

What can we do on the first day of class? What should we do?

Once common answer is simply to start lecturing: “This is day one, here is lecture one, away we go.” Another possibility is: “Here is the syllabus, go buy your books and we will see you at the next scheduled class period.” Neither of these two options seems desirable. But what are some other possibilities? Here are nine.

Involve students quickly. This can be done in a variety of ways:

- Having them introduce themselves
- Allowing them to think and write silently
- Having a whole-class or a small-group discussion, etc.

But letting students know right from the outset that they will be active participants seems like a good approach.

Identify the value and importance of the subject.

Not all students come to all classes 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.

Set expectations.

This can involve such things as what you consider appropriate amounts of study time and homework for the class, the importance of turning homework in on time, expectations about in-class behavior, how you want to relate to students, 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.

Establish rapport.

Almost any class will be more enjoyable for both you and the students if everyone knows each other a bit. This exchange can be started with introductions, sharing some background information, etc.

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. (Don't reveal too much or you may experience a boomerang effect.)

Establish your own credibility.

Sometimes this happens automatically, but at other times students need to know about your prior 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.

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 of the rest of the semester.

Provided administrative information

This often takes the form of going through the syllabus, presuming you have a syllabus with this information in it: what reading material the students will need; what kind of homework will be involved; what your office hours are; where your office is located; how the class grade will be determined; what your policies are regarding attendance, late papers, make-up exams, etc.

Introduce the subject matter.

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

- What is it?
- What are the parts of the subject?
- How is it connected to other kinds of knowledge?

Final note:

Remember that it is imperative that you do on the first day whatever it is you want the class to do the rest of the semester. If you want them to discuss, discuss on the first day. If you want them to work in small groups, find something to do in small groups on the first day.