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Resource: The Torch or the Firehose
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Off to a Good Start

The first few classes are important: they set the precedent and pattern for the rest of the term. As they say, “First impressions last.” Some students seem to think the saying is “First impressions are the last”—they bolt out of their first-day recitation to the undergraduate office where they queue up to see what other section is open.

Your challenge is to get over your first-day jitters and off to a good start. Instead of thinking of yourself as up for inspection, imagine yourself as the host of a party full of strangers, or the conductor of an amateur orchestra meeting for the first time. If you can make your students feel a part of something exciting and interesting, you’ll have taken a big step toward ensuring the success of the next twelve weeks.



The first day

Let’s talk about what you can do the first day. We’ll assume that the sections are essentially fixed from the beginning, but if students are allowed to shop around, changing sections freely (find this out before you walk in), then some things should be postponed until the second or third meeting when the class has stabilized.

Introduce yourself

Your name, office, phone, office hours, for sure. If you feel comfortable doing it, why not briefly tell your class something about yourself—your schooling, research, interests, and in general, what you do besides teaching their class?

If you are from abroad, you should definitely tell them about your background. Read now the section near the end of this booklet for teachers from other countries. You should also read it if your English is heavily accented.

By the way, if the room is too large, the first day is the time to ask the students to move closer to the front.

Introduce the class to each other

If the sections are fixed, make up a class list by passing around a piece of paper on which students write their name, address, e-mail address, phone number, major (or possible major), and advisor’s name. Circulate the list at the next couple of meetings as well. When it firms up—check it with the official list to see who has dropped out—give everyone a copy. (Wait for the second meeting to start this process if students can shop around.)



First Day Subject Matter

The main thing is to choose material that allows interaction. If the lecture hasn't met yet, you could quiz the class orally on background material or work some review problems with them. If the lecture has met, you could, in addition, quiz them about the lecture or start in on the homework. Many lecturers make suggestions about what to do the first day—ask at the course meeting. You could have a discussion with them about what they would like to see done in recitation. If the lecturer isn't going to do it, you could outline topics to be covered; you might give them some examples of what they'll be able to do by the end of the course, to whet their appetites. But avoid lecturing; the message for today is that you want them to talk too. That will set the pattern for the rest of the term.

Learning names: There's magic in a name. Knowing your students' names will tell them you are interested in them as individuals and will help interaction. We're putting this in the present chapter to encourage you to start in on it from the beginning. Your efforts will please students and encourage them to return.

Use the names in class: This is the fastest way to learn them. You can ask the students to give their first names (that's all they ever give) whenever they speak for the first week or two. Don't be inhibited by the fear of making mistakes with their names; you'll be forgiven.

Quick 5 or 10 minute quizzes: Ask them to write their full names at the top, then go around the room while the students take the quiz and look at their names. This is a good way to see who needs help getting started—offer it if it is needed. You can even do this the first day.

Return homework individually: Call the students by their full name. Note any unusually pronounced names; how you say their names is important to students. If there isn't any homework, you could instead call the roll occasionally during the first few weeks. (Both of these let the students see who's who.) As a further help, you can note down obvious physical characteristics, and where they sit.



Student picture: Find out from your undergraduate office when these are available, and be sure to get them. Doctor them as needed by inking in new mustaches, beards, glasses, longer hair (removing these poses more of a problem...)



I urge students to come in and visit during office hours in the first few weeks so that I'll get to see them as individuals instead of just as a sea of faces.

—Math T.A.

In the lecture/recitation format, it's only the recitation teacher who has a chance to know the student. You'll be relied on in a variety of ways (completing evaluation forms, giving grades, talking to advisors, writing letters of recommendation, etc.) to provide information about your students. Students themselves will drop by for help and advice. The more you know about them, the more you'll be able to help. Treat getting to know them as an important business.

Don't be discouraged if the first day doesn't go as well as you had hoped; it's easy to exaggerate its importance. There's always the second day and all the others to come. Expect some quietness in the beginning as you and your students feel each other out. As you get to know each other, most of the first-day awkwardness will disappear and things will go more easily.

Just keep coming to bat—once in a while you'll hit a home run.

—Chem T.A.

