

# First Day of Class Activities that Create a Climate for Learning

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There's no discounting the importance of the first day of class. What happens that day sets the tone for the rest of the course. Outlined below are a few novel activities for using that first day of class to emphasize the importance of learning and the responsibility students share for shaping the classroom environment.

**Best and Worst Classes** – I love this quick and easy activity. On one section of the blackboard I write: “The best class I’ve ever had” and underneath it “What the teacher did” and below that “What the students did.” On another section I write “The worst class I’ve ever had” (well, actually I write, “The class from hell”) and then the same two items beneath. I ask students to share their experiences, without naming the course, department or teacher, and I begin filling in the grid based on what they call out. If there’s a lull or not many comments about what the students did in these classes, I add some descriptors based on my experience with some of my best and worst classes. In 10 minutes or less, two very different class portraits emerge. I move to the best class section of the board and tell students that this is the class I want to teach, but I can’t do it alone. Together we have the power to make this one of those “best class” experiences.

**First Day Graffiti** – This is an adaptation of an activity proposed by Barbara Goza in the *Journal of Management Education* in 1993. Flip charts with markers beneath are placed around the classroom. Each chart has a different sentence stem. Here are a few examples:

“I learn best in classes where the teacher \_\_\_\_”

“Students in courses help me learn when they \_\_\_\_”

“I am most likely to participate in classes when \_\_\_\_”

“Here’s something that makes it hard to learn in a course: \_\_\_\_”

“Here’s something that makes it easy to learn in a course: \_\_\_\_”

Students are invited to walk around the room and write responses, chatting with each other and the teacher as they do. After there are comments on every flip chart, the teacher walks to each one and talks a bit about one or two of the responses. If you run out of time, you can conduct the debriefing during the next session.

**Syllabus Speed Dating** – Karen Eifler, an education professor at the University of Portland, designed this activity. Two rows of chairs face each other (multiple rows of two can be used in larger classes). Students sit across from each other, each with a copy of the syllabus that they’ve briefly reviewed. Eifler asks two questions: one about something in the syllabus and one of a more personal nature. The pair has a short period of time to answer both questions. Eifler checks to make sure the syllabus question has been answered correctly. Then students in one of the rows move down one seat and Eifler asks the new pair two different questions. Not only does this activity get students acquainted with each other, it’s a great way to get them reading the syllabus and finding out for themselves what they need to know about the course.

**Irritating Behaviors: Theirs and Ours** – This activity grows out of research done by Drew Appleby in 1990 ( *The Journal of Staff, Program and Organizational Development*). His findings are a bit dated now, but the idea is not. Appleton asked students to list faculty behaviors that most irritate them. He had faculty do the same for student behaviors. I’d put students in groups and have them respond to a slightly different question: “What are the five things faculty do that make learning hard?” Or, asked positively, “What are the five things faculty do that make it easy to learn?” Collect the lists and make a master list to share in class or online. Below the five things faculty do, you can also list the five things students do that make it hard or easy to teach. The follow-up conversation is about how the teacher and students can each commit to not doing what appears on their respective “hard” list and have a better class experience as a result.

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- [Five Things to Do on the First Day of Class](#)
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