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*DUST FROM  
THE CHALKBOARD*

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The First Day of Class . . .  
What Do You Say After You Say “Hello?”

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The first day lives throughout the course.

—*Parker Palmer*

The first day of class has proven to somewhat of an enigma in American education. Many faculty launch right off into their first lecture with no orientation whatsoever regarding the course. Others

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This article is based on materials in the book, *The Professor's Handbook*, by Gary A. Holt, Kay E. Holt, and Richard Hood, published by Mancorp Publishing, Tampa, FL in 1996.

spend the entire first period orienting their students. Is one approach actually better than the other?

Well, it is probably best to spend the first class period in orientation. This first period serves the purpose of establishing the environment and focus for the entire course. It contributes to a more positive and effective faculty/student relationship, reduces apprehensions about the course and relates expectations about the course so that students can begin planning from the first day. Properly done, this session is often the single most important class period in the course.

As a guide for the first class, consider the topics summarized in Outline 1. Use what is appropriate and ignore the rest. But to be sure, use the first day of class as an opportunity to establish a positive learning environment. Our activities on the first day of class can impact the entire remainder of the course.

### ***OUTLINE 1: TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION ON THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS***

#### ***Opening Remarks***

- Confirm the Course

Are they in the right place? Confirm what the course is. Remember, students sometimes wander into the wrong classroom, and they often will not ask you.

- Introduce Yourself

Let them know who you are and a bit about your background and experiences. This is not a matter of bragging, but rather, it is a matter of helping them understand “where you are coming from.” Students like to know that their instructors are people of expertise and experiences.

- Introduce Students

This is not always feasible. However, it can be especially effective in small groups in which students are expected (or encouraged) to interact as a part of the course methodology. It is also

helpful in courses in which there are “outsiders” present (*e.g.*, graduate students, or students from other departments) who are taking the course, but who are not a member of the normal cohort.

### ***General Housekeeping***

- Instructor Information

Provide your office location, office hours, and phone number(s).

- Course Information

Provide meeting time(s) and location(s), and note any changes that may occur during the semester.

- Laboratory/Practicum Information

Provide meeting time(s) and location(s), and note any changes that may occur during the semester.

- Class Policies

This can include myriad things, including policies that address smoking, food beverages in class, discipline, academic dishonesty, class cancellations (*e.g.*, due to bad weather, vacations, instructor absences), class breaks, use of equipment, emergency situations, keeping the classroom/laboratories clean, class social activities, and how long to wait if the instructor is late. Class policies can include both instructional and individual faculty policies. It is important to relate all policies to students early in the course and the first day of class is the logical day on which to attend to these.

### ***Course Design and Format***

- Instructional Format

Describe instructional format you intend to utilize: lecture, discussion, seminar, or some combination.

- Text(s) and Materials

Describe what materials are required as well as what is desirable but not required.

- Topical Outline

This material provides students with a sense of what the course is all about and serves as an introduction to the course, its content, and its expectations.

- Course Schedule

Let them know when exams will be held, when assignments are due, and the dates of other expectations of the course. Provide them with a written schedule. This serves to transfer “ownership” of responsibility for compliance to the student and will usually eliminate such comments as “You never told us that this was due today!”

Go over the schedule with them!

### ***Evaluation***

How will students be evaluated in the course? Will there be credit given for participation, special projects, or other activities in addition to exams? Let them know what you expect of them . . . and how they can succeed! Properly done, this component (along with the schedule) can prevent a great many unnecessary conflicts between faculty and students.

### ***Course Philosophy and Objectives***

This is introductory course material which relates to the students a greater understanding about what the course hopes to accomplish and how it is to be achieved. It should also be a discussion period during which students can check their understanding of the goals and objectives of the course against what they have previously heard or read about the course. This is a critical discussion, since this serves as the introduction of the course content

and serves to establish an intellectual and learning environment for all that is to follow.

### ***Miscellaneous***

- Provide Written Materials

It is best to provide everything in writing that you will be discussing. This can be outline form. It is important to realize that this is not a matter of “spoonfeeding.” Rather, it is simply a matter of good pedagogy. People better remember written/verbal materials than they do either written or verbal used alone. Written materials also serve to transfer “ownership” of the materials to the student, since they no longer can plead a failure of awareness. Finally, written materials provide a foundation for discussion and clarification regarding the course, its policies, and its requirements.

- Should You Lecture on the First Day?

It probably is not a good idea to lecture on the first day unless the course has a limited number of class meetings (*e.g.*, classes that meet only once each week) and the time is required to present all materials. Typically, students are not too involved in “getting started” into the new semester to be sufficiently receptive to new course content. An appropriately designed course orientation is usually more important and more efficient than other course topics.

