

# Southern Regional Hub-funded project

RESOURCE GUIDE



## Things to do at the start of a course

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# Things to do at the start of a course

**Setting the tone** for the culture and learning environment on the first day is crucial as the first day experience can impact a student's sense of belonging and ability to succeed (Rastovac Akbarzadeh & Ko, 2017). It is also an important chance to model expected behaviour (Rastovac Akbarzadeh & Ko, 2017). The language used matters. There are some simple things teaching staff can do at the **start of the first session** to make people feel welcome and to foster a sense of belonging. For example,

- Display on the door and on the screen the course name and code, so they know they are in the correct place (Rastovac Akbarzadeh & Ko, 2017).
- Ask students to create nametags with preferred name and pronouns (allow people not to include their pronouns) (Rastovac Akbarzadeh & Ko, 2017). Provide the supplies. Providing something more durable would allow it to be used over multiple days.
- Do a mihi at the start of class. When you introduce yourself, you could include not only your name, but a bit about yourself and your interest in the subject (Rastovac Akbarzadeh & Ko, 2017). Also tell students how to address you, e.g. by your first name (Rastovac Akbarzadeh & Ko, 2017).
- Icebreakers are a good way to allow students to get to know each other (Rastovac Akbarzadeh & Ko, 2017).

During the first week, instructors hand out their **course outlines / syllabus**. These often include policies, which have evolved over time to address problems such as poor attendance, late submissions and special requests. This can result in a cold or even antagonistic tone being used (Accessible Syllabus, 2017). Create a warmer and more inclusive course outline / syllabus by doing the following

- Emphasise positive over punishing language, use invitations rather than commands (e.g., use can instead of should not) and use a more collaborative tone (Rastovac Akbarzadeh & Ko, 2017) (Womack, 2017). For example, when writing about how late work would be marked, we could say "late submissions will receive a 20% reduction" (command) or we could say "late submissions are eligible for 80% of the marks" (invitation).
- Cover how to contact teaching staff and detail their office hours in order to be more accessible (Rastovac Akbarzadeh & Ko, 2017). Include information on how to speak with teaching staff.
- Be explicit with learning outcomes and explain the approach used (Tomoana, 2012). Check that students actually understand what is required from the course and the expectations on students. Organised, clear and consistent messaging helps students understand expectations.
- With group assessment be clear on what you are assessing (process and product). Note that if you are assessing teamwork, then you also need to teach teamwork.
- Share with students the behaviour expected from team members during group work:
  - **Good communication with the team:** keeping team members updated, communicating well, making sure expectations are known and listening properly to every team member.

- **Be a team player and do the mahi:** share workload, do the work, allocate time for meetings and the project, be pro-active, take part and be conscientious. Be willing to give and receive help. Stay focused on the core task and deliverable.
- **Respect your team and self (be accountable):** be friendly, treat others well, get to know team members, be reliable, be punctual, be honest and show integrity. Admit when you don't know something or when there is a problem. Do what you say you will do, when you say you will do it.
- Give clear messaging around how essential required texts are, what editions are acceptable and how to access them without purchase. This helps to create an inclusive atmosphere by acknowledging the cost barriers of buying books (Rastovac Akbarzadeh & Ko, 2017).
- Including an inclusion or diversity statement on your course outline, e.g., the one found at [https://docs.asee.org/public/LGBTQ/Syllabus\\_Inclusion\\_Statement.pdf](https://docs.asee.org/public/LGBTQ/Syllabus_Inclusion_Statement.pdf), can help address stereotype threat.
- A teaching philosophy statement could also be included (Yale Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.).

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