

TOOLKIT

Teaching Inclusively: Quick Tips

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As the first interaction students have with academic life and many professional fields, introductory classes can leave a strong impression on new students. Thus, it is imperative that an environment of inclusiveness be immediately established to affirm that while the course may be challenging, its purpose is to educate and uplift all students regardless of background and preparedness—not to “weed them out.” By acknowledging that students are starting in different places, instructors can empower students with marginalized identities and prevent their systemic exclusion from STEM fields.

As a final assignment during the course, “Race and Gender in the Scientific Community” at Brown University, we created a short tip guide for professors of introductory STEM courses to quickly share with them techniques about teaching inclusively. We wrote a script to be used on the first day—with notes on how to use it and pointing out places where professors can personalize the message of inclusivity instead of reading it verbatim. We highlight certain words in the first-day script, however, that we believe are critical to be explicitly verbalized because they will resonate with students.

In addition to the script, we offer a nondiscrimination statement and ways to effectively utilize teaching assistants as well as tips to foster collaboration, real-world connections, and stress and mental health management. We hope that by educating professors in these areas, we can improve the experiences of new stu-

dents and give them the confidence to remain in STEM.

We, of course, note that your institution and its resources will differ from those at Brown, so please adjust the advice below accordingly.

First-Day Script

1. Start by affirming every student’s right to be there.

“First and most importantly, congratulations! If you are sitting in this room, you have proven yourself to be a smart, hardworking individual capable of learning complicated material and improving your critical thinking skills. The admissions office doesn’t make mistakes: you belong at this institution, and you belong in this class. I want you to feel welcome here.”

2. Introduce yourself in two to three sentences. In addition to saying that your research is about X and you have hobby Y, talk about your identity (e.g., your race, gender, sexual orientation) to the extent that you are comfortable.

“I want to be a mentor, not simply a teacher, to all of you. I encourage you to approach me or your TAs when you are struggling with the class material or want to talk about how your identity affects your experience in this class or anything else on your mind.”

3. Share how you struggled with the material in this class or a similar class as an undergraduate. “Many of you in this class have experienced or will experience impostor syndrome. Impostor syndrome is the feeling that

you don’t really deserve to be here and that eventually a low test score, an incorrect response to a question in class, or something else will ‘expose’ you. Marginalized students such as people of color, women, first-generation and low-income students, and students with disabilities are more likely to experience impostor syndrome. If you feel like an impostor now, please let me reaffirm that you do belong here. You are not an impostor. I or the TAs would be happy to talk to you about your experiences with impostor syndrome at any time.”

4. Set up the environment you want in your classroom.

“I want to establish that this class is a welcoming environment to everyone, regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or religious identity. The university and I do not tolerate discrimination. Please feel comfortable coming to me or a university administrator if at any point you ever feel uncomfortable for any reason.”

Unscripted First-Day Content

The rest of the first day includes the following:

5. Introduce your TA staff to the class to make them more accessible (personal stories from the TA staff are a great way to humanize them!). Encourage your TA staff to introduce themselves in a welcoming way to make themselves resources for the students for the material as well as broader questions about succeeding in the field and navigating college.



Example introductions: name, preferred pronouns, year, concentration, hometown, favorite part of the course or fun fact. Build the community and encourage students to pursue your field.

6. Explicitly state that the purpose of the class is to build community, not weed students out. Encourage students to form study groups!
7. Have students introduce themselves to their neighbors.
8. Explain the collaboration policy in terms of what you can do, not what you can't do. Good example: Form study groups, work together on ideation, individually write up answers. Bad example: Don't copy each other's homework, no writing up answers together.
9. Go through your typical syllabus.
10. End with real-world applications. Show why students should be excited about your class. If there are other, parallel introductory courses, describe them! Suggest why some students might be interested in taking them.

Longer-Term Methods

The more you use these techniques throughout the term, the more comfortable your students will feel.

- Use inclusive language; this includes employing the terms “you all” and “first years” instead of the gendered “you guys” and “freshmen” and using gender-inclusive pronouns such as “they/them/theirs.”
- When you refer to scientists or other specialized members of your field, do not default to male pronouns; this applies to writing exam and homework questions as well.
- Explicitly highlight the important contributions of members of marginalized identities who are relevant to the course material (and

maybe include examples of others you feel important to share!).

- In your interactions with individual students, be mindful of what specific privileges you may have that they do not share, and adjust the way you interact with them accordingly.
- Be very mindful of any jokes or any attempts at humor you may make during class; ask yourself what aspects you find funny and how you imagine the comment will add to the overall environment of the class.
- Continually emphasize that while the course material is difficult, its purpose is to challenge the students to think critically about the topics, not just to maintain a certain grade distribution.
- Periodically remind the class that everyone deserves to be in it, and make yourself available for those who feel overwhelmed to reach out to you.
- Do not be dismissive of questions, and do treat all students with respect (in the same manner of how you hope they will address you).
- Remind the TAs to follow similar protocols.

Stress and Mental Health

Colleges and universities are academically challenging institutions with many students far away from home; stress creeps up on even the best of students, and sometimes sudden unexpected stressors pop up in life. Impostor syndrome, depression, anxiety, as well as identity struggles and acceptance are very real concerns that affect many students in the college community. It is important to remember that any student can be thrown off, and students struggling with mental health problems may face an even greater burden.

Talking about stress and mental health openly and honestly reduces the stigma around mental health: you are helping to break down many of the barriers for student-professor interactions and relationships. Doing so will allow students to feel more comfortable coming to you for additional help and allow you to foster mentorships with students.

Share some of the ways you deal with stressors in your academic or personal life, or both, and how you practice self-care to keep yourself balanced. Please remind students that “stress is something that affects everyone, and what is most important is the response to stressors in our lives: practicing good self-care, talking to a support system of friends/family, seeking out other resources such as health services or a chaplain.

Professors and TAs may not know about the details of all campus resources, and that is all right—what they should know is that these resources exist, and they should be able to direct students to these resources if a student seeks help.

Feel free to print out copies of campus resources from your institution, like this one from Brown, to hand out on the first day: bit.ly/2CoxRLc. ■

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