

What should I do on the first day of class?

The first day of class can be daunting for several reasons. Students are still shopping around for classes, meaning that enrollments are likely to change. Many students come in expecting that the instructor will just read the syllabus to them and then dismiss class early. And because students haven't done any preparatory work like homework or reading, it's hard to imagine what they could possibly do on the first day. While all of these factors seem to be disadvantages, they actually present a great opportunity to provide students with the pleasant surprise of a meaningful and engaging first-day experience. In addition, several studies show that students' initial impressions of a course and an instructor endure to the end of term course evaluations. Don't waste the opportunity to reverse these low expectations and set a positive tone for the entire semester!

What does an engaging first day look like?

Principles to guide teaching decisions about the first day of class

- Students should have a learning experience that will show them what your course is about.
- Students should face some of the real challenges of your discipline right away.
- Students should do content-related work that could only take place in your course.

Putting these principles into action

The first step to designing a successful first day is having a clear sense of your course goals. What kind of thinking do you want students to learn to do in your course? What new realizations do you want students to come to as a result of learning about your discipline? What is the work students need to be doing through your course to help them change their thinking in meaningful ways? After you've answered these questions for yourself, you're ready to begin designing tasks for the first day of class. Here are some key actions to take on the first day of class.

- **Defer administrative activities until the end of class** so you can help students experience the kind of work that makes your discipline exciting and what your course is *really* about. Instead of calling roll or reviewing the syllabus right away, use the opportunity to send a strong first impression about the importance of your course.
- **Start with a task that will challenge students' current thinking** so they can begin to see how their thinking might change as a result of your course. Mistakes are essential to learning, but they can be intimidating for students. Use the first day of class to create a space where it's ok to be wrong in the service of learning and development.
- **Use a content-related task to "break the ice" in the classroom** so you can establish a collegial atmosphere. Tasks that require students to practice disciplinary thinking can be designed in ways that are very engaging, so you get the benefits of social icebreakers with the added benefit of having students begin the real work of your course right away.

Examples of effective first day tasks

From a 19th Century American Women Writers course

Students come into this course not recognizing the importance of women writers in the literary marketplace of the 19th Century. They also don't recognize that there is often an inverse relationship between a literary text's popularity and its eventual inclusion in the canon. This task is designed to begin interrogating those naïve beliefs so that they can more effectively use historical and cultural context as a foundation for analyzing and interpreting literature.

1. Students are given a list that includes the author, title, and year of publication of several 19th Century American novels. This list includes novels that were best-sellers in the 19th Century but have since been largely forgotten (most written by women) and novels that did not sell well in their time but have established a place in the literary canon (most written by men).
2. Students work on their own to decide which of these novels sold the MOST copies within a few years of publication, and which sold the LEAST copies. They then put the titles into two categories: (A) Novels that would be in the top half of the list (i.e., sold the MOST copies) and (B) Novels that would be in the bottom half of the list (i.e., sold the LEAST copies). They are required to write down their individual answers.
3. Students work with a group or 5-6 other students to compare individual answers and come to consensus on how they would sort the novels. After they have arrived at a consensus decision, each group writes their list on the board and then is asked to explain their reasoning. Disagreements and different ways of thinking surface; the instructor makes notes regarding the differing rationales and asks questions to probe students' thinking.
4. After the groups have thoroughly explained the thinking that guided their decisions, the instructor shares publication data and begins to explain the relation between the popularity of a literary work and its inclusion in the literary canon. Students have now made a first step toward recognizing how and why many of the writers on the syllabus were very popular upon their initial publication but have since been excluded from the literary canon.

From a Human Development course

Students come into this course with rigid ideas about what a child is and limited ideas about the role that culture and ideologies play in human development. Further, students don't always realize that their own ideas about children, families, and development are limited by their cultural biases and lay concepts. By the end of the course, the goal is that students have a much richer and more scientific network of concepts with which to make good decisions as future parents, uncles/aunts, teachers, school psychologists, etc. This task is designed to surface some of their limited thinking right away and also get them to practice a key aspect of the course: making a decision about the developmental appropriateness of a tool, setting, or activity.

1. Students watch about five minutes of a video showing children at play in a playground. They are asked to make note of things that they think are good for the

children in the playground and things that they think are not good for the children in the playground.

2. After the short video, students decide for themselves if the playground is a developmentally appropriate one for the children in the video. They are required to write down their answer.
3. Students work with a group of 4-5 other students to compare individual answers and come to consensus on whether the playground is a developmentally appropriate one for the children in the video. After they have reached consensus, groups hold up a card representing their answers (yes or no) and then explain their reasoning.
4. Disagreements and different ways of thinking surface; the instructor makes notes regarding the differing rationales and asks questions to probe students' thinking. After some time, the instructor reveals other ways to look at the playground (if these more disciplinary perspectives have not emerged) and tell the students that this kind of activity is similar to the work we will do every day in the class. Students shift from drawing on lay knowledge and their own experiences (and biases) to more informed positions and scientific knowledge during the discussion.

Resources about the importance of the first day of class

- Buchert, S., Laws, E.L., Apperson, J.M., & Bregman, N.J. (2008). First impressions and professor reputation: influence on student evaluations of instruction. *Social Psychology of Education* 11, 397-408.
- Clayson, D.E. (2013). Initial impressions and the student evaluation of teaching. *Journal of Education for Business* 88, 26-35.
- Laws, E.L., Apperson, J.M., Buchert, S., & Bregman, N.J. (2010). Student evaluations of instruction: when are during first impressions formed? *North American Journal of Psychology* 12(1) 81-92.

If you'd like to make sure your first day of class gets students ready to learn in your course, please feel free to [request a consultation](#).