

The First Class

Studies have shown that students form an impression of a teacher and subject area within the first 15 minutes of the very first class. This impression often varies little throughout the rest of the term. Your first class is of paramount importance in establishing the climate and expectations for learning in your class for the entire term.

Before the First Class: Understand the Course Landscape

Know what **textbook (or reader)** will be used:

- obtain a copy from the CI or TA Coordinator in your department
- discuss with the CI what they want covered in the tutorials/laboratories
- find out where students can obtain the required reading materials

Go to your assigned lab or classroom before you teach and **examine the physical layout of the room or laboratory:**

- Do you need a key to unlock the door?
- Where are the light switches? The power outlets? The fan switches?
- Is there a desk or a podium?
- Is there a computer and/or data projector? Where can you obtain all the necessary equipment?
- Is there a whiteboard or chalkboard? Are there markers/erasers?
- If you're going to be showing video recordings, is there a way to darken the room (e.g., using blinds)?
- Is any of the equipment you might need locked away in cabinets—if so, from whom do you get a key?
- How many student chairs and desks or working stations are there?
- Where are the washrooms?

Be sure you obtain (or create if this is not provided by the CI) a detailed syllabus for the course. If you need to prepare the course or lab outline for your students, be sure to include the following:

- Full course title and course number.
- When and where the class meets. Indicate as well the times for individual labs or tutorials in a large multi-section course.
- Your contact information: full name, email address, office phone number (if available) and office hours. **DO NOT** give out your home phone number or cell phone number. Also do not give out an email address other than your utoronto email address.
- Required text(s) and/or readings.
- List of learning outcomes from the course instructor: "At the end of this course/lab, students will be able to..." (Learning Outcomes indicate what skills and knowledge students will acquire.)
- Description of instructions for assignments/tests and evaluation procedures for the course.
- Course policies: attendance, submission of assignments, email correspondence, missed labs,

tests and make-up tests, guidelines for in-class participation. List of important dates.

- Course outline: tutorial/lab topics and reading assignments (a weekly schedule if possible); list of quizzes, tests and assignment due dates.

Write up a lesson plan for each tutorial:

- plan out your topics and themes in advance
- think of transitions between the topics (what are you actually going to say or make the students do in order to move into a new subject area or class activity?)
- divide your class into 20-minute sections—build in time for an introduction, a conclusion and review, and questions from students
- prepare in advance specific, concrete examples, problem sets, or case studies to be used in class
- write down some questions that you anticipate from students and prepare possible answers
- prepare additional handouts to clarify difficult concepts or to explain in-class activities, etc.
- plan in advance how much time you would like each in-class activity or discussion or exercise review or problem set to take.

Think about who your audience is:

- get a class list from the CI
- make sure the level of material you are teaching is appropriate to your group of students

How to Handle your Nerves: Building your Confidence

Remember that most people who teach for the first time are somewhat nervous going into the classroom. There are various strategies around overcoming your nervousness:

- admit it: if you are nervous, admit it as many students will be nervous too
- assume a confident attitude: audiences often see nervousness as dynamism or energy
- focus on the ideas: concentrate on the content that you are excited about
- make a strong start: talk to a couple of students in the audience before you start and begin with an easy to remember introduction to help you and the audience relax
- practice: practice out loud to build your confidence; if possible, do a dry run in front of an audience
- use audiovisual aids: you can always refer to projected images

(Adapted from Teaching at Stanford: An Introductory handbook for faculty, academic staff teaching, and teaching assistants, The Centre for Teaching and Learning, Stanford University; University Teaching and Learning: An Instructional Resource Guide for Teaching Assistants, Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth, UBC.)

Explaining Course Policies: Supporting the Rules of Engagement

Arrive early with all the materials you will need.

Write the course name and number and your name and contact information on the board or overhead projector.

Converse with students as they enter. Treat students with respect and show interest in them. It is important to immediately establish a rapport with them.

Introduce yourself by telling them something about yourself. Tell your students your background, interests, etc. Establish your credibility. It is important to build a sense of community from the beginning so don't be afraid to introduce an introductory activity even in a larger class.

Tell them how to address you (first name only? Mr./Ms./Mrs.?). A tip: whatever you ask your students to call you, you should use the same manner of address with your students—so, if you are asking to be called “Ms. TA”, you should address your students as “Mr. Chang”, “Ms. Digiaralomo”, etc.

Distribute your syllabus and cover the important points:

- Encourage students right away to make use of your office hours. Make coming to your office hours (with prepared questions) part of the participation grade for the tutorial or lab.
- Establish the climate for the class—will the atmosphere be informal with free-flowing questions and interruptions? Or will there be an established question-and-answer period? Will you always start the class off or do you expect students to start off the class by brainstorming some problems?
- Define clear expectations and course policies. Be explicit about what level of participation and engagement you expect in class. Explain how much homework and preparation your students should be doing before they arrive in class. Explain what constitutes a good assignment, but don't go into detail at this point. Review your learning outcomes for the class or lab—discuss overarching goals, not just “passing the exam”.
- Explain clearly the preparation required for each tutorial/laboratory session. Describe all assignments, quizzes, and tests. Outline all the learning outcomes for the course and how they will be assessed. Remember to describe penalties for late submission of work, the university plagiarism and academic violations policies.

Now You are Ready to Teach: The First Class

Start teaching the course material right away! Get the students thinking and problem-solving as soon as the administrative details are out of the way.

Never assume to know the knowledge and skills that your students are bringing to your class. Find out what your students already know about the subject matter by giving a short pre-assessment activity or quiz. Keep this light-hearted as you are only trying to figure out what they know rather than discouraging them by pointing out their limitations.

Show students the kinds of problems, case studies or issues they will be able to solve or discuss at the end of the course. You can begin by discussing some of the current issues, controversies or innovations in the discipline. Show your students how the course content will help them answer many of the questions that they might have.

To build a sense of community, introduce a community-building activity. This will establish a strong rapport in your class.

“Begin as you mean to go on.” If you intend to use group work or pair work in your classes to aid discussion and problem-solving, it is a good idea to do some of these activities in your very first class. Students need to have a very clear idea up-front of what to expect in your class.

Encourage Student Input, Engagement & Participation: Make the Learning Active

Make sure to pause in the continuous flow of information:

- As you teach, stop periodically to ask questions of the students to monitor their understanding.
- Scan the class—ask questions of students sitting in every corner, in every part of the room (i.e., avoid only asking the students in the first three rows for answers, or the same students who always raise their hands).
- Wait a sufficient time after asking a question to allow students to formulate their answers. In other words, try not to answer your own questions! Make sure you wait at least 10-15 seconds for an answer; sometimes even 20 or 30 seconds is better. The longer you wait, the more profound and accurate your students’ answers will be when they finally speak up, because they will have had sufficient time to consider their answer.
- Ask questions that can be partially answered from information just presented to encourage participation.
- Silence is okay! This is particularly true in the first class, when your students don’t know each other and don’t yet know you, and so may be reluctant to speak up in front of the class. Give them time to chew on the material, or put them in groups so they can ask each other questions and get to know each other in the process before addressing the whole class.
- Listen carefully to student responses. Use eye contact, non-verbal cues such as nodding, and facial expressions to indicate that you are interested in what they are saying. Be sensitive to student vulnerabilities when they answer questions in the first few classes.

Provide an activity or a demonstration or a short writing assignment to be done in the very first class—something that demands that the students be active rather than passive. Examples:

- divide class into groups of 3 or 4 and give them 5 minutes to think of a question they would like you to address in class (either in the first class or at the beginning of your second class)
- provide a case study or a problem for them to work through
- get them to reach a consensus on what issues/topics they would like to discuss in the course
- try to inject a bit of fun into activities or demonstrations in order to spark students’ interest
- encourage student interaction (i.e., get the students talking to each other and commenting on other students’ questions and answers, not just talking to you)