

101 Things You Can Do The First Three Weeks of Class

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Beginnings are important. Whether it is a large introductory course for freshmen or an advanced course in the major field, it makes good sense to start the term off well. Students will decide very early – some say the first day of class – whether they will like the course, its contents, the teacher, and their fellow students.

The following list of “101 Things You Can Do...” is offered in the spirit of starting off right. It is a catalog of suggestions for college teachers who are looking for fresh ways of creating the best possible environment for learning. Not just the first day, but the first three weeks of a course are especially important, studies say, in retaining capable students. Even if the syllabus is printed and lecture notes are ready to go in August, most college teachers can usually make adjustments in teaching methods as the course unfolds and the characteristics of their students become known.

These suggestions have been gathered from professors at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln and from college professors elsewhere. The rationale for these methods is based on the following needs: 1) to help students make the transition from high school and summer activities to learning in college; 2) to direct students’ attention to the immediate situation for learning – the hour in the classroom; 3) to spark intellectual curiosity – to challenge students; 4) to support beginners and neophytes in the process of learning in the discipline; 5) to encourage the students’ active involvement in learning; and 6) to build a sense of community in the classroom.

Here, then, are some ideas for college teachers for use in their courses in the new academic year:

Helping Students Make Transitions

1. Hit the ground running on the first day of class with substantial content.
2. Take attendance: roll call, clipboard, sign in, seating chart.
3. Introduce teaching assistants by slide, short presentation, or self-introduction.
4. Hand out an informative, artistic, and user-friendly syllabus.
5. Give an assignment on the first day to be collected at the next meeting.
6. Start laboratory experiments and other exercises the first time lab meets.
7. Call attention (written and oral) to what makes good lab practice: completing work to be done, procedures, equipment, clean up, maintenance, safety, conservation of supplies, full use of lab time.
8. Give a learning style inventory to help students find out about themselves.
9. Direct students to University College for help on basic skills.
10. Tell students how much time they will need to study for this course.
11. Hand out supplemental study aids: library use, study tips, supplemental readings and exercise.
12. Explain how to study for the kind of tests you give.
13. Put in writing a limited number of ground rules regarding absence, late work, testing procedures, grading, and general decorum, and maintain these.
14. Announce office hours frequently and hold them without fail.
15. Show students how to handle learning in large classes and impersonal situations.
16. Give sample test questions.
17. Give sample test question answers.
18. Explain the difference between legitimate collaboration and academic dishonesty; be

clear when collaboration is wanted and when it is forbidden.

19. Seek out a different student each day and get to know something about him or her.
20. Ask students to write about what important things are currently going on in their lives.
21. Find out about students' jobs: if they are working, how many hours a week, and what kinds of jobs they hold.

Directing Student's Attention

22. Greet students at the door when they enter the classroom.
23. Start the class on time.
24. Make a grand stage entrance to hush a large class and gain attention.
25. Give a pre-test on the day's topic.
26. Start the lecture with a puzzle, question, paradox, picture, or cartoon on slide or transparency to focus on the day's topic.
27. Elicit student questions and concerns at the beginning of the class and list these on the chalkboard to be answered during the hour.
28. Have students write down what they think the important issues or key points of the day's lecture will be.
29. Ask a person who is reading the student newspaper what is in the news today.

Challenging Students

30. Have students write out their expectations for the course and their own goals for learning.
31. Use variety in methods of presentation every class meeting.
32. Stage a figurative "coffee break" about twenty minutes into the hour: tell an anecdote, invite students to put down pens and pencils, refer to a current event, shift media.
33. Incorporate community resources: plays, concerts, the State Fair, government agencies, businesses, the outdoors.

34. Show a film in a novel way: stop it for discussion, show a few frames only, anticipate ending, hand out a viewing or critique sheet, play and replay parts.
35. Share your philosophy of teaching with your students.
36. Form a student panel to present alternative views of the same concept.
37. Stage a change-your-mind debate, with students moving to different parts, with students moving to different parts of the classroom to signal change in opinion during the discussion.
38. Conduct a "living" demographic survey by having students moving to different parts of the classroom: size of high school, rural vs. urban, consumer preferences.
39. Tell about your current research interest and how you got there from your own beginnings in the discipline.
40. Use role-playing to make a point or to lay out issues.
41. Let your students assume the role of a professional in the discipline: philosopher, literacy critic, biologist, agronomist, political scientist, engineer.
42. Conduct idea-generating or brainstorming sessions to expand horizons.
43. Give student two passages of material containing alternative views to compare and contrast.
44. Distribute a list of the unsolved problems, dilemmas, or great questions in your discipline and invite students to claim one as their own to investigate.
45. Ask students what books did they read over the summer.
46. Ask students what is going on in the state legislature on this subject which may affect their future.
47. Let your students see the enthusiasm you have for your subject and your love of learning.
48. Take students with you to hear guest speakers or special programs on campus.

49. Plan a “scholar-gypsy” lesson or unit which shows students the excitement of discovery in your discipline.

Providing Support

50. Collect students’ current telephone numbers and addresses and let them know that you may need to reach them.
51. Check out absentees. Call or write a personal note.
52. Diagnose the students’ pre-requisite learning by a questionnaire or pre-test and give them the feedback as soon as possible.
53. Hand out study questions or study guides.
54. Be redundant. Students should hear, read, or see key material at least three times.
55. Allow students to demonstrate progress in learning: summary quiz over the day’s work, a written reaction to the day’s material.
56. Use non-graded feedback to let students know how they are doing: post answers to ungraded quizzes and problems sets, exercises in class, oral feedback.
57. Reward behavior you want: praise, stars, honor roll, personal note.
58. Use a light touch: smile, tell a good joke, break test anxiety with a sympathetic comment.
59. Organize. Give visible structure by posting the day’s “menu” on chalkboard or overhead.
60. Use multiple media: overhead, slides, film, videotape, audiotape, models, sample material.
61. Use multiple examples, in multiple media, to illustrate key points and important concepts.
62. Make appointments with all students (individually or in small groups).
63. Hand out wallet-sized telephone cards with all important telephone numbers listed: office, department, resource centers, teaching assistant, lab.

64. Print all important course dates on a card that can be handed out and taped to a mirror.
65. Eavesdrop on students before or after class and join their conversation about course topics.
66. Maintain an open lab gradebook, with grades kept current, during lab times so that students can check their progress.
67. Check to see if any students are having problems with any academic or campus matters and direct those who are to appropriate offices or resources.
68. Tell students what they need to do to receive an “A” in your course.
69. Stop the world to find out what your students are thinking, feeling, and doing in their everyday lives.

Encouraging Active Learning

70. Have students write something.
71. Have students keep three-times-a-week journals for three weeks in which they comment, ask questions and answer questions about course topics.
72. Invite students to critique each other’s essays or short answers on test for readability or content.
73. Invite students to ask questions and wait for response.
74. Probe student responses to questions and their comments.
75. Put students into pairs or “learning cells” to quiz each other over material for the day.
76. Give students an opportunity to voice opinions about the subject matter.
77. Have students apply subject matter to solve real problems.
78. Give students red, yellow, and green cards (made of posterboard) and periodical call for a vote on an issue by asking for a simultaneous show of cards.
79. Roam the aisles of a large classroom and carry on running conversations with

students as they work on course problems (a portable microphone helps).

80. Ask a question directed to one student and wait for an answer.
81. Place a suggestion box in the rear of the room and encourage students make written comments every time the class meets.
82. Do oral, show-of-hands, multiple-choice tests for summary, review and instant feedback.
83. Use task groups to accomplish specific objectives.
84. Grade quizzes and exercises class as a learning tool.
85. Give students plenty of opportunity for practice before a major test.
86. Give a test early in the semester and return it graded in the next class meeting.
87. Have students write questions on index cards to be collected and answered the next class period.
88. Make collaborative assignments for several students to work on together.
89. Assign written paraphrases and summaries of difficult reading.
90. Give students a take-home problem relating to the day's lecture.
91. Encourage students to bring current news items to class which relate to the subject matter and post these on a bulletin board nearby.

Building Community

92. Learn names. Everyone makes an effort to learn at least a few names.
93. Set up a buddy system so students can contact each other about assignments and coursework.
94. Find out about your students via questions on an index card.
95. Take pictures of students (snapshots in small groups, mugshots) and post in classroom, office, or lab.
96. Arrange helping trios of students to assist each other in learning and growing.

97. Form small groups forgetting acquainted; mix and form new groups several times.
98. Assign a team project early in the semester and provide time to assemble the team.
99. Help students form study groups to operate outside the classroom.
100. Solicit suggestions from students for outside resources and guest speakers on course topics.

Feedback on Teaching

101. Gather student feedback in the first three weeks of the semester to improve teaching and learning.

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