

Making the Most of Your First Day of Section or Class

The Idea: The first day of section is unique: perhaps little course material to discuss, but a unique opportunity because tone setting is crucial and first impressions are lasting.

Techniques and Rationales from Other TAs

“I begin the first discussion section with an "ice breaker." Students pair up and take turns introducing each other. I give them a few points to include: name, major/class, hometown, and something trivial—favorite movie, team, food truck, or recent concert attended. In a discussion section, students need to get used to talking to each other (tone setting), and ice breakers establish collegiality (culture building). Generally tons of laughter and smiling with this approach!”

“I have a lesson plan! Even for the first meeting, I am prepared to cover the lecture syllabus, section syllabus, ground rules, expectations. If you want to know your students beforehand, use GRS’s photo roster with student names. I follow up with emails reminding students to message with any questions or with input about good office hour times (if I previously requested this). I strive to be prompt and thorough in responding to inquiries. It encourages communication by giving the impression early that I’m accessible via email and helpful with my replies.”

“I leave at least five minutes for questions about anything related to the class. With any time remaining, I try to say all of the students’ names, and I invite volunteers to try as many names as they can with help from classmates welcome. I frame this as a way to practice sharing even when you’re not completely confident about what you’re saying: to take a risk. It highlights that section is a collaborative environment in which we support one another.”

“I create a communal environment with an introduction game. This elicits common threads among classmates, gets them used to calling each other by name, and opens them up to low-stakes verbal participation right out of the gate. Here are two versions.

1) Connections. One person starts (perhaps the TA), says their name, program, year, and a fact about them. Example, I have a pet dog. Students matching that fact must stand and the first person picks one and the process starts again. Students can come to the front of the room or stay put. Everyone eventually will have a connection with others, and the game ends when the last student connects to the first. I include myself in the loop.

2) Ball toss. With an alert beforehand, toss a light ball or other safe (soft) object toward a student. Ask them to say their name and introduce themselves. The student then tosses the ball to another student. This student must introduce the previous person before introducing themselves and tossing the ball. This helps with listening and is interactive with the ball.”

“I ask students for an interesting fact about themselves in introductions. Some may get nervous about "interesting." I write these things down and do my best to bring them up in informal conversations prior to the start of section (students arriving early) or meeting individually. On the first day, I ask a follow-up question about every interesting fact. If a student says he plays the trombone: are you in the marching band; how long have you been playing; how do you practice the trombone in a dorm room? Takes time but makes introductions livelier and contributes to a comfortable classroom. It’s worth it.”

CET First Day of Class Resources

At CET.USC.EDU, you’ll find a “First Day of Class” page with links to online resources.