

First Day Practices for Teaching Assistants: Building an Inclusive Learning Community from Day One

Originally authored by Charlotte Hull and Paul Nauert. Modified by Melissa E. Ko (mesako@stanford.edu). This is a product of VPTL's Identity in the Classroom Learning Community (ICLC) 2017.

Why Does the First Day Matter?

Research shows that first impressions matter (Ambady, Nalini, and Skowronski, 2008). For teachers, the first day of class offers an opportunity to make first impressions and begin building the learning community you aim to cultivate over the duration of the quarter. The way a teacher conducts the first day of class can set the tone for the entire quarter. This checklist outlines strategies for how a teaching assistant can intentionally build an inclusive learning community that affirms the backgrounds, experiences, and goals of all students. This list is not exhaustive, but rather can serve as a starting point as you plan your first day of teaching at Stanford.

Preparation Before Day One:

- Meet with faculty and other TAs: agree on course goals, assessment, teaching philosophy, and responsibilities of TAs. Set up routine meetings to stay aligned.
- Plan your learning goals for section: be prepared to share these with students.
- Develop your section syllabus: align to your learning goals.
- Determine how you will present the actual syllabus document (e.g. hand it to students, project it and go through it line-by-line).
- Visit the room before class and think about how you want to design the space (consider seating arrangements and make sure you know how to use the technology).
- Think through the materials you need and bring extras (e.g. dry erase markers, adaptors for your laptop to connect to A/V, a timekeeper that is not a phone).
- Print out student roster with photos and familiarize yourself with their names. Think through a memorization strategy if you have trouble remembering faces/names.
- Know how much time you have for section and budget time in your lesson accordingly: try not to rush or overwhelm students.

Day of First Class Meeting:

- ❑ Arrive early and arrange the space. Greet and engage with students before class starts.
- ❑ Pass out name cards and markers for students to write their names and pronouns: collect them and bring each time you teach. Name cards help everyone to remember each other's names to foster a closer community.
- ❑ Introduce yourself: share a little about how you connect to the course so students can get to know you as the instructor. Share some personal background if you are comfortable doing so.
- ❑ Facilitate introductions: ask for gender pronouns, but give students a chance to opt-out. Consider different approaches than self-introduction (e.g. introducing your neighbor).
- ❑ Consider having students write out a response to a short, thought-provoking question on the subject matter or their learning goals (e.g. "What do we gain from studying history?" or "What learning goals do you have for yourself this quarter?"). Explain that responses will be used to structure your teaching and will not be shared or graded.
- ❑ Present the learning goals for the course.
- ❑ Present the syllabus: include clear guidance on class logistics and expectations (e.g. when we meet, when the deadlines are, what to bring, technology policy).
- ❑ Define the roles of the professor and TAs in the class (e.g. who the students should approach for what sorts of questions). Be explicit about how students can access your support as a TA (e.g. your office hours, response times to emails).
- ❑ Discuss clearly how students will be graded and assessed.
- ❑ Clarify what participation means in your section: keep in mind varying levels of comfort with public speaking as you build the classroom culture.
- ❑ Point out the process for disability accommodation requests. At Stanford, refer to the Office of Accessible Education's website: <https://oae.stanford.edu/>.
- ❑ Consider having students brainstorm community agreements (sometimes called "learning agreements") about classroom and discussion norms: base these on the goals that you have presented for the class. You can read more about community / learning agreements in a higher education context at: www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/applying-learning-agreements-in-the-classroom/.

After the First Class:

- ❑ On the second meeting: consider recapping the main themes of the first day for new students. This recap can be a useful reminder for students who were present.