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## **Teaching Toolbox: The First Five Minutes of Class**

**by Emily O. Gravett**

The semester has officially begun and students are already busy—taking four, sometimes five, other courses and arriving in our classrooms after all kinds of other commitments. How can we help them settle and focus? [James Lang](#), educator and author of the [CFI's Madison Teaching Fellowship](#) book, *Cheating Lessons*, offered “4 quick ways to shift students’ attention from life’s distractions to your course” in [a Chronicle of Higher Education column earlier this year](#). Lang argues that, in every class, “the opening five minutes offer us a rich opportunity to capture the attention of students and prepare them for learning.” He thinks we can do so by:

- **Opening with a question or two**

At the beginning of class, open with several questions on the board or the projector for students to consider. Then, at the end of the class, return to those questions to consider potential answers and to review what students learned. These questions can act as bookends for the class period, with an important reminder at the very beginning that each session has a purpose.

- **Asking students to review what they learned during the previous class**

Spend five minutes having the students try to remember the key points from the last class, without depending on their notes, texts, laptops, etc. This practice is well supported by research (see [here](#), for example) that shows how powerful retrieval and repetition can be for learning: as Lang puts it, “the more times that students have to draw information, ideas, or skills from memory, the better they learn it.” Students can share what they remember with the whole class, turn to a neighbor and discuss in pairs, or even quietly jot down their own thoughts (see below).

- **Reactivating what students (think they) know about the subject matter**

In addition to asking students to retrieve what they learned in the previous session, use the first part of class to revisit what students (think they) already know about the day’s subject matter, from other courses or their lives outside of school. Lang reminds us that “plenty of excellent evidence suggests that whatever knowledge students bring into a course has a major influence on what they take away from it.” During this time, students may even reveal misconceptions they hold about the subject matter, which can help us adjust our instructional approaches.

- **Encouraging students to write**

All of the previous activities can benefit from having students write down their responses for the first few minutes of class. Lang rightly claims that “frequent, low-stakes writing assignments constitute one of the best methods you can use to solicit engagement and thinking in class.” These writing exercises don’t need to be graded carefully, if at all; they don’t even need to be collected. Rather, they can be used to help students make the transition from the outside world to the world inside the classroom and to gather their thoughts and ideas for the day.

*Emily O. Gravett is Assistant Director of Teaching Programs at the Center for Faculty Innovation and a faculty member in the Philosophy & Religion department. Some of the material found in this Toolbox email has been adapted from original content she generated during her time at Trinity University.*