Chapter 2
The First Day of the Term

The first day of teaching, whether it is your first day ever or just the first day of the term, is a simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying experience. You do not know the students, and you want to make a good first impression. You may not be sure of the course logistics, yet you want to sound like you are. This chapter will help you plan for and survive your first day with as little stress as possible.

“I think the day I stop getting nervous before the first day of class—and even a little nervous and ‘adrenalined’ before every class—may be the day I become a less good teacher.”

Before Classes Begin

Here is a short checklist to help you avoid many “first day” headaches.

Know Your Students

If you can get the class list ahead of time, begin to familiarize yourself with the students’ names. You will have an easier time remembering names if you already have a sense of them. If you cannot get a class list in advance, find out how many students you should expect so that you will know how many chairs you will need and how many copies of handouts to make.

Some universities now have a facebook, so you can see students’ photos with the class list. If you want to, you can also check www.facebook.com, and you will probably find photos of many of your students. Photos can really help in learning names.

Check Your Classroom

Look at the classroom before your first class meeting. First of all, you want to be sure you know where it is. Getting lost on the way to class can take all of the fun out of your first day of teaching. Second, you
need to know how the chairs are arranged and whether they can be moved; where the board is and whether it comes with chalk, pens, and an eraser; whether there is a table or podium, and so on. This way, you can be realistic when you think about the logistics of the first day. And you can be sure to have at least as many chairs as you have students.

**Check Class Start Times**

At some universities, classes actually begin ten (or more) minutes after the time printed in the course schedule to allow students time to get from one class to the next. Check to see if such a policy exists at your university.

**Meet the Administrative Staff**

Find out which administrator is responsible for the teaching of undergraduates in your department and make a point of meeting them and their staff. It will prove immensely useful later in the term if you know and are on friendly terms with the director of undergraduate studies, the supervisor of all of the chemistry labs, or the coordinator of the introductory language program. You may look to this person for advice or intervention in a difficult situation, and it helps if they already know who you are.

Administrative assistants in the department wield much of the bureaucratic clout, so (common decency aside) you would do well to be polite and friendly in your interactions with them. These people can often make a room change, an equipment loan, or another teaching request proceed quickly and smoothly if you ask nicely. They also are often the source of invaluable advice.

**Develop Your Class Plan**

Create a detailed class plan. The more detail you put into the plan, the more confident you will feel walking into the classroom. Think about what you are going to say at the start of class and practice it in front of a mirror. It sounds silly to practice your opening, but you have a better shot at delivering it effectively if you have done it before.

*See chapter 3, “The Lesson Plan,” for more information on writing lesson plans.*
Do Your Copying

Make copies of all the syllabi and handouts that you will need. Do not leave this task until the day of your first class because there are always a lot of people making copies at the start of the term. There either will be a huge line or the copier will have gotten tired and decided to stop working.

Know the Drop/Add Policy

Find out about your department’s policy for adding students to a class or section. Do you have the authority to add students to an already full class? If students do not come to the first day or two of class, can you (or must you) drop them from the class? How do you drop and add students from the class? How should you handle a wait list?

Organize Yourself

Decide what you’re going to wear and make sure it’s clean (and ironed if need be!). Pack your bag with everything you will need:

- copies of the course syllabus,
- copies of all other handouts,
- lesson plan,
- class list,
- grade book,
- pens and pencils,
- chalk pens and eraser (if needed),
- index cards for student information,
- a watch or a cell phone with a clock.

Outfitting Yourself

What you wear and the accoutrements you bring will affect how you feel about yourself as a teacher and how your students view you.
Teaching Clothes

Unlike many jobs, teaching at a university gives you more flexibility in the formality of your attire. Your clothes should always be clean, well kept, and of appropriate “coverage,” but their style is a personal choice.

*Dressing Up*

**Pros**

- Students can see that you take your job seriously.
- You look and may feel more professional.
- You may have less trouble establishing your authority in the classroom.
- You create a distinction between your teaching job and your student life.
- You give your students something nice to look at.

**Cons**

- It creates more sense of distance between you and your students (this could also be a “pro”).
- You may not be as comfortable in these clothes.
- Nice clothes can be expensive.

*Dressing Down*

**Pros**

- You may be very comfortable in these clothes.
- You probably already own these clothes.
- It may make students feel more comfortable approaching you.

**Cons**

- Students may take you less seriously as a teacher.
- Students may be more likely to question your authority.
- You may feel less put together.

*Outer Wear*

If you can leave your coat, hat, umbrella, and so on, in your office before class, do so. It gives you less to keep track of going into and leaving class. If this is not possible, think about where you want to remove your outdoor gear (in front of the class, in the back of the classroom, in the hall, etc.), especially if it involves pulling a coat over your head.
Bags
Shoulder bags are a popular choice among teaching assistants because they look professional, but a good-looking backpack works as well if you prefer it. You may want to bring the bag to class because it is an easy way to carry papers, pens, and so forth. Unloading your bag in your office and bringing only the class material you need to the classroom is also an efficient way of organizing yourself before class and making sure that you really do have everything you need.

Introducing Yourself
Many teaching assistants worry that they are ill equipped for teaching if they are barely removed from the undergraduate experience themselves. While you may feel that you have little to offer your students that they cannot offer each other, you will quickly discover that, in fact, you do know much more than they do about your area of study. Remember that your students walk in expecting you to know more, and it is your job on the first day to establish your legitimacy as their teacher.

Your Name
On the first day, you should let your students know what you want to be called; you may want to put your name on the board so that they can see what you want to be called. Many teaching assistants opt to be called by their first name, but using Mr. or Ms. is also a sensible option. To some extent, your decision will affect the formality of your relationship with the students. Do what feels most comfortable for you.

It can be very awkward for students if they do not know how to address you, both in person and on e-mail. Some will default to “Professor ____________,” which you will have to correct (many undergraduates are not aware of the distinctions among levels of faculty and instructional staff). Others will wait for eye contact to begin speaking rather than addressing you. Others may opt for “Hey!” You facilitate easier communication from the get-go by establishing how you would like to be addressed.

Your Background
Fundamentally, most of your students assume you are qualified and do not necessarily care too much about your official qualifications as a
teacher. What they do care about is your interest in and knowledge of the subject you are teaching. The more enthusiastic you are about the course, the more enthusiastic you can expect your students to be. Speak briefly, if at all, about your undergraduate education or experience in your field but do not belabor this subject (as we said, they don’t necessarily care). Some of your previous experiences will also emerge naturally in discussions throughout the term.

There is no reason to discuss your age or the age difference between you and your students unless, for some reason, it becomes relevant. The same is true for other aspects of your personal life; if they see a wedding ring, they will figure out its significance, but outside of that, there is no reason to divulge the details of your personal life, your sexual orientation, and so on, unless you feel this information is relevant to the class.

If they do ask a personal question, you are free to indicate that this question is not relevant, important, or appropriate. You might deal with this humorously (“Actually, I am a very young-looking 89!”) or directly (“Right now I am only addressing questions relevant to the course.”). Do not worry that you are “blowing the student off.” What you are doing is maintaining appropriate student-teacher boundaries and helping students to learn what sorts of questions are appropriate for class.

Remember: you can always tell your students more about yourself as the semester progresses, but you cannot take back anything you say on the first day.

**Your Gender**

Issues of gender are subtle, complex, and extremely powerful, and they are at work in every classroom. When you are thinking about introducing yourself to your students, do not forget that they are also meeting you as their new male or female teacher.

Your gender will influence the power dynamic between you and your students, and it will also influence the power dynamic among your students. While this can be a good thing (e.g., female teachers in the sciences may inspire undergraduate women to consider graduate school) there are an infinite number of ways that the power dynamic in a classroom may be disrupted by issues related to gender.

- Male and female students may be less inclined to respect the authority of female teachers.
Female students may be more or less inclined to speak in a class taught by a man; male students may say more or less in front of female teachers.

Male students may aim to intimidate female teachers; male teachers may intimidate female students.

Teachers may be overly flirtatious with their students; students may be overly flirtatious with their teachers.

Female teachers may be less respected in some fields (e.g., physics), while male teachers may be less respected in others (e.g., social work).

Regardless of your gender, you should keep in mind that gender dynamics are also at work among the students themselves. Unless you are teaching a class about gender, it is unlikely that you will need or want to make an explicit issue of the gender-related power dynamics in your classroom. However, such issues should be on your mind now and throughout the semester. There are many subtle ways that you can manage gender-related issues in your classroom.

- Be sure that men and women are equal participants in class discussions; if they are not, consider possible reasons for this and make the necessary changes.
- Be nonsexist in your presentation of material (e.g., using both males and females in your examples).
- Demonstrate that you expect to be respected regardless of your gender by treating all of your students with equal respect.
- While students may come to the class with sexist ideas about male or female teachers, they will almost always respond to a teacher’s command of the material, regardless of their gender.

**Your Race and Culture**

Like issues related to gender, issues related to race and culture are extremely powerful within the classroom. Almost everything noted previously about gender applies to issues of race and culture.

- Students may be less inclined to respect the authority of minority teachers.
• Depending on the teacher’s race or culture, minority students or stu-
dents who are members of the dominant culture may feel less
inclined to speak in class.

• Both students and teachers may exploit the power differential that
exists among different racial and ethnic groups.

• Regardless of your race or culture, race and culture dynamics will
be at work among your students.

In addition to those noted earlier, there are some special issues that
arise with regard to race and culture.

• While your gender is typically obvious to your students, your race
and culture may not be.

• You may not be able to identify your students’ racial and cultural
backgrounds.

• Racism may result from ignorance—there are many college students
who meet people from certain racial or cultural backgrounds for the
first time in college; sexism rarely results from similar ignorance—
most college students have had ample contact with competent men
and women.

Again, unless you are teaching a course on racial or cultural issues,
you may not need or want to make racial and cultural difference an
explicit issue in your classroom. As with issues related to gender, the
power of racial and cultural differences should be on your mind
throughout the semester. You should use your position of authority to
make sure that all students are treated respectfully by you and their
classmates and that everyone in your classroom has an equal voice. If
you suspect that potentially offensive behavior is a result of ignorance,
use your role as a teacher to provide students with important informa-
tion. For example, you might try to catch a student after class or write
a note on their paper letting them know that most Native Americans
prefer not to be referred to as “Indians.”

See chapter 4, “Handling Sensitive Material” for more information
on addressing sensitive issues in class.
Your Language

Teaching assistants who are nonnative English speakers, whether they were born in the United States or abroad, face a different set of challenges in the classroom, sometimes due to real language barriers and sometimes due to student assumptions and/or biases. Students often complain about “foreign TAs” (in nonforeign language classes), and they often judge foreignness by accent.

In most cases, accent differences should not be a problem for you or your students. Indeed, many undergraduates welcome the opportunity to learn from someone from another country. But, you may also discover that some students respond negatively to a foreign accent. At times, some students will transfer their frustration with the material to frustration with your accent. Regardless of the prejudices students have at the beginning of the semester, they will typically respond positively to your competence in and enthusiasm for the field.

You may want to start the term by telling your students where you are from and whatever else about your background you deem appropriate. If you feel that your accent is noticeable, you can acknowledge that and tell your students that they will quickly become accustomed to your speech. Encourage them to ask questions if they ever have trouble understanding what you are saying.

Example  “I know that my accent may be unfamiliar—if you are having any trouble understanding me now, you will become accustomed to my speech after a couple of classes. Please feel free to stop me and ask to me to repeat anything I say that you do not understand—it will not be a problem.”

At almost all universities, you will have passed an English exam that qualifies you to teach in a U.S. classroom. However, if you find that there is a real language barrier in your classroom, that your students cannot understand your presentation of the material and/or you cannot understand their questions, it is your responsibility to seek help. Contact your university’s resource center for international graduate students or seek out published material for international graduate student teachers. Do not feel that a language barrier speaks to your qualifications as a teacher generally; just be sure that you are taking the necessary steps to teach effectively in a predominantly English-speaking classroom.
Establishing Contact

Be clear about how and when students can reach you. Give all this information to students in writing on the first day, either on the board or on the syllabus.

E-mail

With e-mail, your students can contact you at any hour without even interrupting you. You may want to encourage students to use e-mail as a way to ask questions about assignments, make appointments, or even talk about issues that arise in class. Be clear with your students about how often you check e-mail and how promptly they can expect a response.

E-mail cannot (and should not) replace the one-on-one interaction possible during office hours. If a student’s questions are too numerous and/or far reaching to be answered appropriately on e-mail, or if you feel the student will learn more from a conversation with you, use your e-mail response to make an appointment with the student to visit you during office hours.

“IT’s midnight the night before the paper is due, and the phone rings. Why I answered it, I don’t know—I knew it had to be a student. ‘I think I lost the assignment sheet,’ she said plaintively. ‘Can you read it to me so that I can write it down?’ That was the last time I gave out my home phone! E-mail never wakes me up.”

Office Phone Number

If your department provides an office where you can be reached or where students can leave messages, give this number to students (with warnings about how quickly the message will get to you).

Home or Cell Phone Number

Giving students your home or cell phone number can be problematic because you may hear from them at inappropriate times and more often than you might wish. If you choose to give students your number, you should give them clear guidelines about what hours they may call. Do not expect that they will respect these guidelines. In general, we do not recommend giving students your home or cell phone number.
Class E-mail Groups

Now that almost all students have and use e-mail regularly, you may want to set up a class e-mail group. You can use this to send messages to the entire class, and students can use it to get in touch with each other. Many universities also now offer course-based web sites where you can post announcements as well as class materials. If you will be sending timely messages through the e-mail group (e.g., assignment updates) or posting them on the web site, you must be sure to remind students to check their mail on the web site frequently. Set a policy about what constitutes appropriate e-mail to this list (e.g., “no keggers announced here”).

Office Hours

Most departments require teaching assistants to hold one to three office hours a week. Try to schedule your hours at a time that is convenient for your students and for you and be sure to let them know that you can schedule other meeting times if they cannot attend office hours. While it may be tempting to schedule office hours only at your convenience, in the end, you will save yourself time and trouble and, more importantly, be a better teacher by being more readily accessible to your students. That said, schedule office hours in a way that also makes sense with your schedule. If Tuesdays are free, perhaps you don’t want to schedule office hours right in the middle of the day. It can work well to schedule office hours adjacent to other commitments you have on campus.

See chapter 7, “Office Hours,” for more information on holding office hours.
Meeting before and after Class

Students often will expect to be able to grab you after class for a brief consultation, and if they can, there is no need to say anything. But if you are on a tight schedule, you should let students know that you will not be available immediately before or after class and that they should plan on arranging a different time to talk to you (office hours, by e-mail, etc.).

Syllabus: Setting the Agenda

Use the syllabus as a kind of contract with your students. It outlines what you expect from your students and what your students can expect in return. As with a legal document, the more specific and detailed you make the policies on the syllabus, the easier they will be to “enforce.” If you are leading a discussion section for a lecture course, the professor will have provided a syllabus, but you may want to supplement this with your own.

Establishing Policies

Be as detailed as you possibly can with all of your policies about attendance, late work, missed exams, and so on. You will be glad to have these guidelines to follow if/when these issues arise. For example, be specific about how much grades will be lowered for each day an assignment is late or for a missed lab. Part of your job is to establish your authority as a teacher, and having clear policies indicates to your students that you are comfortable in this role.

Setting the Tone for the Semester

The entire syllabus does not have to be seriously worded. You can be amusing but firm about issues like attendance and class participation. Remember: you are letting students get a sense of who you are and how you expect to relate to them. The paragraph on plagiarism, however, should be nothing but serious.

Do not worry about being too strict or sounding too firm about the rules on the first day. As long as your policies are fair, they are beneficial to everyone. Remember: you can always ease up on the rules later in the term but it is extremely difficult to become more strict in a way that will seem credible to your students. Students appreciate knowing the rules and the penalties for violating them.
What to Include

The syllabus is the students’ reference sheet for the course, so include as much pertinent information as you can. That said, a syllabus should not become novel-like in length or get overly chatty. Decide what absolutely needs to be on the syllabus and what related explanations you can go over orally in class.

Required or Highly Recommended Information

The following information should be presented clearly on the syllabus:

• all of your “bureaucratic” information: name, office location and hours, office phone number, e-mail address;

• required texts and where to purchase them;

• any and all deadlines for assignments and dates for exams;

• a breakdown by points or percentages for how much all work and class participation count toward the final grade;

• attendance policy: how many absences students are allowed and how further absences will affect their grade (also know the university’s policies on religious holidays and students traveling for university-sponsored activities such as athletics—but these may not need to go on the syllabus);

• policy on late work and missed exams;

• information about how students with learning disabilities or other special needs can request special accommodations;

• the university’s policy on plagiarism (it is important to go over this in detail with students, given the usually serious consequences for violating the policy).

See chapter 7, “Plagiarism,” for more information on dealing with plagiarism.

Optional Information

Some of the following information may be more appropriate in some classes than others, and much of it can be presented in other forms or forums, rather than on the syllabus itself:
• the course description;
• course goals or objectives;
• weekly schedule with topics and readings (some instructors provide the schedule in two parts if they have not yet determined what material will need to be covered in the second half of the term);
• brief descriptions of required assignments;
• a brief description of what you mean by class participation;
• classroom conduct policies: cell phones and beepers, food and drink, e-mail etiquette;
• course advice: study tips, note-taking, group work, availability of tutors or other resources;
• ways that students can provide you with feedback about the course. See appendix A for a sample syllabus.
you want to avoid this awkward silence. As the semester progresses, you may want to come early to deal with bureaucratic details or to chat with students.

**Arriving a Few Minutes Early**

**Pro** You have time to get organized, arrange chairs, erase the board, talk to students about class assignments, enjoy informal “classroom banter.”

**Con** You may have to suffer the unbearable silence of sitting with the two or three students who have trickled in early and who will not speak to each other in your presence (and who may feel awkward speaking with you).

**Arriving Exactly on Time**

**Pro** This makes the beginning of class a more clear-cut event (class begins when you arrive), and it avoids the awkwardness of silent dead time before class.

**Con** You need to be completely organized before you walk in the door, or you will be forced to start class late. Therefore, you may want to take all of the materials that you will be using during class out of your bag and carry them into the room so that you do not have to unpack your bag while students wait and watch.

“I am compulsively early, and so on the first day of class, I arrived in the classroom ten minutes early. There were three students there who stopped talking when they realized I was the teacher. I had no idea who they were or what to say to them, so we said nothing, which meant that every new student who entered the room became deathly silent when they came in. It was a mean feat to revive that class when those awful ten minutes were finally over.”

**Taking Attendance**

Write your name and the course name and number on the board so that any students who have suddenly found themselves in the wrong classroom can leave. After you introduce yourself and give as much background as you see fit, you probably will want to go over the class list to see who is and is not there. Be sure to ask students to correct your pronunciation of their names and to tell you if they prefer to be called by
something other than their given name. Get the names of any students present in the class who are not on the list and tell them their status for getting in (or ask to see them after class). Remind all the students of your drop/add policy; for example, they may need to attend the second meeting in order not to be dropped from the class.

In future class sessions, you can take attendance by passing around a sign-up sheet, or you can simply mark down who is absent once you know all their names.

**Learning Names**

Learn your students’ names as quickly as you can. No excuses allowed here (e.g., “I’m just not good at names”). Focus on it and you’ll be able to do it. You have memorized many more arduous things in your career. It makes an enormous difference with students and the whole class dynamic for you to refer to them by name. Some instructors make notes on their roster to help them remember which students go with which names (e.g., buzz cut, nose ring).

**Information Cards**

Having a note card with each student’s “vital information” can prove invaluable later in the term if you need to get in touch with them. Write on the board (inside a re-creation of a card if you’re feeling artistic) all the information you would like them to include. The crucial items: name, address, phone number, e-mail address. Optional items: their major, interests, expectations of the course, other courses that term, and so forth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME:</th>
<th>YEAR:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MAJOR:</td>
<td>PHONE #:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-MAIL:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERESTS IN THIS AREA:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REASONS FOR TAKING THE CLASS:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER COURSES THIS SEMESTER:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Icebreakers**

You may want to try these icebreakers before you go over the syllabus because they can begin to establish a sense of unity in the class. They are a way for you to learn students’ names and to get a better sense of the
makeup of the class. Also, if you want students to learn each other’s names, you must give them a way to meet each other.

**Introducing Your Icebreaker**

Many students and teaching assistants find any icebreaker to be a painfully corny exercise. They’re right. However, icebreakers usually do “break the ice,” and students will be more willing to participate in your icebreaker if you acknowledge from the beginning that the task is a corny one while giving your reasons for doing it anyway.

**Example**  “I know that your worst fear about the first day of class is about to be realized, and that exercises like this can seem really silly, but I have found that this is the quickest way for all of us to meet and learn a bit about each other.”

**Sample Icebreakers**

*Introducing a Partner*

1. Have the students pair up with someone they do not know and give each pair a total of four minutes to interview each other. (If you have an odd number of students, have one group include three students.)

2. Tell them that they only need to get basic information such as each other’s name, year in college, hometown, and interests. You can also have students find out why their classmates are interested in this course and/or tell each other something particularly memorable about themselves.

3. Watch the time for them and make sure that they switch roles (from interviewer to interviewee) after two minutes.

4. Give each student about one minute to introduce their partner.

You don’t need to participate because you already have introduced yourself. This icebreaker relieves students of the pressure of having to talk about themselves in front of an unfamiliar group, and, by the time you are finished, each student should feel familiar with at least one other person in the class.
**Introducing Oneself**

Go around the room and have each student give their name and year in college. In addition, ask each student to tell the class at least one interesting fact about themselves (or one thing that makes them unique or particularly memorable). You can set the tone of this icebreaker (which can be quite humorous) by going first. For example you might share that you were given an F in singing as a kindergartner or some equally silly tidbit. Or you can ask each student to find a random item in their backpack and explain its significance. As students introduce themselves, you can create a student “map” on the board that you all can use later in the class as you try to remember names. This icebreaker takes less time than the first one, and if you start with some humor, students won’t feel too painfully “on the spot.”

**Reviewing the Syllabus**

It is not enough to hand out the syllabus and expect students to read it. They may not. But you don’t have to read it to them either. Have students read various key paragraphs in the syllabus aloud. Call on one student to read the first key paragraph (this also can be a good way to learn names). After they finish, you can emphasize important points or add any supplemental information (make these notes to yourself beforehand on your syllabus because once you are in class, you may not remember the things that seemed important to you the night before). For the next paragraph, you can either call on another student or have the first student choose a classmate to pick up where they left off (this way, they have to start learning each other’s names).

You should review your attendance policy, your grading policy, late assignment policy, and the university’s rules on plagiarism. The clearer you are about this off the bat, the fewer hassles you will run into later (and if these hassles do arise, you have covered yourself).

You do not have to review the syllabus first thing. You can include a content-based activity on the first day and then go over the syllabus near the end of class.

**Using up Remaining Time**

You may want to come prepared with at least one exercise you can use if you have time remaining at the end of class. You can give a brief
introductory lecture if you feel comfortable doing so. You also can learn more about the makeup of your class by asking your students an “introductory question.”

**Examples**

“Have you ever felt math anxiety? When?”

“Can people tell where you’re from by the way you speak? What do they say?”

“What do you see as your strengths and weaknesses as a writer?”

“Why are you taking this course?”

You can ask students to share their thoughts aloud, either with the full class or in small groups, or you can have them spend five to ten minutes writing in response to the question. You can collect these papers and use them to get a better sense of who your students are and what they know. This material also may work well as an introduction to the next class.

**Further Reading**


