



The First Class

Studies have shown that students form an impression of a teacher and subject area within the first 15 minutes of the very first class. This impression often does not vary throughout the rest of the term. Your first class is of paramount importance in establishing the climate and expectations for learning in your class for the entire term.



Before the first class:

- ✓ Know what text will be used, if any, and obtain a copy from the TA Coordinator in your department.
- ✓ Go to your assigned lab or classroom before you teach and examine the physical lay-out of the room.
 - Do you need a key?
 - Where are the light switches? the power outlets? the fan switches?
 - Is there a desk or a podium?
 - Is there an overhead projector?
 - Is there chalk or do you need to bring it with you?
 - If you're going to be showing video recordings, is there a way to darken the room (i.e. blinds)?
 - Is any of the equipment you might need locked away in cabinets—if so, from whom do you get a key?
 - How many student desks are there?
- ✓ Be sure you obtain a detailed syllabus for the course. If you need to prepare the course or lab outline for your students, be sure to include the following:
 - Full course title and course number.
 - When and where the class meets. Indicate as well the times for individual labs or tutorials in a large multi-section course.
 - Your contact information: full name, email address, office phone number (if available) and office hours. DO NOT give out your home phone number or cell phone number. Also do not give out an email address other than your utoronto email address.
 - Required text(s).
 - List of learning outcomes: "At the end of this course/lab, students will be able to..." (actually list what skills and knowledge students will acquire).
 - Description of evaluation procedures for course.
 - Course policies: attendance, submission of assignments, email correspondence, missed labs, tests and make-up tests, guidelines for in-class participation.
 - List of important dates.
 - Course outline:
 - Lecture/discussion topics and reading assignments (a weekly schedule if possible).
 - Quizzes, tests and paper due dates.
- ✓ Write up a lesson plan for each class:
 - plan out your topics and themes in advance; think of transitions between the topics (what are you actually going to say or make the students do in order to move into a new subject area or class activity?); divide your class into 20-minute sections—build in time for an introduction, a conclusion and review, and questions from students
 - prepare in advance specific, concrete examples to be used in class
 - write down some questions that you anticipate from students and prepare your possible answers
 - prepare additional handouts to clarify difficult concepts or to explain in-class activities, etc.
- ✓ Plan in advance how much time you would like each in-class activity or discussion or exercise review or problem set to take.
- ✓ Think about who your audience is: make sure the level of material you are teaching is appropriate to your group of students.

In your first class, DO...

- ✓ Arrive early with all the materials you'll need. Write the course name and number and your name and contact information on the board or overhead projector. (Optional: also write in one corner of the board an outline for what you will be doing in class that day.)
- ✓ Converse with students as they enter. Treat students with respect and show interest in them. It is important to immediately establish a rapport with them.
- ✓ Introduce yourself. Tell your students your background, interests, etc. Establish your credibility. Tell them how to address you (first name only? Mr./Ms./Mrs.?) A tip: whatever you ask your students to call you, you should use the same manner of address with your students—so, if you are asking to be called “Ms. TA”, you should address your students as “Mr. Chang”, “Ms. Digiaralomo”, etc.
- ✓ Distribute your syllabus and cover the important points.
 - Encourage students right away to make use of your office hours. Make coming to your office hours (with prepared questions) part of the participation grade for the tutorial or lab.
 - Establish the climate for the class—will the atmosphere be informal with free-flowing questions and interruptions? or will there be an established question-and-answer period? will you always start the class off or do you expect students to start off the class by brainstorming some problems?
 - Define clear expectations for your class. Be explicit about what level of participation and discussion you expect in class. Explain how much homework and preparation your students should be doing before they arrive in class. Explain what constitutes a good assignment, but don't go into detail at this point. Review your learning outcomes for the class or lab—discuss overarching goals, not just “passing the exam”.
- ✓ Start teaching the course material right away! Get the students thinking and problem-solving as soon as the administrative details are out of the way.
- ✓ “Begin as you mean to go on.” If you intend to use group work or pair work in your classes to aid discussion and problem-solving, you had best do some in your very first class. Students need to have a very clear idea up-front of what to expect in your class.
- ✓ As you teach, stop periodically to ask questions of the students to monitor their understanding. Scan the class—ask questions of students sitting in every corner, in every part of the room (i.e. don't just ask the students in the first three rows for answers, or the same students who always raise their hands).
- ✓ Wait a sufficient time after asking a question to allow students to formulate their answers. In other words, don't answer your own questions! Make sure you wait at least 10-15 seconds for an answer; sometimes even 20 or 30 seconds is better. The longer you wait, the more profound and accurate your students' answers will be when they finally speak up.
- ✓ Related to the above point—silence is okay! This is particularly true in the first class, when your students don't know each other and don't yet know you, and so may be reluctant to speak up in front of the class. Give them time to chew on the material, or put them in groups so they can ask each other questions and get to know each other in the process before addressing the whole class.
- ✓ Provide an activity or a demonstration or a short writing assignment to be done in the very first class—something that demands that the students be active rather than passive. Examples:
 - Divide class into groups of 4 or 5 and give them 5 minutes to think of a question they would like you to address in class (either in the first class or at the beginning of your second class).
 - Provide a case study or a problem for them to work through.
 - Get them to reach a consensus on what issues/topics they would like to discuss in the course.
- ✓ Try to inject a bit of fun into activities, overheads or demonstrations in order to spark students' interest.
- ✓ Encourage student interaction (i.e. get the students talking to each other and commenting on other students' questions and answers, not just talking to you). This ensures that students are actively engaged in learning from day one.

In your first class, DON'T...

- ✓ Arrive late; ignore students while you are setting up at the beginning or packing up at the end; ignore students' questions; distribute the syllabus and dismiss the class; lecture the entire period.