First Day, First Impressions: Orientation Seminar

“Above all, love your subject, love your job (teaching is the greatest job in the world), and make sure you convey that love and enthusiasm to the students in the classroom.”
~ Professor Michael Altschul, History

Seminar Description

This seminar will assist you in transitioning into your role as a graduate Teaching Assistant (TA) at Case Western Reserve University. We will discuss strategies for approaching the first few days with your students, review upcoming TA training opportunities, and learn about the University’s undergraduate student population.

Seminar Objectives

- To learn about UNIV 400A/B/C training
- To sign up international students for the Spoken English placement test
- To meet the Mentor TA team
- To discuss strategies for setting positive first impressions as graduate students and grading assistants
- To learn about specific student constituencies, i.e. international undergraduates and students with disabilities
- To learn about the demographic snapshot of the first-year students
- To be introduced to aspects of Cleveland living
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Overcoming First-Day Jitters

It is the first day of class. Are you nervous? Do not be afraid to admit it if you are. Remember that the students may also be nervous. The first day might be the one day you can guarantee that everyone sitting in the classroom is attentive and motivated. Recognize that this heightened tension gives you an opportunity—and take advantage of it. Below are some suggestions for calming yourself down.

- **Concentrate on your students and on the subject.** If you focus on the fact that you are nervous, you will stay nervous; if you turn your attention to more important matters, you may forget your apprehension.

- **Prepare yourself ahead of time.** Teaching is a kind of performance, and any performance benefits from rehearsal. Visit the classroom ahead of time. Make notes of what you want to say and go over them so nothing is forgotten. By practicing, you will make the events of the first class more familiar and less intimidating. Arrive at the classroom early to write necessary information on the board and to arrange desks as you want them when students start arriving.

- **Ensure that you are ready physically.** Get plenty of sleep the night before. As you walk to class, take deep breaths to eliminate tension. The more relaxed your body is, the more relaxed your mind will be. Remember to smile!

Making a Good First Impression

You may not be able to control what your students want out of your class or what your classroom looks like, or even what textbook you get to use. But you do have control over the first impression you give students. Within about the first seven seconds of your class, your students will form their impressions of you and your course.

- **Show that you are organized.** Fumbling for papers, losing your place in your announcements, and flubbing important details may only be the result of nervousness, but students may uncharitably think you do not know what you are doing. Allow yourself plenty of time before class to get papers and any details in order. Do not rely on your memory for everything you want to announce; write a list.

- **Decide how you want to be addressed by your students.** You may wish to begin with a more formal title, Ms., Mr., etc. You should also check to see how other TAs are addressed in your department.
• **Be yourself.** Do not let your preparation extend to planning the persona you project in the classroom. It is better for students to start out dealing with the real you. You can be approachable without being everyone’s best friend; decide where along the spectrum you feel the most comfortable.

• **Come in really ready for this class.** You are pursuing your academic discipline for a reason; let that reason govern your attitude, not the fact that you are overwhelmed with new projects or that you hate having to walk halfway across campus to find your classroom. Your enthusiasm may inspire students; your disinterest is guaranteed to turn them off. Furthermore, if you have assigned reading prior to the first day of class, be sure you have reviewed the material thoroughly.

• **Err on the side of firmness rather than laxity when it comes to course policies.** As you explain your attendance or grading policy, do not start qualifying everything with the kinds of exceptions you are willing to make. Start out being fair but firm, and students should rise to your standards. It is much easier to ease up a little when a student comes to you late in the semester with a real problem than it is to tighten up your expectations when students seem to be taking it easy in your course. As a side note, if students ask that you give them an extension on an assignment for personal reasons, ask them to speak with you privately during office hours rather than negotiating this extension in public.

**Introducing the Course to Students**

Ideally, students already have some idea of what the course will be like, or they would not have registered for it in the first place. But that does not mean they share your sense of what will happen or even have an accurate picture of what to expect over the semester. You will need to give an overview of the semester so that students know what to expect and are motivated to participate and learn. Take this opportunity to introduce your discipline, to highlight little-known facts about your subject, or to preview interesting class assignments.

The **business of the course**

On the first day, you will need to cover the following details. Most of them are probably included in your syllabus, but it cannot hurt to review them to make absolutely sure nothing is overlooked or misunderstood.

• **Introduce yourself.** State your name; spell it out on the chalkboard; explain how to pronounce it if it is difficult. Tell students how you prefer to be addressed.

• **Tell students where they can find you, and when.** Where is your office? What is your office phone number? Can students call you at home? What is your email
address? Attention to these details shows that you are approachable and that you want students to get in touch with you.

- **Get to know your students.** Have them tell you something about themselves. Make sure you know how to pronounce their names and whether anyone prefers to be called by a nickname; then practice calling students by name. You can also have students fill out an information sheet and use this to help familiarize yourself with their personalities and interests outside of classes. Engage your students in some sort of discussion. Studies show that students who do not speak during the first two weeks of class may not speak in class the entire semester. If you have access to the official roster on SIS, many, if not all, of your students’ pictures will be on the roster. Use this roster prior to the first week of classes to familiarize yourself with your class.

- **Distribute your syllabus and review it.** Explain any policies for attendance, grading, or deadlines. Go over the schedule of readings and assignments, and point out deadlines and special dates. Make sure everything is clearly explained.

- **Preview course materials.** Tell students where to find the text. Bring in a copy and show it to them; this strategy highlights the importance of your course reading assignments. Explain whether copies are in the bookstore, on reserve at the library, or available via photocopies in class.

- **Demonstrate Blackboard.** If you are using Blackboard this semester for distributing readings, collecting and returning homework and papers, and/or posting grades, do not assume that every student knows how to use Blackboard. Demonstrate how to log on and use this instructional tool.

- **Ask if there are any questions.** Wait a few minutes before moving on to your next activity. Treat all questions with respect; even questions that seem silly to you may pose a real quandary to someone else. Your students are watching to see how you will handle questions. Your initial response will determine your students’ level of response in the rest of your classes.

The fun part of the course

Once you have reviewed the syllabus and other such details, you should still have a significant amount of time left. Use the time wisely to set the tone for the rest of the semester. Do not be tempted to release class early; students will feel that class time is not important. Instead, consider the following activities to round out your first day.

- **Consider using an icebreaker activity if your class has no more than 25 students.** Students will do the icebreaker as long as you model it first. Often, you can find an
activity or create an activity that relates to your course content. Then, you can use the icebreaker both to launch a discussion of a course topic or theme. Suggested icebreaker activities appear later in this document.

- **Teach a real class.** Prepare a short introductory lecture, exercise, or discussion to get into the subject matter. Choose material that allows interaction so students can actually get involved. After all, they are in your classroom because of some degree of interest in the subject; take advantage of that preliminary interest to draw them in even further.

- **Start motivating students immediately.** Students are motivated to perform well in a course when they have a clear sense of how the course relates to them personally. They will maintain motivation if they experience success. This concept is important to remember. Finally, students must feel that the time spent on the course is worth it. You may devise some sort of class activity that taps into what students may already know about the course content. For example, you may ask them to respond to a short piece of text, a problem, a controversial topic, or an issue that allows students to connect what they already know with some information that serves as an entry point to the course.

- **Explain the relationships among class activities, homework assignments, quizzes, and exams.** Even your most talented students, especially if they are first-year students, may expect that much of their learning will take place in class and/or that you or the faculty member will tell them what is important to learn. If the weekly assignments are long and/or no mention is made of the material in class, students may quickly become discouraged. They may attempt to read all of the assignments with the same level of intensity and feel overwhelmed. Or they may read just before the exam. Therefore, you should offer some guidelines for how to approach the reading assignments including these suggestions:

- **Ask for feedback at the end of your first class.** Use a one-minute paper, which is an informal assessment process. You can ask three questions: What went well? What did not go well? What can be enhanced? You can use these questions or some variation periodically throughout the semester or even every day. For instance, you can ask students to write down any lingering questions they may have about the material you are currently covering. Or you can ask them to write a brief summary of the main points covered that day in class. Both will help you as you plan the next class. The key, however, is to address issues so the students see that you are listening to their feedback. You do not need to follow their suggestions, but you can spend a few minutes giving your response. For instance, your students may tell you that they did not like weekly quizzes. In your next class, take a few moments to
review why you feel weekly quizzes will help your students master the course content.

- **Consider these three aspects of student motivation from the very first day of class:** be clear about the value of this class for students, show that you expect them to succeed, and demonstrate how their performance will be rewarded.

**The problem of drop/add**

Of course, no matter what you do on the first day, you will have to consider the influence that the two-week drop/add period has on all classes. In many courses, students will be shopping around and may appear or disappear unpredictably. In other cases, students have encountered delays in resolving financial issues or getting permits to take your class, or they are waiting for spaces to open and may arrive a day or two late.

Do not let your first classes be held hostage to this unpredictability. Otherwise, you will lose people who think your course will never get going. Start teaching and assigning homework. However, do not steamroller through those first days, either. Be prepared to catch-up latecomers as much as reasonably possible on the material that they missed during the drop/add period. Do not spend time reviewing for those who have entered the class later than the first day of class. Instead, ask students to stay after class or to come to your office hours to review the syllabus and go over the details of the semester.

**Icebreakers**

You may scoff at the idea of using icebreakers or activities to introduce the members of your class to each other and to you. Perhaps it sounds too silly for a serious academic class at Case Western Reserve University. You may worry that your students will not take you seriously if you refrain from launching into a complicated lecture the first day of class. Or you may think that the students—particularly the first-year students—have already had enough icebreakers during orientation.

However, you can use an icebreaker to do just what the name implies—break the silence that is always there when you begin a new class. Your objective the first day of class is to have everyone say something. If students fall into the habit of not talking in class, even the first day of class, they may remain silent for the rest of the semester. If you have a small enough class (about 25 students or less), you also want everyone (including you) to learn everyone’s name. That takes a while to do. But try to have their names mastered by the end of the first week of class.

Whatever icebreaker you decide to use, ask students to say the name that they would like to be called at the beginning of their response. Be sure that everyone can hear the responses. You may want to respond with a comment back to each response if there is enough time.
You can be as serious or as whimsical as you like when creating an icebreaker. But the key is to model the icebreaker by going first. Then allow students to decide the order that they would like to go when they are responding. Some students may need more time to determine their response. It is all right to skip a student and come back to that person at the end.

**Suggestions for icebreakers**

You can rely on the old standard icebreaker of pairing students to first introduce themselves to each other and then to the larger group. However, why not be original and create an icebreaker that relates to the course or to the content that you are presenting the first day or first week? For instance, if you are teaching a writing class, you might ask students to describe the type of books they like to read and their feelings about writing. If you are supervising a chemistry lab, you might ask students to describe their previous experiences in a laboratory. The information your students provide during an icebreaker may help you to understand their background and perceptions of the course. While students respond, record their names and a brief comment about what they said. Study this information to demonstrate you know their names by the next class session.

**Learning students’ names**

To help learn students’ names, ask then to complete “name tents” (sheets of notebook or printer paper folded as if it is about to be placed into an envelope, with names clearly printed on one side) for the first week if the class or lab is small enough. Bring paper to class in case they come without paper the first day. You can either collect the name tents after class or ask the students to bring them to the next class. By the end of the first week, you should know the students’ names.
Additional Resources

Print


Electronic
