



# THE TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMUNIQUE

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## A Starter Activity to Begin Any Class



What can you implement in your classes that can review content, establish a foundation for the day's topic, encourage student participation, and get students prepared for the day's activities?

Whether you call them starter activities, bell work, or focusing activities, a predictable, formatted, content-based beginning of class activity can be used to achieve these goals.

### OPTIONS FOR STARTING CLASS

Beginning of class activities have previously been used to gain student attention, provide accountability, review material, engage with new content, or establish routines. To gain students' attention, class might begin by using multi-media, hands-on activities, surprising events, humor, or appealing to students' emotions (Davis, 2009). Or class might start with a repeating set of slides, asking students to sequence steps or sketch a content-related drawing (Honeycutt, 2019).

Beginning activities can help provide accountability through activities such as entrance tickets or weighing in on an issue (Honeycutt, 2016). Intentional reading and writing assignments that prepare students for class discussion can also provide accountability (Gillette and Gillette, 2015).

Beginning activities might include reviewing previous class sessions, which could be conducted by students (Weimer, 2015) or could include small group reviews with focused activities (Kohler-Evans, 2009). The beginning of class might be used to create a sense of purpose for the lesson and to connect content to students' lives (Weber, 2019) and can be used as part of establishing routines and providing structure from the first day of class (Bart, 2009; Clement, 2008).

While all of these individual purposes are useful, I would advocate for a daily, structured beginning of class activity that is flexible enough to incorporate any of the above goals.

### TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

For each of my courses, I provide a printed beginning activity sheet for each class session (the same information could be provided digitally). The sheet contains a series of prompts tailored for that course. The format of the sheet and types of prompts are similar for each session of the course, though the topic of the prompts change (see Stephanie, 2011 for an example of a highly-structured daily activity). By carefully selecting the types of prompts for each course, I am able to accomplish several goals with this single start of class activity.

In one of my courses, for example, I want my students to start each class session reviewing material, reflecting on their own experiences, moving in our classroom, participating in discussions with peers, anticipating today's topic, and preparing for our class activities.

To review material, my beginning activity contains prompts in application of material, vocabulary review, and drawing terms. The topics for these sessions could be content we discussed the previous class session or even earlier in the semester.

To reflect on their own experiences and anticipate what we will discuss, at least one prompt asks students to recall or explore their own experiences with a topic we will discuss in class that day. In this way, I hope students connect with the material before we even begin the lesson.

To encourage collaboration with peers, I often include directions in the prompts to *ask a neighbor or discuss with your table before writing your response*. By doing so, I hope students are comfortable talking with each other before I ask them to do more directed peer activities during the lesson.

To encourage movement in the classroom, each day includes a section that has a question where students write their response on a sticky note and bring the sticky note to the front table. This is often an opinion or experience prompt and is my attempt to establish early in the class period that participation is expected.

To be prepared for our class activities that day, the last section of the beginning activity lists what to have out on the table (e.g. previous assignment, lined paper, laptop) so students can be prepared for class and we don't waste time after one activity preparing for the next.

Once time has been provided to answer each section of the beginning activity, I read each prompt out loud and ask for volunteers to either share with the class, ask students to share with a neighbor before volunteering to share with everyone, or ask students to only share at their table. I also gather and group the sticky note responses, share with the class, and ask students to discuss the results as a table or class.

### CUSTOMIZING THE BEGINNING ACTIVITY SHEET

The types of prompts and the activities embedded within the beginning activity sheet could be customized for any course. All prompts could focus on review of material, for example, or the prompts could instead be based on quotes or selected readings, interpretation of data, or labeling of diagrams.

I hope the use of the beginning activity adds predictability to the beginning of my classes, encourages learning from the beginning of each class session, and provides students a structured review to supplement their own notes to prepare for our course final.

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Call us: +92 42 111 300 200 Ext: 3469/3412

Email us: [zarnab.shakeel@umt.edu.pk](mailto:zarnab.shakeel@umt.edu.pk) | [ctl.info@umt.edu.pk](mailto:ctl.info@umt.edu.pk)

Visit us: [ctl.umt.edu.pk](http://ctl.umt.edu.pk)