Faculty Focus

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**First Day of Class Activities that Create a Climate for Learning**

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There’s no discounting the importance of the first day of class. What happens that day sets the tone for the rest of the course. Outlined below are a few novel activities for using that first day of class to emphasize the importance of learning and the responsibility students share for shaping the classroom environment.

**Best and Worst Classes –** I love this quick and easy activity. On one section of the blackboard I write: “The best class I’ve ever had” and underneath it “What the teacher did” and below that “What the students did.” On another section I write “The worst class I’ve ever had” (well, actually I write, “The class from hell”) and then the same two items beneath. I ask students to share their experiences, without naming the course, department or teacher, and I begin filling in the grid based on what they call out. If there’s a lull or not many comments about what the students did in these classes, I add some descriptors based on my experience with some of my best and worst classes. In 10 minutes or less, two very different class portraits emerge. I move to the best class section of the board and tell students that this is the class I want to teach, but I can’t do it alone. Together we have the power to make this one of those “best class” experiences.

**First Day Graffiti –** This is an adaptation of an activity proposed by Barbara Goza in the *Journal of Management Education* in 1993. Flip charts with markers beneath are placed around the classroom. Each chart has a different sentence stem. Here are a few examples:

“I learn best in classes where the teacher \_\_\_”  
“Students in courses help me learn when they \_\_\_”  
“I am most likely to participate in classes when \_\_\_”  
“Here’s something that makes it hard to learn in a course: \_\_\_”  
“Here’s something that makes it easy to learn in a course: \_\_\_”

Students are invited to walk around the room and write responses, chatting with each other and the teacher as they do. After there are comments on every flip chart, the teacher walks to each one and talks a bit about one or two of the responses. If you run out of time, you can conduct the debriefing during the next session.

**Syllabus Speed Dating –** Karen Eifler, an education professor at the University of Portland, designed this activity. Two rows of chairs face each other (multiple rows of two can be used in larger classes). Students sit across from each other, each with a copy of the syllabus that they’ve briefly reviewed. Eifler asks two questions: one about something in the syllabus and one of a more personal nature. The pair has a short period of time to answer both questions. Eifler checks to make sure the syllabus question has been answered correctly. Then students in one of the rows move down one seat and Eifler asks the new pair two different questions. Not only does this activity get students acquainted with each other, it’s a great way to get them reading the syllabus and finding out for themselves what they need to know about the course.

**Irritating Behaviors: Theirs and Ours –** This activity grows out of research done by Drew Appleby in 1990 (*The Journal of Staff, Program and Organizational Development*). His findings are a bit dated now, but the idea is not. Appleton asked students to list faculty behaviors that most irritate them. He had faculty do the same for student behaviors. I’d put students in groups and have them respond to a slightly different question: “What are the five things faculty do that make learning hard?” Or, asked positively, “What are the five things faculty do that make it easy to learn?” Collect the lists and make a master list to share in class or online. Below the five things faculty do, you can also list the five things students do that make it hard or easy to teach. The follow-up conversation is about how the teacher and students can each commit to not doing what appears on their respective “hard” list and have a better class experience as a result.

**Additional articles to help you begin the new semester:**

* [Five Things to Do on the First Day of Class](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/five-things-to-do-on-the-first-day-of-class/)
* [First Impressions: Activities for the First Day of Class](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/first-impressions-activities-for-the-first-day-of-class/)
* [The First Day of Class: A Once-a-Semester Opportunity](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/the-first-day-of-class-a-once-a-semester-opportunity/)

First Day of Class Activities that Create a Climate for Learning was originally published on Jan. 9, 2013 and was one of most popular articles on *Faculty Focus* that year.

23 comments on “First Day of Class Activities that Create a Climate for Learning”

1. **Prudence Ingerman** says:

[January 9, 2013 at 9:24 am](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62030)

All my international college students do not know each other, so I have them pair off and interview each other on the first day. I give them a fve minute limit but… and this is the twist… the interview is silent so students must mime Q and A. I model this stirring an imaginary pot vigorously (cooking)and point to my partner with a querulous look. I don't permit use of writing at all. They usually rush to the world map and get some infomation there. If the shyest students are paralyzed, I write some prompts on the board like sports, music, travel, family, passions etc but I erase the list after a minute or so. At the end of the five minutes each pair stands and does their best stab at introducing the partner. This always results in errors of interpretation and much laughter and in this relaxed atmosphere I am able to assess speaking skills. I never correct speech nor pronunciation in this exercise.  
Prudence Ingerman – Juniata College, PA

1. **Prudence Ingerman** says:

[January 9, 2013 at 9:37 am](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62031)

Another activity I do in my American immigration history course is related to a survey the students will do, collecting 20 name and the country of origin. In class, on the first day I take a marker and write my full name on the board and then I spend about two minutes explaining meaning and/or origins of each part of my name. I then hold up the marker and say ,"Who's next? " The most eager student will jump up and the shyest student will always be last but will have heard many good models beforehand. I urge students to write their names in their own language script.. If there is time at the class end students love to learn how to write their own names in Arabic or Thai or whatever language is available.

1. **Carol** says:

[January 9, 2013 at 10:25 am](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62032)

Review the syllabus with the class, then break into small groups and have the students critique it. Then, have a report out and if possible, negotiate changes that the students may suggest. This activity does a lot of things—gets student talking and building their relationships, encourages review of the details in the syllabus, gets students' voice and input into the room, gets questions answered and helps build rapport between the instructor and students.

1. **Meredith** says:

[January 9, 2013 at 11:21 am](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62034)

I have tried so many icebreaker session on the first day….I have a folder jammed with ideas suggested by others that failed. IT is true that the opening day sets the tone…my students report that these opening activities are too quirky and a waste of time and it takes half a semester for them to get over it. I teach mostly students taking Intro Biology (the majors version) as a requirement for another program so most do not want to be in my class. I would like to hear about opening day activities from instructors of this type of class.

* + **cindi** says:

[January 9, 2013 at 5:07 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62043)

Meredith – I am SO sorry you haven't found what works for you. It really depends upon the size of your classes. I am also in a biology dept and feel your pain!  
BIG classes 200+ it is nearly impossible. I arrive early, meet folks at the main door, ask names and then typically a NUTTY question – vanilla or chocolate? Hogwarts or Narnia? Recommend a movie for my weekend…If a song played when you walked into the room what would be be, Your favorite Pet's name…..What would you do with an hour completely to yourself, stuff like that – they look at me funny, but it sets the stage for you wanting to know them as individuals. I'll do this every day we meet until the first exam. If the question is different everyday they start expecting you to ask = and when you stop you'll get complaints. HA!  
With smaller classes 100 or less (50 is better) I do a 'get acquainted Scavenger Hunt' with 30 or so items on it. They must get a different person to sign each line, but to sign they must either answer the question or fit the description.. Items range from silly (has an outie belly button, or can make a sound like a wild animal), to content (can name 3 differences between spiders & insects, or can name the state tree and ID it) to observational (has birds nesting near their house they can identify). I also put in things like 'carpooled to class today' or 'what team is the national collegiate football champ'. Folks are encouraged to get up, move around, talk to each other (this makes them NUTS too…they can't believe they are encouraged to talk!) The last question is 'WHAT IS YOUR GOAL FOR THE CLASS" and when time is called they must answer that question for themselves.  
When time is called, I single out a student I've talked to and introduce them by name and something they've told me/or marked on my page. They acknowledge the class and tell us their GOAL – I write this on the overhead. They then find someone from their paper and introduce them telling us 'Sharon knows what a 'Didelphus virginianus' is… Sharon acknowledges the class, tells us what it is, then tells us her goal for the class…I write that down and she must then introduce us to someone from her page….Of course while folks are introducing themselves I am writing their names on a seating chart (they have NO idea) and I get to know them more easily using this tool. The nice thing is for most of the questions it doesn't matter if it has been answered or not, people will have different answers (Traveled West of the Mississippi = Traveled outside of the U.S. in the past year = Has seen a star out and about in Nashville, etc.)  
The last day of class I usually pull out the overhead created on the first day and folks are AMAZED that they actually met their goal – of course I tell them that they are paying good money to get an education – so it was up to them to reach their goal.

Good luck in this next semester  
Cindi

1. **Pat Post** says:

[January 9, 2013 at 11:31 am](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62035)

My second year business students are concerned with achieving success in whatever they do. So, on the first day of class, a few moments before class begins in order to allow some time to think about their answers, I put up a one-page Powerpoint with the following request:" Introduce yourself to your classmates (i.e., first and last name and where you are from) and tell us one interesting thing about yourself. In addition, offer one good tip on 1) how to succeed in university; 2) how to succeed in business; and 3) how to succeed in life." The answers are always interesting, often humorous, and surprisingly poignant.

1. **lynn shuster** says:

[January 9, 2013 at 12:49 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62036)

After going over the syllabus filled with pertinate info about the course, classroom rules and my availability and office hours, I hand out 3 x 5 cards, color coded to class folder and request information about each student. The info ranges from, name, major, advisor, background in course, GPA, interests, phone, etc. I always include a question that requires more than one word as the answer! The questions range from….describe a proud moment in your life; favorite class ever and why; favorite teacher ever and why; where do you want to be in 10 years; and why did you choose this college. As they are answering their question, I answer the same question!

1. **Elizabeth** says:

[January 9, 2013 at 1:23 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62037)

I teach a science course. Collaboration is vital to science and students are pretty uptight about meeting strangers. In addition, I want to connect with the students right away. I've had students who didn't know their lab partner's name at the end of the course! After the syllabus review is done, I have each student tell the class the most interesting thing about themselves (or something otherwise noteworthy ). I start with a story of how I once encountered a grizzly bear during one of my field seasons. Any memorable story will do. I invite them to lie or make up a story if they can't think of one themselves. Much like a 12-step meeting, after they state their name, the class repeats, "Hi \*name\*." I allow the student to tel their story. I repeat their name, ask them a follow up question, and then introduce them to the class. For example, \*Bob Smith\* tells me he once played in the World Series of Poker. I ask, 'Bob, what's the most important thing you need to do to play poker well?" He tells me that he needed to be able to read players "tells". I point out that good observational skills are important in science and predict that Bob should do well in the class by applying those skills to this course. Then I introduce our "Card Shark Bob" to the class. The stories are often sweet or poignant or humorous. It really helps to loosen things up and makes each person seem a little more approachable because you already know something about them! They aren't really a stranger anymore.

Students tend to form lab groups with people sitting at a common table, so after we are done, I offer a few minutes for students at each table to introduce themselves again and chat for a few minutes before we begin our class activities.

* + **Evangeline** says:

[January 9, 2013 at 3:34 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62040)

I've done a similar activity, but after a student says her name, I write the first name on the board. At the end of introductions, the board is filled with names and I say something about being a community of learners.

1. **Paul** says:

[January 9, 2013 at 2:32 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62038)

This year I tried a new exercise my coordinator shared with me about identifying student's learning styles. On the surface, it might seem boring to have the students take a survey that reads like a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (preferences), but when the students then learned about which learning strategy worked best for them (watching, listening, or hands-on doing), it seemed to be new and fresh to the students, and it gave them some valuable information about themselves. It also put the focus on learning, but within their unique abilities.

1. **Kristen** says:

[January 9, 2013 at 3:22 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62039)

I've had my students state their name and then answer silly "would you rather" questions – "Would you rather never have to do laundry again or be able to sleep in as late as you want?" Eases some of the first day jitters and they usually open up as to why they would choose one over the other.

1. **cognitioneducation** says:

[January 9, 2013 at 3:46 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62041)

In all class of reasonable size, I have students tell the class an interesting fact about themselves – I do this primarily for myself, to help me learn their names, but it also helps them feel known, which is a good thing. In Intro to Psych classes I also give them a T/F quiz to work on in groups. The statements on the quiz comprise common misconceptions about psychological information and all are false, but of course students usually think at least 3/4th of them are true. Once they realize that all are false (I go down the list asking for a show of hands on which items are true and they usually get it about halfway down), I switch to the syllabus by telling them that throughout the semester they will be learning why all those statements are false, and then some. This activity is fun and piques their interest without detracting from the tone I want in the class.

1. **Mike** says:

[January 9, 2013 at 3:58 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62042)

I teach communications — mainly, writing (journalism), but also a range of media subjects, from media effects to communications law.

I get students involved by asking them to volunteer to talk about themselves — not just the typical major and year in school, but where they're from, how they feel about that place, what their name(s) mean (some unusual ones pop up), what traditions they enjoy (if the first day is near a major holiday), and what hobbies they have.

Another tactic I use when feasible is to arrive in the classroom early and sit among the arriving students, but not identify myself. I listen to them talk about their lives and their classes, and I offer comments — joining the discussion. I find this puts students at ease and shows them I have some of their same concerns. I've never had a student complain that I had duped him or her, so I'm OK with this practice. I figure students should be able to figure out anyway that the older guy in the tie and jacket, and mainly white chin beard, is the professor.

* + [**@Prof\_Blansett**](http://twitter.com/Prof_Blansett) says:

[January 24, 2014 at 9:41 am](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62066)

I used to be able to sit with arriving students without identifying myself as "teacher" in my 20s and early 30s. Now I look too much like "Mom." I can still speak some of their language though, but I expect that's because I have a 13-year-old at home who keeps me UTD.

1. **Bill** says:

[January 9, 2013 at 6:40 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62045)

The physics education research folks (who lead in active learning — check out works like “Improved Learning in a Large-Enrollment Physics Class” on <http://www.cwsei.ubc.ca/SEI_research/index.html> ) have an interesting discussion on how to sell active learning to students. See <http://blog.sciencegeekgirl.com/2013/01/09/the-fi>… .

Also, on the above point about learning styles, they’re actually little evidence that they exist. Two relevant articles are “The Myth of Learning Styles”  
<http://www.changemag.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/S>…  
and the scholarly Pusher et al., “Learning styles: Concepts and evidence,” Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 9, 105-119 (2009) <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/journals/pspi>… . The author of the first is a noted cognitive scientist and the authors of the latter are at the very top of their discipline and their works have thousands of citations. But, much is known about how people learn that can be applied to the classroom; two very nice books are “How Learning Works” by Ambrose et al. and Willingham’s “Why Students Don’t Like School.” As above, physics has shown real results by applying the findings of cognitive science to learning;  
“Don’t Lecture Me” <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/feature>…is a popular introduction

1. **Kahenya P** says:

[January 10, 2013 at 2:16 am](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62046)

I teach maths and I first request students to introduce themselves and talk a little bit about themselves and what made them like or dislike maths. This way i get to know my students and their perception about maths and hence what strategies i can use to change the negative perception, which is normally held by the majority

1. **Sarah** says:

[January 10, 2013 at 9:32 am](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62047)

I teach composition, so a lot of what my students struggle with throughout the semester is analysis, or as I say to them, answering the question, "Why?" On the first day, I have them write down who their favorite musical artist is and give three reasons why. Then, they have to go around the room and say their name, major, where they are from and read what they wrote. This serves as a "get to know you" icebreaker and also as an example of analysis.

1. **Laura S** says:

[January 11, 2013 at 4:24 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62048)

I like a lot of these ideas and have printed them to study over the weekend as I contemplate which ones I might use. My own opening is to have students answer a series of "yes/no" questions by moving to the side of the room designated for "yes" or "no" answers: Are you under age 20? (typically most students will move to the "no" side of the room). Then: "are you under age 25? (typically most of the students will now join the few on the "yes" side of the room). "Do you work?" "Do you work full-time?" (some of the "yes" people will now move to the "no" side as they work only part-time). "Are you in school full-time?" (I would hope to see all of the "yes" people from the previous question now move to the "no" side of the room). This gets the students (and me) to visually see who they may have some things in common with and get a quick demographic of the class.

* + **Laura S** says:

[January 11, 2013 at 4:24 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62049)

(continued) The last question is about where they live. They are to space themselves out in the room according to how close or far they live from campus and in what direction (campus is the center of the room). Then I ask them to look around and meet with the two other students who live closest to them (presumably the two others who are now standing closest to them). Once they are in these small groups I have them exchange names, phone numbers, email (for potential study buddy or car pooling). This is when I might then continue with some of the other ideas here – sharing names, interesting things about them and so on… and then introducing each other to the whole class (as I take attendance).

1. **Lari B** says:

[January 16, 2013 at 12:21 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62053)

As an HR facilitator, our first class deals with Expectations. I ask the students what they expect from this class and ask them to share them. Our classes are usually small (less than 12 students), so the students just say what's on their minds. Examples have been "to earn an A", to "learn about the various employment laws", to "gain insight into what HR is really supposed to do", etc. If the conversation is slow to start, I'll share my expectations: come to class prepared, participate in the online discussions, be engaged in the onsite class sessions, etc. Then during the break, I record these comments and share them with the class throughout the session to insure that together we are meeting the expectations.

1. **Sarah B** says:

[January 17, 2013 at 1:44 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62055)

As students come in, I hand them a quiz which they need to complete right away. The questions are all based on the course material and are either about advanced content or about larger questions that are philosophical and impossible to answer correctly. I tell them that I expect them to "cheat" on this quiz – that is, talk to their neighbors, look in their texts if they have them or use their smart phones to look things up. (I "berate" them if they fail to cheat, which makes them laugh.) When they are done, I gather up the quizzes and we discuss the answers. The content questions remind them what they don't know and get them curious to find out (and I try to make these question impossible to answer with simple googling) and the larger questions get us talking about class philosophy, which gets us started on a class that includes values and critical thinking!

1. **Frank Griffitts** says:

[August 19, 2013 at 3:02 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62061)

I do the basic icebreaker of having the students tell their name and an interesting fact about themselves. I also have them rate themselves on a scale of 1-10 for their skill level on the subject matter. But the MOST important thing I do is make it a point to remember every students' name by the end of class on the first day. This is difficult if you have more than 15 or 20 students, but students will be impressed with you as a teacher if you remember their names by the end of the second class.

1. **Gregory Carr** says:

[December 23, 2013 at 12:26 pm](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-day-of-class-activities-that-create-a-climate-for-learning/#comment-62065)

This past semester I did an activity dealing with the four primary learning styles: Visual, tactile, auditory, and kinesthetic. Students gravitate towards their primary learning style and create a Top Ten list as to why they feel that this is most effective for them. Not only does this activity serve as an icebreaker, but it also provides immediate feedback and assessment for the instructor in the delivery of content for the semester.