How to Start Your First Lecture

How to prepare for the first class

New lecturers are prone to over-preparation for their first class. This is not necessarily a bad thing. If you do this, it means you will have well and truly researched the material you will be teaching and have thought through many of the possible questions your students will ask. You might not need everything you have prepared for the first class but you may well be able to use it later. Over-preparation is rarely wasted.

Deciding what you should prepare depends on several factors. For example, what sort of lecture are you teaching? Is it a lecture, a seminar or another type? The preparation for different types of lectures can be quite different. It can be helpful to look carefully at the subject outline and then put yourself in your students’ shoes. What will they be expecting in this context? Will they expect a straight-talk lecture or include some activities followed by a Q&A session or to have some instruction followed by a few exercises? If you decide to do something other than what you think students will be expecting, then think about how you will explain this to students, and the reasons (usually educational) that you will give.

Try to remember not only to think about the material or content for the class but also the way in which you will teach that particular material. Will you include small group discussions in the lecture theatre? If so, will the groups report back? A request for questions from students? Or something else? It might be helpful to speak to a senior staff member in your department about what usually happens in the sort of class you are teaching. Don’t be afraid to probe and ask lots of questions such as “What does ‘go over’ mean?” and “What do most lecturers in this subject do in the first/second week?” Although it sounds obvious, most new lecturers will find notes a great help in their first class. It can be easy to get flustered and forget what you planned to do. Having some brief notes outlining your class plan can be helpful. See Appendix A for an example of a class plan proforma.

Below are some more detailed suggestions about the first class. In addition, you might like to consult other guides in the series.
It might sound completely obvious but the first thing you should do in the first class is introduce yourself. Give students your full name – “Hello, I’m John Smith” – and indicate to them how you would like to be addressed, “Please call me John”. Write your full name on the whiteboard and then underline the name by which you would like to be addressed:

John Smith

While you’re there, give them your office hours and your contact details and availability. For example:

John Smith.

Email: jsmith@unimelb.edu.au (allow 72 hours for reply)
Phone: (03) 8344 5555 (allow 72 hours for reply)
Office: Room 604, The Spot building (Mondays 3–5.00pm)

The second thing you should do is allow students the opportunity to introduce themselves to each other. Barrington (1998) suggests it is important to construct activities that help students to get to know each other and you so that they are not expected to work with or speak in front of strangers. He adds that an icebreaker can help create an atmosphere conducive to student involvement, activity and learning.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary describes an icebreaker as “A boat used for breaking through ice” (1976:531). This may not be a good analogy for how a lecturer should use any number of strategies available to help members of a group get to know each other! Perhaps icemelter is a better term to describe the gentle activities that can be used to help students to get to know each other and get to know you.

**Group bonding**
Ask students to form groups of three or four and spend a few minutes finding out what they have in common with each other. At the end of the allocated time they report to the other groups what they have discovered they have in common. This works extremely well in getting people relaxed and talking informally.

**Talking about names**
Ask everyone to introduce themselves and talk about their first name and how they view it; how their parents chose it; their feelings about it; abbreviations of it; and whether they would have preferred another name. Because of the time this takes, it works best for smaller groups.
Sticky labels
Give each student a sticky label and on it get them to write their name and three facts about themselves (e.g. birth month, favourite subject or hobby). After attaching the label to themselves they then have to find someone in the room that has a label with some similarity to theirs. They can then tell each other a little about themselves, which may or may not be shared with the larger group. Say something about assessment

Do you remember when you were a student? Do you remember the aspect of each subject that was your primary interest? If you’re among the majority of undergraduate students, it was probably the assessment regime. Most students want to know fairly early on what the assessment tasks are and when they are due.

Acknowledge this by at least outlining the assessment tasks and asking them to note critical dates for assignments; the policy for extensions and/or special consideration and your availability outside the details given earlier (you may not be available outside these hours – make this clear to the students now). Encourage students to start preparation for assignments and study for exams now and to ask questions and seek clarification early.

It is useful in the first session to briefly go over some of the essential assessment information that they need to know to successfully complete the subject. Specific aspects that are usually useful to discuss:

- The overall assessment schedule.
- Due dates for assignments.
- Issues around plagiarism.
- Departmental policy on, and process for getting extensions and/or special consideration.
- Weighting of assessment tasks.
- Set the ground rules/expectations

Most groups function better when there is a clear understanding of the rules. If this shared understanding is not established, students can become very confused and this can affect their decisions to participate.

Establishing clear ground rules or expectations for student behaviour for your class is therefore very important, and may prevent problems from developing. It might even be possible to negotiate the ground rules with the class, although you may have some that are not negotiable. Discuss expectations about what will go on in the class. It is a good idea to record the ground rules.
agreed on so they can be referred to later, if necessary (Barrington, 1998).

Below are a few suggestions for ground rules/expectations – they are not exhaustive and you may prefer to develop your own for a particular group and subject. It will probably be fruitful to spend a few minutes discussing each with the students.

- Do some preparation for each lecture.
- Contribute by speaking, listening and encouraging others to speak.
- Be conscious that some of us have better English language skills than others and encourage each other to develop these skills.
- Don’t interrupt each other.
- Respect each other’s points of view, even when we strongly disagree.
- Take risks and allow ourselves to be wrong at times.
- No put-downs of others (even as a joke).
- Try to be on time.

**Ask for questions**
Ask the students to share their concerns or questions at this point.

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**Be enthusiastic**
Research demonstrates that higher education teachers who are enthusiastic about their subject matter can both enthuse students about the material and leave a lasting impression on the students. Think about your favourite university teacher – did he or she drag themselves in and drone on for an hour each week while staring at the back wall, never making eye contact with students, never mind actively involving them in the classes? Unlikely. More likely the best teacher you had was motivated, energetic and passionate – use that person as a role model for your lecturing.

**Managing nerves**
Nervousness, anxiety and worry are a common and perfectly healthy occurrence among new lecturers. After all, you are doing something for the first time and while you are doing it, many people are going to be watching you – it would be unusual not to feel some trepidation about such a situation.

One of the best methods of managing nerves is to do adequate preparation. Ensuring you are fully prepared gives you a sense of confidence and back up that is likely to be helpful in your first class. Even very experienced teachers and presenters ensure they prepare thoroughly. If you know the material and have thought about how you will share it with students, you are much less likely to feel nervous before or during your class.
Of course, even though it is likely to help to do so, adequate or even thorough preparation may not put you completely at ease. You may have to consciously manage your anxiety as the time for the first class approaches.

If you are feeling particularly anxious, before the class, take a minute or two to close your eyes and picture yourself out the front of the class you are about to teach. See yourself standing, relaxed and confident, in front of smiling students.

You might even like to visit the room where you will conduct your first class. Have a good look around, stand at the front and imagine the students in front of you, pace around, sit down – if the room is free for a while, do some reading or go over some of the notes you have prepared for the class. Relax, it is only a room. If you will be using overhead projectors or other technology, familiarise yourself with it before the class to reduce anxious fumbling in front of the class that will only make you more nervous.

Breathe deeply and slowly and carefully expel all the air from your lungs. This will provide much needed oxygen to your brain and you will need that organ to teach! Ensure you do not overdo the deep breathing and end up giddy! If you do feel dizzy, sit down and take a moment to recover.

Finally, go to the bathroom before the class – you may not feel you need to but once the class starts, you may change your mind. This also gives you an opportunity to check your appearance and reassure yourself that you look fine.

Remind yourself that you were employed to lecture in this subject because somebody with authority thought you were good enough to do so. Remember when you were a student? You usually assumed that the person teaching had some idea of what they were doing; otherwise they wouldn’t have been employed. You probably didn’t even think about it.

Even if you feel temporarily that you do not know enough about the subject or topic, the students will have faith in you and your ability just because you are there. They will assume that you know what you are doing. Your students are unlikely to be watching you as closely as you are watching yourself – relax. If they are first year students, they may even be more nervous than you! Feel better? Good. Now remember to assure your students that you intend to have a great semester with them.
What if I don’t know the answer to a question?
Every lecturer has been asked many questions to which they do not know the answers. Try the following:
- Acknowledge that the question is a good one: smile and say, “Great question”.
- Be honest – tell them that you do not know the answer: “I’m not sure about the answer to this one but will follow up for you”.
- Ask the other students for input: “Does anyone here know the answer?”.
- Offer to find out the answer for next week: “I’ll dig around and let you know next week”.
- Suggest that both you and the students find the answer: “Let’s all find out the answer to that question. We’ll pool our answers at the beginning of next week and see what we come up with”.
- Ensure you do attend to the question the following week.
- Make the point that many academic questions don’t have satisfactory answers and that this is what makes academic work interesting, exciting and challenging. This is also why academic work is important, and students can be part of this process of discovery.

What if no-one does any preparation?
You should not expect every student (or even most students) to do all the required preparation every week but you can set an expectation that they will do, for example, some preparation most weeks. You might even set up a roster where specific students do the reading or preparation on certain weeks and not others and this is rotated so that everyone gets turns and breaks. Those who have undertaken preparation must then summarise the materials and present it in some manner to the other students.

Alternatively, you can explain that if some students choose to do little or no work between classes, they are likely to both learn less and do more poorly in assessment tasks than their colleagues. Ask them to commit to undertaking one hour of reading/ preparation between this week and next so that the class can discuss/work on that material.

Ultimately, the responsibility for student learning lies with the student. As the lecturer, your responsibilities are to: prepare and facilitate the best classes you possibly can; provide engaging and interesting activities in lectures; answer questions; provide feedback; and point students to useful references and other resources. A student’s responsibilities are to: prepare for classes; participate actively in them; and reflect on and study the material provided for them. You cannot make a student prepare – you can only do your
best to encourage them to do so. However, it is important not to punish those students who have not made the effort to do the preparation by simply going through the material again. This wastes the time of those who have prepared and will create a hostile atmosphere.

**What if one student dominates?**

Having one student who has an answer to nearly every question (even if it is not a very good answer) and who is keen to share their wisdom with others is sometimes a challenge for lecturers. One subtle method of discouraging too many contributions from just one student is to stand or sit beside or behind the person, and thereby make it difficult for them to make eye contact with you or otherwise indicate that they want to speak. Another method is to directly ask another student for a contribution when seeking student input. Sometimes a more direct approach is needed:

> “Thanks Derek, you’ve made a couple of very valuable contributions already, could we hear from someone we haven’t heard from yet?”
> “Does anyone besides Melissa have a comment to make at this point?”

Ensure you are polite and respectful and do not embarrass the dominant student – they are often unaware of their dominating behaviour.

In the case of really aggressive students, you can use the drastic solution of appealing to the group to help subdue someone or pass them on to another lecture. These, however, are solutions of last resort. Try not to react defensively. Build on an aggressive student’s contribution where you can, so that you do not risk stifling discussion. You may ask other students to react to an assertion or criticism, for example.

If there is a small group that dominates in some way, seek to break this up, for example, by spending part of the lecture in small group work. Try to involve the others in the discussion by putting value on their contributions.

**What if the students won’t participate?**

Student non-participation can turn the best-planned lecture into a non-event. Preparation and setting expectations are important here. Ensure you have a balanced mix of student activities and talking head (yours) so that the lecture does not become a one-way communication where students adopt a passive approach.
Many students are shy or passive. Try to pitch questions at a medium level so that all will be able to answer. Reassure the shy students that you value what they are saying by concentrating carefully on it, showing by your demeanour that you are listening, and using their ideas or phrases in the next question. Empower the passive student by building their confidence: keep openings for them, use other people’s opinions to give a lead, ask an easy question to encourage them to continue once they have spoken.

You might use aids such as a quotation, or extract from an article or a text to help passive students contribute by having something in front of them. Or you might ask them to give a small précis of a text, which is less intimidating than requiring an opinion. Very often students, particularly at first-year level, read passively and have difficulty translating their reading to the active plane. They have read the material but cannot find the words to say something. Suggest that they jot a few headings down before each lecture that will help their recall with the reading. Ask them to consider how they approach their reading. Do they approach it with a question? What were they looking for? Remind them to highlight key points and take notes. Suggest that they read twice, skimming the first time, concentrating the second.

What if international students do not contribute?
Sometimes international students and/or English as a Second Language (ESL) students are reluctant to speak because they fear their language or accent will lead them to be misunderstood or laughed at. Encourage all students to contribute through the ground rules and expectations you set. Ensure you learn your students’ names and gently ask individual students for their opinion or contribution:

“Henry, what do you think of this issue?”
“Mai, what is your view on what Naomi has just said?”
Alternatively ask general questions to the group that the international students may be better able to answer:
“Can anyone give an example from another country or culture of where this concept applies?”
“Does anyone know of a country where this does not happen?”

Ensure you thank all (international, ESL and Australian) students for their input.

What if a student says something offensive?
This is best avoided by including something in your ground rules or expectations that proactively discourage such contributions. However, if a student does say something offensive, the best thing
to do in this situation is to immediately make a statement that indicates you will not tolerate such comments. You must ensure that you do not engage in a debate with the student who has been offensive or in any other way that might further inflame the situation. Be polite but firm. Try something like:

“While you are entitled to your opinion, I cannot allow comments like that in this class as some people find them offensive. Please respect the views of all students when you make a comment.”

Move on quickly. If the student protests, tell them that you are happy to discuss this situation further after class but that you do not want to take class time away from his/her fellow students. Generally, such occurrences are very rare but it is best to be prepared in case you are confronted by one.

How do I know the students are following what I am saying?
The simple answer to this question is: ask the students if they understand. However, as is the case with all seemingly simple answers, it is a little more complex than it seems. If you ask students bluntly, “Do you understand?”, you are likely to get polite nods, silence and averted eyes. Many students will not have the courage to tell you they have no idea what you have been talking about for the last 10 minutes, or for the last three weeks. Try these instead (and note that these all assume the students won’t understand):

• “This is complex. What are your questions so far?”
• “OK, that’s enough from me for now. Tell me what you are unclear about and we’ll go over it before we move on.”
• “Most people find this concept difficult. Quickly write a question on a scrap of paper and throw it into this box. I’ll pick a few out and we’ll answer them together.”
• At the end of a class: “This was difficult material. Take a scrap of paper and write down the point you are most unclear about. We’ll deal with these in next week’s class”.
• Show that you too are struggling with an idea (even if it is, in reality, perfectly clear). Engage them in the process of assisting you. “I don’t get it! Why is this the right answer?” Feigning lack of understanding makes them see that even those higher than them are learning too.

What if all the materials are covered and I have time to spare?
• Ask the students whether they have any questions. If they do, seek answers from the class, do not feel that you have to answer.
• You might review a difficult part of the topic.
- You could give them a quick quiz. For example you could go round the class asking each student to state one puzzle or question which they still have about the lecture. But whatever you do it is very important not to finish any lecture too early.

**If I decided to include small group work in lectures, what if I run out of time for all the groups to report back?**

With a bit of experience, this probably will not happen. Divide the tasks up between groups to ensure complex tasks are shared equally. It is important that all of the tasks given in a lecture are covered. Some general advice:

- Push the students to complete tasks. “You now have 10 minutes left”, “Five minutes to go”, “I must have all work finished in two minutes. Make sure that every question is answered, even if only in dot points”. Walk around the room assisting and exerting subtle pressure.

- Set manageable tasks. It is important that students have a sense of accomplishment at each lecture, and not a sense of being overwhelmed with the complexity of something. Bite-sized, incremental steps in their learning is critical. If you are finding that the task you set is proving too hard, change tack: “OK, I want everyone to concentrate only on problem three for now. We will do the rest later”.

- Ask them to divide up tasks within their groups: Person A answers the first part, Person B the second, etc. This can even be done with writing tasks: Person A completes a paragraph or two on the first part of the question, Person B edits and revises Person A’s work; Person C drafts a paragraph for the second part, and so on.

**A final word**

It is unusual for a first lecture to go perfectly. More likely, your first lecturing experience will be a mixture of successes and imperfections that will improve with practice.

Becoming an excellent lecturer takes time. It also takes an individual commitment to engage in a continuous process of reflection, refinement and improvement. Successful university teachers will tell you that the rewards of teaching make this commitment worthwhile.
References and Resources


Much of the material in this booklet has been adapted from: Devlin, M. (2003). Teaching for the First Time. Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia