Sample Icebreakers

Piled Higher and Deeper by Jorge Cham
WHERE YOU SIT IN CLASS/SEMINAR
And what it says about you:

- **Mid-Center:** “Bring it on.”
- **Nearest Exit:** Uncommitted
- **Back Row:** “Too cool for school”
- **Front Row:** Teacher’s pet wannabes
- **Second-row sleepers:** Good intentions, bad narcolepsy
- **Against the wall:** “I’m sensitive. Please ignore me.”

---

**title:** "Where do you sit?" - originally published 5/16/2008

---

**GENERAL**

**Wallet Search** – Students select an item from the wallet, purse, or bag that they feel represents them (a gym membership card, a frequent coffee card, a passport, a journal.) Each person then introduces his or herself (name, year, what s/he did this summer, general info) and explains the meaning behind the item. GSI can also participate.

**Basic Question Prompt** – Develop a question for each student to answer. Possible topics include: what I wish I did this summer, favorite ice cream flavor, favorite vacation destination, something that surprised me today, first/most recent concert attended, last book read, best movie this past year, favorite fast food joint.

**Name History** – Students introduce themselves and explain why they have their name or any funny story associated with their name.

**Paired Interview** – Students pair up and interview one another for five minutes, then come back and introduce the partner to the group.

**Unique and Common** – Similar to the paired interview, students pair up (or work in groups) and determine what they have in common, then come back and report to the group.

**Concentric Circles** – Students form two concentric circles so that each person from the outside circle is facing a partner from the inside circle. The group is given a question (what I wish I did this summer, something that surprised me today, if you could have lunch with any person who would it be?) and partners discuss the question for about a minute. Inside circle rotates one spot and partners discuss another question. Questions can also be designed to build on course content.

---

3 Adapted in part from Lisa Fein and Tomomi Yamaguchi, CRLT Orientation Packet, Fall 2003, and Kristine Schutz, CRLT Orientation Packet, Fall 2010. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
Name Games – Creating a learning community where students know and feel comfortable with one another is important. Providing a structure for learning names puts students at ease and allows them to interact in a less formal setting. Although this is higher education, consider using name games you might have learned years ago!

CONTENT BASED

Shifting assumptions – Present a course-related topic that most students think they have some knowledge about (the five paragraph essay, the discipline of anthropology, the notion of a single American culture, supply and demand). Ask students to jot down ideas about the topic in pairs or groups. Discuss the responses as a group and, ideally, explain how the class will push beyond their basic assumptions about the course material.

True/False Quiz – Similar to shifting assumptions, prepare a short quiz on topics in the course. Questions don’t need to actually have a strict true or false answer – these will enable more enlivened discussion. Students can complete quiz in pairs, groups, or alone. Once they have completed it, discuss as a class.

Ideal section/lab – In small groups or pairs, students discuss how they define an ideal class. As a large group, discuss what they come up with.

Provocative question – Present students with a provocative question regarding course content on the board/overhead. Have students discuss it in small groups and then as a class. Relate the question back to course material/goals.

Course title brainstorm – Ask students to brainstorm about the course title in small groups and then together as a large group. Use the student-generated responses to develop a mind map of course content on the board.

Course Goals/Concerns – Ask students (in pairs or small groups) to come up with some of their goals for the course as well as particular anxieties or concerns. Discuss as a class and relate their responses to your own goals and plan for the course.

SUGGESTIONS

If the section is small enough, try to have each of the students repeat one another’s names (or do this yourself – it impresses them and helps you to remember who they are).

In all activities where students are in pairs or small groups, ask them to introduce themselves to one another.
GOALS FOR THE FIRST DAY

There are three primary types of classroom goals:

1. Logistical goals include “housekeeping” and basic classroom business
2. Content goals refer to the “core information,” or content “take-aways” for each session.
3. Process goals are often unstated or intangible choices that will help students learn.

Classify the goals listed below as logistical, content, or process goals. Add goals that your students may have and classify decide whether they fit the above classification scheme.

1. Learn names of students
2. Introduce yourself to students
3. Hand out syllabus
4. Set tone for the semester
5. Create a sense of shared purpose
6. Emphasize value of the class
7. Generate excitement
8. Set goals and expectations
9. Explain class rules and procedures

What is the value of defining your goals for the first day? What conclusions can we draw from this list and from the ways that you classified each of these goals?

---

4 Adapted from Nafpaktitis 2003, Cornelius 2005, Merrins 2008, Bebej 2010 CRLT materials
Identity and Authority in the Classroom-GSI
Several of the sketches presented by the CRLT Players brought up situations and topics around identity and authority in the classroom. Reflecting on the following sketches may be useful for answering the discussion questions.

Imposter, Fraud, Fake, Charlatan, Phony, Sham: Me
The lights go out during a grading session, and the audience gets a peek at the fears of four graduate student instructors.

Practice Teaching-Who Do You Think You Are?
Joe attempts to decide who he will be in the classroom by trying on different teaching personas.

In the “Imposter, Fraud, Fake, Charlatan, Phony, Sham: Me” sketch the GSIs were concerned with how the students would perceive them.
- What aspects of the sketch resonated with you?
- How do you think that your students might see you in the classroom?

The sketch “Practice Teaching- Who Do You Think You Are?” highlighted different teaching personas.
- What is your teaching persona and how might that influence your classroom presence?
- What strategies could you use to establish your authority and identity in the classroom?
Identity and Authority in the Classroom-Students
Several of the sketches presented by the CRLT Players brought up situations and topics around identity and authority in the classroom. Reflecting on the following sketches may be useful for answering the discussion questions.

In Between
A class discussion turns to race, and everyone looks to Imani for answers.

Ass Out of U and Me
Two students share stories about how their teachers’ assumptions negatively affected their learning experiences.

Reflect on the students in the sketches “In Between” and “Ass out of U and Me”.
- How might student identity influence their learning experience in your classroom?

In both “In Between” and “Ass out of U and Me”, assumptions were made about the students’ backgrounds, life experience, and prior knowledge.
- What strategies might you use to make all students feel comfortable in your classroom? Think about how both individual and group work might be affected by real or perceived identity.
Introducing Yourself and Establishing Authority

Make a Strong First Impression

- Arrive early and put important information on the board. Start class on time.
- Show students your enthusiasm for the subject matter, or for teaching.
- If you are worried about looking “young” or about not commanding student attention, dress more formally on the first day (or days) of class.

Establish Your Credibility

- Share your qualifications with your students. Discuss your prior teaching experience, your research interests, or your beginnings in this discipline.
- Focus on what you do know, not what you don’t know. Instead of saying “It is my first time teaching and I’m not really an expert on this topic,” say “As a PhD student in this department I have always been interested in this subject matter and I look forward to learning even more about it.” Remember, you do know more than your students!

Clarify Your Expectations

- Tell students what will be expected of them with regard to attendance, grading, participation, assignments and late work policies.
- Cover important administrative information like when and where your office hours are, where students can buy required textbooks, etc.
- Allow students time to ask questions. If you cannot answer their questions, say you will get back to them once you find an answer (and do follow through).

Identify the Value and Importance of the Subject

- Explain why your course is important. Describe why the subject matter is interesting to you and what you hope students will get out of taking the course.

Establish Ground Rules for Participation in Class

- As a class, set ground rules for classroom interaction. By asking students for their input you give them a sense of ownership that can help them take the “classroom code of conduct” more seriously.

---

Backward Design: A Brief Overview

"Backward design may be thought of as purposeful task analysis: Given a task to be accomplished, how do we get there? Or one might call it planned coaching: What kinds of lessons and practices are needed to master key performances."\(^1\)

"Curriculum, no matter how well planned, is realized through the interactions that occur in social situations....Curriculum is more than what is written on the page."\(^2\)

---


Sample Lesson Plan

DATE: _____________________

LESSON OBJECTIVES: (What are your logistical, content, and process goals for the session?)

BEFORE-CLASS PREP:

MATERIALS:

INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE: (What will you do? What will the students do? How do these steps lead students to the learning goals above?)

ASSESSMENT: (May be formal or informal—how will you know if students have met your objectives?)

END OF CLASS: (How will you conclude? What points do you want to emphasize? What do students need to know to prepare for the next class?)

BACK-POCKET PLAN: (What new, brief activity or extension of a class discussion/activity can you add to the lesson plan if you have additional time?)

POST-CLASS NOTES: (add reflections after you teach the lesson—what would you do the same or differently next time? Did students meet your objectives?)

Adapted from CRLT Orientation Packet Fall 2012. Courtesy: Daphna Atias
**Syllabus Checklist**

---

**Basic Information**
- course title/number/section, days and times taught, location of class
- semester and year course is being taught
- your name and office number, office location, email, home phone number
  (if you choose to include it)
- office hours
- Web site address or group email address

**Course or Section Description**
- goals/objectives/relevancy of course
- prerequisites

**Course or Section Texts/Materials**
- required or recommended (title(s), author(s), edition(s))
- where texts can be purchased
- course pack information
- other necessary equipment or materials (e.g., graphing calculator)

**Course Schedule/Weekly Calendar**
- dates of all assignments and exams
- dates when readings are due
- holidays and special events (e.g., field trips, guest lectures)

**Course or Section Policies**
- attendance/tardy
- class participation (if you choose to formally evaluate)
- late/missing assignments
- academic dishonesty
- explicit grading criteria
- expectations of scholarship
- accommodations

**Other Handouts or Information Relevant to Your Particular Course**
- availability of outside help (e.g., tutoring services, language labs, Sweetland Writing Center)
- unique class procedures and structures that require more detail (e.g., cooperative learning, case study method, class journals).

---

7 Adapted from University of Michigan GSI Guidebook
Opinions of Office Hours

What is the Purpose of GSI Office Hours?
- Follow-up on course materials.
- Answer questions about the homework or other course material.
- Teach the students good study habits.
- Help the students with exam preparation.
- Clarify information from lecture and elaborate on specific points.
- Provide additional mentoring aside from course issues; on life, graduate school, potential jobs, etc.
- For individualized learning.
- To act as a resource for students.

Why Would a Student Attend GSI Office Hours?
- A student needs help completing the homework or answering homework questions.
- The GSI runs effective office hours by providing assistance to everyone who comes.
- The GSI can explain material covered in class better than the professor can.
- The student cannot work with the professor.
- The GSI provides answers to the homework problem.
- Students go to office hours to talk to other students in the class to get their perspective or help; office hours act as a community meeting place.
- The GSI encourages students to go to office hours.
- The one-on-one interaction during office hours may help students clarify their questions and learn better.

Why Would a Student NOT Attend GSI Office Hours?
- The student likes to independently study and do homework on their own.
- There is a stigma about asking for help.
- The office hours are often too crowded.
- Students are uncomfortable with the GSI (the GSI can be condescending, intimidating, etc).
- Confusion about the time and place, students do not know where the office is and/or the GSI has not made it explicitly clear what time they hold office hours.
- Inconvenient times for the student (early Monday morning).
- The GSI does not use the time efficiently (e.g. the GSI spends a lot of time on trivial points; the GSI only answers one student’s questions at a time).

Adapted from CRLT-Engin Office Hours Resource Packet
Things to Consider When Setting Up Office Hours

- Coordination with other GSI(s) and professor – if possible, stagger office hours so that you don’t have your office hours on the same day or at the same time.

- Holding separate office hours for review or conceptual questions and homework questions—this can help students who are struggling with the material not get drowned out by a myriad of homework questions.

- Check with the primary instructor how much help you are allowed to give students—can you discuss the actual homework problems or just problems similar to the homework problems? Are you allowed to tell them when they’re on the right track or when they’ve made a mistake?

- If you have a class with projects, consider breaking some of your office hours up into small appointments so that one group cannot dominate or take a majority of your time while others are neglected.

Adapted from CRLT-Engin Office Hours Resource Packet
Formats of Office Hours

One-on-One/Small Groups
Pros
- Individual attention
- Less intimidating to students who don’t want to ask questions in front of their peers
- Gain insights into the class that might not be gained by addressing them in a large group
- More comfortable for GSIs who do not like to formally lecture
Cons
- Less efficient than meeting with large number of students.
- Less consistent information delivery.
- Repetitive when same questions are asked
- Sometimes difficult to resist simply giving answers

Discussion/Review Session
Pros
- Service many students simultaneously in a time efficient manner
- Students are reassured that they are not the only one that did not understand “that” concept in class
- Stimulate students to learn from each other
Cons
- Students can get answers simply by coming to office hours, without trying the problems themselves
- Must manage excess collaboration depending on course guidelines (e.g. must all work be done independently)

Impromptu Face-to-Face or Email/CTools Chat
Pros
- Students appreciate availability
- Email allows for written explanation which can be good if there is a language barrier for either the GSI or student
Cons
- Possibly intrusive
- Can pose a time management issue
- Number of student emails can be overwhelming.
- Difficult to express mathematical terms.
Common Issues Affecting Office Hours

Common Office Hours Problems
- Room is too crowded.
- Some students are intimidated by the GSI.
- Students want easy answers to the homework problems.
- Layout of the room creates difficulties for the GSI to manage the students.
- Limited resources such as time and space which degrade the experience of the student.
- E-mail office hours, students constantly emailing their questions to the GSI.
- Students expect GSIs to redeliver entire lecture.
- Unprepared students not starting homework assignments before coming in, not attending lectures, etc.
- Students trying to get on the good side of the GSI to get a good grade.

Ways to Address Issues:

GSI Office is Too Crowded
- Change rooms if possible.
- Create problem teams (groups of students with the same question).
- Set up specific rules and stick to them.
- Students put names on a board for help and a time limit can be imposed to ask a question, then when their time is up they have to submit to the next person in line and put their name back on the board.
- Encourage use of email for simple questions.

Student is intimidated by the GSI
- Smile.
- Use the students' names. Every GSI will have access to a photo roster of their students on Wolverine Access which can be used to look up students names.
- Acknowledgement of the material’s difficulties, relate to the students that you had a similar problem when taking this subject.
- Use a variety of examples that students can directly relate to.
- Encourage people to ask questions.

Students Who Want the Answer Only
- Be firm and tell students to work out questions prior to meeting with you.
- Ask them questions about lectures, etc.
- Reiterate the purpose of office hours.
- Communicate that you are on their side but don’t provide the answers (remind them that you are not part of their open book exam policy).

Adapted from CRLT-Engin Office Hours Resource Packet
E-mail Expectations

Email is an efficient way to answer many students’ questions. However, as a GSI it is important to establish “ground rules” for student e-mails so that your students know what they can expect from you in regards to answering e-mails. Think about the following issues when creating your e-mail policy.

When will you answer e-mail?
Think about when and how often you will check and respond to e-mails. Will you check them on the weekend? Will you answer them the day homework is due? Also if you will only check your course e-mail once each day around 7:00 PM, you may want to let your students know so they can have their questions to you and they won’t be stuck waiting until the next day for a response if they e-mail you around 8:00 PM.

Which questions are appropriate to handle by e-mail?
While e-mail can be an easy way to respond to “quick” questions, complicated conceptual questions can often be explained much better in person. Also, it is very difficult to write mathematical formulas and expressions via e-mail. Think about which questions you will handle by e-mail and which would be better handled by having a student talk to you during office hours or a few minutes before or after class.

How quickly will you respond to e-mail?
Let students know that you will answer their e-mails within some target time, and let them know what to do if they don’t get an answer within that time frame. This can help avoid the redundant “I’m not sure if you got my last e-mail” e-mails, but can also help ensure that students receive timely answers to their e-mails.

Should you filter your GSI e-mail?
Asking students to add your course name to the subject of their e-mail can allow you to have their e-mail filtered to a separate folder (for instance, instead of having the subject “Quick Homework Questions”, have students instead write “ENG 310: Quick Homework Questions”). This provides some separation between your personal and research related e-mail and that you are answering for your GSI responsibilities.

Adapted from CRLT-Engin Office Hours Resource Packet