



Preparing to Teach the First Day of Class

Lang, J. M. (2019). How to teach a good first day of class. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/advice-firstday?utm_source=at&utm_medium=en&cid=at

James Lang, professor of English and director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College, has some helpful advice for how to prepare to teach the first day of class. He draws from several sources, which he lists at the end of the article, including a book by Sarah Rose Cavanagh, *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom with the Science of Emotion*. (<https://www.amazon.com/Spark-Learning-Energizing-Classroom-Education/dp/1943665338>). The premise of Cavanagh's book is that because students make initial judgments of instructors based on small pieces of evidence, we should plan the impressions we wish to make the first few days of class. With that in mind, Lang offers several good ideas built around four key principles: build curiosity, build community, get students learning the first day, and deal with expectations.

To build curiosity the first day, Lang discourages beginning the class by going over the syllabus. Instead create interest by talking about what fascinated you about the discipline when you first studied it. Think of what fascinates students of today and ways you might connect the content with their world. Then, engage them in an activity that addresses deep questions or problems. Once you have done that, students are ready to go over the syllabus to find out how the course can address their peaked curiosity.

In order to build community, you must recognize that many students approach the first day of class with some fear and anxiety. You can allay those feelings in three ways. First, try to greet as many students individually as you can by walking around, stopping to ask names and where they are from, why they are taking the class, and so forth. Second, humanize yourself through humor, self-disclosure, and descriptions of your intellectual journey. Try to relate to students at their level. Third, provide an opportunity for students to interact with one another either in pairs or small groups.

In an online course, building community is more challenging. But instructors can use discussion boards and post quick videos of themselves to welcome students and to

encourage them to ask questions of you and to interact with their classmates. Communicate clearly that you are a teacher who truly cares about student learning.

Lang has a couple of suggestions for his third principle—getting students learning the first day of class. You might, for example, assign an activity that stretches their thinking to the limits before any content is shared. This will give you an idea of the extent of their background knowledge, and it will prepare students for what is to come. You can also ask them to think about strategies they plan to employ in order to succeed in the class. What have they done in the past that has worked or not worked? What have been the best classes they have taken in your field. The bottom line is to get them actively engaged on Day 1.

The fourth principle is to be cognizant of and responsive to students' expectations about the first day of class. Find out what you can about your students by going over the roster to determine the range of class levels. Perhaps send a message on the learning management system (LMS), asking students to introduce themselves or to ask any questions they might have. Also, you might want to familiarize yourself with the classroom you will be teaching in. Get comfortable with the space, and make sure all technology is working in advance of the first day.

Beyond these four principles, Lang offers additional helpful tidbits. Decide on the impression you wish to make the first day by the way you dress. After the first day, post a video or written message on the LMS, describing how you thought the first day went and how it connects with the rest of the course. In subsequent class periods, refer back to the first day's activities. On the last day of class do something to help students recognize the progress they have made. For example, on the first and last day of class Lang asks his English composition class to think of all the associations they make with the word "British." The differences can give students a feeling of accomplishment.

So, in summary, the keys to making the first day of class have a lasting impact are to build curiosity, support student learning, give a preview of the course, and build a community of learners.