

The Beginning and End of Class

Yale Center for Teaching and Learning

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Instructors can use the opening and closing moments of a course or class to promote student motivation, clarify intended learning trajectories, and develop conceptual awareness. For instance, opening with a discussion about complex questions can help students enter the learning process; ending with dynamic review or future content can help students integrate content into larger conceptual understandings (Love 2013). Ambrose et al. (2010) suggest that even briefly connecting ideas across class sessions can develop students' conceptual knowledge.

General Strategies

Smith (2008) explains that start-finish strategies help instructors gain “student buy-in” by asking students to “assess their own learning” and even contribute to class learning objectives.

Instructors can deploy a variety of strategies depending on local class culture (some elements adapted from Smith 2008 and Lang 2016):

- **Ask Questions** – Instructor asks provocative questions at the beginning of class, which can catch student attention and privilege their contributions to learning. Returning to questions throughout class and at the end can provide a sense of direction while helping students chart the growth of their knowledge during class.
- **Review Prior Sessions** – Instructor asks students to brainstorm and reconstruct (Lang says “retrieve”) previous content and conversations. This practice cultivates purpose across meetings and helps students access prior knowledge.
- **Activate Prior Knowledge** – Instructor asks questions, provides brief demonstrations, or asks for elaborations in order to activate student thinking about previous topics. This method helps students build new knowledge upon earlier learning.
- **Writing Exercises** – Instructor guides an initial or end-of-class freewrite, 1- minute paper, or response-to-prompt to help students focus on past and future topics. Following up with think-pair-share activities enhances comprehensive review of materials and promotes class discussion.

Additional Exercises

- **Anecdotes** – Provide a compelling anecdote related to class content. This might be an interesting fact, case, or news story that captures students' attention.
- **Demonstration** – Conduct a class demonstration relevant to the material presented that day.
- **Roadmap** – Provide students with a roadmap of the class to scaffold their learning.
- **Objectives** – Present the learning objectives for the class session that day.

- **Review** – Revisit the class learning objectives.
- **Summary** – Ask students to summarize what they have learned. This might be done initially as a think-pair-share or one-minute paper activity and then as a report back to the class.
- **Exploring Confusion** – Ask students where they may still have points of confusion. For example, an instructor can ask the students to write their “muddiest points,” or topics or concepts on which they are still confused, on a note card and collect them. These muddiest points can be discussed during a subsequent class.

References

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