

The First Class

The first class can be a very intimidating experience for even the most experienced TAs. Here are some suggestions for getting off to a good start:

- When class begins, introduce yourself by writing your name on the board as well as your office number, office hours, extension at school and your phone number and email. Ask students to write down all the information so that they have it in an emergency. Ask students to identify contact information (e-mail) as well. Encourage them to visit you during your office hours.
- Plan an icebreaker. They are a lot of fun as well as great way for you to get to know your students, and students to know each other (*see below for some great examples!*)
- Outline what you expect of students and what they can expect of you. Give them a clear explanation of what constitutes an A, B and so on for classroom participation.
- Be enthusiastic! Excellent teachers are excited to teach (and let it show) and you will find that enthusiasm is contagious. Smile, be attentive to students, and make eye contact. Use vocal inflections when presenting material and be willing to truly listen to students' contributions.
- Don't end the first class early. This is valuable time for setting the tone of the class and for getting students excited about the course. Use it wisely.
- If you feel nervous or panicky, remind yourself to slow down and repeat yourself for clarity. Assign a small task (such as recording contact information on a index card) so you can take a few minutes to get back on track. Or, try a think/pair/share in relation to a course-related question. This gets students talking to each other and allows you to get re-focused.

want more?

 Queen's University, "First Day of Class Checklist" http://www.queensu.ca/idc/idcresources/handbook/handbook2002.pdf

Icebreakers

Another excellent way to begin a lab, tutorial, or seminar, is with an icebreaker. Icebreakers not only *break the ice*, but they can also serve as a gentle introduction to the topic. Icebreakers that are out of context for the course or seminar can sometimes seem like a waste of time. Try to be deliberate in your choice of introductory activity. Relating the icebreaker to the topic of the course or the students' interest in attending the class is more relevant than just having them talk about the last book they read. Here are some fun ways to encourage students to get to know each other:

- <u>Name game –</u> students introduce themselves to the class and tell a story about their name who named them, what their name means and whether they like it. Although this activity is not specifically course related, it helps people to remember each other's names more quickly and to establish a sense of community.
- <u>Introduce Your Partner</u> have students chat with the student to their left (or right), then introduce that person to the rest of the class, including why s/he took the course.
- Create groups of 3 or 4 for dialogue. Have them generate a list (on chart paper) of what they already know about the topic/course and what they are hoping to learn. Merge groups to compare and discuss their charts. Post the charts and point out the similarities between the groups the idea is to establish the notion of community within the group rather than one of competition.

want more?

- Visit CTLET and review <u>Icebreakers: A Sourcebook of Games, Exercises and Stimulations</u> by Ken Jones
- Visit the Student Development Centre located in Schmon Tower

Setting Ground Rules

It is important to set some ground rules from the start so that your students know exactly what is expected (or not expected) of them. If students understand your expectations, they can begin to understand YOU.

Some examples:

- 1. Everyone is expected to participate but they can do so in their own way.
- 2. No one is allowed to over participate.
- 3. No one will be judged by their gender, sexual orientation, race or religion.
- 4. No one will ever be sexually harassed.
- 5. Every student has the right to ask questions.
- 6. Every teacher must answer questions without judgment.

Think about your most memorable discussions and ask the class to think about theirs. From this you and your group can brainstorm as to what was good and what was not so good about past discussions. Set some ground rules so that all discussions can be good ones. Some questions to ask are "should

there be a time limit on contributions?", "should there be a limit on the number of contributions from each group member per class?" and "who will inform someone s/he is breaking a ground rule?". This takes only a little time in the first seminar or lab but can save mountains of time in the future.

This is only a start. Add your own rules according to your teaching philosophy, the type of class and the subject. Brainstorm a list of rules with the students so everyone takes ownership of the tone of the seminars or labs. Hand out these rules or post them to WebCT so students can shape their conduct in the seminar or lab.

Do's and Don'ts for TAs and Lab Assistants

The following information is compiled from Brookfield (1990) and from a series of workshops offered through the CTLET.

Do's

Empathize with your students.

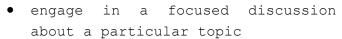
Many students see TAs and faculty as people for whom learning is easy. Talking to them about past difficulties and your own learning struggles can help alleviate their anxiety. Inform them you are there for them and that you understand their struggles. Encourage them to share any anxieties about the course with you during your office hours.

Arrive in class ten minutes ahead of time.

You want to be available to students with specific questions. Reward the eager students by always being there early for them. It also gives you a chance to get to know your students at a more personal level; ask them questions such as "what made you come to Brock?". According to Lorne Adams of Physical Education, showing a little interest in your students at the start of the seminar or lab can turn any potential enemies into classroom allies.

Purposes of the Seminar

Reproduced from the WISE 1F90 course.



- learn to develop oral expressive abilities in an environment that is supportive, honest and prepared
- develop communication and interpersonal awareness - being aware of others, self-awareness, turn-taking, not interrupting, knowing other's names, respecting differences, respecting subject matter
- share responsibility for the flow and focus of the seminar
- learn a variety of cognitive, reflective and body processes reading, thinking, integrating, synthesizing, formulating questions, developing, thoughtfulness, critiquing

Find out about teaching and learning styles.

We tend to teach the way we learn best, but what is best for us is not necessarily best for our students! Make an effort to vary your teaching style so that all learning needs are met. With groups, you can use drama, role-playing, skits, panel discussions and debates. Encourage students to present ideas to the class with these methods as well.

Use a variety of teaching aids.

You can use audio/visual materials, props, guest speakers, PowerPoint, WebCT, etc.

If you make the class more interesting, the attendance will be greater. If you are one of many TAs, make sure you are presenting the same material as the other instructors, but share your experiences using different teaching aids with your colleagues. The CTLET offers a wide variety of workshops on using technology in the classroom.

Establish with your class some ground rules for seminars/labs and discussions.

Discussing basic ground rules that are endorsed by all members of the group allows students to feel safe in the seminar environment.

Personalize the students' learning.

Ask students for personal examples that can reflect or relate to the topic or readings. Share your own stories. The good thing about this exercise is it gets the class rolling (especially if the group is shy or fragmented) and it will allow students to get to know each other.

Require all students who are not doing well or who might be 'at risk' in your class to come and see you.

Showing a personal interest in your students' performance could motivate them to try harder. If you can find out what exactly is wrong (they do not understand the assignments, they have writing difficulties, etc.), you might be able to help them deal with it. Let them know you are willing to help them through their difficulties. Act as a resource person for other departments that provide assistance. For a list of services that Brock offers to students, see the Resources section of this guide.

Be careful about grading procedures.

Clearly define what is being assessed as well as how it will be assessed. Define all aspects of the grading scheme (such as if you get up to 10% for participation, define what participation means). See the appendix for specific evaluation outlines.

Ways TAs and Lab Instructors Play Favourites

(Brookfield, 1990)

- always calling on certain students
- asking certain students to see you during your office hours
- praising some students and not others
- giving more attention to certain students
- smiling at certain students more (non verbal cues are sometimes the biggest giveaway)
- making false attributions (that student got a bad mark because he/she is lazy but this student just had a bad day)

Use the resources available to you and your professional development.

This guide is not the only resource available to you. See the resources section of this guide for a list. Also, feedback from your own students is a great point of reference. Do periodic, anonymous evaluations to see if you are meeting the needs of your students and to clear up any misunderstandings.

Have fun!

Keep a sense of humour so that everyone can enjoy the seminar or lab. If you approach your work as fun rather than a burden, your students will learn more and look forward to coming to class.

Don'ts

Wait until the end of the year to get feedback from your students.

Periodic evaluations can inform you what is working and what is not. Every group is different so make sure you check in with each group as to what they like and benefit from. Ask them about their learning and how you can help them succeed.

Give up on any students.

There may be the occasional student who annoys you, angers you or frustrates you. Remember that you are reacting to what they do and say, not to who they are. Remember to view the student's situation in relation to everything else and not to be too quick to pass judgments. If the student says something offensive, for instance, tell the student it is inappropriate and why, but do not view the student as the "bad-mouther" in the future; view the student as the one who stated something that was inappropriate as an isolated incident (maybe she had a bad day, he was nervous to be away from home, she is physically sick, he had a fight with someone just before coming to class).

BOOST YOUR RESUME!

Taking TA workshops can lead to a CTLET certificate in Teaching and Education in Higher Learning! For more information, see page 50.