Hi there! Welcome to this Caltech Teaching Conference session on “Your First Class: Setting the Tone and Building Rapport with Your Students”. My name is Matthew Langley, I use the pronouns he/him/his and I'm a fourth-year graduate student in Biology. I've been a teaching assistant for the freshman course Introduction to Molecular Biology for the past three years and I'm also involved with the Caltech Project for Effective Teaching.

For those of you who are new to Caltech, welcome! Today I want to share some considerations, tips, and practical techniques to make your first class as a Caltech TA as successful as possible. I’ll also share some ways to use your first class as a foundation for building important connections with your students.

So in today's session we’ll begin by thinking about how you can prepare for your first class. For those of you who may have some pre-first class nerves, we’ll discuss ways to ease those worries and I’ll also present some checklists you can use to help feel prepared for your first day. From there we'll move on to ways you can effectively set the tone for your classroom right from your first class. In particular, I'll introduce connection, humor, and transparency as three aspects of the learning experience that you may wish to emphasize as you begin teaching. Finally, we'll discuss rapport between students and TAs and why it's worth building rapport with your own students. I'll also introduce icebreakers as a set of techniques you might use to jumpstart the process of building rapport with the students in your own class.

So, as we get started, I want to share the learning outcomes I have for this session. By the end of the session, I hope that you'll all be able to recognize the value in building connection with your students from the start of your course, how to implement strategies to help students feel comfortable and included right from the start, and how to incorporate icebreakers and other activities to engage students who are meeting you and each other for the first time.

With that I'd like to begin by inviting you all to join me in a little bit of an imagination exercise. So, I'd like you to imagine that it's your first day of class as a TA at Caltech. Try to actually picture entering the classroom for the first time, waiting for your students to start to filter in, then introducing yourself and beginning to teach. Take a moment and just notice how you feel when thinking about that first day of teaching at Caltech. Now, I imagine, there will be a variety of feelings that might be coming up, and I hope that some of these might be on the list. Now some of you might be feeling excited, or thrilled even. After all, it is really exciting to teach at a new institution and to a new group of students. On the other hand, I anticipate that some of you, maybe even most of you are feeling nervous, maybe a little anxious or even intimidated. I mean, Caltech students are really smart, really bright, and it can be kind of intimidating teaching to a room of students are so intelligent.

The other thing which I want to ask is whether you feel prepared for that first day of teaching. Do you feel like you have a plan for how that first day will go? Do you feel competent that you'll be able to achieve that plan? Or do you feel like that plan is still a little bit fuzzy. Now,
regardless of your answers, I want to make it clear that all of those are perfectly normal responses to you teaching for the first time, not just at Caltech, but anywhere. In particular, if your feeling some pre-first class nerves, I want to let you know that you are not alone. I've definitely been in your shoes. I feel nervous pretty much every time before I get started teaching.

So I wanted to introduce some strategies that have helped me and others for dealing with those nerves before their first class. The first tip I have is just to dress comfortably. Although you certainly want to look professional, I'd encourage you to choose clothes that you'll feel comfortable moving around in and preferably ones that won’t feel too loose, too tight, too itchy, too warm or so on. For example, it's really amazing how much a set of comfy shoes helps me to feel more at ease on my first day of teaching.

The next thing you can do is practice. So practice your introduction, or practice the way you plan to explain important topics to your class. That way you're not left in this nervous position of doing everything for the first time on the first day.

The next thing you might do is talk to students before class begins. It can feel uncomfortable getting up and speaking to a room full of strangers on your first day. I know from firsthand experience! What I've found is that it helps to just say a quick “Hello” or “How's it going?” to students as they come in, just to start to break the ice and get the conversation going. Now, if you are worried that you might stumble over your words or forget something important while you're teaching, feel free to write out what you want to say. This doesn't need to be in full sentences, just even a set of bullet points can help a lot when you're getting started.

Finally, you might choose to begin with class discussion or even an icebreaker activity that will just help everyone to get to know each other a little bit. This can help take some of the pressure off of you as a teacher and start conversations that give your class a little bit of early momentum. Now if you haven't heard a lot about icebreakers before, don’t worry about it, we're going to be talking about them a lot later on in this session.

Alright, a favorite tool of mine with preparing to teach is actually one that has also been shown as helpful for people across many professions and environments. And that tool is really simple: just the basic checklist. I'd like to share to checklist that you might use to help get ready for your first class.

This first one is a set of things you might want to do in the days or weeks before your class starts. The first one is to get advice. Now, this can be advice from the professors for the course, fellow TAs, or even previous TA for the course like upper year grad students. All of these people can be great resources to find out what has worked well when they taught course in the past, and you can kind of pick which strategies and best practices you want to bring when you teach the class as well.
The next thing you might want to do is review the textbook, the course notes, and previous years’ notes. Now, this is a great opportunity to see what topics are going to be introduced, and also how they're introduced, both by previous instructors and also by the textbook, your students are going to be reading that before they come to class. Based off of that you consider how you want to introduce the topic in your own classroom.

The other thing which you might want to review is the course syllabus. When you're doing that, it's important to make sure that your contact information and your office hours are correct. You'll also want to note down any important dates, like exam dates or project due dates, just in case students ask.

The other thing you can do is review the collaboration policy, just so that if students come up to ask about, “Hey, can I work with other people on the problem sets, or do we need to note that down somewhere?”, you'll be able to give them the right answer.

The next thing which you can do—and this is a big one for me—is checking out your classroom. Now, this could be your in-person classroom, or, if you’re teaching online, your virtual classroom. Let's start with the in-person classroom. If you know where you're going to be teaching, I would encourage you to actually go to that room before your class starts and just check out what's there. So, for example, is there a whiteboard or a blackboard? Are you going to need markers or chalk? Are those things there already? What about a projector? If you're going to be sharing slides, is there a projector in the room and is that projector visible if you're able to close the lights or the windows to the room? What about seating, desks? Are there enough spaces for your students to sit down comfortably? Can they have a good view of the blackboard the whiteboard or the projector screen? The other thing that you might want to do is just try speaking in the room. Oftentimes when you're in a new room and you're speaking there for the first time, your voice might sound a little bit weirder than you're expecting it to sound. So if you try just saying a couple of sentences, maybe even introducing yourself like you would on your first day of class, you can get acquainted with how the room sounds.

Now, what about if you're teaching virtually? Let's say you're teaching on Zoom. So one thing that you can do is jump on to the meeting room for your Zoom classroom and just see what's present inside of that virtual classroom, that window. One thing you might want to check out is the participants button. This button, this panel, is where participants, students in your classroom, can raise their hand for questions or ask you to go faster or slower. You could also check out the chat box—this is a really great tool that we have on Zoom for students to ask questions directly to the instructor or for the instructor to send out links or other resources to everyone in the room. You can also check out how your video looks on the screen. Is your lighting good? How about your audio? Do you sound good, is your microphone in the right spot, is it picking up other noises in your room where you're teaching from? And you might also want to check out the recording settings for your class, especially if you're going to be posting these recordings online for the class. Are you recording the slides, your video, the gallery view of all the participants? You can also check a box to see if you are recording the audio transcripts, like the closed captions for your course, which can be a really great thing to post as well.
So once you've checked out your classroom—virtual or physical—another thing which you can do in the week before your class starts is to just send a welcome message to your students, just to say, “Hi, this is me, I'm really excited to welcome you to class next week, this is what we're going to be talking about.” And then the last thing is just to pack the equipment you’ll need for that first day of class, so maybe pens, markers, chalk, whatever. Whatever you need to do to get the actual job of teaching done.

Alright, so that first checklist was things which you can prepare before your first day of class. This next checklist is a set of logistics that you can check off during your first class. The first one, and probably the most important one, is to share your own information. So share your name, share your pronouns if you're comfortable doing that, share your office hours, your office location, and your contact info, so your email or any other ways that you want students to get in contact with you. You also want to try to arrive early. As a student, it can be really frustrating when you arrive for class on time and the TA is not even there. So try to make the time to arrive to class, not just at the time that it's supposed to start, but a little bit early. This also gives you the opportunity to mingle, to chat with your students. And when you’re chatting with them, take note of their interests. What are they doing outside of this class? Even what other courses are they taking? Are those courses hard, are they enjoying them? These can be great things to bring up later on in the class, as the students filter in, just to keep the conversation going and to get to know them a little bit better.

You also on your first day of class want to try your best to start the class on time. This helps to set the expectation that class will start on time in all the following weeks, and so your students feel that they need to show up to class on time as well. On that topic of setting the expectation of showing up to class on time, in general, the first class is a really great opportunity to introduce your expectations to your students. Basically, how you expect them to behave in class. For example, should they raise their hand to ask questions or should they just interrupt you? Can they use their laptops, their phones in class, or would you prefer that those are turned off? All those kinds of expectations, it’s great to set right from the beginning, so that they can be clear and respected for the rest of the term.

So when we talk about the first class, I think one of the most important things we can do is set the tone for our classroom. When I talk about setting the tone, I think one of the most important parts of that is helping to establish a comfortable and welcoming learning environment for your students, right from the start. So, we want to think of ways which we can help students to feel included, to feel supported and, also feel free to ask questions. I know as a student, sometimes you can feel a little bit intimidated coming into a new room and studying a new subject with a new TA. And you want to do your best to kind of make everyone in the class feel as though they're included, they belong there, and that they're able to ask questions about the material whenever they don't understand. This will help your students get as much out of the class as they possibly can. I also think that, just a good guideline is to try to do whatever you can to make yourself feel comfortable in the classroom. Chances are, if you feel comfortable in the class, your students will feel comfortable as well. Unfortunately, the reverse is also true. If
you start to show signs of discomfort, maybe a little bit of signs of nervousness or kind of fumbling over your slides, for example, then it might make your students feel a little bit less comfortable too. So try your best to be comfortable. The last thing is kind of a favorite of mine. So I love letting my excitement show when I'm teaching, I think the best instructors that I've had in the past are ones who allow themselves to get excited about the material and show their students how excited about the material they are. Now, a lot of times we're teaching topics which do feel exciting to us, right? They might be related to our research, or they might be a subject that you've just been studying for a long time, and I think when you feel that kind of urge inside of you to get excited, to kind of geek out on those subjects, I'd say let it happen, just show that excitement to your students because oftentimes it can feel really contagious and getting students excited about that material as well, which just helps everyone to learn a little bit better.

Alright, on the topic of setting the tone, there are three specific aspects of the learning environment that I want to encourage you to focus on when you're thinking about the tone of your own classroom. The first one is transparency. So when we're talking about transparency in teaching, we really mean making the implicit expectations for your students as explicit as possible. We all come to class with a set of implicit expectations for how our students will behave in class, how they'll submit their assignments, how they'll ask questions, what time they'll need to submit everything by. But if those implicit expectations aren't communicated openly, explicitly to students, then they may not be on the same page as us, and we want to do everything that we can to make sure that everyone is working from the same set of expectations. So, how can we do this? I just encourage you, whenever possible, to communicate your learning goals and your plan for achieving them as openly as possible. Now, this has been demonstrated to improve student learning and student grades. It also really helps to explain to your students why they're learning the way that you're teaching them, and it just in general helps to share why you're doing what you're doing as a teacher, kind of peel back the curtain a little bit and let them understand why you're doing what you're doing as a teacher and how it helps support their learning.

The next aspect is connection. When I talk about connection, I don't just mean connecting topics in a course to other topics in the course, although that's definitely important. I'm also talking about connection between you as the TA and your students. So what are some ways that we can build that to the student connection? Well, I think one way to achieve that is by sharing a little bit about your own personal experiences when you were learning the material, or how you're using the topics which you're talking about in the course inside of your own work or inside of your own research. This can be a really great way to give you as the TA a little bit more like a human persona for your students, and helps to make the topics just a little bit more real for them.

I think the other really thing we can do as TAs is be this expert-to-novice link. If you think about the people in a classroom, the students are generally going to be novices, people who haven't really studied this subject before, who are seeing some of these concepts for the first time, and haven't really connected the different things together into kind of a big concept map. However,
they probably see the instructor for the course, the professor, as an expert in the field, someone who knows everything there is to know about the subject which they're about to teach them. And I think a lot of times stuff can get lost in that translation between the experts to the novice, because a lot of times experts in the field forget what it was like to originally learn the material and they forgot ways to explain those topics in a way that fosters understanding among novices. So what we can do as TAs is help to be that link between the experts and the novices in the classroom. Just showcase a little bit about how you learn the material and how you see the connections between the different topics. Help your students to connect these things together in similar ways, maybe, to how you're connecting them together and help them to come to their own conclusions about the material, their own understanding of it. This is a great way to help them become their own experts in the field, rather than just relying on the expert at the front of the class.

The last aspect of the learning experience I want to highlight is humor and playfulness. Now, the reason I bring this up is because play can really enhance students’ learning experiences and it's been shown to motivate them to keep coming back to class, which is obviously a really important part of learning. Now, if you want to try to include games in your classroom that's a great idea. I think you should choose games to support the goals you have for the class and which helps to make the learning experience a little bit more fun your students. I also think that you don't always need to be serious when you're teaching. Sometimes we feel like we need to always be kind of very professional, we do need to be professional, but very kind of like straightforward, not a lot of humor, kind of dry, and I don't think that needs to be true. I think we can bring a little bit of excitement, humor, playfulness, joking around, to the class just to keep everyone engaged and excited and coming back.

I think the other thing that plays into this topic is modeling bringing your whole self to the classroom. So what do I mean by this? Sometimes, when people come to the classroom, they feel like they need to leave parts of themselves at the door. So maybe this is parts of their identity or interests they have outside of that subject, other courses they're taking, problems that they're encountering—they feel like they can't bring that into the classroom because they won't be welcome there. So I think what we can do to help encourage others in the class to bring their selves to the classroom, their whole selves, is to do that in our own capacity. So when I come to class here, I don't want to just be Matthew the biology TA, I also want to bring all the other parts of myself, my other interests outside of this class, my thoughts about you know the topic at large, my thoughts about being at Caltech, what I’m living, all of that stuff. I want to bring as much of myself to the classroom to help encourage my students to bring their whole selves to the classroom too. And overall, I think that helps to make the classroom just feel a little bit more vibrant and engaging for everyone.

Now, when I bring up this topic of introducing humor and playfulness to the classroom, some people often ask, “Well what if my students think that I'm not serious enough, I'm not smart enough, or think I'm just joking around?” So on that topic, I want to say that you can absolutely introduce fun activities into your classroom while still being knowledgeable and professional and being seen like that by your students. I think that games and other fun activities in the
classroom don't have to be silly if that's not your style. [It] doesn't need to be a silly game or silly activity. The other thing is that you can introduce novel activities into your classroom as a way to just add variety to your teaching approach and to your students’ learning experience just as a way to keep things fresh from week to week. And finally, from your students’ perspective, I think that being a relatable and an approachable TA is at least as important as being smart, if not more. Because, really, what is the value to a student in being a smart and knowledgeable TA if that student can’t come to you and ask you questions about the material and feel comfortable asking you those questions. I think that, whenever possible, introducing that kind of humor and playfulness to your class can help you be seen as more relatable and approachable person and therefore help your students more.

Alright, so on this topic of how TAs see students and students see their TAs, I want to introduce this concept of rapport. So when I talk about rapport, I’m talking about this thing that is characterized by meaningful connection, mutual understanding and good communication. Building rapport with your students can definitely help them feel comfortable asking questions and requesting support when they need it. And although building report definitely takes time—it's not something that happens overnight, or just in your first class—it is something which I think you can start building right from your first day of class and you’ll have a great foundation to build on.

So if we want to think about building rapport, you want to think about ways which we can kind of start that process going right from the first class. And one set of techniques that you might choose to use are icebreakers. So icebreakers are a great tool to drive engagement and promote community in your classroom, if used effectively. That being said, I feel like a lot of us have experiences of kind of badly designed or badly executed icebreakers in our past. Kind of that feeling of walking into your first day of class and the teacher says, “Oh, ok we’re going to be doing an icebreaker today. Come up with three fun facts about yourself.” And everyone in the class kind of groans and goes like, “Oh, do we really need to do this?” So I think that's indicative, typically, of a poorly designed or poorly executed icebreaker. When I think about well designed, well executed icebreakers, I'm thinking about ones which really center the purpose and the learning goals of that activity in their design. So as an instructor you want to think: how does this icebreaker support the learning goals I have for my students in this class. You also want to choose icebreakers that fit your needs. So how much time you have available, the format of your class whether it’s going to be in-person or virtual, and maybe the technologies that you're going to be using as well. You want to choose icebreakers that fit all of those things so that they can be done effectively.

Some additional considerations you might want to think about is, on the topic of preparation, will it require any specific tools? Maybe pens, markers, sticky notes, pieces of paper. You want to make sure that you’ll have those tools available. If you're going to be doing an icebreaker in a remote setting you want to think about whether that icebreaker will require participants to turn on their videos or unmute because sometimes people might not be able to do that because of technical constraints or other reasons, and in those cases you'll need to find ways to work around that. And you also want to think if there's anything that needs to be prepared in
advance to make the icebreaker as successful as possible, and if that’s true, you want to prepare those things before class begins. You also want to think about your environments so, for example, does the icebreaker which you plan to perform rely on some form of niche knowledge or references. Just to give you an example, maybe you ask an icebreaker question which is like, “Which one of these characters from a famous movie or TV show do you most relate to?” I think that can be good in the right context, but it's important to consider that maybe not everyone in the class has seen that very famous movie or that very famous TV show. And in those cases, they may feel excluded because they just haven't watched the thing. So I think, whenever possible, if you want to make an inclusive icebreaker, you want to avoid relying on questions or icebreaker techniques that rely on some fun with niche knowledge or reference.

You also want to think about just whether the icebreaker is appropriate for this session, whether your tone needs to be more serious because of the topic, or whether you just don't have a lot of time to do an icebreaker. In those cases, maybe pick a different activity instead.

Right, so now that we're thinking about what makes a good icebreaker, let me introduce just a few ideas for icebreakers that you could choose to include. Starting with “Bingo”, or “Zoom Bingo”. So this is a technique which works well virtually and can also be adapted to in-person. And it involves just asking a question with a small number of possible answers to your students. The students, then write their answer on a sticky note or a piece of paper, and then they hold it up either to the camera or to the other students in the room. And then each student looks around at the answers which they see or on their gallery view they look at which answers appear on their screen, and they call out “Bingo” if they see the same answer in a single row or a single column. Now, I think that this is a really great icebreaker for just getting kind of quick questions and answers from your students and encouraging students to find commonality with the other people in the classroom. You can also consider asking questions of the course material as part of this icebreaker, just as a way to get quick feedback. For example, you could ask, “Which problem set question was the most difficult?” This gives you as an instructor a better idea of what you might want to focus on during that session. You can also consider asking yes or no questions or using zoom reactions to eliminate the need of having participants turn their video on if you're doing this in a virtual setting. Asking those yes or no questions using Zoom reactions allows them to participate without having to hold a piece of paper up to their camera. Alright, so that’s Zoom Bingo.

The next technique I wanted to introduce to you is called “Chat Box Flood”. This is one which is primarily directed at virtual learning environments like Zoom. So the way that this one works is you ask your students a question and then tell them to type their answer into the chat box, but not to press submit yet. Instead, after a designated amount of time, you tell everyone to press the enter button and submit their answer and then all of the answers will appear or “flood” the chat box at the same time. This is a really cool activity because students don’t get to see each other's answers before they submit it and it means that they can identify really kind of like meaningful and unexpected connections between what they wrote down as their answer and other people in the room. It’s also just really quick icebreaker to implement, so you can set up a
chat box flood and finish it basically within a minute. This is a really great opportunity to ask questions again for feedback on your course. Because it's so quick, you can do it multiple times during a session if that's helpful. The only thing is that you just want to make sure you give your participants, your students, enough time to think of an answer and to type it out before you ask them all to press enter. So that's “Chat Box Flood”.

This next technique is called “Check-Ins”. Maybe not everyone thinks that this is an icebreaker, but I think that it's a really important technique for fostering meaningful connections between you and your students. So it works pretty simply: you just want to set aside a specific time, maybe at the beginning of your class or your session, to just ask your students how they're doing. So this could be with one-on-one conversation, you can do it as a group. If you have a really big classroom and you're doing it in a virtual environments, or even in-person, you can use polling apps like Zoom polls or Mentimeter, and those actually give you really cool outputs like a word cloud of everyone's responses and what was most common among them. So these can be really great for asking students directly how they're feeling and what helped they might need from you. If you're doing this at Caltech, I think it’s also important to consider familiarizing yourself with the resources that are available at Caltech for students, should they need support beyond what you're able to give them as a TA.

Alright, this next technique is called “Blobs”. So what is “Blobs”? The way that it works is you ask your students to gather in small groups, or “blobs”, based on something they have in common. For example, a similar shirt color, whether they prefer cats or dogs, and so forth. This is a really great way to help students quickly discover things that they have in common. It's pretty easy to implement, the students don't have to come up with anything clever, they just respond to every question without thinking too hard about it. It keeps students moving and keeps them talking and I think it helps to build a sense of belonging and community in your classroom. Some additional considerations: you want to ask questions that helps students discover things they have in common, so things which you think will generate big “blobs” of people. The other thing is you want to ensure that students have enough room to move around if you're doing this on a physical space. Right so that's “Blobs”.

And a related technique is called “Concentric Circles”. So the way that this icebreaker works is you ask your students to arrange themselves in an inner circle and an outer circle that surrounds it. The students on the inside face out and the students on the outside face in. So each student will be facing another student as a pair and you ask everyone in the circle to answer a particular getting-to-know-you question. For example, do you play any sports, what was the last movie you saw, what would you do with a million dollars, what's your dream job if you weren't studying in this field? And after they answer that question, you give them enough time to answer, you ask the inner circle to rotate so that everyone is paired up with a new person and then you ask a new question. This gives students a great chance to have lots of one-on-one conversations with lots of their classmates, and it can help them quickly feel more at home in your classroom because they've had good one-on-one meetings with just a bunch of people. When you're picking questions to use, make sure that they're more open ended, so that you can get students talking. You don't want to have just simple yes or no questions. Again, you
want to ask questions that help students discover things they have in common and just ensure that you have enough room for students to move around. This is also a technique which you could do via breakout rooms in Zoom if you're interested in doing this in a virtual environment.

Alright, this is the last icebreaker I have to share with you, and it's called “Whiteboard playground”. So this one works by using a shared whiteboard or a digital drawing app and asking students to write down or draw whatever first comes to mind when they think about a prompt. This could be something related to the course, for example, like, “What does ‘molecular biology’ mean to you?”; [and] you draw your response to that, all together. Or, your students’ interests, like “What is your dream job?”; and everyone kind of draws out something related to their dream job. So in this whiteboard playground, it can be a great way to facilitate students learning how to use the whiteboard tools that you might use in your class. So, for example, if you're using a physical whiteboard at the front of class to work on problem sets together or if you're using a virtual whiteboard app to draw out figure together with your students in recitation or in office hours. This can be a great way to tell students, this is where all of the features of that whiteboard are, and you can feel comfortable trying whatever you want on it. So again, just an example an icebreaker that isn't just a fun way for people to get to know each other, but is tightly tied to the learning goals and the types of activities that you’re going to be using throughout the rest of the class.

That’s the last icebreaker I have to share with you, which means that it's time to summarize everything up. So, in summary, consult resources and make preparations to have your first day feel as effective and as comfortable as possible. And I really believe that if you feel comfortable, your students will feel more comfortable too. So consult as many resources as you need to help that happen. Next, try to set the tone of your classroom from the start and, in particular, think about transparency, connection, and humor when you set the tone for your class. Next, I think it's really important to seek to build rapport with your students, because that open communication and that sense of connection can really help to facilitate students’ learning. And finally, if you're looking for a way to help kickstart the process of building rapport, icebreakers can be a great way to get that process going and to start building those connections between you and your students.

With that I want to thank you all for attending this session and share some additional resources if you're interested in exploring this topic more. You can follow any one of the links that are on this page to kind of explore a little bit more about how to prep for your first class or different icebreakers that you can use in the classroom. With that, thank you again for attending. I hope your time teaching at Caltech is great, and that you enjoy it, and I wish you all the best. Thanks!