

Meeting Your First Class

John Quackenbush

During your first class meeting, you may not have very many things to discuss with your students, however, you should still meet with them to introduce yourself and to take care of some important business. What follows are some (hopefully) helpful hints which will help you get ready for that first meeting.

I've based these notes on my experience as a TA in the Physics Department where I've taught both discussion sections and labs. While all my suggestions may not apply to your particular situation, I think you may find a few useful ideas here.

0. Before the First Class

Teaching a class is just like skydiving. Skydiving is exciting, invigorating, and entirely survivable, but it's a good idea to check and make sure you've got your 'chute on before you get in the airplane. The most important thing to remember is to be prepared. The same thing applies to meeting your first class. The best way to ensure success during your first class meeting is to be well prepared. With that in mind, you should begin to get ready *before* the day of your first class.

1. Get in touch with the course instructor before you meet with your class. There are a number of things which you should discuss. This is the time for you to discuss the course mechanics and for you to get to know each other. Among the things which you should think about discussing are

- Office Hours - It is important that he know your office location, office extension, and office hours (if you know what they will

be) so that he can include them in his syllabus. It's also a good idea for you to get this information from him so that you can have it handy in case the students ask you. As a rough guide for planing your office hours, you should have one "base" hour plus one additional hour for each 30 - 50 students. It is often a good idea to schedule at least one hour on the day before the homework is due.

- Weekly Meetings – It's useful to arrange to meet with the course instructor at least once each week so that you can keep up with the course (which is imperative if you want to be a successful TA). Some instructors and departments require that the TA's attend the course lectures. Now's the time to find out if this applies to you.
 - Policy – Find out what the course policy is regarding homework collection, late homework sets, grading, homework solutions and returning homework. In some courses you may be responsible for writing solutions, while in others you may share this responsibility with other TA's. Some courses will require that you grade the assignments and in others, there is a "reader" assigned to grade the problems. It's also useful to know if homework solutions are to be distributed to the students or if they will be posted – this is something the students' enquiring minds will want to know.
 - Syllabus – Get a copy of the course syllabus, read it over, and note when the exams are to be given. Most syllabi contain information about how the course grades will be assigned. Even if you don't get a syllabus, find out about these things. I guarantee that the students will ask you about them. Often more than once.
2. Get any supplies which you may need for your course. You should get a copy of the course texts, pens and paper (which most departments supply to TA's), gradebooks, lab notes, and course lecture notes if they are available. It's also good to find out how to get materials xeroxed for the course.
 3. Meet with other TA's in the course and those who have taught the

course in the past. They are an excellent resource and they can give you a lot of useful insight into managing your TA job.

4. Find out the enrollment procedures for the course and for your department. Some courses allow TA's to sign PTE's (permission to enroll slips) while others do not. If in doubt, do not sign a slip for a student as it may bump someone else off the wait list.
5. Find the room where your section will meet and look the room over. You want to feel comfortable there and it helps you prepare for your class if you know what the room looks like. Often you have to tailor your presentation to fit the room.
6. Think about writing up a short handout to give the students during your first meeting. That way you can summarize the information you've amassed during your preparation. You'll probably want to give them this information anyway, and this way you know that they have it. (A word of caution: some people will advise you to give the students your home phone number. I'd advise you not to.)
7. Like any class meeting, the first meeting requires that you prepare, so plan what you're going to discuss and how you are going to present it.

1. The First Day of Class

If you've prepared for the first day, you're ready to enjoy meeting your class and getting to know your students. Personally, I like to arrive early and wait outside or in the back of the room so that I can see the students before they know that I'm the TA. It lets me get an idea of what the students are like before I have to face them as a group.

A few minutes before the class is scheduled to begin, get up and get organized. Set your things out and start to organize your thoughts. I usually give the stragglers a few extra minutes on the first day so that I don't

have to repeat myself. While you're waiting, look around the classroom and make eye contact with some students. Try to project an image of being relaxed, confident, and in control. When you think its time, take a deep breath and begin.

1. Introduce yourself. Let the students know who you are, where you're from, what you do, and let them know that you're a student. It helps them to relate to you, and it makes it easier to relate to them because it breaks down some of the barriers. If I'm teaching a lab or a small class, I often ask the students to introduce themselves. If it's a lab class and they don't know each other, it helps them to find lab partners.
2. Once you know each other, you can get to the meat of the first class. Begin with your office location and office hours. Then discuss the mechanics of the course. Tell them if they will be required to attend your section, tell them how their grade will be decided, explain the homework policy. These are the type of things which you would include on a handout if you were to prepare one, and you should discuss them whether or not you decide to give them a handout.
3. Discuss the objectives of your class and give them your perspective on the course material. This is your first opportunity to motivate them, so use it to get the ball rolling. Encourage them to get involved - ask them what they think they'll get out of the course.
4. Encourage them to ask questions. Ask them if there is anything which was presented in class which they'd like you to discuss. You may wish to begin discussing some of the course material, especially if the course instructor has already lectured. If you plan to do this, you should prepare a brief presentation beforehand. Nothing impresses them more than a well prepared TA.
5. Dismiss them by encouraging them to be ready for the next class meeting. Be sure to wait around for a few minutes to answer any questions the students may have. You'll almost always have students who were too intimidated to ask during class, so try to handle their questions tactfully and encourage them to speak up in class.

2. Be All That You Can Be

All of the ingredients which go into making a good first class meeting are those which are necessary for being a good Teacher: being well prepared, organized, and *being yourself*. Everyone who teaches does it differently - there are no right or wrong approaches. However, some work better than others. The best way to decide what approach you should take is to think about the teachers who you've had in the past who were good, and try to decide what made them good. I think what you'll find is the good teachers were those who were open and accessible and who were themselves. Your favorite teacher may have been funny, but if that isn't you, don't try to be funny. The one thing you will find, however, is that students prefer real people that they can relate to rather than to stuffy academics. Here are some things you should keep in mind:

1. Show enthusiasm for the course. If you seem interested and excited, chances are the students will get interested and excited.
2. Encourage participation, but don't be afraid to let them know who is in charge. Occasionally, you'll get a smart aleck student, and you have to be prepared to deal with them tactfully. If you come off as too harsh, you may discourage legitimate questions.
3. Remember that you are not only a teacher, but also a student. It's a good idea to remind them of that, because it makes it easier for them to relate to you, but it also lets them know that there are times when you have to do your own work.
4. Don't be afraid to say "I don't know" if they ask you a question for which you don't have an answer. It's much better to be honest than to have to correct yourself later. They really will not lose respect for you if you are not omniscient. If you don't have an instant answer for them, take a minute to think or buy time by asking the class "Well, how would you approach this problem?" or something along those lines. Often students will even be able to help you get started, and it makes both of you feel good.

5. For some reason, students don't trust first time TA's, so don't volunteer this information. But if they happen to ask, answer them directly and positively. Tell them that you're looking forward to the experience and tell them that they can help you out by providing constructive feedback.
6. Don't worry about being nervous, everyone who steps in front of a class is nervous. But believe it or not, it will pass, and you can start to ...
7. **Have Fun! This is it! Be proud that you're contributing to another's education! Exercise your fantasies! This may be the only chance you have to be the star before a captive audience, so enjoy it.**

I hope that this guide will provide with some hints that will make your first class meeting easier. Don't forget that the other TA's in your department can also provide you with tips to make your TA experience easier and more enjoyable. All and all, the best advice that I can give you is to be yourself and to be prepared.

Good Luck!