# The Absolute Worst Way to Start the Semester

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*Image: Clueless (1995)*

"Are you keeping us for the whole time today? Because I need to leave in 20 minutes," asked a student with a baffled expression on his face. As I looked at him, I wanted so badly to explain: Of all the ways you could have chosen to introduce yourself on the first day of class, that was not the optimal one.

At my university — as was the case at other institutions where I've taught — students call the first day of class "Syllabus Day." Their expectation is that they'll show up, the professor will hand out the syllabus, go through maybe 10 minutes' worth of housekeeping stuff, and then turn them loose until the course really starts later in the week. My student was visibly deflated when I told him we would have class for the entire 50 minutes (though, curiously, he did not leave after 20 minutes. Victory!).

One way to approach that anecdote — the easy and tempting way — is to lament the laziness of Kids These Days™ and wail that no one values education anymore. But since this isn't a New York Times op-ed, I'd like to take another approach and talk about the actual teaching and learning implications of Syllabus Day. My student wasn't asking for anything unusual from his perspective; he only sought affirmation that I would adhere to the expectations he had for our first meeting. And those expectations came from experience — his own and that of his peers.

There's a reason that Syllabus Day has become a hallowed tradition and a nearly ironclad rule: So often, that's all that happens when a class meets for the first time. Whether by accident or design, the pedagogical decisions we collectively make about the first day of our classes have conditioned students to expect nothing more than a syllabus (which they will likely leave unexamined for the rest of the semester), a few perfunctory introductions, a

word or two about classroom conduct, and an early exit after about 15 minutes.

That's the absolute worst way to begin a semester. Like the cliché says, we never get a second chance for a first impression. And in our courses, first impressions go a long way. If we lament that students never check the syllabus during the semester, well, what was their first impression of that document? If we are frustrated that students don't take class discussion seriously, did we convey its importance when we introduced the class?

Many of the problems we encounter throughout the semester can at least be mitigated if we take a mindful approach to planning that first day of class. Here are some alternate approaches:

- Ideally, the first day gives students a taste of everything they'll be expected to do during the semester. If the course is going to be discussion-heavy, then a brief class discussion needs to be in the first day's plan. If students will be doing a lot of the group work, then a group activity should be on the docket. If you teach a large lecture class, and plan on interleaving activities such as think-pair-share or minute papers, give your students an opportunity to experience that routine on the first day, and model your expectations and feedback for them.
- In addition to modeling the specific activities, though, the first day is an excellent opportunity to convey your larger approach — your tone and style for the course. If the class is small enough, begin learning students' names right away by having them introduce themselves to both you and their peers. If you want students to engage in active learning, give them an immediate opportunity to do so.
- Take some time in that first class to do a mini-lesson on one of the exciting, weird, intriguing, or controversial parts of the course material. Let your own enthusiasm for the material shine, and let it be a model for your students. If you're teaching a new prep, use the novelty to your advantage — what are the interesting questions you're going to cover in the course?
- Sometimes an explicit discussion of your course structure — the pedagogical decisions you've made — can be powerful. By letting students peek under the hood and see the method and purpose of certain aspects of the course, you're demonstrating that they're partners in its success.

Whatever your plan for the first day, students should get some idea of what's expected of them throughout the semester, and also have the opportunity to discern their place in the class and its activities.

Just because we're rejecting the traditional iteration of "Syllabus Day" doesn't mean there's no place in the first class for a discussion of this crucial document. If my Twitter timeline this summer is any indication, we spend a lot of time creating our syllabi. Why ruin all that effort by merely passing it out to students and announcing "read this and let me know if you have any questions"? That doesn't invite students to examine what their experience will be for the rest of the term, nor does it spark their interest or curiosity. At the other end of the spectrum, though, reading the entire document aloud doesn't accomplish those goals, either —and instead can leave the impression that you're pedantic, some sort of apparatchik, or both.

A better strategy is to highlight important points and direct students to the information they'll need throughout the term. I'd also recommend you announce a syllabus quiz for later in the first week, especially if you plan on giving regular quizzes throughout the semester. That way, your first quiz can both: (a) encourage students to read the syllabus thoroughly, and (b) give them experience with the specific format of your assessments, but in a low-stakes environment that allows them to build some early confidence.

Another important first-day subject that tends to be a slog — though it doesn't have to be — is on policies and expectations for classroom conduct. When I was an undergraduate, I sat through many a class where we spent an excruciating several minutes listening to a list of don'ts from an instructor who treated us like unwelcome distractions rather than college students — and that was before the prevalence of laptops, cellphones, and other mobile devices in the classroom.

It’s all too easy to wield a mighty ban-hammer in an attempt to prevent distractions in class. But a one-size-fits-all technology ban, for example, can be counterproductive (and illegal if you have students with documented disabilities who depend upon technological assistance). If you don’t want devices out at all, and have sound pedagogical reasons for your stance, share those reasons clearly with your students. If you don’t mind devices used for class purposes (laptops for notes, cell phones for a voice-recorder app) — but are wary of all the other ways in which they can disrupt what’s happening in the classroom — invite your students into the discussion on the topic.

I’ve had a lot of success with collaborative expectations-setting, in which I ask students how theywould like to see our class work during the semester: What helps you learn? What gets in the way of your listening or comprehension? What distracts you? In my experience, when students come up with a list of class expectations, they hold themselves to a higher standard than we would expect. The collaboration gives students a sense of ownership over our class meetings; they’ve gotten to help frame how learning occurs on a day-to-day basis, and they’re more invested in the course as a result. An additional advantage is that, when an incident does occur, rather than play the bad cop (“Please stop texting and put away your phone now”), I am merely reminding them of the rules they created (“Remember, we decided that cell phones were only for looking up class-related stuff”). It’s a simple, but powerful, shift — and it originates with a mindful approach to the first day of class.

Opening day presents a unique opportunity in our courses. Our students haven’t experienced anything yet, so there’s a default level of interest which we can leverage with engaged teaching and a welcoming atmosphere. The tone we choose to set and the structure of activities we design can impart a positive first impression, and might also preempt some of the more common frustrations that pop up later in the term. Sure, some students will lament the passing of Syllabus Day, but the dividends from a more substantial and engaging first day will more than offset that disappointment.

We dedicate so much time to designing our courses, planning our activities, reading up on our content, and constructing our syllabi. We ought to ensure that time was well-spent by planning a first day of class that encourages students to become engaged participants in every aspect of the course. This fall, let Syllabus Day go — some traditions aren’t worth keeping.