

## How Can I Use the First Day to Set the Tone for a Semester of Learning?

Presented by:

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**Editor's Note:**

This is a written transcript of an audio recording. Our policy is to edit only the occasional unintelligible phrase. Everything else appears as it was spoken.

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Hello. My name is Alexia Franzidis, and I'm an associate professor at the University of North Carolina in Wilmington. I'm going to talk about the first day of class. I'm going to start by talking about some of the things that we do incorrectly, our misuse of time, and how we can change that so that we can actually maximize the first day of class for ourselves as instructors, but also to benefit the students.

So, the first day of class is where we set the scene for the rest of the semester. It's a great opportunity for us as instructors to introduce ourselves, both personally and professionally, and also to get to know the students. It's also a chance for us to introduce the subject matter, so the students have an idea about the types of things that they're going to be learning throughout the semester.

We also should use the time to get the students familiar with each other. So, that way, when you potentially have any in-class activities or any group assignments or assignments to be done in pairs, the students actually know each other. It makes that sort of assessment a little less daunting. Another great thing about the first day is it's an ideal opportunity to establish rapport with your students and create a sense of culture that you can then continue and maintain for the rest of the semester.

So, there are a few common mistakes that we can make when we think of the first day. The first one is we put our syllabus online, and we don't have class at all. We think of it as being sort of a bonus day.

Another thing that we do is we get the students in, we go through the roster, and we go through the syllabus. Sometimes, we'll do that word for word, or we'll touch on a couple of key points, and that's it. Class dismissed within 15 minutes.

Other things that we'll do is we'll not actually go through the syllabus at all, and we'll jump straight through to content. And that really means that the students don't have that opportunity to get to know us as instructors, don't get to know themselves, and also don't get familiar with the kind of classroom environment that you want to have for the duration of the semester. So, we really need to think about how we can then use our time to do those things, to let them get to know us, us to know them a little bit, and for

them to get an idea about the types of things that they'll be learning during the semester as well as the type of environment in which you run your class.

Every instructor is going to be different. Every instructor is going to have different ideas on how they want to include technology, how tolerant they may be with food or drinks in the class. I know some professors are totally fine with students eating or drinking in class, whereas others have a very strict no food or drink policy unless it's water. So, the students need to know this. The first day is your opportunity to basically set them up for success within your class.

You can also ask the students to read the syllabus before coming to class. Now, this isn't always the most effective tool. I know a colleague of mine has a line inserted in her syllabus that says, "if you read this, email me and tell me your favorite type of candy bar." And I think in the last four years, she's given out one Snickers bar.

So, if we're asking our students to read the syllabus beforehand, we have to then test their knowledge to make sure that they actually have done so. A lot of times, the syllabus is likened to a contract between you as the instructor and the students. And this is mainly because it contains key pieces of information for your class for that semester.

It's obviously got your details as the instructor. It's got the learning objectives, the description of the class. Also, it contains things such as codes of behavior, ethics, any honor code specifications, as well as key assessment that students will be completing over the semester and the dates that are associated with that.

So, if the information is that important, which it is, we need to know as instructors that the students are familiar with that document. So, how do we do that? How do we know that? Now, I know there are some instructors that will get the students to read it and then to sign at the end attesting that they have actually read and understood everything. But do we really know that they have? You might sign something, but you might not have actually read the small print, for example.

Perhaps just getting the students to read it on their own and signing it is not the most effective tool. So, with that, then, what is the most effective tool? So, what I like to do is I like to really know my syllabus. I like to take a look at it and think, OK, obviously, all of it is important. But what really are the key things in the document that I need to relay to

the students and that I need as an instructor to know the students know and they're familiar with.

And then I like to try and turn it into an activity because the point of the first day is to get the students interacting, is to get them interested, is to get them engaged both with the content as well as one another. And the syllabus is the first document that we can use to do that.

So, I'm a big fan of trivia. And so one of the big things I like to do on the first day is I get the students to divide themselves up into small groups, and they introduce each other within those groups. And they come up with a team name, and they then have to do trivia. So, I will ask things like, what is the late penalty for handing in an assignment two days late? And they'll have to look through the document.

Or I'll ask them to read it beforehand, and they'll come up with an answer. And then that way, we actually work through. So, it's important for you, if you're going to do that sort of thing, it's important for you as an instructor to really figure out what are those key things that are important for you within your class that you want the students to know and turn it into a trivia or a quiz. You can do it individually. You could ask them to do just a quick thing. You could go online, get a little quiz set up, and get them to do that. Or you could get them to do it actually in class, in pairs, or in a group. So, depending on your class size, you may or may not wish to implement technology. But I found that to be a very successful tool to get the students actually engaged with the content and the syllabus to remember the things that are important to me as an instructor, but also for them to get to know each other.

Another thing that you can do, which is also fairly interactive, is you can make the syllabus almost a working document. So, what I mean by that is, your syllabus is broken up into a couple of key things. So, the first things you have are your non-negotiables.

So, you know the code of ethics for the university, whether that's the student codes that's specified in the handbook, whether it's something that your university has an honor code that the students must obey—those are pretty non-negotiable items. Same thing for pre-reqs for classes. So, you stipulate that right at the beginning. These are the things that will not change within the class—grading scale, whether that's set from the university or within a particular program. So, you know what those things are.

You also tell the students what you're going to give them. So, for me as an instructor, I'm always going to come to class, and I'm going to be prepared. And I'm going to be creative and think about ways that I can make the content that they need to learn interesting, and fun, and interactive.

I'm also going to be flexible on certain things, or I'm going to be empathetic. So, I tell them the things that I'm going to give them throughout the semester. I then ask them to think about, what are they going to bring to class? What are they going to give me in return? So, I'm giving them things. What are they then going to give me and the class in return? So, are they going to be punctual? Are they going to be turning in their assignments in time? Are they going to be respectful towards each other?

And so the last thing I do is I get them to think about, what are their wish lists? What would they like? Would they like to have a free pass for coming into class one day late? Would they like to have the opportunity to drop the lowest grade in the class for an assignment? Or would they like to have the opportunity to have some kind of bonus activity at the end to replace a low grade?

So, what I say to them then is, these are things that they may want. These are privileges that they may want. If they give me the things that they say they're going to— if they're going to be respectful to one another, if they're going to be whatever—then they will get these privileges. However, if they don't do what they say they're going to do, then they're not going to have those privileges.

And so, by turning the syllabus into a working document, where the students actually will look at it, and they'll scrutinize, and they'll be aware of the content and also then means that they remember the types of things that are important within the class and some of those key topics, and that will help them really absorb the materials that are specified within the syllabus.

So, I believe that on the first day of class, you should have five main objectives. The first one is information, sharing information with students about yourself, letting them share information about themselves, and you're also sharing information about the content of the class as well as the way in which you like to run your class.

So, one of my favorite things to do on the first day of class is to get the students talking to one another but to, most importantly, get them excited about the types of things that

they're going to be learning throughout this semester. So, every instructor, it doesn't matter how prepared you are, when it comes to the first day, you have an idea about the types of things that students will be learning. You might not have every single lecture prepared.

A lot of times, that's not actually good because it's good for us to be fresh and to do things closer to each lecture. But we do have an idea that, in a particular class, the students are going to be learning A, B, C, D, et cetera. So, I'm a tourism and hospitality professor. So, if I'm going to be teaching an Events Management class, I know that the students are going to learn about marketing.

I know that they're going to learn about risk management. I know that they're going to learn about destination marketing, ticket sales, et cetera. So, I have an idea about the types of things that they're going to be learning. And I want to relay that to them.

I want the students to know, coming into class on that first day, that these are the types of things that they're going to be learning about. And one of the reasons for that is I like to get them excited. I like to get them pumped up for what they're going to be doing on this learning journey for that class.

It's also very useful to tell students what they're going to be learning because sometimes, students may be in your class because it's an elective. And so, they need to be familiar with the types of things that they're going to be exposed to, to actually decide if this class is the best fit for them. So, the first day is a good time to do that, particularly if it's before some kind of add/drop deadline.

So, one of the things I like to do to ensure that the students are familiar with the content as I turn it into an activity. And the first activity I like to do is trivia. So, I have a list of content areas, so I know exactly what they're going to be learning. First ones will be definitions, history, et cetera. And I think, how can I make this a fun activity?

So, I get them into small groups. They get to decide their own groups. They introduce themselves to each other within the group, and they come up with some kind of group name. They then have to write that group name down on a piece of paper and designate someone in the group to be their scribe for that activity.

I then have a question based on each key topic. So, for example, if I'm teaching a—because I'm a tourism professor—if I'm teaching a lecture on the history of tourism, my question related to that would be something a little bit fun or lighthearted. So, I typically ask the students a true or false question. The one I use in particular is, true or false, in the 1960s, people could buy travel insurance in vending machines prior to boarding the aircraft. The answer is true.

And so, I get the students to talk amongst themselves. It's always fun to hear why they think the answer is a certain way. And then they'll have to write it down. And because we have a 16-week class, they usually have about 14 questions with one or two up my sleeve in case, at the end of it, we need to have a bonus question to actually come up with a final winner.

And I found this to be really good. It's a great activity that gets students talking amongst themselves. They also start to be curious about certain things. They learn things already on that first day about the subject area.

They hadn't thought like, oh, wow, aviation must have been different if people were actually buying insurance from air crafts—people were buying insurance from vending machines. So, it's a fun thing to do. And I fully believe that anyone can turn their content area into some kind of trivia.

Another way that you can get the students to engage with the materials and the topics in the class is to give them a case study or some kind of scenario. So, for example, in an Event Management class, I might give the students some kind of outline of the Super Bowl. And within that, I will ask the students to get into small groups and to look at the content that's presented in the case or the scenario and to write down all the duties or the tasks that they think are associated with putting on an event like that. From there, what I ask them to do is to compare that list with the types of things that we'll be learning in the class. I find that by doing that, it gets them really excited and also shows the relevancy of the types of things that we'll actually be doing in class.

So, you can either give students some kind of case or scenario. Or alternatively, you can actually just give students a topic and get them to actually research it within the class. So, a lot of times, our students will come to class either with laptops, or cell phones, or some kind of tablet.

And so you can say to them, OK, group A, want you to look at this particular topic. Group B, I want you to look at this particular scenario, whatever it might be. And then from there, get them to find out about it. So, they spend a little bit of time in class doing a little bit of research, and then they can actually map out important things related to that and, again, compare that with the key topics that you'll actually be covering in your class throughout the semester.

So, these types of things are a great way to get students interested in the topic. It shows relevancy. It also gets them sort of excited about some things because they can see that, while I'm only learning this in the classroom, I can see how that kind of relates then to things that are actually occurring in the real world that, hopefully, they'll actually be doing then upon graduation.

The second I is Interest, finding out why are they interested in coming to your class. So, an effective way to do this is paper, or any kind of poster board, or even if you've got a whiteboard, and get students to actually write, as they're coming into class, why they're there. I remember during this as a graduate student. There was a teacher of mine who had the word why written on the board.

And as we walked in, she said, I want you to take a marker, and I want you to answer that question before sitting down. And it was a really great tool to be able to actually visually see why people were enrolled in the class. It's good for the students so that way, they have an idea about other students in the class.

It's good for you as an instructor. That way, you can see the motivations and level of interest in your class. And it's also just good for the students to know themselves, why they are actually interested in that class.

Now, sometimes, they're taking a class because they have to. But there's going to be someone in there who's taking it because they are interested in it. And even if it's something that they have to do, you can then talk about why that class will be beneficial to them in the future to try and bring up their level of interest and engagement.

Another great way to actually establish interest and intent is to get students to either individually, in pairs, or in small groups to have the syllabus in front of them as well as the list of topics that you're going to cover throughout the semester and identify two or three key things that they're really excited to learn about—so whether they're really



excited to learn about how to market a special event, how to put on a particular event. So, get them to list those. Get them to then also write down and identify two or three things that they're already familiar with.

So, a lot of times, students will have some kind of background information that they're bringing in, so get them to write that down. That's good because it also helps them realize that, whilst they're going to be learning a lot in the class, they have some stuff, so they're not coming in with nothing. And that makes them feel a little bit more comfortable about approaching the material.

And then with that, I want them to also write down potentially one or two things that they might find challenging to learn. And so that way, that's good for me as an instructor to actually collect that and collate that. And then I can think about, OK, so most of the students were a bit worried, potentially, about budgets, or financing, or something like that.

And then I can really maybe dedicate extra time in the semester or try and think of creative ways to actually approach that subject. So, it's a very easy activity that you can do. It's very interactive as well. But it can gather a lot of information as well as get students excited about particular topics and also make them realize that they do know more about the topic than they may have originally thought that they did.

Another I is Interaction. I believe it's really important for students to interact with each other, get to know their classmates, as well as to interact with the faculty. And I think the first day of class is really the ideal time to do that because a lot of times when you're in the semester, you're sort of bogged down with content, you don't have that time to get to know your students and for them to get to know each other. So, by setting the scene at the beginning of the semester and getting them a chance to interact with one another, I think it sets you up for success for the rest of the semester.

So, there are a couple of things that you can do on the first day that will help stimulate that kind of interaction. So, as I said, the first day really is a great opportunity for you to get to know your students, them to get to know you, and also for them to get to know each other. So, what are some good ones? If you were just to go online and have a look at some good icebreakers, I'm sure you're going to get a plethora of ideas.

There are a couple that I found to be very useful. The first one is called find a person who, and this is a super easy thing to do. What I like about it is it can be modified to whatever it is that you're after.

So, it's very simple. You can do it just in a regular Word document. It's literally just little squares. And in the squares, you've got written down certain descriptive information.

And you print it out, and you bring it with you on the first day. And you get the students to find a person who actually fits or fulfills that particular descriptive information. So, it might be find somebody who's an only child. Find somebody who's born in September.

Find somebody who speaks more than one language. And so, the idea is, the students will have this piece of paper in front of them, and they will find another person in the class that has that quality or fulfills that descriptive information and then write that other student's name down. The key thing is you can only have one name appear only once. So, for example, if you've got Mark, Mark's name can only appear in one thing. So, sometimes, the students will have to reapproach somebody and say, oh, I'm really struggling to find this. Do you, in fact, have that?

The nice thing about that activity as well is that it gets the students moving. I think movement is a key thing. It keeps the energy up. It makes students talk to a lot of people, depending on how many little squares you have. Usually, I'll have about 25 squares if I have a class of about 30 or 35.

And so most students will then end up interacting with each other. And I find it to be a very, very successful and a very fun game. I've also done this sometimes in workshops with adults, and they also really enjoy it. So, find a person who activity is a very good one.

You can also relate it to content matter. So, find a person who remembers the square root of whatever. Find a person who can calculate such and such. Anything like that, it can be a personal thing, or it can be on a professional or content related. Again, you get to take those squares and manipulate it however you like.

Another activity that I find that's very good at stimulating interaction, but on a bit more of a smaller scale, is what we call the kite. So, in the kite, you get the students to pair up or go into small groups of about three, maybe four. And you get them to draw their own

kite. So, it is a kite with four quadrants, and then a string, and within that string, you've got about three little ribbons.

And so you ask the students then to put stuff in each one of those quadrants. So, the first one you do is you get them to put down and where they're from. Now, the nice thing about the kite is that students aren't allowed to actually write any words. So, it's all drawing.

So, it's kind of a fun activity as well because most of our students aren't amazing drawers. But it also just makes them creative. I mean, drawing makes people a bit more creative.

So, the first one is where you are from. The second one is, what is your proudest moment? That's usually a fun one to draw. Then you do, what do you want to be doing five years after graduation? That's in the third one. And then the fourth one is the best place you've ever visited.

So, you get the students to draw those four things. On the ribbon, the ribbons that are at the bottom, the three ribbons, you then write down—it's the one time you actually write down—three people, either dead, alive, or fictional that you would like to invite for dinner. And so, you get each student to do this individually and then in pairs or in small groups to then share that information with each other.

So, it's a fun activity. You usually give the students about five or 10 minutes to actually draw in the kite. And then after that, they get to go and share it with the small groups. Sometimes, if you're in a big group, what you can do is you can get the students to pair up and do it.

And then you can come together as a whole class, and you can get the other student to describe that particular student's kite and share that with the group. So, student A will share a student B's kite with the rest of the group. So, that's usually quite a fun, little activity that you can do that's also low maintenance, pretty easy.

Now, depending on the type of class that you're doing, you might want to alter your activity, so that way, it causes more of a personal type of reflection. So, I know, a lot of times, if you're teaching a class where the students will do field trips, or if they're doing some kind of practical or internship, or if they're going to be doing anything with a

leadership role, might decide to make your activity a little bit more reflective in nature. So, there are a few tools out there that you can use.

Again, simple internet search will bring up a lot. A couple that I found to be really effective is a True Colors word sort. And basically, you have a list of words that you choose some characteristics, and the students will decide within each square which one really aligns—well, they feel aligns with their personality.

And then at the end, they tally it up, and it's associated with a color. And that color then has some kind of personality trait or behavior trait. And so that's a fun thing to do. And again, you can get the students to do it individually, and they can then share that with the classmates.

What I've done before is the students will fill it out. And then you'll have orange, and greens, and blues, or yellows. And then at the end, you'll get all the yellows to go in a group. And you'll say, OK, yellows, so do you like to usually do whatever.

And so, a lot of them will be like, yes, et cetera. And you say, OK, well, then how are you going to work with the oranges in this particular group? So, it's kind of a fun, easy thing to do. But it's nice because it also makes it a bit more effective and is useful for some of those sort of upper-level or classes that have some kind of community outreach or community engagement.

Another one that you can do I know is, Schwartz has a theory of basic values. Students are presented with a list, and they get to pick which ones they align themselves with. And then from there, they get an idea about what their values are and how that might then impact their viewpoints or their behaviors going forward for the rest of the semester. So, again, there are a lot of different activities that you can do. Those are just two that I find to be quite effective.

I think it's really important when you are doing activities to match them with what it is that you're actually trying to do in the class—what is it that's important or what the nature of the class is. So, as I mentioned, if you're going to be doing something—if you're doing a class there's a lot of community engagement, a lot of field work, you might decide to do an activity that really gets a class either involved with talking to one another—something highly interactive—or something that's a little bit more reflective and then, from there, making that interactive.

Whatever activity you do, you want to make sure that it tries to generate some kind of positive culture in your class. The other nice thing about doing activities is that, when you're doing them on that first day, it's a great chance for you to then also put that syllabus and the practices you set in the syllabus actually in place. So, a lot of times when I'm doing my activities the first day of class, I'm having to get the students to go out and do things and then regroup.

And so, you have to kind of hush the group a little bit, and then you remind them, like, OK, guys, if you remember in the syllabus, it stipulates that when I'm talking, you don't talk. And when you talk, we'll listen to you. And so, it's a great way to cement some of those main behavioral traits that we have from the syllabus and lock it in based on the activities that they're also doing.

So, you choose your activities depending on what it is that you're trying to achieve for the class, what level of interaction, whether it's also just icebreakers, particularly if it's a first-year class and you want to get the students—you know no one's going to know anyone. Having stuff that is very interactive and a good icebreaker activity, that would be great. But it's a great way, as I said, to do a test run of the behavioral traits and the atmosphere that you'd like to have within your particular class.

Another I is Intention—so getting the students to actually figure out what it is that they want to achieve from the class. So, sometimes, I'll get students in their notebooks or on their computers—wherever they taking notes for that particular class—I get them to just come up with their own goals, whether it's one or three, just to write down. And it's personal. I don't need to see it. But I get them to think about, what is it that they want to learn from the class? Or what do they want to get out of the class?

Now, sometimes, it might just be, I want to pass the class. And that's fine. That might be their goal, and that's totally fine. Others, it might be, I really want to learn about this particular part of the topic, or I really want to refine my skills within this particular area. So, I get them to write this down and hang on to it. And then at the end of the semester, I get them to take it out and to look at it and then to, just themselves, reflect on, did they actually achieve that?

And it's a really nice thing to do, particularly in the beginning because it gets the students to think about what it is that they actually want. And it gives them their own personal goal. And I feel like they also can be really honest because I don't need to see

it as an instructor. That's for them. So, I find that having those intentions is a really good thing to do.

Another I is Invest—so getting the students invested within the class. One of the ways in which you can do that is by sharing the types of things that you're going to be covering over the course of the semester. Other ways students can get invested is by introducing any sort of community partners that they might be having, any field trips, or also just showing relevancy. So, that way, they can see what they're going to be doing in the class and how it's relevant to them upon graduation, and how by giving it their all and investing everything that they can into that class will actually benefit them in their careers.

I think, ultimately, though, on the first day, there are a couple of things, a couple of general tips that will come in handy for everyone. The first thing is, come to class early. You want to make sure that you're there. I like to also get to class early, get set up, and then stand by the door and actually greet students when they walk in. I think that's a really nice thing to do.

Be familiar with the technology in your room. Maybe go in a couple of days before. Do a test run if you can. The more complicated the technology, the more beneficial that that will be.

Another thing that you can do or that you should do is try and maintain a personality that you can actually continue for the rest of the semester. It's also very useful to give a full day's worth of class. I think that sets a big message. So, on the first day, if you were to finish 15 minutes into class, that shows that this class might not necessarily be that important to you. So, by giving a full first day, that shows that this is important.

Try and also include an activity where you will be introducing yourselves and the students will be introducing each other. So, these are just a few tips that I have on how I think one can maximize the first day of class. I hope you enjoyed it.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

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