

# White Board



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## Five Things to Do On the First Day of Class

I DON'T KNOW if the first day of class is the most important day of the course, but I don't think many of us would disregard its significance. What we do and how we do it matters. There are lots of good first-day activities—we've shared some in this blog over the years. In this post I'd like to move our thinking in a different direction and suggest five first-day essentials that go beyond the activities. These are the goals for the first day that we can use the activities to accomplish.

1. Showcase course content. The first day of class is the time for introductions, and the content should be among those things introduced. I recommend a bit of content show-and-tell that features a surprising fact, a question the content answers, some current issue that relates to the content, or something that illustrates, better yet, demonstrates why the content in this course matters. Establishing relevance and promoting intrigue can help motivate student learning right from the start.
2. Get students talking. Expectations for an interactive course should be set from day one and telling students that you want them talking isn't nearly as effective as getting them talking. They should be talking to you and talking with each other. Maybe it's a getting-to-know you ice-breaker, or some initial exploration of a content issue of interest to students, or a student discussion of what's on the syllabus. The goal is hearing multiple voices in the classroom or online on the first day.
3. Be personable. Yes, you are the professor, but you are also a person. Students know that you're the one in charge and that you're the one who

enforces the rules. I don't agree with the idea that teachers have to come across as the big "heavy" who lightens up only if students understand and accept who has the authority. It's much more effective to begin the course letting students know that this is a course you want to teach (fingers crossed that it is) with content you love, and that you are there to help them learn. Students want to be taught by a professor but one who acts like a person.

4. Give students a reason to read the syllabus. In most courses teachers cover syllabus content so completely students don't have to read it. Talking at length about the syllabus also sends the message that students can ask you rather than look up course information. How about this, distribute the syllabus and give students five minutes to review it. Then put them into groups and give the groups five minutes to answer 10 questions about the syllabus. The first group to answer all the questions correctly wins stickers that say "We're #1," high fives from the teacher, applause from the class, or whatever suits your style and conveys the message that the things students need to know about this course are in the syllabus and they should look there before asking you. The goal is teaching in ways that make students responsible learners.
5. Be authentic. Yes, this relates to being personable but it's not the same. Since the students probably don't know you, maybe you can fool them on the first day, but they will find out and they will feel cheated. It's about being true to your personal style right from the start. That doesn't mean "doing what you've always done" on the first day.

It's good to change things up, make improvements, and step outside our comfort zones a bit. I have a good friend who is forever after me to try current fashion trends. "Try this wrap, it'll look good on you." I try it, it feels strange, but maybe it does look good. Then I wear it for cocktails on the neighbor's dock and get compliments from all sides. And I'm making a fashion statement I never thought I could make. Teaching can be about discovering who you are and sharing those discoveries with students.

*Maryellen Weimer; Faculty Focus; August 21, 2013; [ <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/five-things-to-do-on-the-first-day-of-class/> ]; August 26, 2013*

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## Advice for the First Day of Class: Today We Will

THE FIRST DAY of class is critical. What happens on the first day, even in the first moments, sets the tone for the entire course. The impression you make will last the entire semester, and today's students are not shy about sharing their opinions. Most students will make up their minds about the course and the instructor during that first class period.

That is why you must use the first day, the first moments of class, to inspire confidence in your abilities and create a classroom atmosphere where the rules are clear; expectations are high; and yet students feel welcome, comfortable, and engaged.

Remember that your classroom will develop its own distinct environment and culture. If you don't make a concerted effort to set the tone, the students will. Most everyone has been in or in front of a class with an adversarial dynamic, yet no one wants to feel at odds with students. A tense, disorganized, or, worse, hostile atmosphere interferes with your pedagogy and impedes student learning. It wastes time and disengages students. It leads to poor evaluations. Moreover, it is unnecessary and easily avoidable.

By starting the very first day of the term with clear routines and expectations, with easy procedures and on-task activities such as the focus questions and "Today We Will" list, students learn that our classes are well organized and that they can achieve success through appropriate class attendance, preparation, and participation. Instructors maximize instructional time and minimize classroom management efforts. All of this creates a classroom atmosphere that allows instructors and students to get down to the real business at hand: learning.

### Today We Will

The "Today We Will" list goes up on the whiteboard or screen at the start of class and it stays there the entire time. What's on the rest of the board or screen will change a lot during the course of the class, but the "Today We Will" list must be there for the whole period.

The "Today We Will" list is a road map. It lets students know what will be covered that day. They can glance at it to check progress or to see if they missed any big concepts. The list also keeps instructors on task. As you move around your classroom lecturing, the "Today We Will" list is a visual reminder of what you need to accomplish in that period. It ensures that you don't skip any concepts that you want or need to cover, and it keeps you from veering too far off on tangents.

The list also reminds students that they are accountable for the day's material whether they are present in class or not. The reality of higher education is that students sometimes arrive late, leave early, or miss class altogether. In some courses, you will have adult students who are juggling family, jobs, and other competing responsibilities that may sometimes infringe on classroom time.

You must inform students that—from the very first day—they are responsible for everything on the "Today We Will" list. You do not, however, have to preach it. A clear, straightforward "Today We Will" list will consistently reinforce this expectation and encourage students to assume responsibility for the material presented in each class.

For example, if Number 1 on the "Today We Will" list is "Today we will go over three big questions that are on the midterm" and a student missed the first 15 minutes of class, she will want to get that material from you or another student, since the list clearly indicates it will appear on an exam. Thus, a thoughtfully crafted "Today We Will" list, as a part of classroom procedures, will motivate students to attend class, arrive on time, and compensate for any portion of class that they miss. It enables you to maximize all available instructional minutes. It also keeps the class organized, and it keeps students organized and accountable.

Keep in mind that the "Today We Will" list is not rigid. If you particularly like the discussion students are having, you can take something off the "Today We Will" list. If you feel that students have really grasped

a concept more quickly than you expected, you can add items to the list.

Other times you can leave some blanks in the "Today We Will" list to allow students to direct the discussion. If students read three articles by three different scholars, take a poll to see which article you will discuss first.

However, the list is fairly standard on the first day of class. It contains the following seven things:

- Do what's on the screen.
- Introduce yourself.
- Review syllabus completely.
- Complete interest inventory.
- Make folders.
- Have lesson on \_\_\_\_\_.
- Conclude with preparation expectations for next class.

*This article is an excerpt from the whitepaper Ten Ways to Engage Your Students on the First Day of Class.*

*Jennifer Garrett; Faculty Focus; August 12, 2013; [ <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/advice-for-the-first-day-of-class-today-we-will/> ] ; August 26, 2013*

