

The First Day of Class

Adapted from Black, Gach, and Kotzian (1996)

It is essential that you put in careful thought and planning for the first lab class. This is the time to set the tone for the rest of the term. It is a time for you to get acquainted with the students and for the students to get acquainted with you and each other. For instance, you may want to know students' majors, math background, computer expertise, and similar courses taken previously, including in high school. If both lecture and lab are not connected as one course, you will want to know which students are taking the lecture course concurrently. You could have students put this information on an index card.

If you plan to have the students work in groups it is important to form the groups and have some way for them to get acquainted with each other (see "Strategies for Developing Students' Group Work Skills", p. 116 for more on using groups). The first day's experiment may be simple but require group members to work together so they begin to get to know each other as collaborators and resources in a learning context.

Help the students understand the relationship of the laboratory section to the overall course and point out that most of the experiments are intended to illustrate basic ideas that underlie the fundamental concepts of science. Briefly review the types of experiments the students will be performing. Emphasize that because it will generally be necessary for you to present essential information and instructions at the beginning of each session, they should be sure to arrive for class on time. Show them the laboratory facilities and give them a few minutes to become familiar with their surroundings.

Much of the lab philosophy, protocol, and policies should be written on a handout in addition to being discussed in class. It is especially important to distribute a handout that specifies policies and guidelines (see "Creating Your Syllabus," p. 18). This is important for several reasons: it gives you and students a written record, students joining the class after the first day don't miss this important information, and, if disputes arise later, you will have documentation. Bring copies to subsequent classes for those who don't attend on the first day. In courses with multiple sections where the instructor provides a course-wide lab handout, it is still important to have your own handout for the section(s) you will teach (see "Sample Lab Syllabus", p. 34). Your students will appreciate knowing your personal outlook and expectations for lab. You can also give more details about your sections (e.g., expected quiz dates, due dates for assignments, embellishments on discretionary points, etc.)

Experienced GSIs in your department are a good resource for finding out what specifically needs to be emphasized or explicitly explained on the first day.

Other things that should be communicated on that first day include:

Lab expectations

- Explain in detail the general ground rules for the proper handling and storage of supplies and equipment.
- Emphasize that because the laboratory must be used by subsequent classes, work areas must be cleared and all equipment cleaned and stored before the end of each session.
- Identify the name and source of the manuals and supplies the students will be expected to purchase.
- Explain the general type of preparation required for each session.

Policies

- Make clear any ground rules such as:
 - › Attendance policies
 - › Late report policies
 - › Lab make up policy
 - › Cheating and plagiarism policies
 - › Breakage and replacement policies

Safety

- Explain the importance of laboratory safety.
- Make sure students know the safety rules, e.g., when to use goggles.
- Make sure the students know what to do in the event of an emergency. (See "Laboratory Safety" on p. 112 for more information)

Student concerns

It is important for anyone who requires special consideration because of physical or other impairments to let you know on the first day. Students may be timid about volunteering this information unless you give them the opportunity to do so. It is the student's responsibility to provide a letter from the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities (734-763-3000) verifying any disabilities, including learning impairments.

Grading

- Review the overall grading policy you will use.
- Discuss your expectations regarding independent and collaborative work.
- Explain the format for notebooks and reports the students will be expected to prepare. You might want to have sample notebooks and reports on hand to show students.
- Give guidelines on what is expected for lab reports. Consider distributing an example of a good lab report and discuss with them why you consider it to be good. (See "Best Practices for Grading Lab Reports" on p. 118 and "Sample Laboratory Report Rubrics" on p. 120 for more information)

Future classes

- Discuss the assignment for the next laboratory session.

Reference

Black, B., Gach, M., & Kotzian, N. (1996). *Guidebook for teaching labs for University of Michigan Graduate Student Instructors*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan.