



# What should I do in my first class?

As government regulations and public health advice continue to evolve, the University is looking ahead to resuming in-person instructional activities in the Fall, at a reduced scale and scope. In so doing, the health and safety of instructors, teaching support staff, and students is a priority. In addition to the health and safety measures being put in place, a key element of the planning process for a return to in-person instruction is classroom management. For safe provision of instruction, consult your divisional/departmental guidelines and the [COVID-19 In-Class Instructional Guidelines](#).

First day of class is a critical moment in your course. What happens in that first course meeting sets the tone for the rest of the term. This tip sheet on **“What should I do in my first class?”** outlines strategies that you could try on the first day of the course given the current context of the pandemic and the University’s safety guidelines. It offers “low tech” and “high tech/dual delivery” suggestions for implementation.

### EXPLORE THESE STRATEGIES:

1. Conduct a diagnostic needs assessment with your students
2. Create a community agreement
3. Include an access check
4. Normalize with students the use of resources
5. Additional Resources for the first day of class

### 1. Conduct a diagnostic needs assessment with your students

A diagnostic needs assessment is a way to collect information about your students’ learning needs and challenges. The collected and analyzed information can effectively inform decisions that you make about ways to enhance students’ learning in your course. There are several strategies you could use to conduct a needs assessment with your students:



### BEST AND WORST CLASSES

Ask students about the best and worst class experiences they have had. First, you could share verbally/post on a slide/write on the board “The best class experience I’ve ever had” followed by “What the teacher did” and “What the students did.” Second, you could ask students to identify “The worst class experience I’ve ever had” with the same two items beneath.

**HIGH TECH/DUAL DELIVERY:** You could do this activity using a shareable/editable document if you are in a classroom where you can log into the Microsoft Office 365 suite of tools and display the document on a screen, or run a live webinar and display/screen-share the prompts on a





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Word document or PowerPoint slide. Students would enter their answers to the prompts directly into the document/slide within the webinar.

**LOW TECH:** Due to physical distancing, you could have students discuss these prompts in small groups of two or three. One of the students can act as note-taker and presenter, and could then report back to the whole class. The same designated student can also share their notes electronically (e.g., via email or shareable document) after class.



### FIRST DAY GRAFFITI

Students respond to prompts about learning together. Some of the prompts could include: “I learn best in classes where the teacher \_\_\_”; “Students in courses help me learn when they \_\_\_”; “I am most likely to participate in classes when \_\_\_”; “Here’s something that makes it hard to learn in a course: \_\_\_”; “Here’s something that makes it easier to learn in a course: \_\_\_”.

**HIGH TECH/DUAL DELIVERY:** You could use a shareable Word document or Microsoft Forms survey where students could respond to the various prompts. They could do this during or after class depending on your access to in-class technology. Or, if not using Quercus, you could simply display the sentence stems on a slide in PowerPoint, and generate responses together with the whole class that you then enter on the slide for display.

**LOW TECH:** Students could respond to the prompts in groups of two or three (to ensure physical distancing). One student could be designated as note-taker and presenter to report back to the whole class. The same designated student can also share their notes electronically (e.g., via email or shareable document) after class.



### STUDENT PROFILES

The first class presents a wonderful opportunity to discover more about your students’ backgrounds, goals and interests: year in school, major, prior course work, current jobs/commitments, goals for the course, characteristics of courses in which they’ve learned a lot, teacher feedback that is and isn’t helpful, peer contributions that support learning. You can use this information to better understand all the students in your course and their diverse learning preferences and needs. Collecting this information can also help you build a sense of community in your class, especially if you are later able to draw on this information (e.g., students’ own interests and goals) to craft more authentic, relatable assignments and more meaningful examples.

**HIGH TECH/DUAL DELIVERY:** Students could complete a survey in Quercus using the [Quizzing tools](#) or a survey built in [Microsoft Forms](#). Students would then enter their answers to the prompts directly into the survey.

**LOW TECH:** You could conduct a series of polling questions in your first meeting with students (be sure you don’t ask questions that ask students to identify confidential or highly personal information). Students could respond to prompts either by raising their hands or by using thumbs up/thumbs down to confirm. Students can also be asked to print and bring their own [ABCD cards](#) for low-tech in-class polling purposes.





### 2. Create a community agreement

Beyond communicating safety protocols to students, you may want to empower students by collaboratively generating with them a community agreement. A community agreement (also known as a group contract, learning agreement or classroom agreement) is a shared agreement between everyone who is learning together about ways they want to work with each other throughout the course. This can include guidelines for what it means to be respectful, expectations about turn-taking, accessibility needs (e.g., please don't bring peanuts to class, please don't wear strong scents – or in the current context, please try to keep your mask on), creating a sense of shared responsibility. Discussing and deciding on how the group will work together builds a collective responsibility to make the classroom a safer place and gives students an opportunity to voice their needs in codeveloping a productive and equitable learning environment. In building community agreements as a class, you have the chance to foster shared accountability and student buy-in to the learning process.

#### How can you enforce a community agreement?

Having an agreement that everyone has actively consented to makes it easier to address a particular behaviour. As the course instructor or TA, you can point out the lack of adherence and ask the class collectively how they would like to address it. Or you can point to the agreement and ask the person to change their behaviour so that it aligns with the agreement.



### COMMUNITY AGREEMENT

To implement this in your class, explore the tip sheet on [Community Agreements](#).

**HIGH TECH/DUAL DELIVERY:** If logged in to Quercus, you could use a wiki, such as is described in the resource [Quercus Pages as Wikis](#) or an online sharable Word document (using your Microsoft Office 365 suite of tools) for students to collectively create a community agreement. You could also display a slide in PowerPoint and solicit ideas from students that you then document in the slide.

**LOW TECH:** You could divide students into pairs or groups of three to ensure physical distancing. Students could create a set of agreements from scratch or you could offer a list on a PowerPoint slide. Each group could identify the top five classroom norms they prefer to include in the community agreement. A presenter from the group would then inform the entire class of their choices and rationale behind them.

### 3. Include an access check

It is important for your students to be able to voice their needs and concerns about the learning environment. An effective strategy to promote such conversations is the use of access checks, which can be done in your very first class as well as on an ongoing basis. An access check is a way of opening up space for students to let you know if they need any accommodations because something about the space is a barrier to their participation. This could be a small thing (“I cannot read the PowerPoint slides because of the colours”, “I cannot hear because there is noise in the hall”) or a larger thing (“I have





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difficulty accessing the room because there are no ramps”). Regardless, access checks give you a chance to make accommodations *where possible*, and even when you cannot change the barrier, at least you can collectively acknowledge that there are barriers to equitable participation, allowing you to try to work together with students to build alternatives.

### How to do an Access Check?

You can begin with a statement on disability and accessibility so that students understand the context, the terminology and the intention: “We understand access to be a shared responsibility between everyone in this space. We will strive to create an accessible space that reduces the need for you to disclose a disability or impairment for the purposes of gaining an accommodation. In doing this together, we strive to welcome disability, and the changes it brings, into our space.”



### ACCESS CHECK

To implement this in your class, explore the tip sheet on [Access Check](#).

**HIGH TECH/DUAL DELIVERY:** You could create space – public (e.g., [Discussion Boards](#) in Quercus) and private (e.g., “open door” communications policy via email)—for students to reach out to you with their concerns. You could conduct anonymous surveys using [MS Forms](#) (in the suite of tools in Office 365).

**LOW TECH:** You could explore specific definitions of access with your students in class and then ask them to complete an anonymous survey after class.

## 4. Normalize with students the use of resources

Students’ life experiences (e.g., coming from an underprivileged group), current commitments (e.g., taking care of dependents at home), and range of challenges (e.g., first in the family to enter higher education) can hinder students’ success in the classroom. Hence, it is important in the first class as well as on an ongoing basis to reinforce access to resources and supports. You can do this in several ways:

- Include a [range of statements in your syllabus](#) and speak to them in your first class, such as, for example: [Accessibility Statement](#); [Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Statement](#); etc.
- Explore strategies to [Facilitate for Equity](#) and to promote [In-Class Inclusive Teaching](#).
- Connect your students to the [Academic Success Module](#).



### NORMALIZING THE USE OF RESOURCES

Beyond including a list of statements and listing resources in your syllabus, there are additional strategies you could use to normalize knowledge about and use of resources across the institution.

**HIGH TECH/DUAL DELIVERY:** Include a resource-focused section in your Quercus course shell, offering links to a range of different student services and supports. You could then create a Scavenger Hunt in the first class (or first week of classes) for students to find specific resources in the Quercus shell.





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**LOW TECH:** Students in groups of two or three (ensuring physical distancing) could review the resources listed in the course syllabus and discuss resources and supports that they have previously found valuable or that they would like to learn more about. A designated student presenter could then report back to the entire class on the group's top resource and how they intend to use it.

### 5. Additional Resources for the first day of class

#### CTSI:

- [First Class Strategies](#)
- [Setting the Tone](#)
- [Inclusive Teaching](#)
- [In-Class Inclusive Teaching](#)
- [Active Learning Pedagogies](#)
- [Active Learning and Adapting Teaching Techniques](#)
- [Classroom Management: Active Learning Classrooms \(ALCs\)](#)
- [Community Agreements](#)
- [Access Check](#)
- [Facilitate for Equity](#)

#### Help your TAs navigate the first day of class by directing them to TATP resources:

- [Community Building](#)
- [The First Class](#)
- [Questioning Techniques](#)
- [Time Management](#)
- [Fostering Accessible Learning](#)
- [Innovative Pedagogical Approaches to Access and Mental Health](#)

#### External:

- Behling, L. (2019, January 9). [Empathetic Syllabi Review Exercise](#). *Faculty Focus*.
- Buirs, A.B. (2018, August 2). [First Impressions: Activities for the First Day of Class](#). *Faculty Focus*.
- Garrett, J. and Clement, M. (2018, August 23). [Advice for the First Day of Class: Today We Will](#). *Faculty Focus*.
- Sibold, W. (2017). [Enhancing Critical Thinking through Class Discussion: A Guide for using discussion-based pedagogy](#). *Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning Guide Series*. Calgary, AB: The Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning at the University of Calgary.
- [First Day of Class](#). Centre for Teaching, Vanderbilt University.
- Lang, J.M. (2019, January 4). [How to Teach a Good First Day of Class](#). *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- [Make the Most of the First Day of Class](#). Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence & Education Innovation, Carnegie Mellon University.
- [12 Icebreakers for the College Classroom](#). University Center for the Advancement of Teaching, The Ohio State University.

