What Works for Me
First-Day Class Activities

Introduction from the Guest Editor

From the time we are small, we're told that first impressions count. Many of us tell our students that the title page of a paper is important because it’s the first thing the reader sees. As teachers, we try to model in the classroom what we expect of the students; when they're writing, we write. If they’re doing group work, we also participate. If they’re revising, we bring in a piece we’re in the process of revising. Much of this modeling, though, occurs exclusive of the first day of class. On that first day, our goal may be to provide an overview of the class and distribute the syllabus and policy handouts. Some of our colleagues, however, begin modeling from the first day; they design a first or second day of class activity that sets the tone and establishes the framework for the course throughout the semester. In this focused What Works for Me section, some colleagues share those initial activities.

Judy A. Pearce, Guest Editor
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Setting Standards: Thinking Critically from Day One

The infusion of critical thinking skills into literature and composition classes is a constant concern for faculty members. We can begin to infuse these skills on the first day of class by having students set the standards for their academic and behavioral performance in the classroom.

On the first day, faculty traditionally inform students of the “rules” such as attendance policies and late paper penalties. With fewer students being aware of proper behavior in the college classroom, many of us have also had to set student guidelines about talking in class, leaving the room during class, being disrespectful to others who are speaking, and so forth.

Critical thinkers know that making value judgments requires a set of standards or criteria. By having students set their own standards on the first day of class, they not
only are more compelled to follow the standards, they begin to take ownership of the course. The tone set by the faculty member is not totalitarian but democratic.

Perhaps not surprisingly, students set standards that are as structured and comprehensive as those of the faculty. To accomplish this exercise, simply list the basic categories on the board. For example, write “Late paper standards,” and ask students to volunteer suggestions. Write all suggestions down, and then have students discuss the options and vote on which standards the class will adopt. During the “consensus” discussion period, students also practice the critical thinking skill of developing an argument. Later, type up the standards, photo copy them, and pass them out the next day. Both faculty and students can benefit from this simple critical thinking exercise.

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First Class Day Activities

I make sure that I’m in the room before the students on the first class day. As they enter, I engage them in conversation to help diffuse first-day jitters. I start the class by writing the popular quote “I write; therefore, I am” on the board and asking the students to write down what the quote means to them. After five minutes, they group into threes and introduce themselves. Next, they pass their papers clockwise, read the response, and write a response to it. Then they again exchange papers, read both responses, then respond to both. After this, they discuss the responses within their groups; then we discuss them as a class.

I explain that throughout the semester, we will read and respond to each other’s work. I then pass out a questionnaire requesting basic information; writing background; goals; what reading and writing skills they want to strengthen; and the question, What else would you like to tell me?

As they finish, I give them the syllabus, which they are to read and respond to by writing two questions for the next class. In the meantime, I use their completed questionnaires to help me determine their needs.

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The First-Day Interview

As teachers we are always thinking of ways for our students to get to know one another, especially on the first day of class. Interviewing one another seems to work best. Moreover, there are many interesting ways in which the information from these interviews can be presented to the rest of the class. Below are two of the ideas students have generated.
1. **About Me:** This activity consists of open-ended sentences which the students fill in with their own thoughts and experiences. Working in pairs, students read aloud their statement, and in response their partner reads his or her statement, resulting in an amazing constellation of two voices. Examples of open-ended sentences are:

   **Student A:**
   - It makes me happy ________
   - It makes me sad __________
   - I get nervous ____________
   - It makes me angry ________
   - I enjoy _________________

   **Student B:**
   - It makes me happy ________
   - It makes me sad __________
   - I get nervous ____________
   - It makes me angry ________
   - I enjoy _________________

2. **Acrostic:** Use the first letters of the person's name to describe the characteristics of that person:

   C  a charming girl I'd like to get to know better.
   H  happy-go-lucky personality from the first impression.
   E  eager to learn all about this class.
   R  really likes to read, but only romance novels.
   I  is involved in many activities including Student Gov't.
   E  eyes of blue that sparkle in the sun.

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**The Me-Bag: Beyond the Ice Breaker in First-Year Composition**

First day use of the simple Me-Bag exercise successfully sets the tone and quickly launches students and instructors into a serious writing course.

On the first day, I give an overview of the course, discuss the syllabus, and introduce the Me-Bag. Students are to prepare and present bags with six-twelve items symbolizing who and what they are, where they've been, and where they're going. I model the exercise, discussing the significance of items in my bag. During the next session, students sit in a circle and present their own bags.

Me-Bags successfully achieve multiple objectives. For students, the exercise:

- Quickly shapes apprehensive students into a cohesive class.
- Provides ready topics for two journal entries (Write about 1. a favorite item and 2. one striking item from another's bag).

More importantly for the instructor, Me-Bags:

- Set expectations for a serious writing course; everyone participates, and every student's voice is valuable in a community of writers.
- Give insight into students' interests and strengths, useful in shaping effective peer review groups.
• Provide quick entry to the first paper, a narrative focusing on overcoming personal challenges. Selecting items for Me-Bags strongly reinforces composing the “show, don’t tell” structure of the narrative assignment.

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Posing Problems in an American Literature Survey Course

This first-day activity is inspired by Ira Shor’s When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in the Classroom (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996). Shor initiates a similar first-day process in teaching composition.

Students in my courses are often new to a systematic study of American literature. Therefore, I present the following sequence of activities on the first day of class, in order to acquaint students with the problems posed and processes undertaken by scholars of American literature. In a brief introduction to the course and to the syllabus, I suggest that the study of American literature has changed significantly over the last quarter century; I also provide examples of especially important questions of canon formation. Then, I invite students to write on the following question: What is American literature? This question requires students to think about the special characteristics of American literature, such as multiculturalism and contact between the Old World and the New World.

Students discuss their responses in small groups. During small group discussion, I pose a second problem: what are good questions to ask about American literature? After small group discussion, the entire class reconvenes to compare responses. I take notes on this large group discussion, and transcribe questions raised by students.

For the second day of class, I write a memo based on the first day’s discussions, including the list of questions generated by students. We use the memo and questions as a point of departure for reading, writing, and discussion throughout the rest of the semester.

Susan Naomi Bernstein
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Integrating the Syllabus Review with a Writing Activity

Most of us who teach writing courses go over the syllabus and have a writing activity during the first class meeting. Integrating these two activities can be productive.

Before the syllabus review (immediately after taking roll for the first meeting), I ask students to spend five minutes writing about their expectations for the course—what they think we will be doing or not doing, what they hope or dread we will be doing. I tell them that they won’t have to read this piece aloud or hand it in for a grade, so they shouldn’t worry too much about how it sounds. Their main goal is to get information down on paper to help me understand their expectations. This informal writ-
ing activity is a precursor to the freewriting techniques that I introduce early in the course and use extensively.

After they have written their expectations, we go over the syllabus. I encourage the students to see how the activities outlined in the syllabus either match or don’t match their expectations, giving them a useful context within which to think about the syllabus.

Their written expectations also create a document that I can return to them on the last day of the course. With their written expectations as a guide, I ask students to think, write, and talk about the difference between who they were as writers at the beginning and end of the course. In a very real sense, I ask them to explore their overall learning (how they have changed as a result of a semester’s experience in the course).

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Call for Papers

The Conference on English Education’s (CEE’s) Commission on English Education and English Studies invites submissions for a proposed volume of essays on collaboration between English Education and English Studies. The collaboration might take a variety of forms—team teaching, program development, curricular partnerships, community literacy projects, professional development between two or more faculty members, or a combination of these. Submissions should not exceed 20 pages. Send two copies by August 31, 1998, to Deborah Appleman, Carleton College, Northfield, MN 55057. For additional information, contact either Deborah Appleman at dapplema@carleton.edu or Andrea Fishman at afishman@wcupa.edu.