

Guide for Instructors of First-Year Courses in Arts and Science

First year at university is vastly different from high school. The first-year experience can be overwhelming for students: not only do they have to adjust to a much more rigorous academic environment, but they also have to learn time-management skills, how to use library and on-line resources, how to take notes and how to write essays. First-year students are thrilled to be here but their initial reactions may be maladaptive. Some seriously underestimate their ability to meet the challenge and are terrified; others seriously overestimate their ability to meet the challenge and are inappropriately complacent. In either case, as an instructor, you have the opportunity, if not responsibility, to set them on the right academic track.

It is our challenge as instructors in such a large educational institution to achieve the benefits of scale, while overcoming its disadvantages. The reality is that University of Toronto is a richly-textured institution populated by talented, positive people, from whose activities students can only benefit, were they to know of them.

What follows are suggestions that have been put forward by experienced teachers of first-year courses, who feel that, as instructors, we can do better in easing students' transition into the realities and requirements of university work. While many of these suggestions could apply to all students, they are here offered in terms of particular relevance to first-year students, including first-year students in courses beyond the first year. It is worth noting that the instructor of a first-year course is introducing students to the university culture as well as to the course. An investment now will be a gain for both you and your students throughout this and succeeding years.

The first class

In the first class, first-year students do a lot of intense processing of the instructor. They are paying more attention to you at this time than at any other comparable time in the course, except possibly when you are discussing the content of an upcoming exam. Their attention is focused at least as much on the manner in which you present the material as it is on the material itself. (Though possibly an exaggeration, some survey results have suggested that students' impressions are set in the first ten minutes of the first class and that these impressions correlate highly with their final course evaluations!) Therefore the first meeting of a class is an important vehicle for getting students on the right track and for establishing your role as an educator beyond merely transmitting information.

The first class is also a critical one for calling attention to the structure and content of the course. This is particularly important for first-year students, who are attempting to deal with all of the new experiences associated with their first taste of university life. In your first class, you should consider attempting to accomplish the following:

- **Providing each of your first-year students with a copy of the course syllabus**

It is worthwhile to explain to your students the importance of the course syllabus as a document that should be kept and referred to for the duration of the course. The information in the syllabus should not be communicated to students merely orally, or via an overhead. The syllabus itself provides the opportunity to convey your own expectations and goals for your students and the educational experience you are providing them through the various components of the course.

Particularly for first-year students, the syllabus should, at a minimum, include a breakdown of the marking scheme, with the value for each component of the course (essays, lab reports, term tests, final exam), and the due dates for term work. You might also include such additional information as the recommended schedule of readings to be completed each week, penalties for late submission of work, the academic drop date, and details about the assignments such as that the essay will be a ten-page research paper, or that term tests will consist of multiple-choice and short-answer questions.

- **Giving your first-year students a clear idea of your expectations of them**

Explain that instructors do vary in their expectations of students and that these are your ground rules. Topics to cover might include the role of the tutorials (optional or required), your policy on group work, a warning about plagiarism and cheating, appropriate web resources, the proper use of the internet for research, and the need for students to familiarize themselves with campus library facilities. Emphasize the importance for them to take the initiative for learning the material and, unlike high school, not to wait to be spoon-fed. *It is also a good time to stress the importance of effective time management and the development of appropriate study habits for the course that may differ from what they had been accustomed to in high school.* One difference in university is the sheer quantity of materials covered on a consistent basis. Another is the need to question and apply, not just absorb, these materials.

- **Informing your first-year students about how to get in touch with you**

If you prefer one type of communication to another (for example, e-mail as opposed to phone calls), let your students know this. Identify other personnel related to the course: teaching assistants, lab assistants, and so forth; tell your students what the roles of these individuals are and how to get in touch with them.

- **Expressing a positive approach towards the course material**

This expressed attitude could take the form of describing your own enthusiasm and interest in the subject and what brought you to the discipline. Make your students feel that you want them to do well. Present yourself more as their coach or facilitator than as their hurdle or obstacle.

- **Recognizing the diversity in the background of first-year students**

With respect to the composition of the student body, the University of Toronto is one of the most diverse universities in North America. This diversity enriches the total educational environment for both students and faculty. It can, however, also present a substantial challenge. How do you ensure that your teaching is comprehended as you intend throughout the class and that your students leave each class with a common understanding of the material you covered? What vocabulary do you choose for students from different language backgrounds? If unsure about how the University respects its diversity while also maintaining consistent and fair academic policies, you might consult with your department's undergraduate coordinator, your chair, or one or more of the student service offices listed at the end.

- **Acknowledging the presence of first-year students with disabilities**

It is likely that there will be some first-year students in your class who have a disability (visible or not visible) and who might be unsure about what to expect from both you specifically and the University in general. It is also likely that the accommodation that they will receive at the University will not be the same as what they received in high school. Therefore it would be very helpful if you could convey to your students a clear message that those with disabilities are welcome in your classroom and that they can safely disclose their disabilities, or choose not to. You should also ensure that they know about DisAbility Services for students and about your willingness to work with either the service, the student, or both – sooner rather than later. You can anticipate being contacted by DisAbility Services concerning those of your first-year students who require accommodation.

- **Projecting the impression that you are approachable**

For course-related matters, your first-year students should feel that they can speak to you (or to the course coordinator if the course is multi-section). They should also be made aware that your department or program has an undergraduate coordinator or program director.

For more personal matters, such as disabilities (as discussed above), anxiety, or harassment, be prepared to refer students to the appropriate student service office such as DisAbility Services, Counselling and Learning Skills Service, or the Community Safety Coordinator. A list of offices and telephone numbers is included at the end of this guide. At the very least, urge them to contact their College Registrar's office, which can direct them to the correct student service office.

It is important to note that many of the points you make in the first class will likely not sink in right away. During the first few weeks of classes first-year students are being bombarded with information from many sources. It is therefore a good idea to repeat the essential information on a semi-regular basis over the first few weeks to make sure that your expectations have been made clear.

Early in the term you will likely be asked by a representative of one or more of the following student organizations for the opportunity to make announcements in class on their behalf: your department's undergraduate course union, the Arts and Science Students Union (ASSU), or the Association of Part-Time Undergraduate Students (APUS). You might take this opportunity to alert students about some of the services these groups provide, such as making available libraries of previous term tests and final examinations, conducting course evaluations, and nominating instructors for teaching awards.

Before the first term test or the first assignment is due

Since first-year students are new to, and apprehensive about, the evaluative process, it is important to clarify the nature and form of the questions that will appear on the first term test, for example, multiple-choice, slide identification, or essay. If appropriate, spend a few minutes of class time doing a short, sample practice test, or provide a couple of examples of the type of essay question you might ask. *It might also be useful to inform students about proper conduct at tests and the seriousness with which the University views and treats infractions.* The expectations expressed should be reinforced consistently during actual tests.

With respect to the first assignment, reiterate your expectations about it, citing, for example, such issues as the submission of group work, plagiarism, and the proper citation of sources. *The issue of plagiarism is particularly important.* It is useful to raise it right from the start in first-year classes, because the attitude to plagiarism is often very different between high schools and universities. By addressing the issue at the beginning of term, you can head off a lot of the trouble before it happens.

The kind of plagiarism is likely to vary across disciplines. Explain to your students what constitutes plagiarism in your discipline. For example, in the humanities and social sciences a principal concern is the proper attribution of sources; in the sciences plagiarism is more likely to occur between students than between a student and a textual source. For essay assignments, inform your students about the writing labs organized by their College, and draw their attention to the web guide, *How Not to Plagiarize*, provided by the Coordinator of the University's Writing Support .

After the first assignment is returned

The sooner first-year students get feedback the better. For many first-year students in Arts and Science, the return of the first piece of marked work is highly informative, though, in some cases, devastating. Your students would not have been admitted to the University of Toronto if they did not have very high marks in high school. Even if you warn your students in the first class that the average mark on the first term test is likely to be in the mid 60s, many of them will not believe that they themselves might well end up with such a mark, or one even lower.

If possible, try to return the first piece of marked work in class, rather than in tutorial or lab, and, in any event, devote some class time to discussing the assignment in detail. Tell your students what your own expectations of them were, how many of them met your expectations, where those who did not do well went astray, what the average mark was, and what they can do if they think there was an error in the marking. Try to put all of this information in a positive light. Your students need to feel that you are pulling for them to succeed.

First-year students in the humanities and social sciences usually need an explanation of a marking scheme in which points are given to reflect the quality of work presented, rather than losing points from a perfect score by deviating from a perfect response. They need to understand that in university marks of 100% or A+ seldom if ever occur outside the sciences.

The sooner in an academic term or year that tests and/or assignments are required and marked, the sooner the requirements of university become known. But this is made less painful by employing marking schemes that de-emphasize the weight of the earliest marks.

First-year students at risk

One of the main purposes of preparing this guide is to establish a process for identifying first-year students who are in danger of failing one or more of their courses. Ideally, such students would themselves take the initiative and seek assistance. But in many cases, first-year students do not recognize their difficulties soon enough or do not know how, where or when to go for help. The Faculty intends to address this problem by requesting each instructor of a first-year course to send before the end of the first term the names of students at risk to the Faculty Registrar's office, which will forward the names to the relevant College Registrar's office. The College Registrar's office will then contact the students and suggest appropriate methods for improving their marks. As an instructor of a first-year course in Arts and Science, you will be contacted by George Altmeyer, Assistant Dean and Faculty Registrar, with the details of this process.

Tips of particular relevance to *large* first-year classes

First-year students find the large lecture class that component of university life most foreign to their previous academic experience. Many find these classes alienating and intimidating, at least initially, and their early experience in these classes exacerbates all the problems they have in adapting to the university culture. And because typically attendance is not recorded and assignments and tests occur much later in the term, there are strong temptations for first-year students to miss classes and to postpone course work, with often severe, and occasionally irreversible, academic consequences. Following are a number of points to consider as you approach teaching your students in a large first-year course.

- **Course organization**

The large first-year lecture course places a particular premium on planned and effective organization: the coordination of the responsibilities of the teaching assistants and administrative staff; the logistics of handling handouts, tests and assignments; and the structure of lectures, tutorials and labs. Your students are aware if a course is or is not well organized, and your attention to such details reassures your students that you have designed the course for their benefit, with little left to chance. Spontaneous flexibility, while an educational virtue in the context of a small class, can lead to chaos in a large lecture course, producing needless anxiety and frustration.

- **The course syllabus**

In a large first-year lecture course there is limited opportunity for interaction with the instructor. Therefore for a first-year student, the course syllabus is a lifeline. Students are alert both to its overt content and to its underlying subtext that reveals, along with your first week's lectures, the attitude of the course staff towards the students. (See general discussion in "[The first class](#)" concerning the syllabus.)

- **Web sites**

In a large lecture course, a course web site can be a useful, if not indispensable, supplement for first-year students. The site might vary from being a simple, static repository of course information, the syllabus, schedule of test dates and other relevant information to being a sophisticated, dynamic system that includes threaded discussions and on-line tutorials. In any case, first-year students, many of whom are already web-savvy, might find it less intimidating to make their initial contacts with course staff through the course web site.

- **The first class**

In the first class of a large first-year lecture course, it is reassuring to your students for you to call their attention to your own awareness of the challenges faced by first-year students in such a large course and what course resources are available to them. Inform them of the administrative network that is in place to help them, such as TAs, administrative staff, the course coordinator, and the course web site. (See general discussion in "[The first class](#)" concerning the first class)

- **The large-class experience**

Describe the purpose of a large-class lecture and how your students can best benefit from it beyond it being merely the means for the transmission of notes. This is an excellent opportunity for you to reinforce for them the distinction between the lecture as an experience that involves a "process" of active engagement as opposed to the lecture as a "product" that might alternatively be made available in a more impoverished form through the vehicle of canned notes on a web site or from some other student's transcriptions.

- **Discipline**

In the large first-year lecture, you should be prepared to address the problems of disruptions arising from individual student behaviour. Usually the problems are inadvertent and arise from the collective effects of seemingly inconsequential individual actions of your students, usually taking the form of talking, rustling of papers, or moving about. If not dealt with, however, the problem can easily escalate to the point that it is quite difficult to bring it under control. There is a perhaps unconscious testing among your students of the limits of acceptable behaviour the effects of which can be discerned in comparing the ambience across the lecture classes of different instructors.

It is best early in the large lecture course, even if not on the first day, to discuss this problem amicably with your students. It can often best be done by simply referring to the normal rules of civility and good manners and indicating how their individual behaviours impinge on the rights of other students in the class.

When a problem does arise from a well-defined area of the lecture hall, it is best not to confront it angrily, say, by haranguing the offending parties and threatening to banish them from the class. A more effective strategy, for example, is to stop mid-sentence and to stare blandly and silently at the source of the disruption. The bulk of your students (who in this respect, at least, are "on your side") will join you in regarding the source. When the offenders, who are likely not yet aware of their effect, discover their impact, they will almost invariably cease their behaviour, often with some embarrassment. The advantage of this minimalist approach is that you have not alienated any students through an angry outburst, and the offending students are themselves affected immediately by the natural negative social consequences of their own behaviour.

Tips of particular relevance to *small* first-year classes

- **Learning your students' names**

For many first-year students, especially science students, a small class might be the only one in which the instructor knows their names. When the classroom layout allows, some instructors use "U.N.-style" name cards in front of each student as a means for the students to get to know each other's names, another desirable feature of such classes. If the class is small enough, you might also consider personal interviews with your students. These interviews need be only a few minutes each and are useful in fixing their names and in explaining specific features of the course, for example essay topics or class presentations.

- **Participation**

A small class can place much more emphasis on frequent participation, such as individual or group class presentations, with written copy submitted as back-up to the presentations. This experience is good preparation for upper-year courses. Group projects for your students can build very strong spirit and effective friendly competition, resulting in quality class presentations.

- **Assessment**

If the nature of the assignments allows, a small class provides the opportunity for closer marking commentary on written work, with appropriate references to, for example, the writing labs.

- **Web sites**

In a small class, it is possible to set up a restricted web site where your students can respond to questions, issues, and readings. Such a site lets them read each other's comments and helps to develop their facility with using the web. It can, if desired, also be incorporated into the overall marking scheme.

Personal issues

One of your first-year students might approach you with a question or concern that is of a personal nature. Although you are clearly not responsible for counselling your students on non-academic matters, as an instructor you are an important component of the support network established by the University to help our first-year students succeed.

All of the services and resources offered to students by the University are described in [Getting There: a student guide to the University of Toronto](#). If you do not have a copy of this guide, you can telephone the University Office of Student Affairs for it or can check the [on-line version](#). If the answer to your question is not in [Getting There](#), call the University Office of Student Affairs for advice or information.

Following are examples of personal issues that you might encounter:

One of your first-year students tells you about being harassed or bothered by another student.

Reassure the student that harassment of any kind does not have to be tolerated. The University prohibits sexual harassment and has a Sexual Harassment Officer to handle cases. Other forms of harassment are prohibited under the *Code of Student Conduct*. Some forms of harassment are covered under Canadian criminal law. Encourage the student to tell the other student to stop the offending behaviour, unless the student has concerns about safety. If you feel comfortable doing so, you yourself might offer to speak to the offending student. If you judge the situation to be serious and you feel that the student's safety is in jeopardy in any way, call the Campus Police or the Community Safety Coordinator. If the student wants to make a formal complaint of a sexual nature, this can be done through the Sexual Harassment Officer. Assistance can also be sought from the student's college and from the Community Safety Coordinator.

One of your first-year students reports having been sexually assaulted.

The student probably should speak to a counsellor. Explain that you are not equipped to provide specialized advice or support but that you do know that help is available. The University has a Sexual Assault Counsellor, housed within the Counselling and Learning Skills Service. You can also direct the student to the Community Safety Coordinator.

One of your first-year students asks for special accommodation because of a disability (and you are not sure whether this student indeed has a disability).

The University is obligated by provincial law, as well as by our own institutional policies, to provide appropriate educational services to students with a disability. If you are not sure whether the student really does have a disability, you can call DisAbility Services to learn whether the student is registered there. As an instructor, you are not entitled to know the precise nature of the disability, though students are encouraged to disclose these details to you so that you can work with them to make the appropriate modifications/accommodations.

That a student is not registered with DisAbility Services does not necessarily mean that the student does not have a disability. However, you are under no obligation to provide accommodations to students unless they register with DisAbility Services and provide adequate documentation to substantiate their need for accommodation.

There is a handbook, *Teaching Students with Disabilities*, that explains all of the strategies used to ensure students can complete your course. You can request a copy from DisAbility Services.

You suspect that one of your first-year students has a learning disability of which the student might not be aware.

Some students do very well in high school, and it is only when they arrive at university that their learning difficulties are manifested. This might become apparent, for example, if there is a distinct difference in quality between a student's in-class performance and written assignments.

You can make a general announcement at the beginning of the course, indicating that students with disabilities who need accommodation strategies should make an appointment to discuss them with you. You can also invite an individual student to discuss an assignment with you, and suggest that the student seek assistance from one of the many writing labs or visit the "Drop-in" facility of the Counselling and Learning Skills Centre, located in the Koffler Centre for Student Services, near the Health Service.

One of your first-year students breaks down, claiming to be under too much pressure.

Reassure such students by telling them they are one of many students who experience significant pressure in their academic life and that there is help available right on campus. The University employs counsellors who deal with anxiety, stress management and other mental health issues. Suggest to such students that they call or visit the Counselling and Learning Skills Service or the Psychiatric Service.

One of your first-year students asks you to change a mark for fear of parental disappointment or reprisal.

Some students who did well in high school are devastated when they do not do as well at the start of their first year in university and are fearful of the information being disclosed to their parents. They should be reassured that the University will not reveal their grades to their parents and that it is up to the students themselves to inform their parents. In any event, you should not, of course, change the mark. You can suggest to such students that they get academic support to improve grades for the next term. They can be referred to their College Registrar's office if unsure of the options for academic assistance.

One of your first-year students engages in bizarre behaviour in class.

From time to time, a student in your class may exhibit behaviour that seems bizarre or unpredictable. Sometimes, this behaviour presents no difficulty, as long as the student is not disruptive or distracting. More often, however, other students in the class might become unnerved and sometimes feel intimidated by such behaviour.

If you feel comfortable, you can approach the student at the break or at the end of class and indicate that the behaviour is disruptive to the class and that you would like it to stop. If you are unable to engage the student in a meaningful conversation, you can call the the University Office of Student Affairs, his or her College Registrar's office, or the Campus Police.

One of your first-year students refuses to participate in some element of the course, citing religious reasons.

The Provost's office urges faculty members to make all reasonable attempts to reschedule a student's test in order to accommodate absence that results from religious observance. Consult the Provost's *Memorandum on Accommodation for Religious Observance*, or call the University Office of Student Affairs for a multi-faith calendar.

Occasionally, a student will object to participating in some aspect of a class or lab because of a religious belief. It might be possible for you to accommodate the student's objection with little inconvenience and with no dilution of the academic program. However, in cases where the student objects to material or activities central to the learning objectives of the course, and you cannot resolve the issue on your own, it is a good idea to seek advice. You can obtain assistance and suggestions for responding to the student's objection from the Campus Chaplains' Association or from the University's Race Relations Officer.

One of your first-year students telephones you at home.

If you feel that this is inappropriate you should feel free to tell such students that it is inappropriate. Remind them of your office hours and e-mail address, if relevant. However, a student who seems to be in a state of distress should be referred to some sources of support service. Several on-campus services provide counselling for students in distress. For students having difficulty coping, there is also a drop-in centre located on the Spadina Avenue side of the University's Athletic Centre; and it is open late at night.

You receive e-mail messages with sexually explicit content.

If you suspect that these messages are being sent by a student or students, contact your system administrator and ask for assistance in identifying the sender. Such behaviour is prohibited under several University policies. If proven to have sent these messages, students are liable at a minimum to a loss in campus e-mail privileges.

Student service offices at University of Toronto

<u>Arts and Science Office of Student Affairs</u>	946-5810
<u>Arts and Science Registrar's Office</u>	978-3384
<u>Arts and Science Students Union (ASSU)</u>	978-4903
<u>Association of Part-Time Undergraduate Students (APUS)</u>	978-3993
<u>Campus Chaplains' Association</u>	978-8100
<u>Campus Police</u>	978-2222
College Registrar's Offices	
<u>Innis College</u>	978-2513
<u>New College</u>	978-2460
<u>St. Michael's College</u>	926-7117
<u>Trinity College</u>	978-2687
<u>University College</u>	978-3170
<u>Victoria College</u>	585-4401
<u>Woodsworth College</u>	978-2411
<u>Community Safety Coordinator</u>	978-1485
<u>Counselling and Learning Skills Service</u>	978-7970
<u>DisAbility Services</u>	978-8060
<u>Health Service</u>	978-8030
<u>Psychiatric Service</u>	978-8070
<u>Race Relations Officer</u>	978-1259
<u>Sexual Assault Counsellor</u>	978-0174
<u>Sexual Harassment Officer</u>	978-3908
<u>University Office of Student Affairs</u>	978-5536

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