It’s the first day of school. The summer quiet is abruptly replaced with noise, motion, smells ... and anticipation. Wearing earbuds, checking their cell phones, students shuffle through the halls. Confused, nervous, confident, bored, cool, and especially trying to be cool, they filter into the classroom. And they carry questions, mixed with assumptions and that mysterious brew of knowledge, myth, and lies we call the grapevine. What will the professor be like? I heard his tests are brutal. How boring is this gonna be?

It’s the first day of school. And all over the building, that first day is wasted. Professors call roll. It will probably be the only time they take attendance, but the ritual asserts status and comforts. Piles of syllabi are handed out. Usually they say little about what the course will be like. Course information, professorial address, a textbook, and a list of days, topics, and readings are the norm, along with a statement that it is “subject to change”. Some professors simply stop class at this point. Others also read through the syllabus, doing their best to remind students of the rules, making sure students know they are hemmed and boxed in by regulations, consequences, failure lurking on every side. And that first day is wasted.

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He stands by the door, shaking hands. “Welcome! I’m glad you are here!” A minute before class starts, he ducks into the prep room. The students settle, intrigued and uncertain. The prep door opens. Wearing full academic regalia, he quietly walks in. Standing in front of the class, he folds his arm and waits.

The noise of chatter quiets, then swells, and becomes a wave of murmuring as the class notices, wonders, pokes neighbors. This isn’t what they expected. What is he doing? I heard he could be weird. He lets the murmurs roll through the group, then holds his hands up. They quiet down, curious to find out what will happen next.

“Good morning. I am Professor Ribbens, and you are my students in Botany 200. And I’m sure you have noticed I’m wearing this robe, an outfit that is probably quite similar to the one you wore at your high school graduation. Oh, there are differences. This hood means I have achieved a doctorate. The colors and stripes on mine are probably different than yours, and mean that I attended the University of Connecticut. The tassel is supposed to indicate your status, although at some places it shows whether you graduated or not, and at others whether you are an undergraduate or not. We’re losing the meaning of that symbol. But these are symbols, dating back hundreds of years through the long sweep of this long collective endeavor we call academia.”

“Some of you, I hope most of you, are here because you want to learn about plants, since you want to build a career in biology. And some of you are here because the university says you have to take a laboratory science course. All of you are going to do some writing in this course, and at
times I suspect most of you will be thinking “Why do I need to know THIS?” And that’s why I’m wearing this gown. It’s a tradition hundreds of years old, but this course today is the result of two very old and very different ideas about education.”

He explains the ideal of a ‘well-educated gentleman’ and the idea of preparing a student for future employment. The students are listening. “And we still grapple with these two ideals today. We think every college student should know something about biology. We think every college student should be able to write. That’s the first ideal in action. We also think those of you planning careers in biology should know as much as possible about plants. That’s the second ideal.”

He stops, scans the room slowly. Yes, they’re listening. “So here’s the thing. Trust. You have to trust me that you really should learn this stuff. But did you ever think that I have to trust you, and you have to trust each other?” Gradually he gets them to describe some aspects of the classroom dynamic. Read the book. Take notes. Don’t be disruptive. Is that trust? Couldn’t he just tell the disruptor to behave? Well, yes he could. But what if everyone was disruptive? He gets them all to talk loudly at the same time to prove his point. A few giggles, a few thoughtful expressions.

“You see, this class isn’t about me. And it’s not just about you either. It’s all of us. And there are some ideas I think we should agree about to make it work.” They discuss some of these. No gossiping about other students and what they may have said or done in the class. No cheating. The professor has to play fair, no favorites. Grading should be fair. Someone is bold enough to ask: what if it’s not? That leads to a discussion about office hours, talking or emailing the professor with questions, and the whole mechanism of appeal and the appeal process ... department head, grade appeal committee, dean ... He brings them back to trust. “This education stuff is funny. It’s my job to help you learn as much as you can, but did you notice that you are the important factor here? I teach, I help you learn, but you have to do the learning! So my very first point for this course is that we are mixing two old ideas about education, and my second point is that you are the important piece of this group, not me.”

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Will it be a good course? No one knows yet. The students don’t even realize it, but they expected to be bored. They expected to be told a set of rules. But this was kind of interesting. They’d never thought about that long sweep of academic history still being around today. They’d never been told they were important.

Don’t waste the first day of class.