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ADVICE

6 Ideas to Perk Up Your First Day of Class

How to start the semester in ways that will pay off for the rest of the course.

By *Kristi Rudenga*

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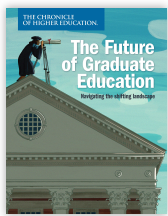
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When I come home from the library with a stack of novels, I often decide which one to start by reading the first pages. I'm looking to be intrigued, to find a character or a tone that makes me want to find out what lies ahead. Much like the first page of a novel, the first day of your course is crucial to grab your students' attention, draw them in, and foreshadow the rich journey ahead.

The first day of class may be the most important hour for determining the success of your semester. In that hour, students form a lasting impression of the course, the subject, the classroom, the teacher, and one another. For a full overview of how to prepare and teach your first day of class, you can consult [The Chronicle's definitive guide](#), written by James M. Lang, who is now my colleague at the University of Notre Dame's teaching center. Here, I offer a set of six ideas for activities to adapt, mix, and match as you design an inviting first day.

Remind them of what they already know. This summer, Lang and I taught an interdisciplinary course on “The Art and Science of Learning,” filled primarily with first-year students. I got to take part in his opening-day activity: He asked students to free-write for 10 minutes on strategies that most helped them learn in high school. Then he asked them to identify themselves (name, hometown, major) and share one of the strategies they had just written about. He asked follow-up questions to get students to expand on their ideas.

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A lively discussion ensued, with lots of students noticing they had learning techniques in common, debating their utility, and raising questions about why the techniques might or might not work for everyone. A strategy like this starts the semester off right in two ways:

- It activates their prior knowledge, which — as we know from [plenty of research](#) — primes students for learning.
- By inviting them to share, it sets up a classroom environment that values each student’s voice.

This works in any type of course. Just create prompts connected to your content. A poetry course could spark students’ prior knowledge by asking how they had learned to interpret a poem in previous literature courses. A chemistry instructor could invite students to brainstorm examples of chemistry at work in the world. In a marketing course, you could ask students to recall when an advertisement led them to make a

purchase. If you teach a large-sized course, you might ask students to share their thoughts and introductions in small groups throughout the room.

How would they write the textbook? In advanced courses, you can push the activation of prior knowledge even further. In my graduate course on “Pedagogy and Practice in the College Classroom,” I’ve been impressed by the effectiveness of a first-day activity that I [read about here](#). The idea is to surface the students’ preconceptions about the field and the course, give them a chance to begin drawing connections among subtopics, and tap into the power of prediction as a motivator. Here’s how it works:

- First, I ask students to individually brainstorm everything they can think of that might be in a book with the same title as the course.
- They divide into pairs to share and categorize their ideas, and give each category a name.
- Next, two pairs become a quartet to combine their ideas and arrange them into their hypothetical book’s table of contents.
- Finally, we discuss the results as a class.

Each time I’ve done this, students have produced widely varying tables of contents. The exercise highlights the different assumptions and interests that students bring to the classroom. And it reminds them not only of how much they already know about the topic, but also why they were interested in taking this course.

Give a syllabus survey. Besides getting a feel for the content, students also need to understand the format and expectations of your course. To that end, the most transformative element that I use — in every class I teach, without fail — was suggested by [Therese Huston](#) in her 2012 book, *Teaching What You Don’t Know*. It involves asking groups of students to fill out a “survey” about the syllabus:

- Give students up to 10 minutes in class to read the syllabus. Then have them divide into groups of three to introduce themselves and answer a set of questions.
- You could pose factual questions to drive home points you want to emphasize from the syllabus (“What types of assignments should be completed before class on a Tuesday? On a Thursday?”), or open-ended questions (“What did you read on the document that concerns you most?” or “What on the course schedule most excites you?”). Finally (and for me, the most important element), ask students to identify three questions they *still* have after reading and discussing the syllabus.
- Collect the questionnaires and use the answers as a springboard to a classwide discussion of assignments, tests, projects, course policies, or anything else causing confusion on the syllabus. Crucially, this is the time to clarify those matters while you have their full attention on the syllabus.

Sure, you could spend Day 1 reading the syllabus aloud and lecturing about it. But why risk half the class tuning out when you could use a technique like this that draws everyone in? In my experience, the group-survey approach injects a surprising amount of energy into a formerly mundane bit of first-day business. While it’s especially easy to do in small classes, the use of digital survey forms or polling technology can make it work even in a large lecture hall.

What is their biggest worry about college? In the first week of a new academic year, students have concerns beyond the content or format of your course. So why not dig into them as a way to show that you [value an inclusive](#) and [supportive classroom](#) environment? Particularly when teaching first-year students, you’ll often find a thick cloud of impostor syndrome hanging in the room. This activity, which I used in a course for first-year students, is a useful way to counter that:

- Give every student an index card and ask them to write an answer to a question like, “What is your biggest concern about starting college?” — without writing

their name on it.

- Once they're finished, ask them to stand up and pass the cards around the room in every direction. This raises the energy in the room as they move around, passing cards chaotically. Reconvene once everyone has a card that is presumably not their own.
- Ask for volunteers to read aloud what's written on the card they're holding.
- Almost invariably, students hear concerns that they think are unique to them, but are, in fact, commonplace and elicit widespread nods of recognition.

Your aim here is to establish a more-open tone in the classroom and chip away at students' fear that everyone but them is perfectly prepared and confident. It may also help students to [tame distracting worries](#) by writing them down. I've since adapted this activity for lecture halls full of new faculty members or new TAs, to surface and discuss their common worries about teaching, and found it to be easily adjustable across audience and scale.

Pose an intriguing question. Here's a way to use the first day of class to introduce students to core skills that (you hope) they will develop by semester's end. I designed this activity for Day 1 of my upper-level "Food and the Brain" course, to start students thinking about how scientific questions are asked and answered, which is a major theme of the course. But you could adapt this idea to any type of course:

- Once students are divided into small groups, I give them the following prompt: "Your roommate, a history major, hears that you are taking 'Food and the Brain' this semester. 'Awesome!' she says, 'I've heard that we should all stop consuming high-fructose corn syrup. Is that true?' You and your group have 15 minutes to find an answer and an explanation for your roommate, using the internet however you'd like."
- After the groups share their answers, we discuss their sources and where they found their information. The students in this elective tend to be senior neuroscience and psychology majors, so they are typically quick to bypass

information from social-media influencers. But in their deeper search for scholarly sources, they find reasonably credible references that often conflict, depending on a variety of factors, including whether they found papers by endocrinologists, agricultural economists, or ecologists.

The point is to discuss the ways in which students should seek and use scientific sources, the importance of clarity in questions, and the key role of nuance in answers. Diving into a substantive topic on the first day helps to get students invested in the course content quickly, and gives me a chance to point ahead to the skills they'll build in analyzing scientific literature and asking scientific questions throughout the semester.

Find out who they are. It's not just students who need to prepare for what's ahead this semester. As a faculty member, you can use the opening day to learn more about your students beyond the basic information (names, hometowns, and majors). On whatever format you prefer — an index card or a Google form — go beyond the standard “Why did you want to take this course” and ask something broad like “What else would you like me to know about you?” Give students the opportunity — though not the obligation — to disclose any particular concerns or complications that might be valuable for you to be aware of.

I've gotten many lighthearted answers (“I just got a new puppy!”). But I've also had students share far more serious issues: that they are grieving the recent death of a parent, that they have chronic debilitating migraines and may sometimes miss class, or that they are on a new ADHD medication that causes them to fidget. Gathering this kind of information is not only useful for your teaching, it also sends the message to students that you care about them as people.

If you're seeking a more in-depth look at your students, this [2020 article](#) from a [biology-education journal](#) offers a template for “first-day information sheets.” Besides

background information, it invites students to list “study strategies that I use to prepare for exams” and “I dislike when my instructors ...”

Activities like the six I’ve described here get students to collectively and actively dig into your syllabus, format, and content. Building them into the first-class meeting can function like the first page of a great book, drawing students in for what lies ahead.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

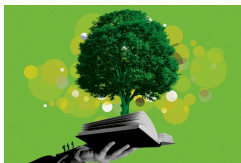
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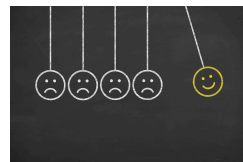
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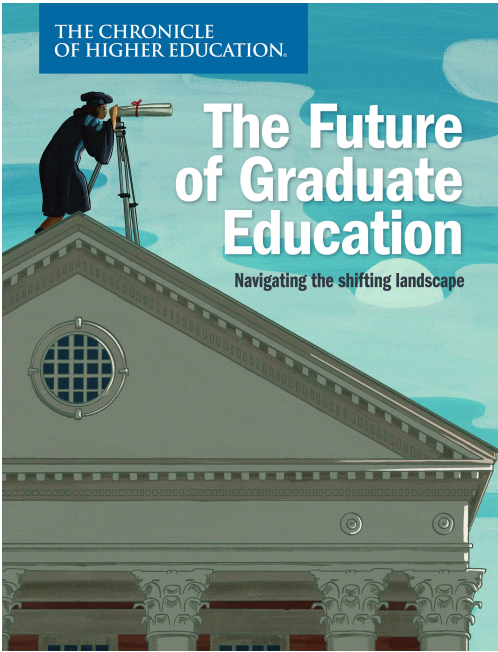


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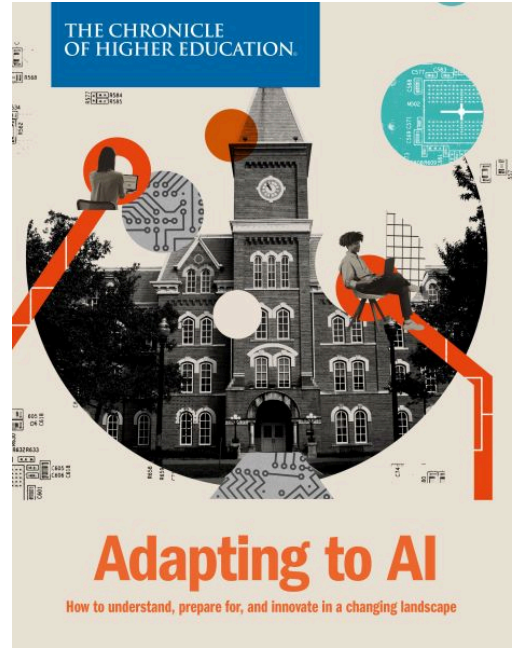


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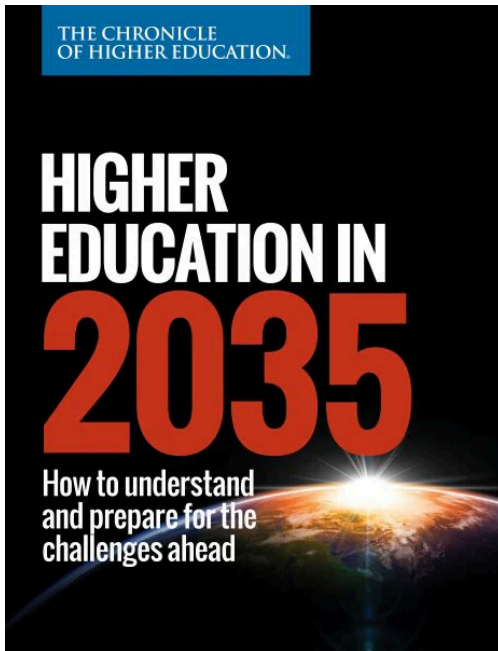
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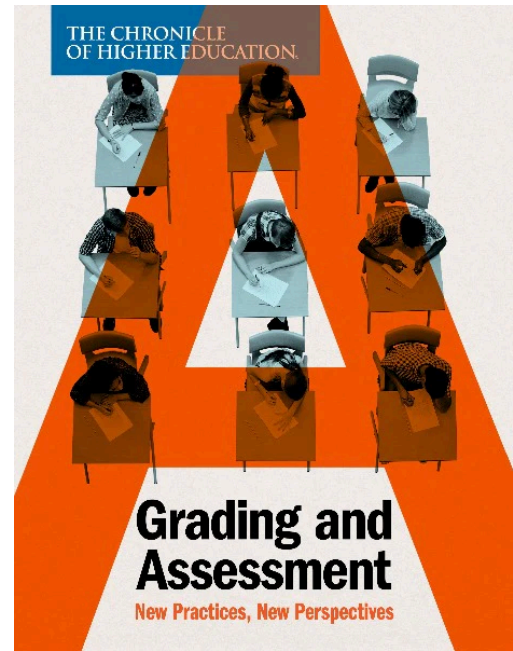
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