Your First Class:
Setting the Tone and Building Rapport with Your Students

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1. Preparing for Your First Class
   a. Dealing with First-Class Nerves
   b. Checklists for Your First Class
2. Setting the Tone
   a. Connection, Humor, Transparency
3. Building Rapport with Your Students
   a. What is Rapport and Why Does It Matter?
   b. Icebreakers for Your First Class
Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- Recognize the value in building connection with your students from the start of the course
- Implement strategies to help students feel comfortable and included right from the start
- Incorporate icebreakers and other activities to engage students who are meeting you and each other for the first time
Imagine... Your First Day of Class as a TA

How do you feel when thinking about your first day of teaching as a TA at Caltech?

▪ Excited? Thrilled?
▪ Nervous? Anxious? Intimidated?
▪ Prepared?

If you are feeling first-class nerves, you are not alone!
Dealing with First-Class Nerves

- Dress comfortably
- Practice
- Talk to students before class begins
- Write out what you want to say
- Begin with a discussion or icebreaker activity
CHECKLIST 1:
Before Your First Class

✓ Get advice (Professors, fellow TAs, previous TAs)
✓ Review the textbook, course notes, and previous year’s notes
✓ Review the course syllabus
✓ Check out your (virtual) classroom
✓ Send a welcome message to your students
✓ Pack some pens, markers, chalk, etc.
CHECKLIST 2:
First Class Logistics

✓ Share your name and pronouns, office hours/location, contact info
✓ Arrive early—mingle, chat with your students, and take note of their interests
✓ Start class on time
✓ Introduce your expectations
Setting the Tone

- Establish a comfortable and welcoming learning environment from the start
- Help students feel included, supported, and free to ask questions
- If you feel comfortable in the classroom, your students will likely feel more comfortable too
- Let your excitement show!
Transparency

- Communicate your learning goals and the plan for achieving them openly
- Share *why* you are doing what you’re doing
Share your own personal experiences learning the material or using it in your work

Be the expert-to-novice link
Play can enhance students’ learning experience and motivate them to keep coming to class

- Try including games that support your learning goals and which make learning fun
- Don’t feel like you always need to be “serious”
- Model bringing your whole self to the classroom
“What if my students think I’m not serious or smart enough?”

- You can absolutely introduce fun activities into your classroom while still being seen as knowledgeable and professional.
- Games or other fun activities in the classroom do not have to be “silly” if that’s not your style.
- Introducing novel activities can be a great way to add variety to your teaching approach and your students’ learning experiences.
- From your students’ perspective, being a relatable and approachable TA is at least as important as being smart (*if not more!*).
Rapport is characterized by meaningful connection, mutual understanding, and good communication

Building rapport with your students can help them feel comfortable asking you questions and requesting support when they need it.

Although building rapport takes time, you can start right from your first class!
Icebreakers can be a great tool to drive engagement and promote community in your classroom

- Think about the purpose and learning goals of the icebreaker
- Choose icebreakers that fit your needs:
  - Amount of time available
  - Class format
  - Technologies you will be using
Additional Considerations for Icebreakers

- **Preparation**
  - Will it require any specific tools?
  - If remote, will it require turning on video or un-muting?
  - What should be prepared in advance?

- **Environment**
  - Does it rely on niche knowledge or references?
  - Is an icebreaker appropriate for this session?
How it works:
Ask a question with a small number of possible answers. The students write their answer on a sticky note or piece of paper and hold it up. Anyone who gets bingo (the same answer across a row or column) calls it out!

Other considerations:
- Ask questions about course material to get quick feedback (Which problem set question was the most difficult?)
- Ask yes/no questions or use Zoom reactions to eliminate the need of having video on
Chat Box Flood

How it works:
Ask your students a question and tell them to type their answer into the chat box but not press submit. After your designated amount of time, tell everyone to submit their answers and watch the chat fill up.

Other considerations:
- Ask questions for feedback on the course
- Can be used multiple times per session
- Be sure to give enough time to think of an answer and type it out
Check-Ins

How it works:
Set aside a specific time to see how your students are doing. This could be with one-on-one conversations, optional group chats, or polling tools (Zoom polls, Mentimeter, etc.)

Other considerations:
- Consider familiarizing yourself with Caltech resources for students
How it works:

Ask your students to gather in small groups (“blobs”) based on something they have in common (ex. similar shirt color, prefer cats or dogs)

Other considerations:

- Ask questions that help students discover things they have in common
- Ensure students have enough room to move around
Concentric Circles

How it works:
Students arrange themselves in an inner circle (facing out) and an outer circle (facing in). Each pair of students facing each other answers a getting-to-know-you question. Then the inner circle rotates so everyone is in a new pair.

Other considerations:
- Ask questions that help students discover things they have in common
- Ensure students have enough room to move around (or set up breakout rooms in Zoom)
How it works:
Using a shared whiteboard or digital drawing app, ask students to write or draw whatever first comes to mind in response to a prompt.

Other considerations:
- The prompt can be related to the course material (“What does molecular biology mean to you?”) or students’ interests (“What is your dream job?”)
- Can be a great way to familiarize students with any whiteboard tools used in your class
Consult resources and make preparations to have your first day feel as effective and comfortable as possible—your students will feel more comfortable too!

- Try to set the tone of your classroom from the start (ex. Transparency, Connection, Humor)
- Seek to build rapport with your students
- Icebreakers can be a great way to kickstart connections among you and your students
Your First Class, Dr. Jenn Weaver (CTLO)
https://ctlo.caltech.edu/documents/3944/online_hdo_weaver_yourfirstclass.pdf

Fun and Games: Creating Enjoyable and Memorable Learning Experiences in a Comfortable Setting, Dylan Freas (Caltech, CCE)

Icebreakers that Work, Jennifer Gonzalez (Cult of Pedagogy)
https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/classroom-icebreakers/

How to Play in the College Classroom in a Pandemic, and Why You Should, Sarah Rose Cavanagh (Chronicle of Higher Ed)

Zoom-Friendly Warmups and Icebreakers, Eugene Korsunskiy (Future of Design in Higher Ed)