



FIRST DAY OF CLASS

What can we do on the first day of class? What should we do?

One common answer is simply to start teaching: "This is day one, here is lesson one, away we go." Another possibility is: "Here is the syllabus, "Read it when you get home! Our first lesson is about....."Neither of these two options seems desirable. But what are some other possibilities?

A group of effective teachers identified **nine attractive possibilities**, as described below for working with your students on the first day of school.. A teacher should not feel obliged to do all of these, but doing even one or several of them on the first day would seem to accomplish a number of important tasks for getting a class started in the right way.

1. Involve students quickly.

This can be done in a variety of ways:

- having them introduce themselves
- allowing them to think and write silently
- having a whole-class or a small-group discussion, etc.

But letting students know right from the outset that they will be active participants seems like a good approach.

2. Identify the value and importance of the subject.

Not all students come to all classes with a clear idea of why this subject is important. The teacher may need to help them understand the significance of the course. The sooner this is done, the sooner the students will be ready to invest time and energy in the task of learning the subject matter.

3. Set expectations.

This can involve such things as what the teacher considers appropriate amounts of study time and homework for the class, the importance of turning homework in on time, expectations about in-class behavior, how the teacher wants to relate to students, and how much interaction among students is desired. The first day also offers an opportunity to find out what expectations the students have of the teacher and of the class.



4. **Establish rapport.**

Almost any class will be more enjoyable for both the teacher and the students if they know each other a bit. This exchange can be started with introductions, sharing some background information, etc.

5. **Reveal something about yourself.**

Sometimes students can relate to the teacher more productively if they can see him or her as a human being, i.e., as something more than just an authority figure or subject matter expert. Sharing personal stories and being able to laugh at yourself can help this process.

6. **Establish your own credibility.**

Sometimes this happens automatically, but at other times students need to know about the teacher's prior work experience, travel experience, or research and publications in an area. Having this knowledge can help students gain confidence that the "teacher knows what she or he is talking about."

7. **Establish the "climate" for the class.**

Different teachers prefer different classroom climates: intense, relaxed, formal, personal, humorous, serious, etc. Whatever climate you want, you should try to establish this early and set the tone for the rest of the semester.

8. **Provide administrative information.**

This often takes the form of going through the syllabus, presuming you have a syllabus with this information in it: what reading material the students will need; what kind of homework will be involved; what block you have your planning period ; how the class grade will be determined; what your policies are regarding attendance, late papers, make-up exams, etc.

9. **Introduce the subject matter.**

Generally this introduction will be facilitated by starting with some kind of overview of the subject.

- What is it?
- What are the parts of the subject?



- How is it connected to other kinds of knowledge?

BREAK THE ICE

Final Note:

Remember that it is imperative that you do on the first day whatever it is you want the class to do the rest of the semester. If you want them to discuss, discuss on the first day. If you want them to work in small groups, find something for them to do in small groups on the first day.

The first day of class is usually spent in part by getting acquainted and establishing goals. Icebreakers are techniques used at the first session to reduce tension and anxiety, and also to immediately involve the class in the course. Use an icebreaker because you want to, not as a time filler or because teaching guides say one should be used. Listed below are several examples of icebreakers.

- **INTRODUCE MYSELF.** Participants introduce themselves and tell why they are there. Variations: Participants tell where they first heard about the class, how they became interested in the subject, their occupations, home town, favorite television program, or the best book they have read in the last year.
- **INTRODUCE ANOTHER.** Divide the class into pairs. Each person talks about him/herself to the other, sometimes with specific instructions to share a certain piece of information. For example, "The one thing I am particularly proud of is..." After five minutes, the participants introduce the other person to the rest of the class.
- **CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS.** Have students write down one or two adjectives describing themselves. Put these on a stick-on badge. Have class members find someone with similar or opposite adjectives and talk for five minutes with the other person.
- **I'VE DONE SOMETHING YOU HAVEN'T DONE.** Have each person introduce themselves and then state something they have done that they think no one else in the class has done. If someone else has also done it, the student must state something else until he/she finds something that no one else has done.
- **FIND SOMEONE.** Each person writes on a blank index card one to three statements, such as favorite color, interest, hobby, or vacations. Pass out cards so everyone gets someone else's card. Have that person find the person with their card and introduce themselves.
- **FAMOUS PERSON.** People write a famous name on a piece of paper and pin it on someone else's back. Person tries to guess what name is pinned on his/her by



- asking others around the room yes or no questions. Variation: Use famous place instead of famous person.
- **MY NAME.** People introduce themselves and tell what they know about why they have their name (their mother wanted to name me after her great aunt Helen who once climbed Pike's Peak in high heels, etc.). It could be the first, middle or nickname.
 - **HOW DO YOU FEEL?** Ask the students to write down words or phrases that describe their feelings on the first day of class. List the responses on the blackboard. Then ask them to write down what they think you as the teacher are feeling this first day of class. List them on the blackboard in a second column and note the parallels. Briefly comment on your feelings and then discuss the joint student/teacher responsibilities for learning in the course.
 - **COMMON GROUND.** This works best for small groups or for each small group sitting together as a team (4-6 learners). Give the group a specific time (perhaps 5 minutes) to write a list of everything they all have in common. Tell them to avoid the obvious ("we're all taking this course"). When time is up, ask each group how many items they have listed. For fun, ask them to announce some of the most interesting items.
 - **ME TOO.** This also works best for small groups or for each small group sitting together as a team (4-6 learners). Everyone in the group gets 10 pennies/toothpicks/scrap of papers, etc. The first student states something he/she has done (e.g. water skiing). Everyone else who has done the same thing admits it and puts one penny in the middle of the table. Then the second person states something (e.g. I have eaten frogs' legs). Everyone who has done it puts another penny in the center. Continue until someone has run out of pennies.

These are just a few of the hundreds of icebreakers. Be creative and design your own variations. Don't be afraid to experiment and try different approaches, and above all, have fun and start that most important first day of class on the right foot!

Student Feedback

At the end of the first block, give students two minutes to write their reaction to the first day. These should be anonymous so you get an accurate sense of the students' views. This can provide feedback on doubts, or questions that students were afraid to raise. It can also begin to build a learning climate in which they have responsibility for thinking about learning in this class.



Checklist For The First Day

1. Am I energized to be enthusiastic about this class?
2. Is the classroom arranged properly for the day's activities?
3. Is my name, course title, and number on the chalkboard?
4. Do I have an ice-breaker planned?
5. Do I have a way to start learning names?
6. Do I have a way to gather information on student backgrounds, interests, and expectations for the course, questions, and concerns?
7. Is the syllabus complete and clear?
8. Have I outlined how students will be evaluated?
9. Do I have announcements of needed information ready?
10. Do I have a way of gathering student feedback?
11. When the class is over; will students want to come back? Will you want to come back?