

## The First Day of Class

One of the most important times in the semester is the very first day of class. The first class is an opportunity to make an immediate impression on your students and to set the tone for the course. What does it mean to set the tone of a course? What should you do during that pivotal first day of class to have students take you seriously, as well as your course and their time and energy spent in it over the semester? Simply handing out the syllabi and dismissing your students on the first day of class is no longer an adequate approach. Instead, consider using a systematic approach to set the tone:

1. First, welcome your students to the class in a friendly, yet professional manner. Ensure your students that you care about their success, but inform them that they will be challenged and that you expect excellence. You might even make the point that learning is a shared enterprise between student and professor. However, remind your students that, ultimately, they are responsible.
2. No matter what subject you teach, it is important to help students realize the value of the class they are taking with you by pointing out the skills the course helps to cultivate. For instance, if you are an English professor, you can tell your students your class will improve their communication and critical thinking skills. If you are a math professor, help students realize they can improve their quantitative reasoning skills.
3. Explain the distinguishing features of your course and recommend specific strategies that will help them be successful.
4. Clearly outline expectations for behavior and participation. Share your ideal course environment and delineate the type of interactions conducive to maximizing learning in your classroom.

After welcoming students and speaking for a few minutes about the course, stop talking. At this point, about 10 or 15 minutes into the class, it's a perfect time for an icebreaker. Try not to pick anything too complicated or one that has too many steps. The purpose of the activity is for students to learn something about their classmates.

One easy and useful icebreaker activity is to have students create name cards for themselves. Provide one blank sheet of paper to each student and instruct them to fold the paper horizontally so that it stands up like a tent on their desk. After folding the paper, have students write their name in large letters on the middle of the card. Next, tell students

to draw symbols or use words to describe who they are in each of the four corners of the paper. Alternatively, you could ask four questions that elicit detailed responses from your students. For example, you might ask your students, "What is your career objective? If you had your own radio station, what kind of music would it play? What is your major? And do you prefer dogs or cats?" You can also create your own questions. After students have completed their cards, go around the room and ask everyone to introduce themselves by using their name cards. You can then use the name cards during the first few days of class to more easily call on students and to learn their names. The entire icebreaker process should take less than ten minutes.

Next, transition into covering the syllabus with your students. Walk through important points in the document and encourage your students to continually refer to it throughout the semester. You might even include a hidden extra credit opportunity within the syllabus or in some way incentivize your students to review the document in its entirety. Your syllabus will no doubt include grading requirements. Take time to explain the difference between an assignment that counts as only 5 percent of the overall grade versus a major assignment that counts as 30 percent. Be sure to include in the syllabus course policies related to common discipline concerns such as cell phone usage, attendance requirements, and class participation. Point out those specific sections that detail cell phone and attendance policies, along with other concerns you feel are important to address. As you review the syllabus, be sure to build in multiple opportunities for students to ask questions.

Once you have completed a thorough, yet succinct, review of the syllabus, there could still be time remaining before the end of class. This remaining time is perfect for teaching a short lesson. Provide your students with a preview of your teaching style by sharing material that is captivating and relevant to your students' interests. Remember, you are learning about your students during this first day, but they are also learning about you. If time still remains before the end of class, ask students to exchange contact information with a fellow classmate if they're comfortable doing so. Explain that if a student cannot attend class, they can contact you directly to learn about missed material, but also encourage them to connect with each other for missed notes or assignments. This teamwork between students develops a sense of community in the classroom and encourages your students to exercise responsibility and independence.

If at this point on the first day, the class is still not over, do

---

not end it early. If you end class even a few minutes early, students will expect you to dismiss them early throughout the semester. To that end, any potential “routine” you initiate the first day, positive or negative, will become a persistent expectation. Continuing class until the end of the scheduled meeting time sets the right tone and sends a clear, but positive, message that your class is to be taken seriously.

After a successful first day of class, your responsibility for enforcing classroom policies is not over. In fact, it is only just beginning! A well-rounded professor knows how to operate his or her classroom from pedagogical, intellectual, and organizational standpoints. A central goal of sound classroom management is to create an optimal learning environment designed for student access and success by setting the example you want students to follow, beginning on the first day of class.

**Nicholas Vick**, *Director, Learning Commons*

For more information, contact the author at Tallahassee Community College, 444 Appleyard Drive, Tallahassee, FL 32304. Email: [vickn@tcc.fl.edu](mailto:vickn@tcc.fl.edu)