First Time Up

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THE FIRST DAY

First days are the worst days. A good mantra if you have a bad first class. Amid the inevitable confusion and chaos, we have little chance to make real contact or get the grateful feedback that sustains us. Foul-ups with the roll, the room, or the equipment eat up time, and even veterans often feel frazzled.

I fear only experience can bring the alternative view of first days—to look out on the sea of new faces and guess and wonder. Who will be the smart ones? The good writers? The friendly, appreciative ones I’ll always be glad to see in my office? The skeptics that will have to be won over? I often wish I could videotape the faces that first day and record my guesses about how each of them will turn out. It’s a fun game, a bit like a first date. It’s just too bad we don’t have the chance to sit back and appreciate it.

Chapters three and eight attempt to prepare you for the first day by suggesting—and by asking you to brainstorm—what might go wrong and what you can do to prepare for it. This chapter will focus on a variety of different ways to get off on a good foot. Forget the traditional first day activity—going over the syllabus section by section. It bores students and gives them a bad impression of the class, and no one remembers anything from the syllabus anyway. Instead, do something interesting and fun with writing the first day, and assign a close reading of the syllabus for the second class period, asking students to write down questions as they read. You will probably have to call roll, give your name and office number, and do a few other business and housekeeping duties. Write your name and the course number on the board, which will cause a student or two in the wrong room, on the wrong day, or on the wrong planet, to slip out. Write up the homework for the next few days; few things establish authority faster than reminding students “I’m in charge of the work you’re going to do.”

But that should still leave you with at least half an hour to set the right tone for the course. Here are some ways to use that time.
**CREATE COMMUNITY**

The success or failure of a writing class often depends on the interpersonal dynamics among classmates—the “chemistry” of the class. We can’t control all the elements of that chemistry, but we can create the best chances for positive interactions by establishing early on that

- civil, supportive, and sometimes constructively critical relationships are crucial to the functioning of the class and the learning of individuals

- getting to know each other’s names and styles is not just friendly, but it’s also important for students’ growth as writers

- every voice and every idea deserves a respectful hearing, but no idea and no person is above challenge

- as I believe Yvor Winters said, a victory for one writer is a victory for all. In the ideal writing community, everyone eagerly helps everyone else and cheers every well-written sentence, including the teacher’s. If you portray yourself as a struggling writer, your students may well invest themselves in your struggle. But on a day when the whole class seems to have conspired to make trouble, you may find it difficult not to see your students as the enemy. Resist that urge. Few students will expend the energy necessary to conspire against you unless they feel that you’ve already cast them in the “disruptive student” role. And once you think “me against them,” your semester may never recover.

Such ideas presented directly to the class won’t have any effect, but if integrated into a day or two of community building, they may start to take on meaning for students.

How do you build community? Our culture overflows with ideas, from doing ropes courses together to playing silly games. Ironically, I find that a group develops best when we focus on individuals. So I usually spend a day (not necessarily the first, if lots of people are adding and dropping) just having each person introduce him- or herself with some basic information—major, hometown, campus residence—and something quirky, memorable, unique (“I once toured the world with Up With People”; “I can bend my thumb back to touch my wrist”; “I went to six high schools.”) I encourage “pointless” conversation in response to these introductions: “Do you know So-and-So? She would have been a year ahead of you” or “I
went to seven high schools and this is my third college.” The quirky, tenuous bond developed by such a connection may provide the foundation for a good peer group.

Variations on this kind of introduction abound. Students can interview each other, then introduce their interviewee to the class and perhaps write a profile for their first assignment. The class can play a name-learning game, in which each person tries to recite the names of everyone who has gone before. You can gather information from each student and then quickly create a treasure hunt: “Find the person whose parents were both in the military”; “Who in the class speaks fluent Portuguese?” Or you can set up a kind of cocktail party scenario (perhaps even with bagels and orange juice cocktails) in which everyone tries to meet and find out information from as many people as possible.

Use your imagination and your experience in scouting or church groups or elementary school. Silly is good. Maximum laughter is good. And be sure to include yourself and try to be as open as possible. I often mention as one of my “unique” characteristics that I have an adopted Korean daughter, and that creates an instant bond with anyone who is an adoptee or has one in their family.

**QUICK PROCESS OVERVIEW**

The problem with doing a community-building exercise the first day is that your community is not stable yet, and the students, flustered about their schedules and antsy about the first day back at school, will not remember names and details as well as they will once things calm down. So while I recommend devoting a day to community building, I prefer to do it some time in the second week, and to use the first day to give students a quick sense of the kind of work (fun work!) we’ll be doing throughout the semester. In a writing class, that means a speedy introduction to writing process.

Students should know from the outset that writing process activities are not exercises, like playing scales, but practical steps that actually accomplish writing work, more analogous to learning the first few bars of a musical piece. Therefore, even on the first day, if I ask students to do some thinking-on-paper, I try to make it contribute to the first assignment, so they’ll finish the day feeling they accomplished something useful.

For example, if the first paper is a personal essay, the first activity will be a listing of subjects that might turn into such an essay: conflicts or questions or traumas or favorite people, places, or things. Right from the
start, I want students to view their lives, opinions, and ideas as valuable ore from which they can refine writing that others will want to read. And I do my own list on the board.

I allow three or four minutes for that first list, then I follow it with three minutes devoted to each item in a series of activities like the following:

- choose one subject from your list
- freewrite on your subject
- read over the freewrite and mark anything interesting, especially surprises
- jot down 6-8 key ideas about your subject
- write as many titles for an essay about your subject as you can in 5 minutes; choose one
- write a short paragraph about your subject
- reread and revise your paragraph
- read the paragraph aloud to the class or a small group.

You can explore endless substitutions, variations, and condensations of this sequence. I don’t aim to give students the process to follow in the future, but rather to expose them to the idea that writing can proceed in small, relatively painless steps, and that they can produce a finished product in a very short amount of time. Subsequent classes can build on the end product or on any of the steps.

As they explore the surprises that inevitably pop up in such a process, students may start believing that writing is thinking. “I’d never thought about that!” many say as they leave class, and if they grasp that writing made them “think of that,” they’ll begin to see how important writing can be to their academic and post-academic lives. Most students reach college thinking that writers simply encode already-completed thought, and students who aren’t in the humanities may consider writing a necessary evil that they’ll be done with as soon as they complete their “gen ed” requirements. It probably doesn’t do much good to lecture students on the importance of writing, but revealing it to them can become a major focus of the first few weeks of class.

DIG RIGHT IN

I like the process overview to be practical, oriented toward future assignments, but it is an overview, covering an unrealistic amount of material
quickly. If you want students to take a significant step into the work they’ll be doing for the course rather than understand the whole writing process, you can have them do any number of activities even though they may not yet have purchased books or looked at a syllabus for the class.

First, find paper topics. Different schools of thought point novice writers in different directions to explore for subjects. Some say “Write about what you know.” Most of us write most comfortably from knowledge, but we also find it easy to get up on a soapbox and preach already-formed conclusions, and such a rant usually does not make an interesting paper.

Another approach: write about what you don’t know; explore and question rather than preach. Great research papers can come from trying to answer questions that intrigue us. A useful compromise: have students write about a subject they’re familiar with but choose an aspect of that subject that they don’t know well. Figuring out something that bothers you, pursuing a real question or conflict, produces the best papers.

In any case, I want students to find enthusiasm and energy, so I try to help them locate a subject that they want to write about. An authority list is a great first step: students write down everything they know more about than does anyone else in the class. Terrific subjects might arise from it, but more importantly, students need to realize that they are authorities on subjects worth writing about; they don’t need to live ten more years or travel the world before they find a subject. Often they’re inspired by what I put on my list—when they see that a professional writer thinks he could write an essay on growing giant pumpkins or the joys of Scrabble or the difficulties of raising one adopted and one biological child, they begin to see more possibilities in their own lives.

You can spend the whole first day listing: an authority list, a want-to-know list (“I wish I understood the theory of relativity”), a conflicts and questions list (“Why do I have such trouble getting along with my mother-in-law?”), a traumas list (accidents, family deaths, muggings), a things-I-feel-strongly-about list . . . I usually give six to eight minutes for each list and assign students to “finish” the list—come up with at least 25 items—for the next class meeting.

My current favorite listing-for-topics approach borrows from Don Murray’s concept of writing territories (1999 18-19). Murray points out that most of us write about a finite number—maybe five or ten—of general “territories.” (Mine include writing, music, teaching, family, hiking and skiing, psychology, politics.) To come up with a list of their territories, experienced writers can look back over what they’ve written and put the
specific texts into general categories. Novice writers have a slightly more difficult job, thinking about the things they would write about if they had the time and motivation.

The list itself can be useful, but I always ask students to go one step farther and connect the territories, sometimes simply by closing their eyes and randomly drawing a line between two or more items. Our uniqueness resides not so much in any individual interest we have but in the confluence, the overlap of those interests. The overlap contains the subjects we can write about that will most likely be unique and very much us. For instance, millions of Americans share my interest in music, millions more teach, almost everyone cares about families, and many are fascinated by writing. How do I find something new to say in any of those very popular areas? I search the area where all four overlap, a smaller area not nearly so well populated. And out of that area have come two articles, several presentations, and a book.

I make that point with my classes but also do what I ask them to do—randomly connect territories. Hmmm, skiing and politics. Not subjects you see put together often. No obvious overlap . . . except if you think back to the 2002 Olympics, which took place just down the road from where I live, and the fact that a formerly sleepy, mom-and-pop ski area, Snow Basin, became glitzy and expensive, with amazing new lifts and a controversial new federally-funded road, just in time for the Olympics, and if you know that the owner of the resort was also on the Olympics governing body. . . . Many of my students have come up with productive paper ideas by making similar connections.

QUIRKY ACTIVITIES

Consider doing things on the first day that surprise students, shake them up (maybe with Diesenhaus and Leary’s “electroshock therapy”), make them rethink their assumptions about English classes and possibly about college in general. Besides tearing students loose from their preconceptions, unusual opening-day activities can open students’ minds to ideas that they might use throughout the semester. Writers and English classes always hunger for subjects, and subjects can be anywhere; therefore we can justify analyzing and hunting for subjects in almost any area of human endeavor.

With Music

My favorite quirky area is music. I begin almost every class period with music, and I find that simple act sometimes wins over students for the
semester. As Edward Corbett says, teachers “are more likely to succeed if they resort to the medium of sound than to the medium of print” (5). My book *From Dylan to Donne* suggests many course-starting musical activities. I’ll just sketch two here.

Before I play any music myself, I ask students to jot down the name of a song or two that’s in their heads at the moment or that they’d like to hear on the radio driving home . . . not necessarily “my favorite song of all time,” but something they’re currently attached to. Then I play a song from my past and explain how analyzing my attraction to it helped me understand some part of myself. Sometimes I use Dickey Lee’s “Patches,” a maudlin tragedy about the girlfriend from the wrong side of the tracks who kills herself because the upper-class narrator’s family prevents him from visiting her . . . so the narrator pledges to “join” her, presumably by drowning himself too. It seems a silly, embarrassing song now, easily dismissed. But it was my favorite at age ten, on the first album my brother and I bought with our own money, and when I realized recently that for almost thirty years I’ve been playing the same model guitar that Dickey displays on the cover, I decided to mine the connection. I fear that the “Patches” view of romance—as frustrating, hopeless, ultimately tragic—has had a huge influence on who I am and on my expectations about relationships.

After I’ve told my story and explained what I learned from analyzing the song, I ask students to figure out the meaning of their song choice. Besides shaking up students’ ideas about what subjects merit inquiry and analysis, this activity has two fundamental goals: it often leads to interesting essays (in my case, I could pursue an essay about why suicide is considered romantic, or perhaps do a Marxist analysis of elements of our culture that warn us that crossing the boundaries of class leads to death); and it demonstrates to students that analyzing their own interests, tastes, and passions has value and might teach them something.

Another musical starter: I play a song that no one knows and ask students to jot down not an analysis but an initial gut reaction, an “ugh” or “wow” or “I don’t get it.” During a second playing of the song, I ask students to find a particular detail of the music that provokes the reaction. We then go through steps very similar to those I use for beginning any literary analysis: students freewrite about the connection between the detail and their initial reaction, then they distill their thinking into a single assertion remarkably similar to a thesis statement. Without planning to, they come up with something: a thesis plus a detail, feelings, and intellectual thought to back it up.
While particularly appropriate for a literature class, this process benefits any class that involves analysis because it underscores a crucial point that many students won’t at first believe—that most analysis, even literary criticism, begins not with the head—knowledge and critical scrutiny—but in the gut, with some kind of felt response. As neuroscientist Antonio Damasio argues, “if we didn’t have those gut responses, we’d get caught in an endless cycle of analysis, drawing infinite pros-and-cons lists in our heads” (qtd. in Johnson 46). Most students get to college distrusting their
gut responses—too many times in school, the teacher’s “correct” interpretation contradicted their reaction to the text, and they concluded that their own thoughts were useless. Many are shocked and delighted to find that they can start with something they really feel, pin their impressions on particular details, create an assertion or thesis statement about their ideas, and then flesh out the assertion. If they can learn to believe in—or at least take seriously—their gut reactions, they will be significantly closer to becoming better, happier, readers and writers.

**With Other Media**

Before I began to concentrate on music as my quirky opener, I started every class with what I called “Tales From the Outside World.” I would read or paraphrase a news story to bring up an issue that would lead to a discussion or that I thought students might write about. Bill Strong, in *Coaching Writing*, suggests some wonderfully useful and amusing activities with strange newspaper stories, having students rewrite the story from an unusual perspective, for instance. And most students enjoy reverting to grade school and making collages with scissors and a stack of magazines. As long as we remember that in most cases we’re not training journalists, we can do an almost infinite number of things with print media.

The same holds true for film, art, TV, photography: if you’re sufficiently interested in it, you can think of ways to use it in class, and your enthusiasm for it might make it a fine way to start off your course. In his book, *Tune In: Television and the Teaching of Writing*, Bronwyn Williams makes an extended and convincing argument for the value of analyzing television programs in composition class. You could open your class with a scene from “The Simpsons.” We accomplish a lot if on the first day we can stretch students’ ideas of “English class” and broaden their definition of “text.”

**With “The Arrowmaker”**

Probably the most clever and literary class-opener I know, and the one with the longest-lasting effects on students, was developed by Charles Woodard using an excerpt from N. Scott Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. The activity demonstrates to students, in vivid symbolic form, the importance of speaking up, in class and in life. It requires students to dust off their critical reading skills, and it can lead to a rousing class debate. Dr. Woodard has kindly given me permission to reprint his whole original article in Appendix B, and I strongly urge you to read it and try it out . . . if not on the first day, then sometime in the first two weeks of class.
With Other Key Readings

Troll your memory for short readings that have meant a lot to you and might be a perfect starting point for your class, either because they immediately raise a theme you want to build on or because they attack a belief you want to challenge. Billy Collins’s poem “Introduction to Poetry,” for instance, quickly and humorously raises the question of how we should respond to poetry or any other creative writing and warns readers against beating the meaning out of a text. Marvin Swift’s article, “Clear Writing Means Clear Thinking Means . . . ,” argues persuasively that writing and revision create and change meaning, not just style, and reading the article can be an effective first salvo in the battle to convince students that writing isn’t just transcription of already-formed thoughts. Bruce Ballenger’s “The Importance of Writing Badly” can relieve students of some of their anxiety about being less-than-perfect writers. Reading a Dave Barry column can allow you to assert that good writing can be fun and funny. Follow your enthusiasm. Start with something you enjoy.

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I don’t like slow “introductions,” either in essays or courses; I like to get right to the important stuff, even if that means spending the first day building community and good feelings. Often on the first day, I’ll ask students to sign up for a conference sometime later in the week, giving me a chance to meet everyone by the second or third class meeting. I also always hand out a questionnaire (see Appendix C) for students to fill in before their first conference, to give me a head start on finding out who they are and what they might write about. In addition, I give writing students a questionnaire about their writing backgrounds, asking them to think about a recent paper they’ve written and the process that led to that paper. (See Figure 4.) Asking themselves, “How did I write that?” is a good first step for students, most of whom need to become more aware of their writing processes, especially ones that have worked for them.

Don’t fall into the trap of thinking that first days are automatically lost time, treading water until students get the books. Accomplishing something, however small, on the first day will make you feel much better than just dismissing the class early; it will leave both you and your students expecting each class to be purposeful and worthwhile.