

# TEACHING TEACHING

## First day of class: What do I do?



For both new and experienced teachers, the first day of class can be daunting.

How do I set the tone for the class?

How do I help the students get to know each other, and me?

How do I convey my expectations for students and get them on board with class policies?

How do I get students excited for the rest of the semester?

The answers to these will depend on your class and goals, but here's some tips that have helped me plan the first day. For context, I've used these ideas in class sizes of 8-16, so some things may need to be adapted for larger classes.

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## Goal setting

As soon as you start prepping, ask yourself: what do I want to accomplish this semester?

The answer is up to you – maybe you'd like students to leave the semester with research skills, or specific content knowledge – but whatever it is, I like to make it explicit to students on the first day. Setting goals for each activity, each class, and each semester and communicating those goals with students not only helps you focus on what's most important, but also keeps students motivated by helping them understand why you're doing what you're doing.

For example, imagine that students were assigned an article to read before class. When you get to class, you don't talk at all about the introduction, method, results, or discussion. You only talk about the figures. With no explanation, students might feel annoyed that they read an entire paper only for it to be hardly discussed. But if you communicate on the first day that one of your goals for the semester is that they be able to critically analyze papers, then explain day-of how figures are a crucial part of how you perceive a paper (what's included on the figure? What's missing? Why did they choose to represent that information with an image rather than text?), students will better understand how this activity helps them achieve long-term goals, making it worthwhile.

Regardless of what your goals are, make sure you think about what they are, and communicate them to students every day.

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## Your “teacher persona”

What kind of teacher are you? Your “teacher persona” will define what stories you share, what kinds of things you tolerate, and what boundaries you set. Establishing this on the first day will help students know what to expect from you and help guide your interactions with each other – they'll better understand whether they can come to you asking for an extension or career advice.

What comes naturally to me is a warm, friendly persona. I like to let students know that I'm on their side and know what it's like to be a college student. For example, I expect them to show up on time, but I understand that it takes exactly 14 minutes to walk from Econ to here, so you'll always be 4 minutes late. I try to be fair to them, but I expect them to be fair to me as well. Students know that they can email me any time and I'll most likely respond right away, but I can't guarantee a response on weekends or after 5pm – so plan early when assignments are due.

I also like to share personal stories to help convey content. Students know my family background, including my nephew who frequently appears in videos to demonstrate concepts we're learning in developmental psych. They also know that I was a psychology nerd in college, designing studies to test on myself and making psych-themed cupcakes.

I believe the warm, friendly persona gets students to open up to me more, allowing them to trust that I'll have their best interests in mind. Personal stories can also be more engaging and memorable.

Whatever your persona, don't try to be something you're not. I am not the funny teacher, or the strict teacher. Those can also be effective, but not for me. Also make sure that you're consistent; since the goal of defining your persona is to help students manage their expectations, make sure they can actually use those expectations to succeed.

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## Creating a safe environment

On the first day, students must get to know each other. This is probably the most important thing you can do to help the rest of the semester run smoothly.

Think about the last time you were in a meeting or seminar where you knew no one. If you had a question to ask the speaker, you might have hesitated or waited until your question was perfectly formed before asking it. In other situations, when you're around people you know well, you'll likely ask the question even if you don't quite have the right phrasing.

The same thing happens in classrooms: the better students know each other, the more comfortable they feel expressing thoughts, and the more willing they are to share them out loud.

I like showing up early, which allows for casual conversations between students and myself. By sharing updates about our weekend or other small talk, when we start class, students feel less like I'm there to criticize their ideas, and more like I'm there as a friend to share thoughts with.

To get students comfortable with each other on the first day, try this activity:

Have students pair up with someone they don't know. Have them introduce themselves and share their phone number or email. Then ask students to find something that the two of them have in common that no one else in the room has in common with them. If they succeed, I like to reward winning groups with Oreos. One of the most creative winners was two students who realized they'd both been kicked out of a restaurant in England.

I think this activity has lots of advantages:

- 1.It gets students to be comfortable talking to at least one other student in class, who they can pair up with for later activities
- 2.By exchanging numbers, I encourage them to text each other with any course questions, which helps them learn from each other (this also minimizes emails for me)
- 3.It's not a typical "icebreaker" activity where each student feels pressured with lots of focus on them and their answer
- 4.The results are often creative and funny, and sometimes lead to tangents that get the whole class talking

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# Creating an inclusive environment

Part of what makes students feel comfortable is knowing that their race, gender, and other identities are respected by others in the room.

At the end of the first class, I pass out a “snowball activity” sheet. It looks like the following (with spaces for students to fill in their answers):

All of this information is optional and confidential. I will keep it in a safe place and will never share it with anyone else. You can leave anything blank. The goal is to help me get to know you and your situation better so that I can help you in whatever way I can.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Pronouns: \_\_\_\_\_

Is there anything you'd like me to know that might affect your performance in class? For example, any additional responsibilities you have, things with family that you're worried about, or learning disabilities? (You do not have to say anything, or say specifics, if doing so makes you uncomfortable. This space is only here in case there's anything you'd like to privately communicate to me about your class performance.)

Is there anything you are worried about as a student? For example, language barriers, not knowing college class norms, accessible accommodations, etc.?

Why are you taking this class?

What do you hope to get out of this class? What are your goals, and how do you hope to achieve them?

Anything else I should know?

After they fill it out, students crumple it up and throw it like a snowball into the middle of the room. This ends the class on a light, fun note. At the same time, these info sheets allow students to privately communicate necessary information to me: do they use pronouns they're not comfortable sharing with the whole class? Are they working two jobs which might affect whether they submit assignments on time? Has a particular classmate been racist towards them before?

Getting this information is necessary to provide an inclusive classroom space, and also signals that I'm on their side – I want to know how I can help.



Additionally, during the first class, it's necessary to communicate what office hours are. However you encourage students to come to office hours, the first class is essential to getting students to come. Make sure you explain that it's not necessary to have a well-formed thought or question – just showing up is what matters. I like to tell students that I will be sitting in my office doing absolutely nothing unless they show up; them coming to office hours is a good thing for me, because I'll have someone to talk to. I also provide baked goods but only offer them in office hours, and tell students they don't need to have a question, but they must show up if they want snacks.

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## Preparing students to succeed

In the first class, you don't need to teach every skill that you eventually want students to learn. But it's helpful if you teach the skills necessary for the first week.

For many students, this is their first college class, and they might not know how to read journal articles. If you've assigned a journal article due the second week, make sure you cover the basics of what a journal article is. There's many ways to do this: you can use the QALMRI framework or go over a simple article in class together. But make sure that every student starts off on the same page.

The first class is also a good time to go over the syllabus, clarify policies, and answer questions.

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## Getting students excited!

This is the fun part.

Why is [insert your class topic here] exciting? Why should anyone care? Why are there thousands of researchers around the world studying this topic? Why are you studying this topic and teaching it to your students?

For me, this part of class requires personal reflection about what we can learn from our discipline. Sometimes, it's answers to big questions: why do kids ask "why"? Sometimes, it's practical implications: by studying eyewitness testimony, we can make the world more just. Sometimes, it's to learn skills that can apply anywhere: psychology teaches us how to critically evaluate arguments.

Spend some time thinking about why your topic is cool. Get excited about it, and make your students excited to come in next week.