

## THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS

The following is a set of suggestions that might help make the first day of class a bit less traumatic for you and your students. This first day of class provides an initial opportunity for you to communicate something about you as a professional educator and the discipline that captivated your interest when you were a student. It is also a time for you to examine the characteristics of the students who make up your class, so that you will be able to develop learning situations that are more likely to succeed.

### Getting Started:

- Introduce yourself-first things first. Much of the information you give to students will be repeated on the syllabus, but give it anyway. Write your name on the blackboard as you would prefer to be called, and add your office location and phone numbers. Don't be afraid to give your home number but do not feel obliged. Also, make it clear what hours or days calls will be unwelcome.
- Learn who is in the class. This could involve the time-honored method of passing out index cards for students' names, social security numbers, years, majors, phone numbers, and anything else that will be useful to know. If you collect this information, write what you want to know on one index card and then copy it on the board. This saves countless questions and much confusion. In order to establish a comfortable environment for learning, it is important that everyone, including you, knows the students by name if at all possible. Have the students introduce themselves briefly, or pair up the students and have them introduce each other. This method works well with first-year students, who are more likely to be shy about speaking and who are eager to meet people anyway. If you repeat each name, starting from the beginning, with a bead stringing effect, you might learn the names within the day. Of course, the makeup of the group will change as students drop or add the course, but you will have most of the names down.
- Another way to begin is to have the students explain why they are in the course. Many will say "It fit my schedule" or "It's required" or "The registrar put me in it," but you will also hear what interests students bring to the course. If you get a lot of discouraging they-made-me-come comments, you might ask what would encourage them to stay.
- A variation on this theme is to ask what students know about the subject matter you will be presenting. There could be considerable differences in students' prior knowledge. Even if you receive only the most tentative and naive responses about your subject, be careful not to embarrass the respondents; they are letting you know where you need to begin.
- You can also get started by doing some of the talking yourself. Students will want to know what you know about the subject, how you became interested in the field, and why you think it's worthwhile dedicating several years (or a career) to it. In many cases, students will be interested in your method and approach to the subject.
- You can remove the focus from yourself by talking a little about the nature of your subject, its methods, and its history. This introduction can begin to dispel any simplistic or mistaken notions of the field that your students may have. You can

reinforce your introduction with a text or some artifact: a slide in an art course, the story of a technical breakthrough in a lab.

- Many classes touch on issues in the news. You could bring copies of a recent article to the first class meeting, ask the students what they know about the issue, and use it as a springboard for a general discussion. This is a particularly useful ice-breaker in rapidly-changing fields.

- Explain how the course is set up. The more you can refer to a syllabus, the better off you will be. Note exam and assignment dates for your students, point out where the reading assignments are heaviest; make clear, if you can, what the major emphasis of each part of the course will be. Of course there will be questions about whether exams are cumulative, how long assignments will have to be, and other things you might not have considered. The students are "shopping," and may be concerned about the end of the term when your only worry is getting through the week, so think ahead.

Whether to introduce substantive material on the first day depends to a large extent on the course. In language courses, especially on the primary level, TAs combine basic language exercises with learning students' names. In English and other TA-taught courses, TAs may begin with a brief text and discussion. Check with your department on when and whether diagnostic or other tests should be given.

- One possibility, if you feel nervous about the first day of class, is to come a little early. You can say hello to a few students at a time, and feel that you are welcoming them to the class rather than walking in, precisely on time, to face a room full of strangers.

- Do not feel obligated to say that you are nervous, or that you are new. You survived and prospered in many a course that was taught by a new professor or TA, and you are none the worse for it. Students expect a teacher, so to a certain extent you can role-play for the first few days. As your confidence level rises, you can cut back on "acting" like a teacher as you internalize your role and become a teacher.

- Do not worry if you do not know all the things you will be asked, whether about the course or the material. Your students may at first expect you to be the complete authority on your topic; if you let them know that you are an informed, advanced student and teacher but not an encyclopedia, you will both insure reasonable expectations and provide a model of a thoughtful, non-authoritarian member of the profession. Make a note of questions you are not able to answer, check with your professor or the course supervisor, then get back to the student with an answer.

- If you have handouts for the students, distribute them yourself rather than giving the whole lot to one student to pass on. You can begin to make eye contact with your students this way.