The First Class Session: a Guide for CE Faculty

Introduction
The first day of class is a very important time for you to establish a tone for what will happen the rest of the term. It is appropriate that you reflect on just what climate and first impression you would like to establish. What can you do to establish a positive beginning? How can you make sure a student's attitudes toward you, the course, and the subject matter will support a constructive learning climate for the semester? The following ideas have been gathered to stimulate your thoughts about these questions.

Enthusiasm
Conveying a sense of enthusiasm for the content is important. You rarely need to impress students with your command of the material. What you should make clear to students is whether you are interested in the subject and whether you will be able to help them become as competent as you are. One way to demonstrate enthusiasm is to talk about yourself and your own excitement about what you teach. What intrigues you, and what could interest them?

Ice-Breakers
Opening communications among students as well as between you and students will pay dividends throughout the semester. "Icebreaker" activities can take many forms such as the following:

1. Have each person introduce themselves and give some information you and other students can associate with the person. This could be field, questions they have, why they took the course, etc. Include yourself in the introductions.

2. Ask students to suggest what problems or ideas they would like to see included in the course, or have them tell what they expect to accomplish in the course. List these on the whiteboard and refer to the list when the syllabus is reviewed. Students can clarify or correct perceptions they have held.
Your Own Introduction
Who you are and what you are like is of great interest to your students. Learning in the classroom results from an interrelationship of people, and what students perceive about you can help support that interaction. Sharing something about yourself (examples of your work) can begin a constructive relationship. You might share your own experiences in the course when you first took it. Share what you as a teacher expect from them. What do you believe about teaching and learning? Who is responsible for what in an academic setting? What are your outcomes for them when they have completed the course? Be sure to indicate how you would like students to refer to you on the board or in your syllabus. Let them know your attitudes about when and where it is appropriate to contact you outside of class. Are you willing to spend a few moments after each class for those questions which may warrant it?

Some characteristics most appreciated by students are:

- Enthusiasm and willingness to work to make the course worthwhile
- Objectivity (the students will call it, "fairness")
- A sympathetic attitude toward the problems of students

Course Expectations
A well designed syllabus goes a long way toward clarifying expectations so students have a sense of knowing what they are to do. You can give them the idea that you are prepared to help them learn, while also developing the sense of their own responsibility for achieving course goals. The syllabus usually includes: information about the course, policies, requirements, tests, assignments, texts, references, prerequisites, schedule, grading policies, etc. See Syllabus Guide for additional information related to syllabi construction.

Syllabus | check your syllabus for the following:

a. Accurate course description, meeting times, and dates of holidays and assignment due dates
b. Contact information (phone, email, etc.) and how/when they can expect a response
c. Required textbook(s), supplies, special tools, etc.
d. Synopsis of major learning goals + objectives in terms of knowledge and skills students will gain
e. Class sessions | dates + times, and corresponding activities detailing the projected dates for assignments, portfolios, surveys, projects, etc.
f. Statement of instructor’s right to change the course schedule and learning activities as needed

  g. Course grading system description

**Textbook Introduction**

Introduce the textbook(s), tell students why it was chosen, and how you expect them to use the text in their learning. Have copies of all materials on hand for students to review.

**Student Questions**

Provide an opportunity for students to ask questions about the course, you, the text or other aspects of the course. It is important to establish a sense that you are willing to explain things they do not understand. Be accepting of all questions. This does not mean you need to change your plans, but you can listen to questions and be responsive to communication.

**A Checklist for Your First Session**

No matter whether this is your first class or your hundredth, you will be more successful when you ensure that you have completed a specific list of course startup tasks. The checklist that follows is only a suggestion, and you should modify it to fit your specific situation—or better yet, create your own checklist. Here is a sample checklist designed to help you track your progress during the first critical session of the term.

**First Class Meeting Preparation Steps** | reduce the chances of something going wrong during the first session, check off these items:

- [ ] Syllabus has been carefully checked for accuracy and completeness
- [ ] Have printed 5 more copies than initial registration information shows
- [ ] Checked the classroom and labs for seating arrangement, equipment, and negative environmental situations such as noise, poor lighting, ventilation, etc.
- [ ] Obtained samples of required supplies, copies of textbooks, handouts, etc.
First-Day Tasks

Make certain you:

1. Come early to class + welcome students
   - Faculty should plan to arrive (a minimum) of 1-hour prior to the start of their first class session. This will allow sufficient time to
     a) sign + review their contract and instructor packet with CE Office staff
     b) secure their room key from security
     c) ensure classroom is arranged properly + is clean
     d) review roster - enough copies of handouts + syllabus?
     e) all tech working - computers | projector, audio, etc.
     f) your name, course title, and number on the board | screen

2. selected appropriate ice-breakers to gather information on student backgrounds, interests, expectations for the course | questions | concerns

3. Survey students for more information on their course subject knowledge and experience levels

10 Strategies You Should Employ

Below are 10 strategies you should consider employing at the first class session. You should not feel obliged to do all of these, but doing even one or several of them on the first day will go a long way toward ensuring your class gets started in the right way.

1. Involve students quickly - let students know right from the outset that they will be active participants
   - This can be accomplished in a variety of ways:
     a. having them introduce themselves
     b. having a whole-class or small-group discussion, etc., followed by a brief presentation

2. Identify the value and importance of the subject matter
   - Not all students come to class with a clear idea of why this subject is important. You may need to help them understand the significance of the course. The sooner this is done, the sooner the students will be ready to invest time and energy in the task of learning the subject matter.
3. Set expectations
   - This can involve such things as what you consider required amounts of out-of-class work time, the importance of completing homework, how important their active participation in each session is, and how much interaction among students is desired.
   - The first day also offers an opportunity to find out what expectations the students have of you and of the class.

4. Establish rapport
   - Almost any class will be more enjoyable for both you and the students if everyone knows one another a bit. This exchange can be started with introductions, sharing some background information, etc.

5. Reveal something about yourself
   - Sometimes students can relate to you more productively if they can see you as a human being, i.e., as something more than just an authority figure or subject matter expert. Sharing personal stories and being able to laugh at yourself can help this process.

6. Establish your own credibility
   - Sometimes this happens automatically, but at other times students need to know about your work experience, travel experience, or research and publications in an area. Having this knowledge can help students gain confidence that you know what you are talking about.

7. Establish the "climate" for the class
   - Different teachers prefer different classroom climates: intense, relaxed, formal, personal, humorous, serious, etc. Whatever climate you want, you should try to establish this early and set the tone for the semester.

8. Provide administrative information
   - This often takes the form of going through the syllabus - what reading material the students will need; what kind of homework will be involved; how students can contact you; how the class grade will be determined; what your policies are regarding attendance, late assignments, etc.

9. Introduce the subject matter
   - Generally this introduction will be facilitated by starting with some kind of overview of the subject.

   and in the subsequent weeks...
10. Three-to-four Session Benchmark Tasks

At the three-to-four week mark in your course, make sure you:

- Have learned students' names + completed at least one measurement of learning, such as a quiz, case study, assignment review, group presentation, etc.
- Asked for written feedback on your teaching style + techniques
- Encouraged and given learning quality feedback to your students