

Vanderbilt University

Center for Teaching

First Day of Class

The first day of class is your opportunity to present your vision of the class to prospective students. It is helpful if you can introduce yourself as a scholar and educator and provide insight into how you will teach the class and what you will expect them to contribute to the learning process.

Consider that several of your students may be “shopping” for a schedule the first week of classes. They may be looking for a class that will fill a particular time slot, include a particular learning environment (i.e. lab-based or lecture style), or a class with a certain workload to balance the demands of their other courses and extra-curricular responsibilities. Thus, students will appreciate a clear roadmap of what you will require of them over the course of the semester. You may also want to model, as specifically as possible, the classroom environment you intend to foster during the class. For example, if they will spend a good deal of time doing group work over the course of the semester, you may want to break them into groups the first day.

- The Inviting Classroom
- Course Expectations and Requirements
- Additional Resources
- Summary Checklist

Welcoming: How to Create an Inviting Classroom

“Professors who established a special trust with their students often displayed the kind of openness in which they might, from time to time, talk about their intellectual journey, its ambitions, triumphs, frustrations, and failures, and encourage students to be similarly reflective and candid.”

–From the chapter “How Do They Treat Their Students” in Ken Bain’s *What the Best Colleague Teachers Do* (Harvard Press, 2004), available in the CFT Library

Introduce Yourself

The point of an introduction is to establish yourself as a unique individual sharing the classroom with other unique individuals. Other than providing your name and the name of the course you’re teaching, here is some information you may consider sharing:

- Personal biography: your place of birth, family history, educational history, hobbies, sport and recreational interests, how long you have been at the university, and what your plans are for the future.
- Educational biography: how you came to specialize in your chosen field, a description of your specific area of expertise, your current projects, and your future plans.
- Teaching biography: how long have you taught, how many subjects/classes have you taught, what level of class you normally teach, what you enjoy about being in the classroom, what do you learn from your students, and what you expect to teach in the future.
- In making your decision about what information to share, consider how much you want them to know and how much you want to reveal about yourself.

Allow the Students to Introduce Themselves

This is your opportunity to focus on students as unique and diverse individuals. Consider how introductions can lead into a productive and welcoming classroom environment. Instead of just asking general questions concerning their name, major, and years at Vanderbilt, ask them questions that are pertinent to the subject and the atmosphere you want to build through the semester. Here are some examples:

- In a geography or history class, you may want to ask students to introduce themselves and explain where they are from. You could mark these places on a map of the world as they talk.
- In a math class, you may want to ask the students to introduce themselves and state one way mathematics enriches their lives every day.
- You may also want to have the students break into pairs, exchange information, and introduce one another to the class.

This may also be a good time to give your students an exercise that enables teachers to assess the state of their students' previous or current learning. Examples of these Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) can be found on our Web site, but include the following.

- The *Background Knowledge Probe* is a short, simple questionnaire given to students at the start of a course, or before the introduction of a new unit, lesson or topic. It is designed to uncover students' pre-conceptions about the area of study.

Discuss and Evaluate the Room Environment Together

As your students are introducing themselves and you are talking to them, ask your students to comment on the acoustics and remain conscious of how well you can hear and see each of them. Consider, with their input or alone, how you would change and optimize the seating arrangement. At the end of the introductions, ask them to move to optimize communication and make note of unexpected needs for a microphone, lighting changes, seating arrangements or other environmental controls.

Truth in Advertising:

Course Expectations and Requirements

“What happens between you and your students in your classroom or lecture hall depends largely on what you want to happen. How you treat each other and how you and your students feel about being in that place with each other is modeled and influenced by you.”

–From the chapter “Classroom Contracts—Roles, Rules, and Expectations” in David W. Champagne’s *The Intelligent Professor’s Guide to Teaching* (Roc Edtech, 1995), available in the CFT Library

- **Course overview:** Provide a map of where the class will start and end, and what you expect them to understand at the end of the semester. See the [Course Design page](#) for resources on creating and summarizing course goals.
- **Departmental Requirements/Expectations:** If your department sets standards and requirements, you may want to establish that you are required to work within those parameters. Vanderbilt Teaching Assistants may want to refer to [Questions TAs Might Ask Their Supervisors](#) for assistance understanding this information. This may be the best time to discuss Vanderbilt University’s Honor System.
- **Presentation of material:** Tell your students how you will provide them with the materials they need to be successful in class. Do you use Web-based materials, like OAK, or rely on electronic course reserves through the Library? Will your students have to schedule evenings to watch films or attend performances? Will you lecture and expect them to take notes on your presentations?
- **Expectations for class time:** How will the student feel confident and competent in your classroom? Is the class discussion-based? Do you follow your syllabus or do you improvise? Do they need to bring their books every day? Tell them what they can expect and how can they interact within those expectations to thrive in your classroom.

- **Expectations outside of class:** Provide them with an idea of what they will need to prepare for the course outside of class. Is their preparation primarily reading and writing individually, or will they be working in groups? Will they need to turn in assignments electronically outside of class hours? Give them enough information so they will be able to plan their schedules accordingly.
- **Instructor responsibilities:**
 - Establish what you will provide for your students to be successful in your class. This may include in-class material, study guides, meaningful and prompt feedback on assignments, facilitation of discussion, attention to students with special needs, and a positive and welcoming classroom environment.
 - Assert your boundaries: Let your students know how to contact you and when. For example communicate or provide your office hours, office phone number, availability for instant messaging, email, and when you do not respond (evenings, weekends, and traveling for example). If you are traveling during the semester, you may want to explain the dates that you will not be available.
 - You may also want to alert your students to the events, habits, or situations that detract from your ability to fulfill your responsibility. For example, if late assignments, lack of participation, or sleeping during your lectures distracts you from timely and persuasive teaching, explain why you cannot tolerate these events and how you handle them when they occur.
- **Student responsibilities:** If attendance is required, participation is mandatory, or you want them to read the assignment before class, explain to your students that this is expected of them throughout the semester. Explain policies on absences, make-ups, emergencies, and accommodating special needs. You may also remind them that they are responsible for their success and communicating with you when they have need assistance or have other concerns. The Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Disability Services Department (322-4705) provides information about accommodating disabilities of many types. The ODC suggests the follow statement be included on all syllabi: “If you need disability related accommodations for this course; if you have emergency medical information to share with me; or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment to speak with me, as well as the Opportunity Development Center (2-4705) as soon as possible.”
- **Assessment:** How will you assign the course grade at the end of the semester? How many assignments will you grade? Do you have grading policies and/or rubrics or criteria for grading?
- **Cooperation/communication/resources:** Finally, you may want to spend a few minutes discussing university, department, library, or other resources for students to use in through the course of the semester.

“By giving students an interesting and inviting introduction, I was able to reduce anxiety about the course and help students view the class as a collaborative learning process. Every field has its own exciting research or striking examples, and it is a good idea to present a few of these up front. The teaching challenge is to find special ideas within your own field. Your class will thank you.”

–From “How to Start Teaching a Tough Course: Dry Organization Versus Excitement on the First Day of Class” by Kevin L. Bennett, in *College Teaching*, 52(3), 2004

Additional Resources:

- Angelo, T. A., and Cross, K. P. *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*. (2nd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.
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Other Vanderbilt Center for Teaching Resources:

- Teaching Resources

Other Academic Web sites on First Day strategies and online publications:

- Honolulu Community College
- University of California, Berkeley

Summary Checklist

- Introduce yourself
- Allow the Students to introduce themselves
- Discuss and evaluate the room environment together
- Course overview
- Departmental requirements/expectations
- Presentation of material
- Expectations for class time
- Expectations outside of class
- Instructor responsibilities
- Student responsibilities
- Assessment
- Cooperation/communication/resources

Teaching and Learning – inquiry, experimentation, reflection

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Mailing Address: Peabody Box #183, Nashville, TN 37203 · **Phone:** (615) 322-7290 · **Fax:** (615) 343-8111 · **Email:**
cft@vanderbilt.edu · [Sitemap](#)

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for your consideration...

SUGGESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

January 2009

The First Day of Class ... Your Chance to Make a Good First Impression

The way you choose to spend the first day of class will set the tone for the entire semester. In the academy there used to be a relatively common practice of devoting the first class meeting to reading the syllabus to the students and then, after answering questions about the course, either beginning to lecture or dismissing the class early. Alternatively, there are many things you can do on the first day that will help establish rapport with students, set norms and tone for the course, prepare students for the semester's work, correct any misperceptions about the course, and generate excitement about the subject matter.

Students typically want to know two kinds of information on the first day of class. They want to learn as much about the nature and scope of the course as possible, which helps them to decide whether they want to remain in the course and, if so, to better anticipate the work requirements for the semester. Students are also curious about the teacher as a person. They want to know if you will be reasonable and fair with them, if you care about them as individuals, and if you care about the course content itself.

A comprehensive, learning-centered syllabus distributed during the first class promotes a positive attitude in students, as it shows you care about the course and have made an effort to plan it carefully. At minimum, your syllabus should

- describe the course goals and objectives and how these fit in the larger curriculum;
- outline the structure of the course, including topics, grading, examination procedures, reading assignments, attendance policy, faculty office locations, and office hours;

- describe expectations for everyone in the classroom; and
- provide an easy to access guide to navigating the course throughout the semester.

By preparing a well-designed syllabus, you remove the necessity of discussing in detail the various components of the course. Students can read those for themselves. A detailed and clearly organized syllabus frees up time on the first day of class to spend on learning more about students and their interests, sharing information about yourself, and exploring why the topics of the course are important for students to spend time learning. The syllabus will also provide late-joining students with all the vital information they need to succeed in the course. Do consider how much of the syllabus to emphasize during class and leave the remainder for students to read on their own. Emphasize the importance of the syllabus and explain they will be held accountable for all material in the syllabus, much like they are held accountable for all content of the text, not only the material read to them.

Get to Know Your Students

We have known for many years that respect and other affective factors greatly impact student motivation (Cohen, 1981). Students have strong preferences for being treated as respected individuals and achieve more when instructors have a positive attitude toward both the course content and the students themselves. Thus, there are good reasons to show students from the very beginning that you view them as individuals within a community of learners and care about them as people.

Learn Your Students' Names

One of the easiest ways to show students you care about them as individuals is to learn their names as early in the semester as possible. Aside from the benefits already mentioned, there are other reasons to learn students' names. Your ability to call upon them by name helps create a relaxed and friendly classroom atmosphere. It enables you to stimulate class discussion by asking individual students to express their points of view. It may also transform a group of isolated and anonymous individuals into a community of people who cooperatively engage in the exploration of ideas and knowledge.

Methods for small classes

1. In small classes, learning student names may not be difficult. If you teach a class of less than twenty students, you might first ask students to identify themselves one row at a time and then repeat what each student in that row has told you. As you move on to subsequent rows, try to repeat all the names previously mentioned. This exercise can be repeated at the beginning of each class period until you feel confident that you can connect a name with every face.
2. Using the registration list, call the roll at the start of each class. You can also ask students to say their names before they make comments or ask questions.
3. Distribute index cards on the first day and ask students to write down who they are and where they come from. After collecting these cards, spend time on the first day and subsequent days reading the names on the cards, looking at each person and trying to form an association between names and hometowns, facial expressions, hair color, or any other striking characteristics. To reinforce these associations, call the roll every day during the first week of classes to fix the names in your mind.

All these methods are effective in classes with relatively small enrollments, but they are difficult to implement in larger classes. Although it may not be possible to learn every student's name in a large class, it is still important to learn as many names as possible. At the very least, learn the number of names you would in a smaller class.

Methods for large classes

1. Tell students to select the seats they wish to sit in for the semester. Once course enrollment has stabilized and students have chosen their seats, make a seating chart. If you explain that the reason for the seating chart is to help you learn their names, they will be less likely to object.
2. Review photographs of students as often as you can to learn as many names as possible. Students' One Card photos are included in your course's

Electronic Class Roll. Alternatively, you could have students send you digital photos of themselves. It will not take long before you will be able to identify many of the students in your class.

3. Show up for class early enough to spend five minutes talking to students and learning something about them. Select a different area of the room each class period so that during class you can call on some students by name without always calling on the same section of the room. This method will yield an additional benefit: you will demonstrate to students that you care about them as individuals, even in large enrollment courses.
4. In the first few minutes of a class, record your students on video giving their name and any other information you wish to know about them. Repeated viewings will aid you in learning names.

Get to Know Your Students' Attitudes and Abilities

Entering a classroom with a new group of students confronts a teacher with a wide array of attitudes, abilities, and capabilities. Acknowledging that these elements can be used effectively to engage and motivate students gives the teacher additional resources for delivering a student-centered learning experience. The more information you have about your students, the more you can direct your teaching to their capabilities, preconceptions, and interests. Here are some ideas for collecting this information.

Student Biographies

Having students provide information about their background experiences can be very beneficial. First, this gives you some idea of the interests and prior knowledge that students bring to the course. Using this information, you can improve your presentation of material by bringing in topics and examples that match their interests, an approach that will engage them as learners and demonstrate how course material has real-life applications. Second, you can enhance the quality of student-teacher interactions if you review a student's biographical information just prior to a scheduled appointment. Third, contact information can be copied and distributed to all members of the class to help students locate each other if they miss class, need help with the course, or want a study partner. Before you distribute this information, remember to ask students to identify which information they are comfortable having shared.

To gather biographical information, give each student an index card and ask them to write his or her name, local address, email address, phone number, hometown, and major. Then ask them to write about their interest in your course and in other courses or about life experiences which relate to the

or her name, local address, email address, phone number, hometown, and major. Then ask them to write about their interest in your course and in other courses or about life experiences which relate to the course's subject matter. You might also ask them who their heroes are, what hobbies they enjoy, and skills or talents of that they are especially proud. In asking for personal information, you should emphasize that students are not required to reveal anything that they do not feel comfortable sharing.

You might consider collecting biographical information about students before the first class meeting. You could use Electronic Class Rolls or Blackboard to send an e-mail to your students a week before the course begins, asking them to reply with as much of the information noted above as they are comfortable including. If you use Blackboard, you could create a discussion forum and have students post something about themselves for members of the class to read. For smaller classes, you could set the forum to allow students to post anonymously. On the first day of class the group could attempt to match the biographical information with individuals in the class.

Short Essays

Another method that can be beneficial to you and your students is an ungraded short essay written on the first day of class. Short essays can reveal several important student characteristics, including perception, knowledge, and attitudes about the subject, analytical and conceptual skills, as well as general writing ability. For example, if you are teaching a course in the sciences, ask students to write about the questions and problems that science seeks to answer. If you are teaching a course in art history, show a slide of a lesser-known work and ask students to identify and describe the style, symbolism, and historical period. If you are teaching about a foreign country, ask students to write about their perceptions and beliefs about it. Reading their essays will help you understand what preconceptions, attitudes, and prior knowledge students have about the subject matter and will help you identify themes that you may want to emphasize as you teach.

Diagnostic Tests

Designing and administering a non-graded diagnostic test is another method you can use to gauge students' knowledge and perceptions of the course's subject matter. The questions might cover the major themes you will address during the semester. You should explain to the students that the purpose of the test is to help you present course materials more effectively and that the more you know about their knowledge or understanding of the subject matter, the easier it will be to focus on what you need to teach them. Many of the questions asked in the diagnostic exam may be used as questions on the mid-term and final

exam: enabling you and the students to compare their knowledge at the beginning and end of the course. You will have a basis for judging how much each student gained by participating in the course (even though you may not wish to use this criterion in assigning grades). In addition, it provides students with examples of the types of questions you will ask on graded quizzes and exams.

Introduce Yourself

The preceding suggestions are designed to help you learn as much as you can about your students. Just as you have good reason to want to know more about them, students appreciate knowing more about you than merely your contact information on the syllabus. The hierarchy of the classroom can inhibit communication between you and your students. Your willingness to reveal something about yourself helps overcome this behavior.

The first day of class is an opportune time to tell students something about your personal or professional life. Each teacher must decide what self-revelations are acceptable and relevant, but some subjects are relatively safe and easy to talk about—for example, your educational background and research interests. Taking time to share your professional journey to becoming an expert in your discipline places a human face on the subject matter for students. It can also foster excitement in your subject matter. The sense of wonder and curiosity that you can convey may be just the catalyst that students need to reframe a required course to one that is exciting and engaging.

If you don't feel comfortable talking about yourself in class, there are other ways to convey the same information. You might distribute an abbreviated personal resume or curriculum vitae. For those who prefer to be more creative, you could construct a personal profile along the lines of an advertisement.

Set Classroom Ground Rules

It is important on the very first day of class to discuss with your students expected classroom behaviors. Do not make the students guess what behaviors you desire to observe in class. For example, if you find it rude for individuals to come to class late, tell students that you expect them to be there on time. If you are not troubled by students being a few minutes late, let them know that you appreciate timeliness, but that you would like for them to sit near the door upon arrival. Discussing ground rules for disagreements among students during discussions, policies on cell phones ringing in class, and whether students can use laptops are just a few areas that should be addressed. Essentially, determine what constitutes a civil classroom environment to you and discuss those issues briefly. This discussion is

necessary, as faculty members tend to have differing opinions as to what qualifies as considerate behavior. This is particularly true of individuals from different cultures.

Discuss the Honor Code

The Honor Code at Carolina plays a critical role in upholding the values of the University. Each instructor is responsible for making sure that students understand what academic integrity means within the context of a specific course. Devoting ample time during the first class period to discuss the Honor Code sends the message to students that academic integrity is important to you, their fellow students, and the University. Do not assume that students have read the Honor Code. Reinforce key points and expectations. Most students focus on those aspects of the Code that address lying, cheating, or stealing. Equally important is how students should conduct themselves each day, both in the classroom and in other academic settings. Initiating a discussion about what it means to be a respectful and responsible learner will help you and your students establish a positive learning environment for the course.

The UNC Honor Code and additional information are available at <http://honor.unc.edu>.

Introduce the Subject Matter

Introducing the subject matter on the first day of class underscores its importance and relevance to students' learning. Activities that foster engagement with course topics can stimulate students' curiosity about the subject matter and help students begin questioning their current knowledge of the discipline.

A professor in communication studies shows a fifteen-minute video which introduces her subject. The film is colorful, exciting, and motivational, and she reports that students come to the second class eager to begin learning more. An economics instructor asks students to think about the questions

they want the course to answer for them. He writes these items on the blackboard and discusses each of them in turn, pointing out when in the semester the questions will be addressed—but only hinting at possible answers in order to whet students' curiosity. A biology teacher asks students to draw a picture of a cell and has students work in groups to identify commonalities and differences in their perceptions that will become the focus of later lectures. Providing samples of course content can be accomplished in many ways, but the more successful methods are creative approaches that both introduce course concepts and stimulate student interest in course content.

The first day of class affords a variety of opportunities to establish rapport with your students and to provide the kinds of information you and they want in that initial class. By meeting these needs, you can increase students' motivation and achievement and enhance your own effectiveness.

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