Empirical studies demonstrate that a successful first day of class is an important predictor for a successful semester. *First impressions matter.* The key to success on your first day is *preparation.* Here are some suggestions for you to consider.

A) **Scout out your classroom** a day or two before you are to begin teaching. Get a feel for what it will be like. Check on A/V equipment, if you will be using it.  
B) **Arrive** five or ten minutes before class begins.  
C) **Introduce yourself,** then take role, if class size permits.  
D) **Explain what you'll be doing the first day of class.** Use up all or almost all of the class time.  

What’s possible here is constrained to some extent by class size. In a relatively small class, you can ask students to introduce themselves, say where they’re from, and what they hope to learn during the semester. In larger classes, you may wish to pose a question or two for open discussion. Answers may not be easy to solicit, of course, because many students--especially first-year students--are frightened and/or intimidated by being in a college class!

This is the time in which you can and should explain to your students *why the subject matter of the course matters to you!* Share your enthusiasm. If you are unable to muster any enthusiasm for your course, and by extension your field of study, it’s time to find another career.

Let students know that you are committed to their success. I have found it helpful to ask my students to relate to me as their coach, rather than as their teacher (and certainly NEVER as their parent). Students can do a lot of “projecting” on you, especially in relation to issues pertaining to authority, assignments, grades, and so on.

E) **Distribute and discuss your syllabus,** which is a key component to success of your course.

The syllabus amounts to a *contract* between you and your students. Explain to them that if they choose to remain in the class, they have *agreed* to abide by the terms and conditions spelled out in the syllabus. If your syllabus is well constructed, you will be able to show any complaining students later on that the syllabus already stated in plain language your expectations.

**Your syllabus should:**

1) include the recommended statements about special educational needs, conduct, etc., as
spelled out by the university administration.
2) explain the purpose of your course
3) spell out the ground rules for the course
4) set out the course assignments (by book chapters, articles, page numbers, website, etc.)
day by day for the entire semester

Groundrules may include the following:

a) your attendance policy (and penalties)
b) you policy for being on time for class
sessions
c) your policy for completing assignments prior
to class session at which they will be discussed
or at which they are due
d) your policy regarding penalties (if any) for
assignments submitted after the deadline, for
missed exams, and so on
e) your method for weighting assignments,
tests, and papers in relation to the final grade
f) your policy regarding computing, texting, cell
phones, twittering, and other electronic/digital
devices. [I allow none of the above in my
courses.]
g) your policy about how students are to
conduct themselves toward each other and
ward the instructor.

In regard to conduct, expect civility and show respect. Above all, however, do not tolerate
rudeness to you or anyone else in the class. If it
occurs, you must immediately call attention
to it—respectfully—and ask that such behavior
not continue.

Students who routinely engage in rude behavior
are disrupting class and can (and should) be
removed. Strict university policies govern such
behavior. Always counsel a student privately
before deciding to take further action, however.
In my experience, such counseling almost
always puts and end to negative behavior.
Consulting your chairperson would be the next
step to take.

Calling attention to what is going on in the
classroom (focusing on the “process” of
teaching/learning) is important no matter how
many students are in your class. You are the
ringmaster. If you sense that something is
going wrong, or is not going well, you are the
one responsible for bringing the issue to
everyone’s attention and for devising ways to
address the issue. You can ask your students
for recommendations, in some cases.

There are university policies governing
attendance. Your course should be in line with
them, if possible. Spotty attendance is
demoralizing for those who show up. If you
don’t care whether students come, why should
they care?

(Having said this, I acknowledge that a lecture
course with 400 students is typically not
conducive to learning.)

Excused absences, such as for illness, are a
different matter. If we have a long and difficult
flu season, some students may miss more
classes than usual.

You have to make a judgment call regarding
how many missed class sessions are
permissible, even due to illness. Someone who
is so ill that he/she misses many class sessions
should be encouraged to withdraw from your
class (and possibly from the university) in order
to facilitate recovery.

Course assignments:

Clearly indicate dates for tests, due dates for
assignments, exams, and so on. Consider not
making any formal assignment for the final two
days of class. Students are overwhelmed at this
time and cannot assimilate new information
easily. NEVER assign a “crucial” topic the
last week of class! Remember what this time
of the semester was (and is) like for you. Having
this flex time also allows you to make up
assignments that were unable to be covered (for
whatever reason) earlier in the semester.

Other crucial matters.

1) During your first day and throughout the
semester, you must establish your authority
in an appropriate way. In many cases, you won’t
be much older than your students. Establishing
authority will look different for each
teacher/coach. It can’t seem phony because
students will notice and resent this.
You must prepare yourself for being afraid on your first day and beyond. Stage fright is a term that comes to mind. You will be performing in front of a group of total strangers.

Keep this in mind: It is possible to be afraid AND to perform effectively at the same time.

If you don’t have some serious concerns about how you’re going to do, your preparation may be insufficient.

Adequate preparation is the key to being effective even in the face of fear.

Preparation in this case means not only having the syllabus ready and having a plan for working with the students on the first day, but also REHEARSING prior to the first day. Stand in front of a mirror. Talk out loud, say your lines, and anticipate questions. These practices sessions will inevitably make things go more easily for you.

Many of your students will be afraid, nervous, distracted, and/or anxious. They will not hear much of what you say because they will be talking to themselves about all their worries, concerns, etc. This is why the printed syllabus is so important. They won’t hear a lot of what you say, so it needs to be there for them in black and white. Knowing that your students are often afraid can help you with your own fears.

Remember, the course is not about you. It’s about facilitating learning on the part of your students. If you can remember that you are serving them, as does every great teacher and coach, they will “get” this at some level. If you are indifferent to how your students perform in your course, you should definitely find another occupation!

Have some fun the first day. Let the students get to know you a bit. Tell them that this can be a great course but that you need their commitment, their participation, and their hard work for the good things to happen.

Enroll students in what you’re going to be doing.

Finally, expect to make mistakes; then, clean them up as best you can. I still make mistakes after 35 years of college teaching. It goes with the territory and offers the opportunity to develop humility!

Michael E Zimmerman is a professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Colorado Boulder. He is primarily concerned with anthropogenic environmental problems; his research interests include the metaphysical, cultural, ethical, cognitive, political, and religious dimensions of such problems.