

101 IDEAS

for Your First Three Weeks of Class

101 Things you can do the First Three Weeks of Class

Beginnings are important. Students 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 “101 Ideas...” is offered in the spirit of starting off right. It is a catalog of faculty-suggested strategies 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, most of us can usually make adjustments in teaching methods as the course unfolds and the characteristics of students become known.

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 yourself by slide, videotape, short presentation or self-bio.
4. Hand out informative, attractive, 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 on the first time lab meets.
7. Call attention (written and oral) to good learning habits: completing assignments on time, previewing schedule topics, reviewing materials covered, full use of lab time with regard for safety.
8. Give a learning style inventory to help students find out about themselves.
9. Refer students who need help with basic skills to the counseling center.
10. Tell students how much they will need to study for this course.
11. Hand out supplemental study aids: library use, study tips, supplemental readings and practice exercises.
12. Explain how to study for the kind of tests you give.
13. Put in writing in limited number of ground rules regarding absence, late work, testing procedures, grading and general decorum, maintain these.
14. Announce office hours frequently and hold them without fail.
15. Show student how to handle learning in large classes and impersonal situations.

16. Give sample test questions; provide answers.
17. Explain the difference between legitimate collaboration and academic dishonesty; be clear when collaboration is wanted and when it's forbidden.
18. Seek out a different student each day and get to know something about him/her.
19. Find out about students' jobs; if they work, how many hours, and what kind of job they hold.

Directing Student's Attention

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

Challenging the Students

28. Have students write out their expectations for the course and their own goals for learning.
29. Use variety in methods of presentation at every class meeting.
30. Stage a figurative “coffee break” about 20 minutes into the hour; tell an anecdote, invite students to put down pens and pencils, refer to a current event, and shift media.
31. Incorporate community resources; plays, concerts, state fair, governmental agencies, businesses, the outdoors.
32. 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, plan and replay parts.
33. Share your philosophy of teaching with students.
34. Form a student panel to present alternative views of the same concept.
35. Stage a change-your-mind debate, with students moving to different parts of the classroom to signal change in opinion during discussion.
36. Conduct a “living” demographic survey by having students move to different parts of the classroom; size of high school, rural vs. urban, consumer preferences.
37. Tell about your current professional interests and how you got there from your beginnings in the discipline.
38. Conduct a role play to make a point or to lay out issues.
39. Let your students assume the role of a professional in the discipline; biologist, philosopher, literary critic, engineer, political scientist.
40. Conduct idea generating or brain storming sessions to expand horizons.
41. Give students two passages of material containing alternative views to compare and contrast.
42. 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.
43. Ask students what books they've read in the last six month's.
44. Ask students what is going on in the state legislature on a subject which may affect their future.

45. Let students see the enthusiasm you have for your subject and love of learning.
46. Take students with you to hear guest speakers or special programs on campus.
47. Plan a "scholar-gypsy" lesson or unit which shows students the excitement of discovery in your discipline.

Providing Support

48. Collect student's current telephone numbers and addresses and let them know you may need to reach them.
49. Check out absentees. Call or write a personal note.
50. Diagnose the students' prerequisite learning by questionnaire or pretest and give them the feedback as soon as possible.
51. Hand out study questions/study guides.
52. Be redundant. Students should see, read or hear key materials at least 3 times.
53. Allow students to demonstrate progress in learning: summary quiz on day's work, a written reaction to the day's materials.
54. Use non-graded feedback to let students know how they are doing: post answers to ungraded quizzes in class, oral feedback.
55. Reward behavior you want: praise, stars, honor roll, personal note.
56. Use a light touch: smile, tell a joke, and break test anxiety with a sympathetic comment.
57. Organize. Give visible structure by posting the day's "menu" on chalkboard or overhead.
58. Use multiple media: overheads, slides, film, videotape, audiotape, models, and sample material.
59. Make appointments with all students-individually or in small groups.
60. Use multiple examples, in multiple media to illustrate key points and concepts.
61. Hand out wallet sized telephone cards with all important numbers listed: office, department, resource centers, and lab.
62. Print all important course dates on a card that can be handed out and taped to a mirror.
63. Eavesdrop on students before and after class and join their conversation on course topics.
64. Maintain an open grade book, with grades kept current so students can check their progress.
65. 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.
66. Tell students what they need to do to receive an "A" in your course.
67. Stop the world to find out what your students are thinking, feeling and doing in their everyday lives.

Encouraging Active Learning

68. Have students write something regularly: journal entries, course commentaries, content reports.
69. Invite students to critique each other's essays or short answers on tests for readability or content.
70. Invite students to ask questions frequently.
71. Probe student responses to questions and their comments.
72. Put students into pairs to quiz each other over materials for the day.
73. Give students an opportunity to voice opinions about subject matter.
74. Have students apply subject matter to solve real problems.

75. Give students red, yellow and green cards (made of poster board) and periodically call for a vote on an issue by asking for a simultaneous show of cards.
76. Roam the isles of your classroom and carry on running conversations with students as they work on course problems.
77. Gather student feedback in the first three weeks to improve teaching and learning.
78. Ask a question directed at one student and wait for an answer.
79. Place a suggestion box in the rear of the room and encourage students to make written comments every time the class meets.
80. Do oral, show of hands, multiple choice tests for summary, review, and instant feedback.
81. Use task groups to accomplish specific objectives.
82. Grade quizzes and exercises in class as a learning tool.
83. Give students plenty of opportunity for practice before a major test.
84. Give a test early in the term and return it graded at the next class meeting.
85. Have students write questions on index cards to be collected and answered the next class period.
86. Make collaborative assignments for students to work together on.
87. Assign written paraphrases and summaries of difficult reading.
88. Appoint a student volunteer weekly to ask "dumb" questions for other class members.
89. Give students a take home problem relating to the day's lecture.
90. Encourage students to bring current new items to class which relate to the subject matter and post these on a bulletin board neatly.
91. Practice allowing sufficient "wait time" when posing questions.

Team Building

92. Use special techniques to help you learn names.
93. Set up a buddy system or helping trios 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 a group/ mugshots and post in classroom, office or lab.
96. Form small groups for getting acquainted; mix and form new groups several times.
97. Assign a team project early in the term and provide time to assemble the team.
98. Solicit suggestions from students for outside resources and guest speakers on course topics.

For More Ideas...

99. Exchange a tip for successful teaching with a colleague.
100. Rethink an old idea.
101. Smile! Enjoy the new semester...more ideas will come.

Adapted from the "Teaching Effectiveness Network: at Sinclair Community College, from material prepared by Joyce T. Poul The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Teaching and Learning C.