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# **50 Activities for the First Day of School**

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**By Walton Burns**

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# Introduction

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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\*

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*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.

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\* *I learned about this activity from Shelly Terrell ([www.shellyterrell.com](http://www.shellyterrell.com)).*

### 4-3-2 Intro\*

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*This is a well-known fluency activity that can also help students forget to be reserved because they are so focused on speaking fluently.*

- 1** Divide the students into two groups, A and B. Put them in pairs with one A and one B.
- 2** Tell them that the A's will start by talking about themselves for four minutes. Count down so you can time them, and then let them talk. It can be challenging to talk about yourself for four minutes, but encourage them to keep going. You can remind them of the kinds of things people talk about when they just meet.
- 3** Now put them in new pairs of A and B. Tell the A's that they will talk about themselves again, and they should tell the same basic information, but they only have three minutes to do it. Tell them to focus not on talking faster, but on speaking more fluently and also on focusing on important details.
- 4** Put them in new pairs of A and B one more time. This time give the A's two minutes. This should result in fluent speaking and concise introductions.
- 5** Once the A's are done, have the B's introduce themselves in the same way.

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\* Paul Nation first came up with the 4-3-2 fluency activity.

## **Name Chain**

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*This is a short and simple way to remember your students' names and get them to remember each other's names.*

- 1** Introduce yourself. Say something like “My name is Mr. Burns” or “My name is Walton.”
- 2** Call on a student to repeat your name and then give their own name. For example, “His name is Mr. Burns and my name is Peng.”
- 3** Call on a third student to introduce you, the first student, and then themselves. Continue in this fashion. If the speaker forgets a name, get the student to repeat their own name.
- 4** As the teacher, you go last and introduce everyone in the whole class.

## Memory Chain

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*This is a fun game that gets students learning about each other and, most importantly, teaches you their names right away. Depending on the size of the class, this one can take a bit of time.*

- 1** Before class, make one card for every student in your class and put a number on each card, starting from 1.
- 2** Find the student with the number 1 and ask them to say their name and one interesting fact about themselves. Try to nip in the bud any facts that could apply to a majority of your students to prevent a lot of repetition, which is boring and counterproductive.
- 3** Now find student 2. Student 2 has to introduce student 1 by repeating their name and fact and then say their own name and a fact about themselves.
- 4** Student 3 must repeat student 1 and student 2's introductions and then introduce themselves in the same fashion. Continue in this way until all the students have gone. Then tell the students that it's only fair that you repeat all of them. This is a great way to remember names and also to show that you are listening and care about them.
- 5** If a speaker forgets a name or fact about a student, get that student to repeat it. The more repetition, the better everyone will remember everyone's names.