

THE FIRST NIGHT

Big Idea: The first night is the best opportunity to set the tone and establish expectations.

The Win: Create a space where people feel welcome, safe, and clear on what they can expect for the next 3 months.

You may have heard the saying, “First impressions are everything.” While there is some truth to that, it’s not the absolute truth. The only Absolute Truth is Jesus Christ. So, don’t put undue pressure on yourself to create the “perfect night.” Relax. Even if you feel like the first night doesn’t go well, remember: God is sovereign. If He can redeem sinners from hell, He can certainly redeem a #firstnightfail.

That said, the first night is still an excellent opportunity to set the tone and establish expectations for the semester. That’s your win for the first night.

WIN #1: SET THE TONE

What do we mean by “tone”?

Tone is the mood, atmosphere, or culture of the group. Ask yourself: “If I were attending this group for the first time, how would I want to feel?” While every group has its own nuances, two things are universal:

1. **Every group should feel welcoming.**

A welcoming group ensures everyone knows their presence is valued. Here’s how to create that environment:

- **Call each person** to welcome them to the group. Share your excitement and explain what they can expect.
- **Communicate throughout the week** leading up to the meeting. Provide clear instructions on what to bring, where to go, etc.
- **Set the atmosphere** by tidying up the house, playing light background music, and maybe lighting a candle or using essential oils to create an inviting scent.
- **Offer refreshments** like basic snacks and drinks.
- **Greet every person** who walks in, and introduce new people. Give them clear directions on what to do when they arrive.
- **Use conversation starters** while waiting for everyone to arrive.
- **Express gratitude** for their presence at the beginning and end of the discussion.



Remember: Some people are walking into an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar faces. This can be intimidating, so think about how you can help them feel comfortable.

2. **Every group should feel safe.**

A safe group is one where people feel they don't have to wear masks. When they walk through the door, they should enter a "shame-free zone." Here's how to foster that:

- **Keep the first discussion light** with laughter and smiles.
- I'll provide **icebreakers and intro questions** for the first night.
- **Avoid putting new people on the spot** to introduce themselves.
- After each new person shares, **affirm them** by saying, "Thank you for being here tonight. We're so glad you're in this group."
- **Provide discussion rules** to establish a safe space:
 - "What's said in the group, stays in the group."
 - "Seek to understand before you seek to be understood."
 - "There is no such thing as a stupid question in this group."
- **Set clear prayer guidelines** at the end:
 - No judgment for how you pray.
 - We all need to grow in prayer, and no one is alone in that.
 - There are no "professional" prayers here.
 - Pray simply and honestly from the heart.
- **Optional:** Introduce "shame-free stories." Have each person share their story throughout the semester. Leaders should go first, starting in the first or second week.

Remember: Many people feel spiritually intimidated. Make sure they know your group is a "shame-free zone."

WIN #2: SET EXPECTATIONS

We all need structure. God is a God of order, not chaos. Unclear expectations are a common source of frustration in groups. If you expect people to bring their Bibles each week, but you never tell them, they won't know. Here's how to set expectations:

1. **Communicate expectations out loud** to everyone after the icebreaker. While this may seem obvious, people appreciate clarity. It's best to wait until after the icebreaker so the group has had time to warm up to one another.
2. **Allow time for questions.** Don't assume everyone understands. Give space for people to ask for clarification.

Expectations Every Group Should Have:

1. Commitment to Attendance

- Encourage members to prioritize attending meetings regularly.
- Discuss the importance of consistency for building relationships and deepening discipleship.

2. Confidentiality

- Emphasize the need for trust by keeping personal sharing within the group.
- Create a safe environment where people feel comfortable being vulnerable.

3. Respect for Time

- Honor the group's meeting start and end times.
- Encourage everyone to be prompt and mindful of each other's schedules.

4. Participation

- Encourage all members to engage in discussions and prayer times.
- Create space for everyone to share without feeling pressured.

5. Support and Encouragement

- Set the tone of being a group that prays for, encourages, and supports one another.
- Make sure people know they're here to build each other up in Christ.

6. Follow-up and Communication

- Agree on the best ways to stay in touch between meetings (e.g., group texts, emails).
- Make sure group members are comfortable reaching out if they need prayer or support during the week.

7. Respect for Diversity

- Acknowledge that members may have different perspectives and backgrounds.
- Encourage respectful dialogue and unity in Christ, even when there are differences.

8. Serving One Another

- Discuss ways the group can serve the church and community together.
- Create a culture where members look for opportunities to help each other in practical ways.