

Five Suggestions for a Successful First Class

Center for the Enhancement of Learning & Teaching
108 Bromfield Road | Somerville, MA 02143 | 617 627 4000 | celt@tufts.edu

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The first day of class is always exciting. Even seasoned faculty become anxious and often forget to focus on the group's relationship, leaping directly into the course content. The first meeting of a new class lays the foundation for the whole semester, and is critical to student retention. You have the opportunity in the first class meetings to create an atmosphere that will encourage student participation and engagement, adding to the richness of the experience.

1. It is important to take attendance and get to know your students

- If class is a reasonable size, confirm those in attendance correspond with your list of enrolled students.
- Pass around a sign in sheet to obtain relevant information that might be useful to you in communication with your students (telephone, email, background, learning issues, other concerns they might have upon beginning the course.)
- Decide whether you prefer that students keep the same seats throughout the semester or not. If so, prepare a seating chart to make it easier for you to call on students by name. You can use name tents if it is a large class, and challenge yourself to remember as many student names as possible.

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2. Introductions are an important way to establish a rapport

- Introduce yourself and perhaps tell a little personal story or a little about your life. Specify how you want students to address you.
- Establish your credibility in relation to the course topic – relate your background and research.
- Have students introduce themselves and share something either about themselves, where they are originally from, or why they chose the course – even in a large class, you can ask them to do this in small groups. Introductions give you another chance to learn students' names and begin to foster a positive class atmosphere.
- Use the "[Getting to Know You](#)" form developed by Barbara Oakley of Oakland University.

3. Identify the value and importance of the introduced subject

For some, this is the easiest part. What drew you to the field, what is exciting about the topic, what is current about it? Why should students spend a semester exploring this subject?

4. Provide administrative information

- Hand out an informative, possibly artistic, user-friendly syllabus that includes the objectives for the class, your expectations around attendance and work, dates of scheduled exams, due dates of papers, and a reading list. Spend a few minutes describing what the books and readings listed are about and how they relate to the theme of the course.
- Convey expectations regarding appropriate amounts of study time and homework assignments. Provide, in writing, policies regarding attendance, grading, late assignments, make-up exams, and explain the differences between academic dishonesty and legitimate collaboration.
- Announce your office hours and location (then hold them without fail) and the best way to contact you, and how quickly you will respond. It's absolutely fine to tell students that they should not expect an answer to their emails within the hour around the hour. Let them know how you prefer to contact the class members.

5. End by determining whether students are “on the same page” and ready to move on

As faculty, we often want to relate so much material, that we forget to pause and take the pulse of the class before moving on. It is a good idea to end the content portion of each class five minutes early in order to summarize information, raise and answer questions, and preview the next class. On the first day, end class ten minutes early in order to pass out an evaluation card for students to provide informal feedback regarding the class. (e.g. Is there anything unclear?) Collect the cards and use them to transition to the beginning of the next class. Another version of this is to ask students to write a “One Minute Paper” where students write for one minute about their thoughts on the topic or lingering questions. If you want to learn more about “one minute papers” and other quick assessment techniques, feel free to come and browse the CELT library (an annotated bibliography of the books we make available can be found on our [website](#)).

Assign homework and suggest an approach for the assigned reading. For example, ask students to keep in mind certain key points when completing their assignments, to connect their work to a current event, etc.

Follow Up Soon After the First Class Meeting

By following up with students right after the first class, you convey that you are proactive and you set a model that will enhance course satisfaction for you and your students. It is a good idea to review the students’ evaluations of the first class meeting, if you have done them, and attempt to discern any patterns to the comments. Then write an email to send to students. In the email, you should:

- Thank students for their comments on the evaluation.
- Address questions having implications for the entire class.
- Clarify any information that you feel was not clearly presented in class.
- Remind students of the assignment for the next class.
- Encourage students to contact you individually if they have questions regarding the course and the material presented. If you prefer to receive questions by email – or on the contrary only during office hours – make that explicit.
- Conclude with a statement emphasizing your enthusiasm about the semester and your subject matter.