



**You are here:** ▶ University of Vienna (<http://www.univie.ac.at/en/>) ▶ Teaching Affairs and Student Services (<http://studien-service-lehrwesen.univie.ac.at/>) ▶ Center for Teaching and Learning (<http://ctl.univie.ac.at/>) ▶ Infopool besser lehren (/en/) ▶ Start Page (/en/start-page/) ▶ Teaching & Learning at the University (/en/start-page/teaching-learning-at-the-university/) ▶ First Class Meeting

## First Class Meeting

September 2018

### Overview

1. Goals and Topics during First Class Meetings
2. Final Preparations for Your First Class Meeting
3. Planning the First Minutes of Class
4. Course Information
5. Clarifying Organisational Matters & Work Modes
6. Approaching a Topic

*During each initial class session, the following two quotes may describe the key spectrum of the emotions teachers and students experience: "**Every beginning holds its own magic**" by Herman Hesse and "**Nip it in the bud!**" by Ovid.<sup>[1]</sup>*

The first session is often the beginning of an engagement with a new topic. At the same time, teachers and students convene bringing **prior experiences** of university-level teaching and learning that inform the **hopes and fears** for the coming semester. Moreover, for teachers and students, the beginning of the semester is often associated with **a lack of personal relationships**, since both groups may be meeting each other for the first time. For example, some teachers may feel disorientated when they are unable to figure out students' motivation level or prior knowledge.

Traditionally, first class sessions of the semester are usually shortened along the lines of, "lectio prima brevis est." If only organisational topics are touched upon during these first sessions, then the start of the semester is in danger of becoming associated with cumbersome information sessions. However, the first session holds the **potential** of **awaking students' interest** for a subject, **highlighting** topic **relevance**, and motivating active participation.

# 1. Goals and Topics during First Class Meetings

During the first class meeting, teachers usually take care of the following:

- **Determining participants:** Instructors determine which students participate in the class, particularly where course waiting lists are involved (see below).
- **Course information:** Instructors will inform students about the organisation of the course, learning objectives, topics and evaluation criteria (hand out course syllabi) (see below).
- **Stimulating enthusiasm and curiosity:** Students should leave the session with the impression of having embarked on an interesting and exciting journey. Teachers may achieve this goal by doing the following: (a) discussing in detail what students will learn, and (b) explaining why what they learn is relevant to them and what they are studying.
- **Establishing relationships and a positive working environment:** Getting to know one another encourages a positive working environment and the start of trusting relationships among students and with their teachers. These are important for the teaching and learning processes. Building a relationship between teachers and students can also include establishing how to properly address one another. Students getting to know one another encourages group formation.
- **Assessing prior knowledge & establishing expectations:** When planning lessons, teachers may have some assumptions about their future students. The first session is an opportunity to get to know your students on an academic level (i.e. their prior knowledge, previous experiences, interests and expectations). This information can be important when planning future lessons.
- **Group division and topic assignment:** If you require the same groups to work together for most of the semester, it is useful to divide the class into groups during the first or second session. The same applies to the assignment of presentation topics.

The number of objectives and topics to be discussed during the first session is manageable. This implies a certain **structure or sequence** that is **easy to plan** – even though teaching means, sometimes, dealing with unforeseeable events.

## Note:

Because of the relatively standardised character of these contents, first class sessions can also be prepared well in foreign languages.

## 2. Final Preparations for Your First Class Meeting

### Visit the classroom

We recommend visiting the classroom one week prior to the first session if you are unfamiliar with the class interior and location. It is important that you are aware of the space and seating arrangements (fixed or flexible seating) in order to plan your lesson. It is especially important for teachers who experience stage fright to visualise where the course lessons will take place in order to minimise any anxiety and instil a certain sense of **security**. This exercise provides a feel for the space and helps you think about where you place yourself (standing, sitting, or behind a podium), in the classroom, relative to your students during the first session. Take notice of the available equipment inside the classroom. Is there a **wall clock** within sight? Is there a **flipchart** with pens, a **computer**, a **whiteboard** or **chalkboard**, **chalk**, **pin board**, etc.?

**Technical problems** may occur at the beginning of a new term, leading to distraction among students and unsettling new teachers. In order to avoid these problems, familiarise yourself with the classroom's technical equipment before your first class meeting. Consider the following questions:

- Where are the switches for the **lights**, **projector** and **blinds**?
- Can I connect my **laptop to the projector**? **If so, how**? Does my computer work with the projector? Does the projector work?
- Does the **Internet connection** work on the local computer? Can I connect my laptop to the Internet via Wi-Fi, or do I need to connect using a cable?
- Do I require a **key** for a **media cabinet** in order to access a computer or other media and electronic equipment? If so, where do I get the key?
- Do the **loudspeakers** work (in case I would like to use media and other electronic equipment)?
- Is there a **microphone**? How do I use it properly? Where might I obtain spare batteries if I needed them?

In some classrooms (e.g. **laboratories**, **physics labs**, etc.) teachers are entirely dependent on properly functioning equipment for their experiments. In this case, we recommend the instructor conduct the experiments 1-2 weeks prior to the start of the course in order to know sufficiently ahead of time of any malfunctioning apparatuses. Also use the opportunity to exchange experiences with other teachers in your field or with the custodians of the technical equipment.

## Checklist: Suggestions of what teachers should bring to their first lesson

Many teachers bring the following items to their first lessons:

- **Information leaflets** including information about the course (see below). Remember to print sufficient copies of the information leaflets if you wish to distribute them among your students.
- **A hard copy of the attendance list:** You can automatically create the document via u:space.
- **Personal course or seminar notes:** Include a lesson plan with schedule of events; that is, notes of when you do what, when, and how. These notes are for the teacher's eyes only, not to be shared with students.
- **Required and suggested readings:** Some teachers like to bring their copies of the required and suggested reading material to show or pass around to their students.
- **A flash drive with a set of slides.** Or access your teaching material, in class, from the cloud (make sure you know or bring the password).
- **Laptop** for presentations (in case you don't use a classroom computer).
- **Additional technical equipment** (e.g. laser pointers, loudspeakers).
- **Flipchart markers** (or other varieties of thick pens) and flash cards in case you want your students to use them.
- **Wristwatch:** If there is no wall clock in the classroom, many teachers use a wristwatch. This way you won't have to retrieve your mobile phone in order to find out the time.
- **Mobile phone:** Don't forget to turn it to silent mode. Be consistent if you also ask your students to do the same, or not to use their mobiles during the lesson.
- **Facility and resource management service number** (+43 664 60277 12760): Immediate assistance for lecturers if a classroom is over capacity (during the winter semester only; see Teaching Manual, Chapter 3.6 Exceeding capacity of the lecture hall)

### 3. Planning the First Minutes of Class

#### 10 minutes before the start of the class:

- Be in the classroom at least ten minutes before the start of class in order to properly arrange your course material (presentation slides etc.).
- Write your name and course title on the chalkboard or flipchart if your first slide does not include them.
- Some teachers find it useful to skim their lesson planning notes one last time and prepare their opening before the class starts.
- Other teachers use the last minutes to talk to, and get to know, some of the students that have arrived early (what they are studying, what other courses they are taking this semester, if they have a job, what topics they are interested in).
- In smaller to mid-sized classes, teachers usually greet their students as they enter the classroom.
- You could also play background music. Turning it off will audibly signal the start of the class.

### Start with a welcome:

- You could begin the first session **five minutes late**, since some students may have a hard time finding the classroom or lecture hall on the first day.
- When you are ready, **announce the start of the lesson**. Some teachers pick up a microphone, start with a welcome, or request that the students be silent. Others clap in order to get students' attention.
- **Welcoming** is a sign of reciprocal acknowledgement between teacher and students.<sup>[2]</sup> The way you welcome your students (i.e. your composure, including eye contact) can give them a first glimpse into the working atmosphere you would like to establish in the classroom. We recommend that you also include the course title in your welcome ("Good morning everyone! Welcome to our course on . . .").
- This is also a good opportunity to find out about the **acoustics** in the class, how the sound travels around the room, and whether students in different locations are able to hear you and each other without difficulty.

### Course Registration and Attendance:

- For courses with continuous assessment, you can find out from **u:space** how many students are registered for your course. A **waiting list** will appear if the number of registered students exceeds the maximum capacity. In this case, you will (if applicable) see a list of students who have guaranteed spots and another list of students on the waiting list. It is important to establish who will be taking part in the course from the very beginning.
- This can be achieved by referring to the **official course registration list**, which can be found on u:space. You can either call out the name of each student and note their attendance, or you may let them sign the attendance list themselves.
- If registered students do not show up during the first class meeting, you should deregister those students and register an equal number of students from the waiting list (see Teaching Manual, Chapter 5.5 (De)registering students for courses and examinations).
- If students, who are not on the waiting list, show up to the first lesson refer them to the Studies Service Center (SSC).
- Proceed with the following steps (introduction of participants, topic introduction) when those left in the class are only the students registered for the course.

## Setting Up – Choosing Seats:

- If seating is flexible and you prefer an alternative **arrangement of tables and/or chairs**, you may ask the students to help you rearrange the classroom furniture.
- In the first session, some students may avoid the front row(s) and sit in the back of the classroom or lecture hall. Teachers often interpret this choice of seating as a sign of a limited desire to participate.<sup>[3]</sup> If you are bothered by the fact that students tend to sit toward the back, ask them early on to take seats in the front and progressively fill in remaining rows. If you are in a large lecture hall and fear that no one will feel the need to heed your **request**, go to the back, make eye contact with your students and invite them to **move forward, to fill in the seats up front**.

## Introductions and Getting to Know One Another:

At this point, teachers and students usually introduce themselves. The type of **introduction method** to use depends on (a) the **size of the group** and (b) your **primary goals** (relationship building, ice breaking, finding out prior knowledge, establishing expectations, etc.).

## 4. Course Information

A **syllabus** or an **information sheet (1-2 pages)** is often suitable for a course and should be available for download on **Moodle** throughout the entire semester. Upload the syllabus or course information sheet to an easily accessible spot (normally at the very top). Mention the syllabus or course information sheet during the first session and/or hand out printed copies of either document. The course syllabus or information sheet should have all of the important course information on it, even though some teachers prefer to include the most important points in the first slide of their presentations during class. In any case, it is important that sensitive information **such as deadlines** are **written down** in order to **communicate** them in a **clear and reliable manner**.

## What Should You Communicate?

- **Course contents:** Offer an initial outline of the topic with the aim of arousing the students' interests. Many teachers discuss the topics in chronological order, giving students an idea of how the semester will progress. It is important, however, that the outline not be too detailed. A general introduction of the semester in 2 to 4 contextual segments is more relatable to students than revealing all topics of each individual lesson. However, feel free to adapt these suggestions to match your personal interest and enthusiasm for the subject. For teachers who have the flexibility to choose their topics, you may inform your students about how you arrived at the topics. Communicate what makes the topics relevant or interesting to you. Inform your students how they may use their newly acquired knowledge (e.g.: *"In the last third of the Semester we will talk about... This will be interesting to all those who may want to specialise in... / who may want to consider a master's programme in... / who may want to write a BA thesis on this subject."*).<sup>[4]</sup>
- **Methodological approach:** Students will want to know how you will conduct the course. That is, students will want to know what teaching and learning methods will you use, and what will happen in the classroom. Telling students these things upfront is especially important if you use different teaching methods or your students are not very familiar with them. If you sense any reservations about specific teaching methods, please briefly explain how and why your methodological approach will help the learning process. You can, for example, highlight the merit of group work in order to raise its acceptance among your students.
- **Tasks assignments and completion during the semester:** What tasks are the students expected to fulfil? Will there be any regular preparations and follow-ups, or other activities apart from classroom-based sessions (i.e. self-study or tutorials)? If yours is a course with continuous assessment and multiple assignments, we recommend providing the students with the semester course schedule that also includes the course's thematic and methodological development. A graphic depiction (e.g. timeline) can be helpful in achieving this. Always communicate the dates or deadlines of individual assignments, both orally as well as in a written format. It is helpful to mention the distribution of the workload, whether there will be periods of relative quiet and busyness during the course of the semester. In this way you help students manage their workload by paying attention to small tasks, requiring less work time and larger tasks, requiring more time to complete (in consideration of their other courses).<sup>[5]</sup>
- **Required & suggested readings:** Inform your students which literature will be required readings, absolutely relevant to understanding the content of the course and which will be suggested readings. Many teachers inform their students how to access the reading material (if it can be accessed online or if the students must find the reading material on their own).
- **Course objectives and learning outcomes:** Similar to the individual topics, it is equally important that you don't introduce learning outcomes in too much detail. Students are better at remembering a small number of general points (i.e. 4 to 6 goals). The course objectives and learning outcomes constitute an apt thematic segue into the topic of assessment, since monitoring performance is based on these objectives.
- **Evaluation criteria:** How will the performance of students be evaluated (oral or written exams, open examination questions, multiple-choice questions, term papers, class participation, etc.)? What are the minimum passing requirements (e.g. maximum number of absences, a minimum score of 60%, passing 3 out of 4 assignments, etc.)? What assessment standard will be used (e.g. the weight of each assignment for the overall grade)? How will the grade be determined

(how are percentages translated into grades)? You should provide your students with a brief overview of the course evaluation criteria. Note that concrete questions about each assignment may arise through the semester. For example, students may want to know the assessment criteria for a term paper or presentation; how group projects will be assessed (whether there will be individual or collective grades for all group members); whether all Moodle forum postings will count as participation, or whether they have to meet specific criteria.

- **Indicating prerequisites or required knowledge:** During their first class sessions, teachers often mention what students should come to class already knowing (prior knowledge), how this course relates to previous classes (e.g. on StEOP – study introduction and orientation phase), and which topics are relevant to the current class. Curricular participation requirements have already been automatically reviewed by the University of Vienna. If your course requires the successful completion of other courses or modules, the curriculum will provide you with information on what proficiencies and competences to expect from your students. If you have the impression that the actual proficiencies of your students differ from those of the requirements, let them know that they need to catch up within a specific timeframe (e.g. in two weeks). Supply the literature necessary to achieve that.

Encourage students to **ask questions in cases** there are any **unclear points** regarding the organisation and focus of the course. Sometimes questions will arise about you as a teacher and your teaching style (e.g. how strictly you evaluate). Since this can be a lot of information for students to take in at once, many teachers grant their students the option of **asking follow-up questions during the second session**.

Students have the opportunity to learn about the course in the **course directory** during the enrolment period. Teachers have an **obligation to inform** students or anyone else who inquire about the course (see Teaching Manual, Chapter 5.1 Information requirements of teaching staff). The course directory includes many of the points mentioned above. However, since students attend several different courses during a semester, do not assume that all of them are already familiar with the information provided in the directory.

## 5. Clarifying Organisational Matters & Work Modes

**Agreed upon rules** make it easier for students and teachers to work together and establish expectations. The first class is an important opportunity to (if possible) **prevent** any **problems** and unwelcome developments that may come up and to agree upon a framework to successfully complete the course. Teachers should speak openly about important rules to help them work together with their students so that the course can run successfully.

The following section will provide you with some ideas of themes you may wish to address to ensure an amicable working semester with your students:



- **Email correspondence:** Let your students know how you will engage with emails. If you are afraid of becoming overwhelmed by a flood of inquiries, establish boundaries ahead of time. For example: You prefer students to first consult the Moodle-Forum for organisational questions (so that other students can help answer these questions); determine what questions students should first ask their tutors (if they have tutors); determine whether you would answer questions about course content by email (if not, mention your office hours or the option of raising the question during the course); you may also let students know when you will answer after receiving emails and whether you will answer on weekends.
- **Opportunities for further questions:** Let students know whether you permit them to ask clarifying questions during your lecture, or whether you will organize scheduled opportunities for such questions later on. You should establish whether students may ask and whether you answer questions after class (because, for example, you need to catch a train or rush to another course, or the room is needed for another class right after yours, etc.).
- **Missed deadlines:** State (in writing and spoken) unequivocally whether there is any penalty for assignments handed in past the deadline, and if so, what is the penalty.
- **Absence and attendance:** Let students know your class attendance policy (e.g. how many classes can students miss without penalty, do they need a doctor's certificate if they miss class because of illness etc.). In addition, let students know your course of action in cases when students have to give a presentation but are absent.
- **Tardiness:** In order to prevent tardiness, it often helps to announce that the course will always begin on time (even if you made an exception and began the first session somewhat later, see above); ask students to come to class on time. According to the result of a University of Vienna teacher survey, 25 % of teachers reported experiencing a class disruption because of tardiness. This indicates a widespread problem. One possible way of remedying class disruption because of tardiness might be to emphasize the importance of coming on time during the first session of the course.<sup>[7]</sup>
- **Leaving early:** A related point to the previous one is students leaving class early. One way to deal with this problem may be to ask students to give you notice before class begins in justified cases. Fewer students leave class early without permission, particularly when they have to justify leaving before the end of class.
- **Office hours:** Write your office location and office hours on your course syllabus or information sheet (see above). If few students attend your office hours, encourage them during class and tell them that you would be happy to answer their inquiries in your office sessions as well. It is also important to let students know the type of topics and questions permitted during office hours (e.g. questions about the course, further information, feedback on outlines for presentations or term papers, discussing the challenges of working in small groups, etc.).
- **Social rules and culture of discussion:** To nurture an open discussion environment, where students feel safe to respectfully and openly express their thoughts, encourage them to let each other speak about their ideas without interruption. In this context, peer feedback becomes an especially valuable activity. We recommend discussing peer feedback in detail later in the semester, just before students engage in this activity. You might hand out to the students the table from the "Peer Review" entry, distinguishing between "descriptive vs. judgement-based feedback".

- **Breaks:** Let students know early on how the class time period will be organized, whether there will be breaks (especially in the case of block seminars), and if so, when.
- **Costs:** Let students know whether they will have to bear additional costs to purchase extra materials, or to print necessary reading documents.

## 6. Approaching a Topic

### Possible approaches:

- Chronological overview of topics (in the form of semester schedules)
- Overview of topics with a focus on contextual connections (e.g. in the form of mind maps)
- Immersion in the most important concepts (or an important concept)
- Indirect or slow introduction to topics: Some teachers compare a first class meeting to a threshold. They approach topics indirectly, slowly helping students achieve a deeper understanding of the concepts. Using this method, teachers can help students refrain from drawing hasty conclusions about the course material.
- Stimulating students' interest (e.g. by raising questions that should be addressed; using examples from life or teaching experiences to make relevant points)
- Creative methods to explore and come up with ideas (e.g. brainstorming, free writing, etc.)

### Sources

- [1] Witt, Susanne. "Anfangssituationen (<https://wb-web.de/wissen/methoden/anfangssituationen.html>)". In: *DIE space Wissensbaustein*. Bertelsmann Stiftung: November 2015 [last accessed on 01.03.2018].
- [2] Kotthoff, Helga. „Aspekte der Höflichkeit im Vergleich der Kulturen“. In: *Muttersprache* 4 (2003), 289-307.
- [3] see Witt. „Anfangssituationen“. [1]
- [4] Brauer, Markus. *An der Hochschule lehren. Praktische Ratschläge, Tricks und Lehrmethoden*. Berlin: Springer, 2014, 43-48.
- [5] Brauer. *An der Hochschule lehren*. [4]
- [6] Svinicki, Marilla, und Wilbert J. McKeachie. *McKeachie's Teaching Tips. Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. Fourteenth Edition, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2012, 24.
- [7] Besondere Einheit für Qualitätssicherung der Universität Wien. *Auswertung des Fragebogens für LV-LeiterInnen*, 27. Mai 2015.

## Recommended citation

Center for Teaching and Learning: *First Class Meeting*. Infopool *better teaching*. University of Vienna, September 2018. [<https://infopool.univie.ac.at/en/home-page/teaching-learning-at-the-university/>]

---

## This work is licensed under a Creative Commons

Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Austria License (CC BY-SA 3.0 AT)

For more information please see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/at/>



## Contact

---

T (Telephone): +43-1-4277-120 60  
[infopool@univie.ac.at](mailto:infopool@univie.ac.at)

---

University of Vienna | Universitätsring 1 | 1010 Vienna | T (Telephone) +43-1-4277-0

[Sitemap \(/en/sitemap/\)](/en/sitemap/) | [Imprint \(/en/imprint/\)](/en/imprint/) | [Accessibility \(https://www.univie.ac.at/en/about-us/accessibility/\)](https://www.univie.ac.at/en/about-us/accessibility/) | [Privacy Policy \(https://dsba.univie.ac.at/en/privacy-policy/\)](https://dsba.univie.ac.at/en/privacy-policy/) | [Printable version](#)