

# How to Teach a Good First Day of Class

By [James M. Lang](#)

I was 21 years old when I first stepped into a college classroom as an instructor. My master's program had assigned me to teach a composition course and gave me a brief orientation to teaching the week before the semester began. I was so close in age to my students, so nervous about how they would perceive me, and so uncertain about what I was doing that I had precisely one goal for the first day of the semester: Get through it.

I managed to achieve that modest goal. But over the course of the next couple of decades of full-time teaching, I have become much more aware of the extent to which the first day of class sets the tone for everything that follows. In [her book](#), *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom With the Science of Emotion*, the psychologist [Sarah Rose Cavanagh](#) explores how humans quickly make initial judgments of people, on the basis of thin slices of evidence. “On the first few days of class,” she explains, “students will be forming their impressions of you, and this impression may be more important than much of what you do later.”

On that first day, I would argue, your students are forming a lasting impression not just of you as a teacher but of your course, too. Their early, thin-slice judgments are powerful enough to condition their attitudes toward the entire course, the effort they are willing to put into it, and the relationship they will have with you and their peers throughout the semester.

So that first class meeting is a big deal. You want to give students a taste of the engaging intellectual journey they will undertake in the coming weeks — and you have great flexibility in how you go about it. Helping you to make that opening session as effective as possible, whatever your discipline, is the goal of this online guide. What you can expect to find here:

- I'll start, as we academics so love to do, with a little bit of theory — specifically, four core principles that can help shape your planning for the first day of your course.
- Next, I'll cover the logistics of a successful first day, including managing the space and technology as well as getting to know your students.
- To show you how to put the principles and the logistics into practice, I will provide examples of what a good set of first-day activities might look like in four disciplines.
- I'll finish with some suggestions for how to support the good work you have done on the first day with some follow-up activities.

# Four Key Principles

As you devise your plan of attack, these four principles can help you decide which activities and approaches will best draw your students into the course and prepare them to learn.

## Principle No. 1: Curiosity

Too many college courses are presented to students as boxes of content: “British Literature From 1800 to the Present,” “Inorganic Chemistry,” “Principles of Sociology.” We walk into the room on the first day of the semester, open this box of knowledge and skills for the students, hand it over, and expect them to give it back three months later in the form of a final exam. The first class meeting usually affirms that approach. We tell students all about what we will cover throughout the semester, even though they might have no particular or prior interest in our subject matter.

Instead, consider the first day as your best opportunity to spark students’ curiosity and invite them into a fascinating intellectual journey. In [his book](#), *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain argues that instructors should build and present learning experiences around deep questions and problems. Highly effective college instructors recollect what first fascinated them about their discipline, pay attention to what fascinates students today, and make a connection with those issues at the opening of the semester. Such instructors reflect upon why the course should matter, and work to convey the significance of its content to students as well as to their world beyond the classroom.

All of which is why I can’t recommend strongly enough: *Do not begin the first day of the semester by immediately handing out the syllabus*. Instead, spark their curiosity about the content first, and then demonstrate — with a review of the syllabus — how the course content can help satisfy that curiosity. (I’ll offer some examples of how to do that in various types of courses below.)

## Principle No. 2: Community

We do not teach brains on sticks. We teach human beings who are inspired by wonder, driven toward community, beset by fears and anxieties, and influenced in countless other ways by aspects of their lives beyond the purely cognitive. For both

you and your students, those emotions will be at a peak on the first day of the semester, and they can have a significant influence on what happens in your classroom.

You can support those emotions on the first day by fostering a sense of community in the room — even one filled with several hundred students. The intellectual journey you are taking together comes in the form of a caravan, and while you might be the leader, you want all of them to contribute to the learning experiences you will be creating for them. How do you convey that?

- **Humanize yourself to the students.** Talk with as many of them individually as you can, and provide opportunities for them to meet and communicate with one another. Humanizing yourself can take the form of humorous asides, occasional self-disclosure, or a more formally narrated description of your own intellectual journey. Don't overdo it, though. Too much humanizing can easily tip into oversharing. Keep the primary focus on the course rather than on yourself.
- **Get students talking to one another.** Some faculty members like icebreakers or warmup activities on the first day of class, and you can find a treasure trove of practical suggestions for such activities from the [Equity Unbound team at OneHE](#). I'm not an icebreaker person, and you don't have to be, either. If you feel more comfortable staying focused on course content, by all means do so. Divide students into pairs or small groups, give them a simple course-related task to complete, and offer a brief injunction before they start: "Make sure you introduce yourself before you start talking."
- **Greet each student, if you can.** That's impossible if your course has an enrollment of 200, but it's easily done in a class of 20 or 30. Instead of standing at the front of the room and calling out students' names from the roster sheet, get to class early and walk around, asking students for their names and a fact or two about themselves: class year, major, hometown. Let them know you're glad they have joined you for the semester.

The more comfortable the students feel with you and with one another from the beginning, the more comfortable they will be participating throughout the semester.

## Principle No. 3: Learning

You don't have to wait until the second class meeting for students to start learning in your course. But that doesn't mean you have to jump right into content delivery on the first day. Here are two ways to get them learning on the first day.

- **Ask students to try a cognitive task before they are ready.** That’s one of the most effective ways to spark learning, according to excellent evidence. This trying-before-they’re-ready can take many forms: It might involve attempting to solve a problem before they have the skills they need to be successful, or working to complete a challenging task that they will face again at the end of the course. The idea is to require students to draw upon whatever knowledge they might bring into the room. As they retrieve and work with that knowledge, they are creating what [the authors of \*Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning\*](#) call “fertile grounds” for new knowledge and skill acquisition. Moreover, the students’ partial or unsuccessful attempts to complete the task will give you a clear view of the current state of their understanding — knowledge you can use to shape the opening weeks of the course.
- **Invite students to think about the course from a metacognitive perspective.** (But don’t freak them out by using the word “metacognitive.”) In other words: What kinds of learning strategies will they have to use in order to be successful in the course? What kinds of support will they need from you to make those strategies work? Which strategies have been effective, or ineffective, for them in the past? For example, ask students on the first day to reflect upon the best and worst classes they have taken in your field (or related fields), and to describe what made those courses successful for them, or not. Put their responses on the board. Then invite them each to draw up a list of individual actions they will need to take to do well in the course, and a list of actions they would like to see taken by you and their peers. Those lists can be shared and discussed in class, or afterward on the learning-management system.

Whichever approach you use, the most important element is basic: Set aside a chunk of class time on that first day for students to engage in cognitive work of some kind. Writing class? Have them write on the first day. A problem-solving course? Have them work on a problem. A discussion-based class? Get them talking. The point is that if you want your students actively engaged in learning throughout the semester, actively engage them in learning on the first day.

## Principle No. 4: Expectations

The previous three principles will guide you in devising creative, engaging activities for opening day. But you can’t ignore the fact that students will bring a host of expectations — things they will want to know right away — into the room with them. What shape will the course take? What materials will they have to buy? What tests, projects, and other assignments will they be required to complete? Are there any special obligations (such as field trips or community service) that might differentiate your course from a typical one?

An important practical reason for answering those questions on the first day is that not all students who show up will remain enrolled. Although you might be tempted to take it personally, my experience as an academic adviser suggests that students tend to switch in and out of courses during the first week because of logistical issues in their academic and personal lives. A student might discover on the first day that three of her courses require extensive amounts of writing, and decide to postpone one of them until next semester, so as not to be overwhelmed with deadlines. Or a student might switch into another section after he discovers that you have a required field trip that conflicts with a family wedding.

So allot at least some time of Day 1 to outlining the parameters of the course beyond subject matter: materials, assessments, policies, key dates and deadlines. You'll have all of that information handily available to you in the form of [your carefully constructed syllabus](#). I don't recommend reading the entire syllabus aloud in the first class. Give students copies in print and online, and then highlight the major elements. Set aside time for questions. Some instructors give students a no-points or low-stakes [syllabus quiz](#) on or immediately after the first day of class, ensuring that they get familiar with the most important aspects of the course.

## Before the First Day

To put the four core principles into practice requires a few practical considerations before the semester starts. Doing some advance work to familiarize yourself with the students, the space, and the technology available in the classroom will support the activities you have planned.

## The Students

I often teach English composition, a class designed for first-year students at my college. Some years ago, I planned a first-day activity that asked students to think about what they had learned in their high-school writing classes. When I arrived in the classroom, however, I discovered — while looking over the roster for the first time — that more than half of the students were sophomore and juniors who had put off taking composition until now. My first-day planning fell apart, and I had to devise another strategy on the fly.

I learned from that experience the importance of taking a close look at the roster in advance of my planning, and uncovering whatever I could learn about the students before the semester began. At my college, the roster lists only the class year and contact details of each student. But even that basic information helps me understand the level at which I should pitch the opening of the course, and the kinds of first-day activities or examples that will resonate with the actual students in the room, instead of the ones I imagined would be there.

Your institution's learning-management system offers you opportunities to gather information about your students. You can send a message, or post an announcement, before the first class asking them to introduce themselves — via a discussion post, a short video they make with their phones or laptops, or an email sent directly to you with some basic information about themselves.

Being able to recognize and make connections with students on the first day will go a long way toward creating that strong sense of community in the course.

## **The Space**

When I was a new teacher, still suffering from an excess of first-day jitters, a senior faculty member gave me some advice that had always worked to calm his own nerves. He would go to his new classroom a few days before each semester and get to know the space. He would make a full walking circuit of the room, getting himself comfortable with every corner, every angle, every perspective. That allowed him to teach more confidently on the first day.

I've been following that practice myself ever since — not only in my courses, but also when I have to give presentations at conferences or on other campuses. This ritual not only helps alleviate those first-day nerves but also informs me what kinds of adjustments I am going to have to make that semester for group work or other class activities. I see how much board space I have, whether the seats and chairs or table are fixed or have wheels, and whether I happen to be teaching in a space that has a thick column in the center of the room (as was the case on my campus until a few years ago until that classroom was, thankfully, closed).

Get a preview of the room before the semester begins. Stand at the front and say a few words. Write something on the board, then walk to the back of the room or sit in a seat. Envision yourself in the shoes of your students.

## **The Technology**

If you plan to use any technology in support of your teaching — either on the first day or during the semester — you will, of course, want to test it in advance. How many times have you sat groaning inwardly while a conference presenter stands at the front of the room flummoxed by some technological issue that should have been addressed before the start of the presentation? Spending the first class session exclaiming in frustration at a confusing control panel won't set the stage for an effective semester.

Get into the classroom before the first day and test everything you might conceivably use throughout the semester. Plug in your laptop and make sure you know how to ensure it will appear on the classroom screen. If you're going to show a video, check the volume. If you're going to use polling or other activities that require students to use a connected device, ensure that the room has good wireless connectivity.

And remember that teaching technologies are not just digital — any tool that will support your teaching counts as technology. Make sure the board erases, the chairs can be moved, and that you have a space for your materials at the front of the room.

Do all of this well enough in advance so that you can contact your IT department or buildings-and-grounds office to resolve any problems before the semester starts.

## **The Wardrobe Question**

Like it or not, students will notice what you are wearing and how you present yourself on the first day of class. If you wear casual clothes, encourage students to call you by your first name, and put the desks in a circle, you are forming a different impression than if you wear a three-piece suit, refer to yourself as “Doctor,” and stand at a podium. Neither of those impressions is necessarily right or wrong, but they do have implications for the level of authority you project in the classroom.

Some faculty members wish to project a strong sense of authority, emphasizing their expertise and leadership. For them, more-formal attire and forms of address will support that perception. Others wish to present themselves as informal guides or companions on the course journey; casual dress and a relaxed manner can help convey that. New and younger instructors often feel compelled to emphasize their authority

early in the semester, while this 49-year-old, in his 20th year of full-time teaching, feels pretty comfortable wearing jeans on the first day of the semester.

Of course, this question is an [especially pressing one](#) for [female and nonwhite](#) faculty members, whose authority [tends to be subject to more criticism](#) than that of white men. Across higher education, we should all be working to dismantle the prejudices that would [lead students to question the authority](#) of professors based on these aspects of our identities. But if you are concerned that [some aspect](#) of [your identity](#) might cause students to question your authority or take you less seriously as an expert in your field, you can [find advice](#) on how to proceed via the links in this paragraph.

## The First Day of Class

Don't think you have to hit all four of the core principles in the first 50 or 75 minutes of the semester (although doing so is less difficult than you might imagine). Some well-designed activities can allow you to hit two or three at the same time. The following four models — for courses in English composition, history, psychology, and linear algebra — demonstrate how a set of well-designed first-day activities can put the principles into practice.

### English Composition

This model draws from my own experience in teaching a composition course that has a “community-engaged” focus — my students interact with a local nonprofit organization throughout the semester, producing written material for its website. Here's how I spend the first day of class:

- I arrive 10 minutes early. Roster in hand, I walk around the room and introduce myself to students, asking them questions about their major/intended major, hometown, and any previous writing courses they might have taken.
- I make a brief introduction to the grounding principle of the course — that writing has the power to change their lives for the better, both in their academic work and in their lives outside of the classroom. Indeed, writing probably has already helped determine their future, in the form of their college application essays.
- Students spend 15 minutes writing a paragraph in response to the following prompts: *“When has a piece of writing, something you either wrote or read,*



*made a significant impact on your life? What qualities or context made that piece of writing so significant?"*

- Next, I ask students to introduce themselves to two or three people sitting near them, and to work in small groups to create a list of qualities of powerful writing. After 10 minutes, I shift the activity to a classwide discussion. We use the whiteboard to list and categorize the qualities they have identified, noting along the way the ones that connect with our learning objectives.
- The class finishes with a review of the syllabus, with a focus on how the community-engaged learning they will complete has the power to make an impact.
- After students leave, I take a picture of the board, with the intention of showing students the images on the last day of the semester and inviting them to consider how their perspectives have changed.

## A History Survey Course

This model comes from [an excellent blog post](#) by [Cate Denial](#), chair of the history department at Knox College, on how she conducts the first day of the semester in her lower-level history courses.

- After introducing herself, she offers students the opportunity to ask any question about her they would like. "I do this," she explained to me in an email, "because I will be asking so many questions of them during the term, it only seems fair to let them start by asking a whole lot of questions of me! Those questions vary wildly — from whether I have pets to what we'll be covering in the course, from my favorite binge-watch on Netflix to how long I've been at Knox."
- Then she hands out a "document packet" of sources related to a single historical event. The content of each packet varies from student to student; some items are in every packet, others are not. For this exercise, Denial chooses a historical event that she will *not* cover in the course, in order to ensure that all students — including those who might have signed up for the course because of existing interest or expertise — will have to struggle with unfamiliar sources.
- Students are put into random groups — selected in advance by the instructor — and asked "to put the sources in the order that makes the most sense to them, and tell the story the sources supply." This activity, Denial says, takes 15 to 20 minutes. Afterward, each group is asked to share their story with the class.
- No two stories end up alike, and Denial then leads a discussion about that, which allows her to introduce a core theme of the class: "History changes as more sources are found, old ones are re-examined, and new theories suggest new interpretive frameworks. For the duration of the term, every student in the class will be a working historian, putting sources together to understand one part of our collective past."

- She finishes the day by distributing the syllabus and assigning students their first homework assignment: Annotate the syllabus with comments and questions. This serves dual purposes: allowing her to introduce the skill of annotation and encouraging a close reading of the syllabus. She and the students discuss their annotations in the next class session.

## An Upper-Level Psychology Course

Sarah Rose Cavanagh, an [associate professor](#) of psychology at Assumption College and [author of](#) *The Spark of Learning*, uses a slide presentation to guide students through the first day of her upper-level “Brain and Behavior” course. Here’s how it works:

- First she introduces herself, with a focus on her academic background and research, along with some personal (dog-related) information.
- Knowing that many students in this course are there only to fulfill a mandatory “biological” cornerstone of the psychology major, she announces that she is, nonetheless, determined to convince them that the subject matter is fascinating. She presents some philosophical puzzles (What does it mean that we’re using the organ we’re studying in order to study ... the organ we’re studying?). She talks about remarkable cases of brain injury and recovery. And she shows a trailer for a popular movie suggesting that we could become cognitively limitless through neuroenhancement.
- Working in small groups, students anonymously complete an assignment aimed at testing their background knowledge of the brain — their ability to label its parts and functions, the parts of a neuron, and other foundational concepts. This exercise provides both a refresher for students and a benchmark of where this particular group stands in terms of previous preparation.
- Next, Cavanagh collects information about her students. They each fill out a sheet, listing their name and major and answering two key questions: “*What one topic do you hope you will learn about this semester?*” and “*What is one weird thing that your brain does?*” The latter question is always good for some memorable tales. Brains are weird.
- Discussion in her course happens in a variety of ways, some of which involve students moving around the classroom. To demonstrate how this works and to set it as the norm on the first day, she shows students slides with “You Must Choose” statements on them. Then she asks students to move to the side of the room concordant with their views and explain their choice to people standing near them. Some of those choices relate to course content (“True or False: You use only 10 percent of your brain”) and

some are simply designed to loosen up and engage the students (“*Star Wars* or *Star Trek*”? “Cats or Dogs”?).

- She finishes with a final set of slides featuring highlights of the syllabus and previews of the course content to come.

## A Mathematics Course

This model comes from [a blog post](#) by Derek Bruff, director of the [Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching](#), who wrote a book on the use of personal-response systems (often called “clickers”) and peer instruction in the classroom. Since those tools form an essential part of his teaching, he gets students using them on the first day of his linear-algebra course.

- Before the first class, he identifies a math problem that students should be able to solve by the end of the semester, and phrases it as a multiple-choice question. One such problem gives students information about changes in the spotted-owl population and asks them to consider the following question: “Given these rates, in the long run does the population increase, decrease, or level off?”
- Students work in small groups to come up with an answer, and then register it via their clickers. By displaying and discussing their responses, he guides them to the correct answer.
- Then Bruff proposes another question, this one more complex than they are prepared to answer.
- He concludes by noting that the course content will fill the gap between what they were capable of doing on the first day and what they could not yet master: “This [exercise] allowed me to make the point that we’ll have to develop some mathematical modeling tools in order to analyze this situation accurately and make valid predictions. This, I hope, provides students with some motivation to learn about those tools later in the semester.”
- By engaging students in this kind of activity on the first day, Bruff is shaping their expectations about the kinds of in-class activities they will experience throughout the semester. He finds that students often expect a “chalk-and-talk” math class, which isn’t how he teaches. They’re more open to active learning pedagogies if they know from the first day that that’s how his class operates.
- And what about the syllabus? Bruff hands that out to students at the end of the first session, asking them to read it and bring questions to the next class. He finds the syllabus discussion less inviting than his problem-solving activity, particularly for the nonmajors who typically take his math courses, so he saves all the syllabus talk for Day 2.

One more issue to keep in mind as you plan for the first day: Context matters. What works for first-year students might not work as well for seniors. Obviously you can't ask students new to college to reflect upon their previous college science courses. Likewise, students in a senior seminar might already know one another, so icebreaker activities will be superfluous for them.

## **After the First Day**

Whatever you do on Day 1 will require some follow-up. Here are three pathways you can use to extend the reach of your first-day activities.

### **The Learning Management System**

A quick and easy way is via your institution's learning-management system. Record a brief, informal video to convey your impressions of what students produced or discussed in class. Show your enthusiasm for a great start, remind them about any conclusions drawn, and point them to aspects of the course that will connect to the first-day activities. If you don't like making videos, do it in writing. You could supplement both approaches with links to relevant resources, articles, or videos.

In either case, finish your response, recorded or written, by pointing forward. How does what you accomplished on that first day set the stage for what will happen on the second day, the third, and beyond?

### **The Next Class and Beyond**

Or, you can do all of that in person on the second day of class. Produce a PowerPoint with the key findings from your first meeting, or a word cloud with their impressions of the course content. If the students created a list of activities that would help them succeed in the course, pull their ideas together into a one-page handout for successful learning.

As the semester continues, find small ways to link your opening-day activities to the current course content. In a senior seminar I teach on 21st-century British literature and culture, we watch a segment of the 2012 London Olympics on the first day, and analyze what it tells us about the British values that the organizers wanted to project

to the world. As the semester continues, I refer back to those values whenever we can. Occasionally students, too, will refer back to that video in our class discussions, a connection I always affirm.

## **The Last Day of the Semester**

I always like to close the course by pointing students back to where we started — in part, because I like to show them how far they have traveled in their learning. In my survey course on British literature, on the first day we do a group brainstorming session in which I ask students to tell me what associations they have with the word “British.” Their impressions are always woefully limited — they always mention the royal family, for example, and never say a word about the enormous impact that immigration has had on Britain in the past half-century. On the final day of class, when I show them images of the board from the first day, they can see how deeply their knowledge of British history and literature has grown.

*From the start think about how to connect the first day to the last day, and vice-versa.*

Your efforts to link back to Day 1 will have the greatest impact if you can show students visually what they did. So put that on your agenda, too, for the first class. Take pictures of the board that day. Make copies of worksheets or surveys they filled out. Keep discussion-board posts or videos preserved throughout the semester. Now pull those bits of evidence together into a quick presentation.

## **The First Day Online**

The four core principles that will guide you to an effective first day in a face-to-face classroom will do the same work for you in an online course.

In the opening module of an online course, you can still identify and emphasize a problem or question to spark the curiosity of students, and you can still begin a content module by asking students to engage in some task before they are ready. But in the online environment, you face larger challenges in terms of building community and outlining expectations for the course, especially if you are teaching students who aren’t accustomed to taking online courses.

Quick videos and discussion boards offer you great opportunities to build community. Some options:

- Introduce yourself through a brief opening video and describe yourself more formally in a “Meet the Instructor” page included in your course pages. Present your formal credentials and intellectual journey on the page, and speak more informally in the video.
- Follow the lead of the historian Cate Denial and invite each student to ask you a question about yourself.
- Have students introduce themselves to one another in a discussion post, through either writing or a video. Post a comment or question in response to each student, just to let them know that you are present for them and interested in their learning.

How to navigate an online course will not always be evident to your students, especially if they are adults returning to education after an absence or are students taking an online class as a supplement to their face-to-face courses. So it is especially important to provide another video or document that outlines how they can find the assistance they need, how to proceed through the course, and how to make sure their questions get answered. You can use an online annotation tool like [hypothes.is](https://hypothes.is), or an equivalent tool in the course-management system your college uses, to have students annotate the syllabus with questions and comments.

Online courses can easily become bloodless transactions of brains behind screens. In the opening of the course, establish your presence as a teacher who cares about their learning, and invite students to help you create a vibrant community of learners.

## **A Lasting Impact**

Whatever you do on the first day of class, get beyond the goal of just getting through it. A little time invested in first-day planning can have a lasting impact. Start the semester off by fostering students’ curiosity, supporting their learning, and giving them a preview of how they will be engaging with you and one another, and with the course content, throughout the semester.

## **Resources**

### **Books**

- *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching*, by [yours truly](#). See especially the chapter on “Week One.”
- *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips* ([14th edition](#)). See Part One, Chapters 1-3.
- *Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors*, by [Linda B. Nilson](#). See especially Chapter 7.

## Articles

- “The First Day of Class: A Once-a-Semester Opportunity,” [published](#) in *Faculty Focus* by Maryellen Weimer on August 21, 2018.
- “Ten Tips for Dealing With Nervousness on the First Day of Class Faculty,” [published](#) in *Faculty Focus*, by Delaney J. Kirk, on August 14, 2018.

## Online Guides From Teaching Centers

- “Make the Most of the First Day of Class,” [posted by](#) Carnegie Mellon University’s Eberly Center Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation.
- “First Day of Class,” [posted by](#) the Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching.

## Videos

- “First Day of the Semester: Good Activities,” [posted by](#) Discovering the Art of Mathematics, a group that offers ideas for teaching math to liberal-arts majors.

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