

Better Beginnings

Strategies for the Start of the Semester

Shared in association with the “Why We Drop” Panel

**I AM 20 YEARS OLD AND I AM GOING TO
START COLLEGE FOR THE FIRST TIME**



**AND I AM LEGIT SCARED AND
NERVOUS**



The Very First Day

- Be early
- Play music
- Rethink the room set-up
- Greet and welcome students as they arrive; begin conversations; start making connections
- Do advance work on name pronunciations
- Be kind to those trying to add
- Be willing to share your story
- Demonstrate enthusiasm for the subject matter
- Save “going over the syllabus”
- Establish ground rules and norms in a fun way
- Engage students in discussion about the differences between high school and college learning
- Do an office, lab and/or bookstore “field trip”
- Lay off the PowerPoint!



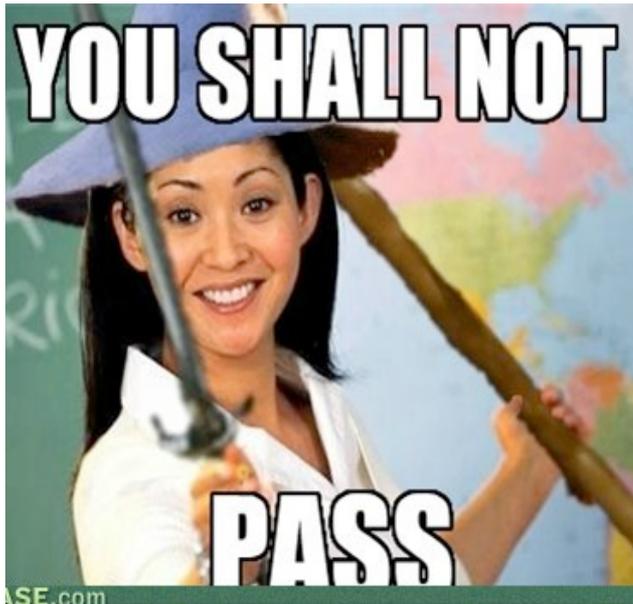


DEATH BY POWERPOINT



Potentially Problematic

- Trying to “scare away” mediocre students
- Making assumptions about students based on pre-existing biases or past experiences
- Emphasizing fear and punishments
- Coming across as aloof and inaccessible
- Thinking your class is the only thing of value going on in their lives
- Individually calling out students (for apparent differences, for being late)
- Letting students go early because there’s “nothing else to do” on the first day



Building Trust

- Increase trust, future communication, and commitment to the class

1. Ask each student to **take a selfie with you** on the first day and have them email it to you with a few other photos from their life so you can see their name and know them a bit better



2. Do a first-day **email reflection** by giving students a prompt asking them to email you about their thoughts about the first day of class (or “What are some challenges you think you might face this semester, if any?”). Respond to each email personally within 24 hours and encourage them to persist through any challenges. Offer support.

3. Have every student make a **5-minute office hour appointment** with you during the first two weeks of class in which you will give them a free pass to miss one day of class (rather than giving it away for free in your syllabus). Have a question jar on your desk with questions they can choose from if they don't have anything to ask you about when they arrive.

Building Community

- Icebreakers can build a sense of community, reduce anxiety
1. Ask students to **list their feelings** on the first day of school, put some of these responses on the board. Then ask them how they think the teacher feels on the first day. Put these responses in another column and compare the similarities. Then comment briefly on your feelings. Allow the students to ask questions about you. The responses can lead to an interesting revolution on stereotypes and the actual biography of the teacher.
 2. **Do a name recall** exercise (many are online)
 3. Do a **scavenger hunt**- get them out of the room, especially during the first 30 minutes while stragglers are coming in.
 4. What are other icebreakers you use?



Teaching “How to Student”



1. Teach students **how to take notes** and explain what they might use notes for later. Always give them a moment to photograph the board before you erase a section.
2. Teach students **how to be late** and **how to be absent**. Explain how to handle problems properly so they don't just disappear or avoid issues until they are un-fixable.
3. Talk openly about **how to study** and the time that is needed.
4. Provide samples or **format guides and web resources for writing assignments or presentations** with information about the Writing Center or other lab. Don't assume they can distinguish your idea of a “short essay” from a “journal entry,” “research paper,” or “report.”
5. Incentivize students to attend a **library resource workshop** and show students how to access library databases by logging in and doing practice searches.

Creating *Forward Action* Toward Success



Lee Jones from the University of Mississippi introduces his students to the text on the first day by having them **find an essential word in the first chapter** and count the number of times that it is used. He points out the power of repetition in the learning process and introduces them to the importance of action on their part in that learning process. This exercise introduces students to essential concepts in the course and gets them into the text right away.

How else do you get your students to take **forward action** toward success early in your class?



Sources/Resources:

- <http://adulthood.about.com/od/teachers/tp/Room-Setup-Options-for-the-Adult-Seminar-Classroom-or-Conference.htm>
- <http://www.4faculty.org/public/siteindex.htm>
- [Liesel Reinhart: LieselReinhart@mtsac.edu](mailto:LieselReinhart@mtsac.edu)