

INSTRUCTIONAL SUCCESS: DAY 1 COURSE MATERIALS: Information Sheet, Letter to Students, Syllabus Exam

Everybody hands out their syllabi on the first day of class. I do as well, but I also have students complete an information sheet as well as respond to a letter that I have written to them. This gives them something to do and focus on at the beginning of class while I call roll. Students that arrive a bit late haven't missed anything. I hope it sends the message that I am interested in them, that this course will be different in many ways, and that we will get right to work.

INFORMATION SHEET The information sheet asks for information such as academic background (e.g., HS graduation date, favorite/least favorite subjects, anything else they want me to know about their HS experience); college background (# credits completed, responsibilities other than coursework, motivation, anything else they want me to know about their college experience); teaching interests (why/what they want to teach, what they hope I will/won't do in the course, course goal) and life in general (hobbies/interests; favorite books/TV/movies); anything else they want me to know about them. I review their responses and provide some general feedback (no names) on the second class. I specifically address what they hope I will/won't do in class and what they want to learn in the class. This allows me to immediately confirm or deny any expectations they have about the course (e.g., If someone says "I hope you won't give exams," I can say that this expectation will not be met!)

LETTER The letter is set in a two-column format with the left column using about ¼ of the page and the right column using the other ¾. The right column contains the letter itself and includes a welcome to the course, a brief overview of the course, my teaching philosophy and style, a bit of personal information about me, my expectations of them, a short to-do list of what they need to do to be successful in the course and some insights about the course and college success in general. The left column contains writing prompts such as "What else do you want to know about me? How do you think you will handle my teaching style? What are your concerns about the course or about succeeding in college this semester? The letter serves several purposes. First, the written format allows me to say exactly what I want to say in the way I want to say it and is still available for students that come in late or miss the first day of class. I also include some personal information that I might not actually say in class. Second, I think the first day of class is often one of those deer-in-headlights moments when students are in a new class and trying to figure out what it's about while still endeavoring to appear cool and collected. As a result, I got to the point where I wasn't entirely sure that students actually "heard" what I said on the first day. This format gives students the time and space to focus on what I've written. Third, the writing prompts encourage students to read more carefully in order to respond. Fourth, I can tell a lot about students from what they write as well as how they write (spelling/grammar). I collect the letters and respond to their questions and concerns by writing short notes below what they've written and I return the letters on the second day of class. This makes the activity personal and interactive.

SYLLABUS EXAM. Although I do “go over” the syllabus on the first day of class, I also have students complete an exam (50 points) over the syllabus content. All of my exams are online including this one. This assures that students know how to access WebCT and take exams early in the semester. Because the exam focuses on key information within the syllabus, it also assures that they have read the syllabus and understood it.