

# Off to a Great Start: Stanford Teachers Share Tips for a Successful First Day of Class

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On the first day of the quarter, our new batch of Stanford students will file through the door sporting summer tans, hoping to get hooked. As teachers, what we do for the next hour or two is key to getting everyone off to a strong start. To see what Stanford's instructors drum up for the first day, I spoke with several lecturers and professors, who graciously shared some tips. Whether you're a veteran teacher or just getting started, check out their suggestions below to get a new take on the first day.

## NAME THEM

Before class even begins, [Dr. Waheeda Khalfan](#) (Department of Biology, instructor of "Introduction to Biology") suggests you learn your students' names. "On the first day, I knew I was going to have 53 students. I made it as important as the lesson plan to learn their names," says Khalfan. "I get a little disoriented when I see them, especially if their photo doesn't match... but if I make mistake with their name, they see the human side of me. They see me screw up. And they see me pick myself up again. As the 53 walked in, I called them out by name. They were shocked."

[To find a list of your new students, log in to [Axess](#), scroll over the "Teaching" tab, and click on "View Class Lists." To see their photos, click the bubble for "Include photos in list" and then click the small, red hyperlink that says "View All."]

Being able to call out students' names on the first day helps to build community not only between instructor and students but also between the students themselves. With names, everybody is better able to recognize the contributions of their classmates ("As Kaila said, ...") and build on those contributions.

Since we're on the topic of names, we should also remember that students often don't know what to call *us* until we send out that first email with our signature at the bottom. Do we want to be called Dr. So-and-so, Professor, or simply just our first name? Let them know, so they feel comfortable calling us by name as well.

## OWN THE SPACE

Another thing to consider before the first day is your classroom. [Marcelo Clerici-Arias](#) (Department of Economics, instructor of "Principles of Economics") diligently vets the space before beginning a quarter anew. "I check the classroom as soon as I get the classroom assignment," he says, "even if it's months before. But also, the Friday of the week before, I go there with a technician to make sure the technology works."

**Dr. Alyssa O'Brien** (Program in Writing and Rhetoric, instructor of “Visual Rhetoric, Capturing Culture Across the Globe”) makes the space her own. O'Brien arrives early and cues up a number of plasma screens around the perimeter of the room with a welcome message and instructions. From the moment they walk in the door, “I make it an engaging environment,” she says.

One quarter, O'Brien went to check out her assigned room and found a narrow space with no windows. The students arrived on the first day and entered a room with outdoors scenes tacked up on the walls. Putting a personal touch on your classroom and assuring it's all set up makes the first day go a lot smoother.

## ARRIVE EARLY

Every professor and lecturer across campus I interviewed for this article agreed on one recommendation: arrive early. While some reported arriving as early as thirty or forty minutes ahead of time on a daily basis, even those who confessed to habitual tardiness during the quarter made an extra effort to get there early on the first day.

It's not always about setting up technology or arranging chairs. The real benefit of being set to go early on the first day is that readiness allows you to interact freely with the students as they walk in.

O'Brien makes an effort to greet each student. “As students come in, I'm located near the front door to literally say hello to each one, shake their hands, and introduce myself. It just shows that I treat students with respect, and it establishes a relationship with each and every one of them. It's an investment that really pays off later.”

Khalfan reports, “What I like to do, I put on music, and I take requests. Sometimes it's real interesting because they are pretty vocal about their requests.” It's a way for students and instructor to break the ice and get to know each other on different grounds.

## GET STUDENTS INVESTED IN YOUR TOPIC

Several instructors also recommended using field-specific icebreakers to introduce the topic of the course and to form community. “Get the students talking,” suggests O'Brien. “Studies show that if you get every student talking on the first class, they are more likely to talk the rest of the quarter. You can ask them all to state their name or get them to introduce each other. You might ask, ‘What do think you'll tell a future boss about this class in an interview five years from now?’ and then link that to the theme of the course. It helps them get to know each other and get them invested in your topic.”

**Dr. Donna Hunter's** (Program in Writing and Rhetoric, instructor of “The Virtue of Vice and the Vice of Virtue: The Rhetoric of Criminality”) primary goal for the first class is to get the students to think about their own personal investment in the class. To achieve this in her criminality course, she stands in front of the students and tells them all to get up. Next, she commands, “All of the criminals go to the left side of the room, and all of the non-criminals go to the right side.”

“They look at me like I'm crazy,” says Hunter. This activity forces them to think about what comes to mind when they hear the word ‘criminal.’ After the activity, she puts them in groups of three, has them come up with a definition of a criminal, and writes the definitions on the board. Through all of this, Hunter turns ambient rhetoric (stuff we hear all the time but don't stop to think about) into a mindful debate central to her course. And all this, on the first day.

## SET EXPECTATIONS

While Stanford students shop around for classes, one of their primary objectives is to find out what they can expect from a particular course. While some might bolt to the section of the syllabus that outlines assignments and due dates (admittedly important), it's also important to communicate what will be their broader involvement while in your course.

**Dr. Chaya Nanavati** (Department of Physics, instructor of "Mechanics, Heat, and Electricity") makes sure that on the first day she communicates to the students that they shouldn't see her as the only expert in the room. Peer-instruction will be key in this class, she explains.

She introduces **Just-In-Time Teaching**, or JiTT, a teaching method where students complete electronic assignments a short time before each class so that the instructor has just enough time to adjust the lecture according to the needs demonstrated in the responses. As such, it's critical that students come to Nanavati's class prepared. To drive this point home, she shows **a short clip** from *The Paper Chase* where a stern, grey-haired professor chastises a young man for assuming that the first day of class would simply be lecture. After the clip Nanavati tells her class, "The real reason I want you to come prepared is that, when you arrive, you already know what you don't understand."

Current trends in higher education privilege interactive classrooms, and many Stanford instructors have been moving away from the lecture model. Still, many students need specific criteria for understanding what good, active participation in a course looks like.

Khalfan explains, "I tell them on the first day I really expect this class to be interactive. In the past I haven't given them clear guidelines or incentives. This year I have them keep track of their own participation, and grade their own participation. I gave them **very objective criteria**."

For example, they must earn two participation points each week. They get a point each time they ask a question in class or respond to one of hers. So, when half the room raises their hand, she decides who to call on by asking a simple question, "Who hasn't gotten their two participation points for the week?" Spelling out participation expectations on day one goes a long way to facilitate participation in the remaining ten weeks.

## TEACH SOMETHING ON THE FIRST DAY

We all know that going over the syllabus can take up an entire class period, especially after you've taught a course more than once and have the opportunity to tell students from the beginning what you wished you had told them last time. Still, some instructors recognize that this may be the *only* time they see some of the students before them, and they strive to send them away more learned than when they walked in.

"I do try to convey the most important message of the class, so if the student never comes back, they still get something important out of the course. I use examples from their personal lives so that examples are more intuitive," says Clerici-Arias. For example, on the first day of class he explains a basic principle of economics: opportunity cost.

Let's look at decision-making in the dining halls and in the residences on campus. Stanford now has an all-you-can-eat system. Before, there was a point system. Think about your eating choices within the two systems in relation to eating an extra steak for dinner. In the current system, there's no additional monetary cost, but there is an opportunity cost (just see the many studies on heart disease). Before, with the old system, you had both an additional monetary and opportunity cost to that steak.

To drive the concept home, at the end of the class, he tells them a fairytale that goes something like this:

A long, long time ago, the King of Tanstaasl wanted to understand economics better so he could be a better ruler. He ordered some economists to teach him, so they wrote him an encyclopedia. "It's too long!", the king complained. So the economists got together again and condensed it to the size of a textbook. But the king still wasn't happy. One brave economist couldn't take the king's complaining anymore, and before he could stop himself, he spoke: "Dear king, I wonder if you've ever thought about the name of your kingdom, Tanstaasl. Many have argued about its meaning, but the best economists agree – there ain't no such thing as a free lunch." And there and then, the king got his first economics lesson.

There's usually some kind of cost to every decision, and students walk away from that first day having learned one of the key principles of economics.

### MAKE IT MEMORABLE

When I asked Khalfan what she does in the first class to make it stick, she replied, "I definitely try to show them my love of the subject. I do it by being very specific. I think, 'What is an experience I've had that truly moved me in biology?' On the first day I showed them this [video of cuttlefish](#). The organisms camouflage themselves incredibly. And these cuttlefish can actually become whatever pattern they need to, even a checkerboard. When I saw that video, I was just floored. So I show them and say, 'You need to know the basic stuff so that you can investigate the more complicated questions that really puzzle us all.'"

So whether it's a YouTube video, calling students by name, a fairytale, having them take a stab at a central concept on day one, changing the classroom décor, or some other creative strategy, make sure your students walk out of there remembering the first day of your class. Who knows, maybe it'll be the first day of a very long passion for the field.

What do you do on the first day? Do you assign something for the second day of class? How much time do you spend going over the syllabus? Share with the Stanford community by posting below.

### READ MORE:

Erickson, Bette LaSere, Calvin B Peters, and Diane Weltner Strommer. "Meeting the First Class." *Teaching First-year College Students*. Rev. and expanded ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006.

Ambrose, Susan A. "What Factors Motivate Students to Learn?" *How Learning Works : Seven Research-based Principles for Smart Teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010.