

# Preparing for the First Class

## OVERVIEW

Whether you are teaching for the very first time or are a seasoned veteran, prepare carefully for the initial class. Your preparation and attitude is contagious: students will pick up on your excitement, be more likely to commit to your class, and invest greater energy in the class. In this section, we discuss strategies for both the new and experienced teacher.

## OPEN WITH A BANG

To prepare for your first class, choose a strong opening. There are several conventional ways to open a course:

- You can explain what you hope to accomplish in the course and why you find the subject matter important.
- You might begin by simply raising some of the more fascinating questions or problems that your field addresses to spark students' curiosity. You can then describe in more detail how your course might help students address those questions or solve those problems.

Then, be prepared to provide a more general overview.

- Go over the topics of the course and let students know how your course connects with others in the discipline.
- Hand out your syllabus and go over it with the class. You should explain how the lectures and sections or labs—if the latter are part of the course—fit together. Bring more syllabi (and any other handouts) than you think you'll need; many more students may “shop” your class than will be enrolled on Axess.
- Be ready to answer questions on grading and exams and to recommend alternatives if the students tell you the readings aren't available yet.

## GET PERSONAL

You can also tell your students something about yourself that first day. If the class is small, you can have class members introduce themselves. If the class will require a lot of student interaction in discussions or projects, you might divide the students into pairs and give each pair five minutes to interview each other (be sure to indicate when the time is half over). The pairs then introduce each other to the rest of the group. This method has the advantage of not putting people on the spot to talk about themselves and yet making sure everyone already knows at least one other member of the group.

Also consider giving your students a minute to swap email addresses or phone numbers with at least one other person in the class—this provides a safety net for the student who misses a class or needs help with an assignment; it also minimizes the number of trivial questions you'll receive about course details.

Demonstrate your commitment to the students by making a serious effort to learn their names and their reasons for taking the course, and by letting them know when and why they should visit your office hours.

### **Learn Their Names**

Learn your students' names as soon as possible, even in a large class; students will invest more in a class when the professor knows them. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- If the class is small enough, considering taking digital photos to review later.
- If the class is large, you might consider using a seating chart for the first week or two. This way, not only will you learn students' names, but they will also learn one another's.
- Have students put their names on a placard that they set out each class.
- Some teachers pass out 3 x 5 cards and ask the students to write down their names, addresses, and a couple of sentences about why they are taking this course. This will give you a sense of what your students expect and appreciate.

### **DIVE INTO MATERIAL**

Although many teachers devote the first day merely to such preliminaries, we recommend that you make a running start—that is, that you also begin discussing material or presenting information. This signals to the students that you are serious about making their time with you worthwhile and that you expect progress to be made in every session together.

Since students are also “shopping around” for the best courses at the beginning of a term, you will give them a fairer sense of your course by actually digging into the subject matter and letting them sample your approach.

### **TIPS FOR FIRST-TIMERS**

There are many things you can do before the first class of the quarter to prepare for your first teaching experience.

- If possible, observe at least one class like the one you will be teaching. Talk with the instructor about problems or successes he or she has had with the course.
- Ask experienced faculty or graduate students in your department for information and tips.
- Visit your classroom in advance and familiarize yourself with the lighting, equipment, and layout; it's amazing how fast your technology IQ can drop when trying to figure out new equipment in front of a room of students.