Can you share your experiences when starting a project? What are the initial steps taken and key factors to consider when starting a project?

Okay, as a project manager, and in the context we're talking about right now, in my context, working with students anyway, the very beginning of a project means I have to go find a project, I have to find one that'll work. And, ironically, this is something that I would love to have students in, but it's not available to them. They haven't even registered for the class sometimes. So here's a little thing, I have often gone to our graduate students and said, how many of you are planning on taking this class with me next term? And I'll start that, say in September, if it's a January startup. And I'll try and find people who are already interested and I'll take them along with me to client meetings. And those people kind of, they're not in a class, we're not doing that for anything other than the public good. But they're going along to see how projects are negotiated on the front end. And so I spend a lot of time with the client on the front end trying to figure out what a project would be. Now, one of the things that happens in every context, every time, is that I'm trying to develop shared clarity and understanding of content. And I find that so hard, every time, really getting a sense of what the content is, and in enough detail, and doing it well enough that I can manage it. It takes time, especially with complex projects. It just takes time to figure out what the client has in his or her head. They usually have a clear vision, they don't always share it well. And I'm not an expert in the content. So I don't know what's right or wrong, and I don't know it in depth. And sometimes I don't even want to know. Sometimes I'm working with content that I'm not all that interested in to begin with. So I need reliable SMEs preferably on the team who are subject matter experts. And I need time to grapple with the content and try to develop a working knowledge of it. One of my favorite examples of this is a project I did a very long time ago for a corporate client. It was for a chain of grocery stores on the eastern seaboard of the United States and they had a problem. Their store managers couldn't interpret their financial reports, their monthly financial reports, which included a store operating statements, and a charge gross report, they were called. And they wanted us to train them on how to read those documents. Well, the first thing we had to do was go into a room ourselves and we took, gosh, I can't remember how long it took, but it was days and days to try and learn how to read those financial reports. We had subject matter experts we could call if we got stuck. But we didn't have one sitting with us as we were trying to learn them. And so we learned them from the ground up. Well, that's a really interesting problem to have. Because when you do that, you can make mistakes, you can get really wrong interpretations. And in this case, we made a whopper. We were looking at some reports on cash flow and what happens within the management of a project. And we saw how returns of bottles and cans and all those deposits were handled through that. And that doesn't sound like much. But when you're talking about a whole series of stores, it adds up. And the thing is, what it looked like to us was that they were burying the money that it wasn't showing up and tracking through the reports the way it should. And we thought we found a case of corporate fraud. We looked at each other, our eyes got this big. And we thought uh oh, how do we deal with this? And so we ended up having to go back to one of the principal players, one of the principal clients in the thing and ask them about it. And we did it by saying "Could you talk to us about how these things are tracked through the reports? We don't see where they go. And we are worried that people might misinterpret that and think that it's fraudulent behavior.' I don't think we said exactly that. But we let them know that we were really concerned about where that went. It created belly laughs from the person, the accountant we were talking to, because we should have known, every accountant on the planet knew evidently, except for us,

we weren't accountants, where that money was and where it was sitting and how it was reclaimed and how it was reported. And he took us through it. And frankly, I was so bored with the answer that I don't think we ever dealt with it again. I don't think we dealt with it in the training, or anything else. But it was one of those really small things. But grappling with content on the front end of a project, that early thing, trying to figure out what the content is, and knowing it well enough that you don't make some really dangerous mistakes is important. Also, early on in the project, I like to identify the skill sets in my team. In corporate settings, you usually acquire those in the organization or you bring people on and contract to do things. So if you need illustrators, you bring in an illustrator, If you need a videographer, you bring that person or a team in. But in working with students particularly, and on the cheap, with a lot of the projects we do, I'm trying to find the hidden skills in teams. So my students come to me with amazing, diverse skill sets. It's amazing. I'm looking for that person who knows canoeing or plays guitar, or writes poetry. I want to know who those people are. And it can make a difference. It takes time, it's a real community of practice stuff ferreting out tacit knowledge that people have, that's embedded in team members and making it explicit for the team to be able to exploit if we can. And I do that, by spending a lot of time talking about our personal lives and the other things that we do, and the other things we know, the other stuff that we bring to the table that we don't know whether it's going to have any value at all to the project underway, but it often does. We had, I have mentioned, a sketching issue that we had with one project that we were working on. And we had in that team, we had somebody who self-identified as a skilled illustrator. And indeed, that person was a good Illustrator. Wonderful, actually. But it turned out that we needed to be using simpler, easier illustrations. And this person was almost incapable of dumbing down her work to the point where we needed it. And so we had somebody else who liked to sketch when she was a kid. And she gave it a try and did a few sketches for us and they were bang on with what we needed, where we needed to go. They weren't nearly as sophisticated as the other persons. But that was exactly the point. We needed something that was less sophisticated, or less detailed, but sophisticated in a different way.