
50 Activities for the First Day of School

By Walton Burns

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Contents

Introduction.	1
Getting to Know Them	3
3-2-1.	4
The Same and Different	5
Find Someone Who...	6
Two Truths and a Lie	8
Desert Island Choices	9
Weird Attendance	10
Meuume	11
Ask the Teacher	13
Answers on the Board	14
Tell Me about Me.	15
Never Have I Ever, Classroom Edition	16
Sorting Line	17
Draw Me Out.	18
Where Are You From?	20
In Your Own Words	21
Who Wrote That?.	22
4-3-2 Intro	23
Class Survey	24
Name Chain	25
Memory Chain	26
Toss a Ball	27
English Names	28
Going on a Picnic.	29
Expert Game	31
Snowball Fight	32
Snowball Texting.	33
Time Capsule.	34
Assessing and Evaluating	35
Needs Evaluation Survey	36
Goal Setting	38

Complete the Sentence (<i>continued</i>)	
Class Survey	40
What Do You Know?	41
Pantomime Introductions	42
Label the Classroom	43
Classroom English Pantomime	44
Simon Says	46
Mother May I?	47
Word Association Brainstorm	48
Picture Words	50
Classroom Scavenger Hunt	51
Flashcards	52
Sentence Auction Assessment	53
I Am a Word	54
Dry Run.	56
Setting the Tone	57
Rule-Breaking Role Play.	58
Classroom Rules Negotiation	60
Routine Modeling	61
Study Habits Myths	62
Sharing Tips	63
Syllabus Scavenger Hunt	64
References	65

Online Resources

At www.alphabetpublishing.xyz/first-day-of-school-resources you can download free worksheets and templates that you can photocopy and use in your classroom.

Introduction

I don't like the first day of school. As a teacher, I pride myself on knowing what my students like, what kinds of activities they enjoy, and which teaching methods work best for them. But on day one, I don't know any of that about my students yet. On that first day, I am trying to get to know them. And they are trying to get to know me, as well. So they're a bit more reserved. That makes it that much harder to figure out how best to engage them. It's tempting to resort to a long introductory lecture or to go over the course syllabus in painstaking detail. Or just to dive into the material.

And yet as difficult as the first day is, it's also the only chance you have to start fresh. After the first day (or couple of days), expectations are already set for you and for your students. That first day is the time to set the tone for the course. It's a chance to tell them your rules and expectations. And to find out their expectations. Day one is also an opportunity to build rapport with your students and between them, while they are still looking for their place in the class. Something as simple as learning their names on the first day will also go a long way to making the students feel comfortable.

As a teacher who dislikes stepping into a classroom cold, I've come to rely on a set of established activities that let me take care of all that first day business, that require very little prep, and that engage most students. This book is a collection of fifty of my favorites, with clear instructions and variations where possible. For example, many of these activities are designed with beginners in mind. I've tried to indicate how those activities could also be used with more advanced English learners.

Obviously, not all of these activities are my own creation. Many of them are classic icebreakers and children's games. I am also grateful to my fellow teachers who shared their favorite first day activity ideas. While the inspiration for the activities may have come from elsewhere,

I have not shared anything here unless I have adapted or changed it sufficiently to make it my own. In all cases, I have tried to give credit to the person or source where I learned about the activity. I apologize if I have forgotten anyone.

Finally, just because these activities work well on the first day doesn't mean you can't also use them at other times. Students continue to get to know you and each other throughout the year. They have changing interests and expectations from the class. They may need a reminder of the rules in the middle of the semester. So don't limit your use of these activities to any one time of the year.

But hopefully they will help you begin your class well from the start.

3-2-1*

This is an easy getting-to-know-you activity that can be adapted in many different ways.

- 1** Ask students to take out a piece of paper and write three interesting facts about themselves, two hobbies or things they like to do, and one thing they would be doing if they weren't in class.
- 2** Ask them to find a partner, swap information, and then report one interesting thing about their partner back to the class.
- 3** Alternatively, you can hang the papers on the wall, have students find an interesting one, and then form a question to ask the person who wrote it.

* I learned about this activity from Shelly Terrell (www.shellyterrell.com).

The Same and Different

Students find similarities and differences with a partner.

Put students in pairs and have them question one another until they find two similarities and two differences. Have them report back on the most interesting similarity or difference.

Variations

Have the pairs find five things they have in common.

Make groups of four from two pairs. The four then have to find five things in common among the four of them. Now combine the four into groups of eight and have all eight students find five things in common or as many as they can. Keep going, forming bigger groups until you have the whole class together again.

Find Someone Who...

This activity should be in every teacher's toolkit. It can be used to review or practice almost any grammar point or vocabulary set. But it's also a great way to help students get to know each other. This one does require some preparation, however.

- 1 Prepare a sheet of paper with two columns and as many rows as you have students. At the top of the first column, write "Find someone who..." and at the top of the second column, write "Name." In the first column write phrases that complete the sentence "Find someone who..." and that are likely to be true of at least one student in your class. For example, "has a birthday in the summer" or "can play a musical instrument." The phrases can be random. You could choose to target basic biographical information or hobbies or things people can do. You could practice a particular grammar structure or set of vocabulary too.
- 2 Hand one copy of the form to each student in the class. Ask them to go around the room and find one person who fits each description on the sheet. That person should sign their name, or initial.
- 3 Students sit down when they have found one name for each statement.

Optional Rules

Students can only write their name once on each sheet. In other words, if Rodrigo both plays guitar and has a birthday in the summer, he can only write his name in one space on each sheet.

Students cannot show their paper to each other. This makes it slightly harder to copy.

Students cannot ask questions directly. They must broach the subject naturally asking questions such as, "Do you enjoy eating?" "Do you spend time in the kitchen?" and then, "Do you like to cook?"

You can also make different versions of the sheet, so students cannot collaborate as easily.