

The first day of ESL class is one of the most important days for students and teachers alike. It sets the tone for the rest of the course or semester. Good first impressions are vital for establishing a rapport and connecting with your students. You and the students will probably feel excited and a little anxious. Make sure you have a well-prepared first lesson and keep your objectives for the first class simple and achievable. This helps to establish a structured learning environment from the get-go. Here are a few ideas to help you and the students get the most out of the first class.

First impressions

Arrive to class early! Coming to class early gives you time to get set up and deal with any issues that arise. If possible, set up the classroom seating. The physical setup of chairs and tables can significantly influence how students learn. Seating arrangements can also impact how you communicate with your students and how the students interact with one another. Students often make decisions about what the class will be like by the way the chairs are arranged. U-shaped seating is ideal for most ESL classes as it helps to create a more relaxed and open atmosphere that encourages student participation. Also, when you arrive at class, check that your teaching aids such as the computer, speakers and projector are working correctly. You don't want to be dealing with faulty equipment with a class full of students looking at you as this takes away from your credibility. Furthermore, make sure you are dressed appropriately. Research suggests that clothing affects how people first judge you. A shirt and tie for men or smart dress for women shows you are professional and adds to your confidence. Smiling and greeting the students as they enter the class is also a good idea as it helps to create a good atmosphere and first impression.

Names

It is a good idea for you to start using the students' names as soon as possible. Depending on the country you are in, you may wish to use students' first names or nicknames. On the first day, have name cards for the students to wear, so you and the other students can remember one another's name. You could also draw up a seating plan with the students' names on. Learning a lot of names takes time. Don't be ashamed if you forget a student's name. Be direct, apologize and ask for their name. The more you use the students' names in class, the quicker you will remember them. Students often feel good when you know who they are. It also helps build a more personalized relationship between you and the students. Games and activities that help students remember one another's name are also useful. Try our [Portraits](#) or [Both of Us](#) activity to help students with names. For younger learners, you can have the students play [The Name Game](#).

Introducing yourself

Introducing yourself to the class is an important part of the first lesson. The students will be interested to know who you are and what you are like. You should introduce yourself and give some background information about who you are. This helps the students relate to you and begins building the student-teacher relationship that's so important on the first day. Your introduction is also an opportunity to establish your own credibility. Tell the students about your qualifications and teaching experience. This will give the students confidence in your teaching ability. There are many ways to introduce yourself. Think about your own teaching style and do whatever works best for you. To keep energy levels up and reduce boring speeches, try turning your introduction into a game or activity the students can participate in. To help you introduce yourself to the class, here are some fun activities you can use. The [Who am I](#) game is not only great for introducing yourself, but you can also gain insight into your students' level of English, which is extremely useful on the first day. [Teacher's Question Time](#) is another entertaining way to introduce yourself to the class. This game provides the students with a chance to write and respond to a variety of questions.

Games

There is nothing better to make students feel relaxed than playing a fun ESL game. Playing games in the first lesson makes the students feel energized, calms nerves and improves their confidence to speak English. Games also help to break down any barriers between you and the students. Some great games to play on the first day of class can be found on our [First Day Introduction Games](#) page.

First class activities

Your students need to understand that they are going to be active participants in your class. Asking students to introduce themselves, ask you a question, talk about their expectations for the course, or introduce a partner are all good activities for the first day of class. Try to keep all the activities you do in the first lesson fun and light. Don't start off with a grammar lesson that is going to kill the classroom dynamics. It's also important for you to find out about the students so you can tailor future classes to suit them better. If you find out the students like a particular pop group or sport, you will be able to tap into this interest at a later point in the course. Have a look at our [Greetings and Making Introductions](#) page for activities to help students greet each other, find out one another's name and introduce themselves and others. You could also try our [Giving Personal Information](#) page and [Small Talk](#) page for resources to help students talk about themselves. We also have a [Getting to Know You](#) activities page that contains fun materials to use in the first lesson.

Class rules

A set of rules for the class is not a bad thing. Students need to understand what you consider acceptable behaviour. However, don't have too many rules and whatever rules you have make sure you stick to them. Students will normally test the rules to see how you react and to see what they can and can't get away with. Stick to your guns and don't bend the rules for anyone or you will lose credibility. Additionally, you will want to go through any other expectations you have for the class, such as homework or in-class behaviour.

The course

The students are going to want to know the course objectives and the basics of the course syllabus to help them clarify what they have to do. Explain the significance of the course and how learning English is going to benefit the students. In this way, the students will invest their time and energy into studying with you. Try not to criticize the textbook if you don't like it. Instead, show enthusiasm for the content. If you show interest in what you are teaching, this will rub off on the students. At this point, you may wish to go through any other administrative information, e.g. office hours, breaks, exams, attendance, grading, lateness, etc. Furthermore, cover how you plan to teach. For example, if you want the class to work in pairs or small groups, try to incorporate an activity that covers that on the first day. Also, make sure you set aside a time for the students to ask questions about the class or course. Shy students may wish to come and speak to you at the end of class. Give these students time and try to answer all their questions.

Phones

Phones are generally an annoyance in the classroom and disrupt teaching and learning. A good idea to stop phone usage is to introduce a small fine for offenders. This turns an annoyance into something that is quite amusing and financially beneficial. You can ask the students to suggest a worthy charity on the first day of class and donate the money you receive at the end of the course or semester.

Another strategy for dealing with phones in class is to offer offenders a choice of giving the phone to you or having their phone put in a paper bag, stapled shut and left on the student's desk. The bag offers the student reassurance that the phone isn't confiscated, but also stops phone usage as the bag is sealed and if touched makes a loud crinkling noise which discourages the student from touching it.

Racks or boxes are also a popular choice to limit phone use. As the students come into class, they put their phone on the rack or in the box and get it back at the end of class. If you're teaching younger students, you can create a points system that rewards students each time they remember to turn off or put their phones on silent. At the same time, the system can be used to take away points from students who are caught using their phones during class. At the end of each week or month, award small prizes to the students with the most points.

Final thoughts

A lot of time and effort goes into planning the first lesson. However, the results are worth it. An engaging and fun first lesson will put your students at ease and help create a positive learning environment for the rest of the course. Good luck.