

# The First Day of Class — Some Do's and Don'ts

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## Abstract

There's a lot to accomplish on the first day of class. Realize that you are setting the stage for the entire semester. Let's examine some simple do's and don'ts, and open the floor for debate over some activities that straddle the fence. I'll borrow extensively from **McKeachie's Teaching Tips** (14th Ed., Cengage Learning).



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## A Simple Outline?

- Introduce yourself
- Hand out the syllabus
- Ask if there are any questions
- Start with the first topic
- Make the first assignment

Okay, what do you think?



## Be It Resolved: First Impressions Count

- Convey enthusiasm **and respect**.
- Welcome the students, expect late arrivals, welcome them as well.
- Write (or display) your name and the course number/title on the board (or screen).
- Provide accurate and complete information.
- Tell students how you expect them to “call upon you.”
- Tell students some background about yourself—establish credibility but don't brag.
- Prepare, prepare, prepare!
  - Know the classroom and facilities, make sure to **visit well ahead of time**.
  - Be prepared to accommodate all students.
  - Appearance as well as content counts; be neat!

## Be It Resolved: You Need to Get to Know Your Students

- Learn (memorize?) student names.
- Insist that students know “your name.”
- Get started by engaging them in questions immediately.
- Both student **and instructor** are fallible, agree upon that immediately!
  - “I may call you by someone else’s name at the start, correct me, we’ll all be better off in the long run.”
  - “You’re right, thanks Bill. With the sum of forces I’ve shown, the expected acceleration isn’t achieved. Can anyone help me with my mistake?”

## Be It Resolved: The Syllabus/Schedule is a Contract

- The syllabus describes a commitment from **both** sides.
- Students need time to read, digest, discuss the contract.
  - Doesn't mean that the terms are negotiable.
- True or False: "All a student wants to know is how to get a @#\$!% in the class."
  - How the grade is constructed **is** a big deal; don't ignore it.
  - Attendance policies and assignment schedule must be spelled out accurately.
  - Accurately and thoroughly detailing the demands of the class does not imply "coddling" of the student—it's an issue of simple respect.
- Include the caveat of "subject to change," but don't expect to get away with brandishing this sword in an arbitrary fashion.
- UW Reg 2-117, Syllabus Requirements, lists 20 (yes, 20!) categories of mandatory content for a syllabus!

## **Be It Resolved: The Content is Why You/I/They/We Are Excited**

- Don't step off the deep end of expert knowledge in a land of novice followers.
  - Your enthusiasm must be “governed” by the knowledge and skills the students bring to the “discussion.”
- It's a great idea to “get everyone's feet dirty” in the topic right away, but understand that the intent of the first day is largely agreeing upon the contract (which includes “where we're going” as well as “where we've supposedly been”).
- Be prepared to address / dodge / deflect / “deal with” misconceptions.
  - “Ah yes, a perpetual motion machine, that's an interesting application of gears, chains, hydraulics, and inert soil that you've described. . . ”
  - How you deal with this situation will reflect across the class and throughout the semester. 'Tis better to be humble and correct than boastful and bass-ackwards.

## Conclusions

What you do on the first day is important!

- It sets the tone for the rest of the semester
- It's a huge opportunity to get students interested
- It allows you to set the stage for a positive, collaborative environment in the classroom
- It can save you time and grief in the future.