STARTING OFF ON THE RIGHT FOOT

This job aid explains why good beginnings are important and tells you what you should do to get off to a good start at the beginning of a new course.

This job aid will help you to:

- make sure you are completely prepared to deliver the course before classes start
- make your first day of class have lasting impact and set the tone
- establish an excellent learning environment in the first few classes that will continue throughout the course

net Includes techniques for online courses.

Beginnings are important

What happens in the first few classes can affect the entire course. It affects the success of your students and whether the course can continue to attract and retain capable students. Students decide very early in a course whether they will like the content, the way it is delivered, the instructor, and their fellow students. You set the tone and expectations in the first few weeks of classes, and make the biggest impression on the first day. This is no different in an online course! So, make sure you start off right.

Before classes start, check your preparations

Make sure that you are completely prepared to deliver this course. When you are prepared, classes go more smoothly and productively for you and for your students.

Check that your course outline is complete and that your evaluation plan is in place. If you need help developing learning outcomes, planning your classes, involving your students actively in their learning, or writing suitable tests, seek help from an Instructional Development Consultant in the Learning and Teaching Centre or use other job aids in this series.

Make sure that the assigned texts for the course are in stock in the bookstore. If not, you may have to change your reading assignments or temporarily supply copies of the sections of text. Go over the list of students and any information you have on their previous learning. Prepare any lists or seating plans you need for the first class.

Check out the classroom you will use—check its seating capacity for the expected class and ensure that needed equipment is in place and working. Prepare any overhead transparencies, presentations, videos, or handouts you need for the first class. Have a pack of file cards or writing paper ready if you wish to collect information from the students.

Checklist for class preparation

As you prepare for a new class, use the following checklist.

To prepare for this class, I need to:

☐ Update the course outline

☐ Prepare lessons plans

☐ Prepare teaching aids (audiovisual, file cards, etc.)

☐ Ensure texts are available

☐ Check the classroom and equipment

☐ Become familiar with the students' names and prior learning

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🔲 For the online class

If you are teaching online, ensuring the online environment is ready for the start of the course is critical. You should make it clear to students where to begin so they have a good overview of the course, a good understanding of the structure and the expectations, and a sense of you and your teaching style.

One of the differences teachers often notice between teaching in a classroom and teaching online is that written instructions have to be exceptionally clear online, since you are not in the room with the students to walk them through the information.

Another difference is that all (or most) of the weekly course materials should be prepared and posted online ahead of the start date of the course, so that during the course you can focus on facilitating students' learning.

As you prepare to teach a new online course, use the following checklist.

To make sure my students will have a good understanding of the online course, I need to:

☐ Post instructions on how to get started (i.e., what to do first)

☐ Post an introduction to the course explaining its structure and my expectations

☐ Include a description/tour of where to find various course components

☐ Post the course outline and a course schedule outlining key events in the course (assignment due dates, weekly topics, etc.)

☐ Provide information about any additional resources that students will need to get for the course

☐ Post a welcome message with some information about myself

☐ Have an activity prepared asking students to introduce themselves to the class (often in a discussion forum)

☐ Decide how much of the course content should be available to students on Day 1 (and let students know when new content will be made available to them)

☐ Have all course materials and communication forums prepared and posted online

☐ Be familiar with the online teaching environment

☐ Provide information on how to access technical help

On the first day, hit the ground running

Start on time if you expect students to arrive on time. After your introductions, don't make the mistake of dismissing students early on the first day of class. It throws away a perfect opportunity to get to know your students, show your enthusiasm for your subject, and clarify expectations. Start the first day with substantial content. Explain how you will help the students to learn and how they can improve their learning. Include an assignment on the first day and start your exercises and lab experiments at the first opportunity.

Introducing yourself and the students

Start by introducing yourself to your students and your students to each other. Take attendance by using a roll call, asking them to sign in, or creating a seating chart. Have the students make folded card name tags to display on their desks. If the class is not too large, try to learn the students' names.

Give your students some details about yourself—let them see your enthusiasm for your subject. Tell them about your current professional interests and describe how or why you chose your career path. Share with them your love of learning and your philosophy of teaching.

Many instructors find it helpful to distribute paper or a 3" x 5" file card to each student to get their names, phone numbers, and addresses. You might also use these cards to collect other information such as hobbies and special interests or why they are taking this course. Let the students get to know each other. There are various types of "ice-breaker" exercises you can use to set a participatory tone in the class. For example, you might ask them to interview each other in pairs and introduce each other to the class. Larger groups might be divided into small groups and asked to share their individual backgrounds and interests.

Introducing your course

Describe the course and what you expect from the students.

Describe the course

Hand out a standard BCIT course outline. Ask the students to review it (maybe in pairs or small groups) and answer any questions they have. Briefly describe the rationale for the way the course is organized. This might be a good time to ask them to write brief descriptions of their learning goals and their expectations for the course. You could collect them with their names and addresses.

Clarify expectations

Tell your students how much time they will need for the course. Include assignments, reading time, class and lab time, and field work. Remind them that their time in school must be divided among studying, working, and socializing. They will have to make tough choices.

Give them a list of ground rules regarding absence, late work, tests, grades, and classroom and lab behaviour. You may wish to have students negotiate some rules regarding classroom behaviour. Be specific and then be consistent in applying the rules.

Explain how collaboration and teamwork differ from dishonestly using someone else's work. Be clear about when collaboration is expected and how shared work will be graded.

Tell students how they should study for this course. Explain how to study for the kinds of tests you will give. Describe (in writing too) good study habits such as previewing scheduled topics. Hand out any supplemental study aids such as hints on library use or practice exercises. (Continue to do this throughout the course.) This would be a good time to distribute letters of advice from last term's students if they were obtained.

Show how you will be available to the students: tell them where your office is (and how to get there) and what your office hours will be.

Checklist for the first day of class

As you prepare for the first day of a new class, use the following checklist.

To establish relationships, I need to:

☐ Introduce myself and my enthusiasm for the subject

☐ Begin the process of getting to know the students (for example, collect data on the cards)

☐ Use a group exercise to introduce the students to each other

☐ Establish office hours and describe the location of my office

To describe the course, I need to:

☐ Post the day's agenda

☐ Describe the course goals

☐ Hand out the course outline

☐ Hand out learning aids such as glossaries or practice exercises

To clarify expectations, I need to:

☐ Hand out and discuss my expectations for student work

☐ Hand out or negotiate expectations for student behaviour in class and lab

☐ Hand out and discuss ground rules for absence and late work

☐ Describe how course work will be evaluated

☐ Describe how group work will be organized and graded

☐ Discuss good study habits

net During the first week of an online course

Once your course starts, it's important to establish a feeling of community, and this can be done in a variety of ways, but it always involves communication. It's often effective to provide a way for students to communicate with each other (e.g., with discussion forums), and also directly with you for any individual concerns.

The first week, you need to make sure that students are connecting with the course, and if some are not, you need to contact them (usually by email) since they may be having difficulty connecting. This is also a good time to go over expectations and field any questions from students about any aspect of the course.

If you will be including synchronous (same-time) communication activities (e.g., chats, Elluminate Live® sessions, etc.), find out from your students when they would be available for these sessions. Students who have a clear understanding of the course and feel part of the learning community within the course are more likely to stick with the course to the end.

In the first week of an online course, use the following checklist to establish a feeling of community.

In the first week of the online course, I need to:

☐ Monitor who logs on and posts their introduction information

☐ Respond to the introductions by welcoming students individually

☐ Contact students by email if it appears they are not connecting with the online course

☐ Post a new announcement to let students know what's coming next in the course

☐ Provide a way for students to ask questions about the course structure, schedule, etc.

☐ If discussion forums will be a major component in the course, provide or collaboratively develop a set of group norms for communicating effectively

☐ Find ways to connect with the students and for them to connect with each other

☐ Establish synchronous communication options, depending on student schedules

☐ Establish communication guidelines to make clear when and how you will be available (chats, email, discussion forums, office hours, etc.)

Establish a good environment for learning

You will establish the pattern of learning for your students in the first couple of weeks of classes. Make sure that these early classes establish a pattern that you have planned for and wish to continue.

net This is no different in an online course. The main difference is that you will mostly be communicating in writing instead of face-to-face.

Reinforce relationships with and among your students

If the class is not too large, greet students at the door when they enter the classroom. Try to meet individual students in the first few weeks, and find out something about each of them. If they are working, ask for how many hours a week and at what types of jobs. Some instructors take pictures of students and post them. (Asking students to post pictures of themselves is a good idea in an online course too.)

Regularly remind students of your office hours and always be there. Consider having students pick up their first assignment from you there.

Students may wish to set up a buddy system to contact each other about assignments and course work. Encourage the use of study groups outside the classroom.

Where students are required to work in groups, be clear about the importance of full participation. Explain how team work will be assessed and graded.

Avoid difficulties with students

Always go to class well-prepared and expect the best from your students. Try to appear calm and confident. Make sure the students know what you want—ask students to paraphrase your directions for activities and assignments. Wherever appropriate, use humour, but avoid sarcasm and put-downs. Compliment students for jobs well done when appropriate.

As you work, keep students involved. Be respectful of their ideas and use techniques to involve all students in answering questions (such as "*thumbs up if you agree*").

Make sure your feedback is informative and explicit but don't try to be the perfect expert. Saying "*I don't know, but I'll find out for the next class*" is liberating for you and for your students. Give up some control—let the students have some say in how the class is run.

Keep your classes interesting

If the class is very large, make a grand entrance to get their attention. Create energy by moving around as you speak—be animated and show your enthusiasm. Varying your vocal inflections helps maintain student interest.

Show the organization of your class by posting the day's agenda and learning outcomes before you start. Refer to each point as you cover it in your presentation.

It's a good idea to involve the students in an activity at the beginning of class. This helps them to focus on the topic. You could begin a class with a puzzle, question, scenario (real or imagined), paradox, cartoon, or picture that introduces the topic. Ask for student reactions or interpretations as a way to get them interested.

Engage students with different learning styles by varying class activities. Change the pace and include some pauses. Get the students involved by using exercises and small group work frequently—you could pose a question or ask students to reflect on the main thing they've just learned in the last fifteen minutes or so, then share it with their neighbour. Also, try to include relevant references to current events and tie them to the course materials to demonstrate the link between what students are learning to their future careers.

Keep track of student learning

Students require frequent feedback on what they are learning. Some ideas for obtaining *informal* feedback include:

At the beginning:

- Give a pre-test on the day's topics
- List students' questions on the board

As the class proceeds:

- Give the students instant feedback whenever you can
- Answer the listed questions

Near the end:

- Do a brief post-test
- Invite the students to identify any points they found vague or difficult

For more *formal* feedback:

- Give a test early in the term and return it graded at the next class meeting. Review any points that the students found particularly difficult. After the first test have students complete the sentence: "*I could have done better on this test if...*".
- Gather feedback from the students about the content and delivery of the course after the first few weeks. Their views may help to improve your instruction and their learning during the term. One way to do this is to use Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF). The Learning and Teaching Centre at BCIT can facilitate this process for you.

Checklist for establishing a good environment for learning

In the first few classes of your course, use the following checklist to ensure you are on the right track.

To reinforce relationships, I need to:

☐ Greet students personally whenever possible; use their names

☐ Interview as many as possible and find out more about them

☐ Encourage informal study groups (or buddy system)

☐ Be sure students set ground rules when working in groups

To keep classes interesting and engaging, I need to:

☐ Be energetic and enthusiastic; vary the pace

☐ Post the agenda and learning outcomes for each class and refer to them

☐ Start each day with a question or scenario requiring student input

☐ Give students useful handouts to guide their note-taking

☐ Vary presentation techniques by using exercises, audio-visual displays, group work, discussions, and brief written tests

To keep track of learning, I need to:

☐ Give pretests and post-tests on the day's topics

☐ Allow for sufficient time to deal with student questions

☐ Use various techniques to check understanding throughout the class—give instant feedback wherever possible

☐ Give a test early in the term; grade it for the next class and use the results to guide instruction and student learning

☐ Gather student feedback about course content and delivery before mid-term (maybe using SGIF) and use the results to improve instruction and learning

To avoid difficulties with students, I need to:

☐ Be well prepared for all classes

☐ Involve the students in their learning

☐ Be respectful of the students and their ideas

☐ Give up some control—it's not necessary or possible to be perfect