pre-empt some of the challenges anonymity in the university environment can cause. Some instructors have found success in the follow strategies. You might therefore:

- Ask students to fill out information cards with their name, field of study, and a memorable detail (this can take the place of attendance).
- Clarify, via a handout or discussion, your expectations for students, including those for in-class behaviour and participation, preparation for class, assignments, and interaction with you and the TAs.
- Explain your organization of the course, including your selection of texts and materials.
- Use clickers or flashcards to poll students about any anxieties they have about the course or about university in general, or about their current familiarity with the topics of the course.
- Conduct an "ice breaker" activity, such as asking students to introduce themselves and share the last book they've read, or describe their interest in the course topic. With a small class, everyone can participate; with a large class, you may ask students to introduce themselves to a neighbour, or give small groups of students a short problem to solve and present to the rest of the class. You may encourage students to collect each others' contact information for notes or questions, or to form study groups.
- Contextualize academic regulations and standards (such as those regarding academic integrity) within the broader goals and outcomes of advanced education in the field and within the academic community.
- Provide a brief overview or review of the material students must have already mastered in order to succeed in the course.

Before dismissing the class, briefly discuss what you will be covering at your next meeting and give them something to do (eg. a reading or a short assignment).

Institutional resources for students:

Writing at the University of Toronto (<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/home>)

Academic Skills Centre, UTM (<http://www.erin.utoronto.ca/~w3asc/>)

Centre for Teaching and Learning, UTSC (<http://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~ctl/>)

Academic Integrity website (<http://www.utoronto.ca/academicintegrity/>)

Additional resources

Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, Iowa State University. (2008). First day tips for large class instruction.

Retrieved from <http://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching/firstday.html>

Center for Teaching, Vanderbilt University. (2008). First day of class. Retrieved from:

http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/resources/teaching_resources/preparing/first_day.htm

Centre for Teaching & Learning Services, Concordia University. (n.d.). The first day of class. Retrieved from

<http://teaching.concordia.ca/firstdayofclass/index.htm>

Davis, B.G. (1993). The first day of class. In *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Retrieved from

<http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/firstday.html>

Faculty of Arts & Science, University of Toronto. Guide for instructors of first year courses. Retrieved from

<http://www.utoronto.ca/ota/resources/teachingguides/FirstYear.pdf>

Faculty of Arts & Science, University of Toronto. Meeting the challenges of larger classes. Retrieved from

<http://www.utoronto.ca/ota/resources/teachingguides/LargerClasses.pdf>