Even though he’s now retired from the classroom, Donald Graves has this recurring nightmare. “I suspect this is a common dream for anyone working in our profession,” says Graves, a well-respected author and writing consultant. “Most teachers struggle with classroom organization throughout their professional lives.”

To be a good teacher, it’s simply not enough to know the subject matter or to like children. Effective teachers know how to manage and organize classrooms. An efficiently organized and managed classroom eliminates many potential behavior and learning problems and sets the stage for a productive year.

As veteran teachers know, a well-organized classroom doesn’t just happen. It takes a lot of advance planning and hard work. Some of the most important work of teaching takes place before the first day of school. This is when teachers arrange the physical environment, decide upon the routines and procedures they’ll use for daily life in their classrooms, plan curricula and activities consistent with state standards and benchmarks, and open lines of communication with parents.

It’s important to get off to a good start before students even set foot in the classroom. Be ready for them on that first day of school. First impressions really do count. The attitudes and expectations students

“Two children poke one another. Five or six others wander aimlessly around the room. I lean down to help a child with her writing, and she doesn’t even know this is writing time. I hear a sudden noise at my back, and someone yells, ‘Ouch!’”

—Donald Graves
develop as early as the first few hours of school affect their behavior and learning all year. Even if you’ve received your teaching assignment late and have only a day or two to get ready, you can accomplish many of the most important preparations for creating a stimulating, effective environment that will motivate children, enhance learning, and reduce behavior problems. (If the school year begins tomorrow, proceed immediately to “The First Day” on page 46. Read the rest of the chapter when you have time.)

This chapter offers information and tips for creating an efficient, well-run classroom. It will help you organize a learning environment that fosters an atmosphere of community and collaboration, success and acceptance, joy and challenge. The emphasis here will be on the first few days and weeks of school, because this is when the most important management and organization work occurs.

**Important Beginnings for Beginners**

If you are a new teacher or are new to a school, you need to get to know your colleagues before school starts. Perhaps the principal or someone else will introduce you to the building staff. If not, don’t wait for people to come to you. Take the first step. Introduce yourself as a new teacher and explain that you are trying to learn the proper procedures. People will appreciate your effort and be much more inclined to help.

In addition to other classroom teachers, make sure you meet the custodians, secretaries, kitchen staff, librarians and media specialists, counselors, and special teachers (reading, math, gifted, Chapter 1, ELL, art, music, physical education, and so on). If time doesn’t permit face-to-face encounters before school starts, ask for an organization chart that lists the staff in these positions.

Also, be sure to:

- ✓ read the school policy manual.
- ✓ learn the physical layout of the building.
- ✓ become familiar with schoolwide objectives.

- ✓ obtain a copy of your state curriculum standards—and READ it. (Find your state’s standards and benchmarks on your state’s Department of Education Web site. See Chapter Four for more information about standards and standards resources.)
- ✓ write out a detailed first-day schedule, keeping in mind that you must remain flexible enough to respond to the unexpected.

You’ll also want to begin stockpiling materials. Long before the school year starts (or even before you have a permanent teaching position), you can develop an idea file and start collecting supplies. On page 14 you’ll find great ideas for items to collect and what to do with them once you have them.

**The Physical Environment**

Warm, well-run classrooms begin with the room’s physical layout—the arrangement of desks and working space, the attractiveness and appeal of bulletin boards, and the storage of materials and supplies.

**Arranging Space**

The physical layout reflects your teaching style. If you want students to collaborate in small groups, for example, organize them around tables or clusters of desks. For frequent whole-group discussions, try a circle or U-shaped desk configuration. If you plan on an individualized, self-paced curriculum, you might set up learning stations.

The physical layout should also reflect you. Don’t hesitate to give the room your personal touch with plants, art, rugs, posters, and maybe some cozy pillows for the reading corner.

“Creating a caring, child-centered environment takes lots of thought and planning,” says fifth-grade teacher Frank Garcia. “Basic bulletin boards are not enough. I believe in a very colorful classroom with posters, functional bulletin boards, and other ‘interesting’ items to enhance the environment, such as a small refrigerator, TV, and a stereo system with CD player.”
# Materials to Save

Copy and post this list as a reminder of things to save for class projects—and ways to put these materials to work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Save, stash, scrounge, tuck away:</th>
<th>To concoct, convert, invent, turn into, use for:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paper bags</td>
<td>Costumes, masks, fold-away towns, wigs, puppets, forms for papier-mâché animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plastic lids</td>
<td>Coasters, frames, mobile parts, molds for plaster plaques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buttons</td>
<td>Jewelry, mosaics, eyes for stuffed animals, decorations, collages, games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panty hose/stockings</td>
<td>Weaving, braiding, knitting, crocheting, soft sculpture, doll or puppet heads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardboard fast-food containers</td>
<td>Unusual displays for class work or special projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuts, cones, pods,</td>
<td>Mosaics, jewelry, decorated wreaths, candle rings, boxes, frames, flower and seed pictures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stones, shells, and water-smoothed glass</td>
<td>Paperweights, sculptures, jewelry, mosaics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressed flowers, leaves, and grass</td>
<td>Place mats, window transparencies, collages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rug and tile samples</td>
<td>Hot-dish mats, covers for small books, mosaics, fuzzy boxes, dioramas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odd mittens, gloves, and socks</td>
<td>Finger and hand puppets, clothes for small dolls, loops for pot holders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hangers</td>
<td>Simple mobiles, cloth banners, weavings, or masks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scrap wood</td>
<td>Toys, carvings, construction, games, building blocks, printing blocks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shredded paper</td>
<td>Stuffing for cloth dolls, animals, or pillows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bits of string, yarn, and cord</td>
<td>Macramé, weaving, stitchery, knitting, crocheting, braiding, string painting, animal tails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gift wrap paper</td>
<td>Collages, paper weaving, paper chains, origami, beads, dioramas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old jewelry</td>
<td>New jewelry, accents in macramé or ceramics, holiday ornaments, collages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wire</td>
<td>Armatures for papier-mâché or clay sculpture, flexible skeletons for cloth dolls, jewelry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hair rollers</td>
<td>Armatures for cloth, clay, plaster, or papier-mâché sculpture, parts for doll furniture, jointed dolls, snakes, or marionettes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plastic meal trays</td>
<td>Printmaking, necklaces, frames, dioramas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plastic packing chips</td>
<td>Decorative chains, constructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foil pans and trays</td>
<td>Plaques, ornaments, jewelry, lanterns, rhythm instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egg cartons</td>
<td>Containers, sculptures, animals, planters, sorting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film canisters</td>
<td>Collecting and storing tiny items (such as beads)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallpaper samples</td>
<td>Frames, mats, crafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines and newspapers</td>
<td>Collages, math problems, compare/contrast writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Reggio Emilia, a northern Italian town that has internationally acclaimed early childhood programs, classrooms feature displays of children’s work, collections of “found” objects, ample space for supplies (all aesthetically arranged), and clearly designated spaces for large- and small-group activities. Reggio Emilia educators stress the need for a classroom environment that informs and engages the child. They consider the physical space to be “another teacher.” And in the sense that it can motivate children, enhance learning, and reduce behavior problems, the environment really is an extra teacher.

Author and educator Mike Hopkins points out that personal teaching style and specific educational needs should largely determine how you design your classroom space. Hopkins urges teachers to forget about the way things have always been done and to visit museums, libraries, other schools, and colleagues’ classrooms to identify different ways of organizing learning space.

Many teachers prefer to create different areas within the classroom. For example, a classroom might feature a quiet reading corner, a music area where students can play soft music while completing work, a discussion/conversation center, a large table for cooperative projects, spaces for wet or messy projects, multimedia spaces, learning centers or stations, and individual work areas.

Easily accessible materials and supplies can eliminate delays, disruptions, and confusion as students prepare for activities. In poorly arranged classrooms, students spend a lot of time waiting—waiting in line, waiting for help, waiting to begin. To eliminate some waiting, store frequently used items such as scissors and paste in several different areas.

Desk Placement
In many classrooms, the largest amount of space is devoted to the arrangement of individual student desks. Teachers’ preferences for desk arrangements vary greatly, but most teachers agree that the days of 30 desks lined in neat rows and facing the teacher’s desk up front are long gone. Instead, some teachers like to arrange desks in cooperative groups of four, while many others prefer a U-shaped configuration, where everyone has a front-row seat.

“What’s your purpose for your desk placement?” Mentor teacher Tim Bailey suggests teachers consider this question. “If all of your students need to see the chalkboard at one end of the room, then don’t arrange the desks so that their backs are to it.”

But no matter how you arrange desks, don’t be afraid to make changes. Rearranging the furniture to support positive student interactions is essential from the first day of school through the rest of the year.

“Set your room up, and at the end of each unit...
Safety Tips

As you design your space, keep basic safety precautions in mind. Use this checklist at the beginning of each school year.

- High-traffic areas (pencil sharpener, for example) are free of congestion.
- Students’ desks are always visible.
- Art and science supplies—especially anything sharp or toxic—are stored safely.
- Breakable items are displayed or stored in safe places.
- Students can easily see instructional displays and presentations from their desks.
- Students have space to store their belongings.
- Electrical outlets are available, but frayed cords and other dangers are not.
- Window and door exits are unobstructed.
- Rugs are fastened down so no one trips.
- Fire drill procedures and exit routes are posted by the door.
- Your name, class, and room number are posted on the classroom door, where parents and students can easily see them.
or month, evaluate and make changes,” advises fifth-grade teacher Laurie Borger. “Move students’ desks on a regular basis so all children learn to cooperate with others.”

Wisconsin teacher Alexis Ludewig offers this suggestion for managing seating changes: “Put each child’s name on a small sticky note. You can arrange groupings and change seating assignments easily and yet maintain a current seating chart for substitute teachers.” She explains that it’s also easy to note any special seating considerations, such as vision or hearing, on the back of the sticky note.

**Environmental Preferences**

Other important environmental features include temperature, lighting, and noise level. These factors affect students in different ways and are directly related to individual learning styles. Studies suggest that when teachers adjust the environment to students’ preferences, the students perform better academically and are better behaved.

How can you address environmental preferences in the classroom? Here are some tips from research and practice:

- **Create both well-lit and dimly lit areas** in the classroom by using bookcases, screens, plants, and other furniture. Some children learn best in bright light, but others do significantly better in low light. Bright light actually makes some students restless and hyperactive. Try allowing students to sit where they feel most comfortable, or try placing fidgety children in low-light areas and listless children in brighter areas.

- **Provide opportunities for children to move around** while visiting learning centers and other special classroom areas. Most of us have the mistaken impression that children learn best when sitting still, but research now proves that many children need extensive mobility while learning. These children learn significantly more if they move from one area to another as they acquire new information.

- **Establish informal furniture arrangements** where students can sit on soft chairs or pillows, or lounge on the carpet. Another myth is that children learn best when sitting up straight in hard chairs. About 75 percent of the total body weight is supported on only four square inches of bone when humans sit up straight in a hard chair, so it is easy to understand how the resulting stress on the buttock tissues causes fatigue, discomfort, and the need for frequent changes in posture. Research supports the commonsense notion that many students pay better attention and achieve higher grades in more comfortable positions.

- **Set up listening stations with headsets** for children who need sound, and quiet study areas for those who work best in silence. Many children disprove another commonly held conception: that silence helps students concentrate better.

- **Help students become aware of their own temperature preferences** and encourage them to dress accordingly. Temperature preferences vary dramatically, and most children can’t concentrate when they are either too cool or too warm. Ask students who tend to be chilly to keep an extra sweater at school.

**Learning Centers**

One feature of many classroom environments is the learning center. A learning center is any part of the classroom designed for independent learning. Learning centers can offer individualized, curriculum-based instruction in exciting packages. For example:

- **a full-length mirror where kindergartners try on costumes, masks, hats, or silly glasses.** Here, they role-play and learn about themselves and their friends by observing and creating their own mirror games.

- **a Book Box on a table filled with reading materials about a particular subject or theme, or organized by author or genre.**

- **an Art Cart with materials and instructions for making mobiles, puppets, dioramas, cartoon strips, crayon rubbings, and friendship cards—all tied to the curriculum.**
a Math Path, where students find math games and activities stored in a large box.

✓ a Spare Chair, a comfy seat in a quiet corner designated for independent reading.

✓ a Writing Center, stocked with different types of paper, model fiction or nonfiction pieces, story starters, grammar tip sheets, word lists, and editing pencils.

Students of all ages love the challenge and the change of pace that working in a center promotes. Learning centers allow children to explore, apply newly learned skills, feel independent, be creative, and interact with peers.

You can use learning centers to supplement or enrich the curriculum, for “free-time” activities, and sometimes to deliver much of the curriculum. When you want to work with small groups or individual students, learning centers are an exciting alternative to seatwork. You can use centers as rewards or as places for extra help and practice. Use them to encourage students to cooperate or work independently. Learning centers are also a great way to involve parents as classroom helpers. One group of parents at Tinicum Elementary School in Pennsylvania meets regularly to design, implement, and monitor elaborate learning centers.

No matter how you use learning centers, the important thing is that you do use them, suggests author and educator Bonnie Murray. Learning centers “can provide reinforcement of newly learned skills as well as opportunities for children to discover new ideas for themselves,” Murray writes. “They allow children to interact with other students and to manipulate learning materials.”

Maintaining Effective Centers
Establishing and maintaining effective learning centers requires some advance planning and thought. Centers should be designed so that students can work independently. First, decide on the intent or purpose of your centers: enrichment, academically based free-time activities, or content instruction. Then, follow these suggestions offered by Mary Beth Spann, author of Quick-and-Easy Learning Centers: Word Play, and other mentor teachers:

✓ Begin with one learning center in an area of personal strength or in an area especially interesting to you and your students.

✓ Tie centers into your curriculum: the content or skills can change to match what you are studying in a particular subject area.

✓ Create a storage system of boxes, file folders, or large envelopes. Label all of the materials in each storage container.

✓ Include a variety of activities to engage different types of learners—avoid providing only paper-and-pencil tasks.
✓ Remember that children respond to inviting environments such as cozy corners, attractive decorations, and special touches from students (a mural painted on a cardboard room divider, for example). Area rugs and netting or sheer fabric also help set off an area and make it appealing.

✓ Account for the needs of second-language learners.

✓ Model expected behaviors and introduce learning objectives when you open the center and as needed throughout the year.

✓ Invite students to contribute to your centers with personal collections or related artifacts and items.

✓ Allow for some student choice. Simply rotating students doesn’t allow them to practice self-direction and responsibility, Murray explains. “Keep in mind that choice doesn’t mean a free-for-all,” she cautions. To limit the number of children at individual centers, Murray suggests putting labeled clothespins or necklaces at each one. “When the labels for a center are gone, students know to select another center.”

✓ Designate a special place to display student work.

✓ Invite donations and ideas from parents.

✓ Watch the centers in action to determine which seem most engaging and successful and which need fine-tuning.

✓ Periodically add new activities/centers to maintain student interest, but be realistic about how often to do so. Weekly is too often.

✓ Take photos of the centers to help you set them up the next time around. Alexis Ludewig suggests: “It is a great idea to take photos of learning centers, not only for your reference, but also for a volunteer to re-create for you in the future. I keep a mini photo album that I use as a reference when planning.” Ludewig further notes that she puts a copy of the photo with the center’s storage container and all its parts.

Arizona teacher Alice Rice points out that in learning centers, students learn decision-making skills, record keeping, filing, time management, and interpersonal skills. Rice has developed many learning centers herself and employs them extensively in her classroom. Each center generally has one theme with four activities. The purpose of an activity may be to teach, enrich, remediate, have children apply a new or previously learned skill, or test. Rice suggests that each learning center include these six features:

1. the objective
2. simple directions
3. a sample, when appropriate
4. materials in a self-contained box, folder, or area
5. a self-checking or proofreading system, if possible
6. follow-up or recognition by the teacher

Here are Rice’s tips for organizing and maintaining learning centers:

✓ Organize centers around subjects such as art, creative writing, language, math, and independent reading.

✓ Give centers catchy titles such as Art Cart, Math Path, Think Tank, and Spare Chair.

✓ Designate a monthly theme, based on students’ interests and grade-level standards, to tie together activities and learning centers. Rice uses the following schedule with third graders:

- **September**—Friendship
- **October**—Sports and Hobbies
- **November**—The Five Senses/Thanksgiving
- **December**—Celebrations Around the World
- **January**—Jobs and Careers
- **February**—Patriotism
- **March**—Space
- **April**—Ecology
- **May**—Review

✓ Plan the year with another teacher who is interested in rotating themes and sharing materials.
✓ **Solicit help from volunteers.** Parents can help collect materials, make the activities, set up the centers, and assist students. (Make sure parents understand the purpose of the learning centers.)

✓ **Give students opportunities** to draw, color, cut, glue, match, list, write, play games, sequence items, talk, listen, fasten or connect, tie, select, compare, classify, outline, assemble, rearrange, and so on as they learn academic content.

✓ **Set a time schedule** for using the centers. (Rice and her team teacher schedule two 40-minute periods back-to-back each morning. During each period, half the students are in learning centers while the other half are in reading groups.)

✓ **Supply the necessary materials** for each activity. Usually, it doesn’t work to have students sharing materials for different activities.

✓ **Provide a record sheet listing** the activities and have students record the ones they complete. They can keep the record sheet and the papers and products they produce in their own folders. By developing activities that are self-checking, you can pare down your paperwork and teach students to be responsible for their own learning.

✓ **Periodically review student folders** and decide how much catch-up or review is necessary, if any.

Be creative. Learning centers are limited only by your imagination. They are as simple or complex as you wish to make them.

**A Sample Center**
Here’s an idea for an easy learning center that will motivate students all year long. This interdisciplinary center, developed by Lynne Kepler, author of *Quick-and-Easy Learning Centers: Science*, capitalizes on students’ natural tendency to look out the window at the world around them. It can be adapted for any grade level.

Using your classroom window or one you have access to elsewhere in the school, begin by posting a topic and listing questions for a monthlong investigation. Have students keep a window-watch log to record their observations. At the end of each month, post a summary of students’ discoveries. Here are the topics and questions Kepler suggests:

**Seasons:** (can be used for four different months):
Look out the window. How can you tell it is autumn (winter, spring)? Record seasonal changes you see, such as leaf color, people’s outerwear, precipitation, and plant life.

**Temperature:** What do you think the temperature outside is? Check the thermometer to find out. What are some words that tell about the temperature today? Keep a record of the temperature each time you visit. Work with a partner to create a temperature graph each week. Then make a graph to show the temperatures for the month. Did you notice any trends?

**Clouds:** What do clouds tell us about the weather? Illustrate types of clouds you see. Note weather conditions, too. (Be sure to record the date.) Try to find out the names of these cloud types. At the end of the month, look for connections between clouds and weather.

**Learning Center Resources**
For more about learning centers, you might consult one of these books from Scholastic.


*Shoe Box Math Learning Centers,* by Jacqueline Clark (2002)

For more resources on learning centers and other topics in this chapter, see page 49.
Ten Easy Art Centers

Art centers are a great idea if you don’t have a separate art period in your daily curriculum, says art teacher Mary Parks of Naperville, Illinois. These centers also provide a good way to integrate arts throughout the curriculum. Here are ten centers, adapted from an article by Parks, that you can set up in any corner of your room.

1. The Easel: An easel, paints, paintbrushes, plastic containers for water, and paper (construction or newsprint) can help bring out students’ natural creativity. Cover the floor with newspaper, position the easel near a sink, if possible, and have children get started by illustrating a story. One variation is to ask them to imitate the style of a certain children’s book illustrator. If paint is too messy for your room, try colored chalk, pencils, pastels, crayons, or watercolors.

2. Masks and Puppets: Have students re-create the features of their favorite characters by gluing recycled scraps of fabric and paper to white paper plates for masks and brown paper bags for puppets. Then have them their own puppet show or mask-play about classroom rules.

3. Quick-Draw Station: Tips from how-to-draw books help children develop drawing skills. And since good drawings rely on basic geometric shapes, children also build math skills.

4. Stamp Prints: With rubber-stamp kits or stamps carved from potatoes, students can personalize their papers. Use tempera paint for ink.

5. Modeling Clay: Students can create three-dimensional representations of characters or objects that interest them. (Store modeling clay in airtight containers. For permanent sculptures, use inexpensive air-dry clays.)

6. Crayon Rubbings: Fill a shoe box with items such as leaves, scraps of textured fabric, coins, and small items students bring from home. Using thick crayons on thin paper—such as newsprint, typing paper, or tracing paper—students can make rubbings.

7. Theme-Oriented Murals: Set up a large roll of newsprint, paint, chalk, and crayons on one side of your room. Place the paper on the floor or tack it to a bulletin board. Have the class create a mural to go with the next science unit. Students can collaborate on an appropriate background, then add details and labels as their knowledge grows.

8. Paper Collages and Mosaics: Save and recycle scraps of construction paper, wallpaper, yarn, etc. Have students create fancy collages with the recycled scraps.

9. Tangram Kits: Integrate art and math with tangrams. Use either a premade kit or tangram pieces cut from construction paper. Challenge students to invent tangram challenges for one another involving symmetry and patterns.

10. Art and Music Appreciation: Display prints of famous paintings and set up a tape recorder and headphones with samples of different types of music. Then create sheets for students to fill in as personal responses. For example:
   - The music made me feel _________.
   - The artist is trying to say _________.
   - This music (__________) seems to go best with this picture (__________) because _________.

Tip: To keep your art centers clean, assign two students per week to replace supplies, wipe up spills, and keep things in order.

From Instructor, September 1995.
Shapes: What shapes can you spot outside the window? Look for circles (squares, rectangles, ovals, and other shapes) in nature, in the structures you see, and in the sky. What shapes do you see most often? Why do you think this is so?

Birds (requires a bird feeder in view of the window): What kinds of birds live around our school? Observe birds at the feeder. Describe the birds you see, including behavior, markings, and size. Try to find out what they’re called. At what times of day do you see them?

Grouping
When we teachers organize students for instruction or activities, we are grouping them. First, they are grouped into classes, usually classes of children at the same grade level. Within classrooms, we further group students. Sometimes we use whole-group configurations (the whole class), and other times we divide the class into smaller working groups.

While grouping can often be an instructional strategy, as in the case of grouping for cooperative learning or grouping by ability in math or reading, it is also an organizational and management concern. Planning for groups sometimes occurs before students arrive on the first day, because group configurations can determine the classroom floor plan.

For example, many teachers organize their classrooms into groups of four to six students sitting together at tables or at desks pushed together. Students work in these groups to complete assignments and activities; they line up as groups; and they earn points and special privileges as groups.

Teachers and researchers alike stress the importance of keeping group membership fluid. Students need the opportunity to work with many different classmates in many different situations. Many teachers change their group seatings every month or every marking period. Others time the changes to coincide with major units.

Instructional Groups
When grouping students for instructional purposes in subjects such as reading, many educators make an important distinction between ability grouping and flexible grouping. The Literacy Dictionary: The Vocabulary of Reading and Writing, edited by Theodore Harris and Richard Hodges, offers these definitions:

Ability grouping: the placement of students according to similar levels of intelligence or achievement in some skill or subject, either within or among classes or schools; tracking; homogeneous grouping.

Flexible grouping: allowing students to work in differently mixed groups depending on the goal of the learning task at hand.

In his book Flexible Grouping in Reading: Practical Ways to Help All Students Become Better Readers, Michael Opitz says: “Most often, ability groups reflect children’s overall reading achievement; those with similar achievement levels are placed together in one of three groups—high, medium, or low—to receive instruction.

“In contrast, flexible groups fulfill a variety of purposes. All children needing to learn a specific skill, for example, might be grouped to learn that skill. Once children have learned the skill, the group dissolves.”

First-grade teacher Jim Henry uses ability grouping. “I have some kids coming into first grade reading at a third- or fourth-grade level and others who don’t know all their letters yet,” says Henry, explaining how he creates four reading groups based on ability. He purposely keeps the numbers small in the two lower groups and works with those groups every day. The other groups can work more independently.

Henry avoids naming the groups, calling them instead by the names of different group members (Jason’s group, Jenny’s group, and so on). He further blurs the distinction among groups by regularly inviting individuals from one group to join the activities of another group. Although students are grouped by ability, Henry moves them
in and out of the groups as their progress dictates.

In her multiage first- and second-grade classroom, Laura Fendel groups children many different ways. For math skills instruction, she divides the class by ability, usually according to whether they are first or second graders. But frequently these groups overlap as first graders surge ahead or second graders’ progress slows.

“I always explain these groupings to children,” says Fendel. She tells them, “It’s really important for you to learn what you need to learn. Don’t think about it as first- or second-grade work.”

Fendel also mixes and matches her first and second graders into ability groups for reading, and into interest groups for “Book Club” (where children group themselves according to which story they want to hear her read).

Middle-school educator and author Paula Naegle suggests grouping students randomly for short cooperative activities. “Part of your goal is to help students develop their social skills by working with students they may not ordinarily choose as partners,” she writes.

Naegle describes how she quickly groups students by handing out items that can be sorted by color, shape, or type.

**Benefits of Flexible Grouping**

Educators such as Michael Opitz who use flexible grouping for reading instruction cite numerous benefits. These include helping all children to feel part of the learning community by sharing reading experiences, working cooperatively with a variety of peers, becoming more involved with learning, and avoiding the stigma of ability groups.

In flexible grouping, teachers employ a variety of grouping techniques to achieve specific goals in reading instruction. The table on page 24 shows eight ways to form groups and explains how and when you might use each. As Opitz stresses in his book, the groups dissolve once their purpose is met. Often, the groups break up after a few days, although they may last longer.

**Balance in Groups**

Adele Schroeter, principal at New York City’s PS. 59, remembers grouping her fourth graders when she taught at PS. 321. She and her colleagues gathered before each new school year to group students into individual classes. They worked to achieve academic, racial, behavioral, and gender balance.

“Heterogeneously grouped classes become microcosms of the world children live in,” Schroeter explains. “Our job is to build a sense of community, getting kids to know and appreciate each other as learners and individuals.”

Within a heterogeneous class, students have many different chances to work in groups. Soon into the school year, after the students get to know each other, Schroeter suggests that teachers ask them to write letters describing who they think would be good learning partners—who would complement their own styles, strengths, and weaknesses. These student choices (surprisingly accurate, according to Schroeter) helped guide her successfully in regrouping the class.

For certain subjects, Schroeter recommends other types of grouping. In her math class (an ability-based class where students were drawn from the entire fourth grade), Schroeter regrouped her students every two weeks. She arranged children into seven cooperative groups by randomly handing them cards as they walked into class. (Unknown to the students, she reserved a few special cards to group those who need extra attention.) “Kids quickly learn that leadership qualities can be as valuable as discrete math skills,” she explains. “The most sought-after workmates are not always the most skillful mathematicians.”

In social studies, the students grouped themselves according to common interests. They then completed various group projects.

But perhaps the most exciting grouping occurred during reading. Here, the children formed book clubs of three or four individuals who chose their own books and assignments and conducted their own discussions. To select group members, the children first wrote letters to Schroeter commenting on the qualities they were looking for in other group members. Then they wrote “personal ads” modeled on classified ads.
## Flexible Grouping Techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grouping Technique</th>
<th>How</th>
<th>Use when . . .</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Random</strong></td>
<td>This is completely arbitrary; have students group themselves by like book titles or by given colors.</td>
<td>your focus is on management and forming groups of equal size. Also use random grouping when you want students to get to know one another.</td>
<td>Students choose a book title from a bag you circulate and group themselves by like title. There are enough titles to form groups of equal size.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Achievement (Ability)</strong></td>
<td>Use performance on a reading measure; students with similar scores are placed in the same group.</td>
<td>you want to have students read literature selections at their instructional levels as determined by the reading measure.</td>
<td>When completing a folktale unit, students are directed to read a folktale that corresponds to their general reading levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social (Cooperative)</strong></td>
<td>Group students according to specific social skills: leaders, followers; heterogeneous in that each group member has different skills.</td>
<td>students will need to function in different roles; students learn different roles from one another and work together to complete a group task.</td>
<td>Students read a script and glean important information to share with the rest of the class. When preparing, one person reads, another takes notes, another draws. One child is the group spokesperson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interest</strong></td>
<td>Assign students to a group or have them assign themselves to a group based on interest in a topic. Grouping may be based on an interest survey.</td>
<td>student interest is the main motivating force for learning about a topic.</td>
<td>Students who are interested in a favorite author or illustrator come together to learn more about him/her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task</strong></td>
<td>Group together students who are successful in completing given types of activities.</td>
<td>you want to enable students to use their strongest modality to show understanding.</td>
<td>Children who find drawing enjoyable are grouped together to construct scenery for the reenactment of a story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge of Subject</strong></td>
<td>Group together students with knowledge of a given subject or hobby.</td>
<td>you want students to see likenesses among one another and share information.</td>
<td>Students who are interested in baseball cards are grouped together to share the statistics of their favorite players.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skill/Strategy</strong></td>
<td>Group together students who need practice with a skill or strategy.</td>
<td>you want to teach the skill or strategy to those who need to learn it.</td>
<td>Children who need to learn specific print concepts are grouped to learn them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Choice</strong></td>
<td>Allow students to group themselves according to a like characteristic such as author or genre.</td>
<td>you want to use literature response groups in which students take the lead; also good to use when student success is not dependent on choice.</td>
<td>Several books are displayed and students are invited to choose the book they would like to read. Those with like titles are then put in the same group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What About Gifted Students?
Teachers of academically gifted students sometimes claim that in heterogeneous groups, high-ability students are unchallenged by their less able peers, become resentful and/or bored with group members, and often end up doing most of the group work. Teachers of the gifted argue that these students need to have the same exposure to positive role models and challenges as other students do. Further, there is considerable evidence that constantly placing gifted students in heterogeneous groups where they are perceived by themselves and others as the “smartest” leads to arrogance, resentment, and negative consequences all around. Instead, many educators and researchers insist that high-ability students need the challenge (and humbling experience) of working with their intellectual peers.

Conversely, students with learning challenges need some group experiences in which they are the “smartest” or most able.

Despite the grouping controversy, most educators agree that group configurations should be kept flexible and that students need opportunities to work with many different classmates.

Routines and Procedures
Consider these two classrooms: In the first, the teacher is trying to start a math lesson. She raises her voice for attention and gestures frantically as students jump out of their seats to sharpen pencils, retrieve math manipulatives, or ask friends for help. Cries of, “What are we supposed to be doing?” fill the air. The time this teacher has allotted for math is half over before the lesson begins.

Meanwhile, just across the hall, a writing workshop progresses smoothly. Circulating among small working groups, the teacher consults with some students while continuing to monitor the others. As they complete their writing, the students file their papers in their writing portfolios, then take out their library books, as previously instructed.

One teacher established routines and enforced them, the other did not. It’s obvious which is which.

Routines Help Children
Routines are the backbone of daily classroom life. They facilitate teaching and learning. That’s the bottom line. Routines don’t just make your life easier, they save valuable classroom time. And what’s most important, efficient routines make it easier for students to learn and achieve more. That’s not to say teaching and learning can be made routine or formulaic. Never! But procedures for turning in assignments, talking in class, lining up for lunch, getting your assistance, using the pencil sharpener, and passing out materials must be.

“Routines are the most important thing,” claims Deborah Charles of New Jersey. “It doesn’t matter what the routine is, as long as it becomes routine.”

“Children who often have trouble organizing their time benefit greatly from routines,” adds Jane Kelling of Texas.

“Routine is good for the teacher and good for the students,” concurs Pamela Shannon of San Diego. “Basically, kids feel secure with a routine. They know what’s expected of them. You build on this security before you go on to something new and different.”

Academic routines—lesson warm-ups, independent reading, weekly tests, homework collection and correction procedures, and other activities that structure learning—help children learn better, concludes researcher Gaea Leinhardt of the University of Pittsburgh’s Learning Research and Development Center. In her studies of mathematics teaching in elementary classrooms, she found that the major difference between expert and novice teachers was in the use of well-practiced routines.

Leinhardt tells of an expert teacher who gave students guided practice after a lesson by assigning two problems and asking them to stand when they finished. Thus, the teacher could readily see who needed help, which she would offer during the next round of problems.
As Leinhardt explains, this routine enabled the teacher to pace the practice and give rapid feedback on performance to all the students.

“Academic routines are just as important as other routines,” says Jane Kelling. “Starting lessons with warm-ups and ending lessons with reviews help children retain the material. And routines about homework and assignments are also extremely important for everyone to be successful.”

**Routines Help Teachers**

Research documents the effectiveness of routines. Regents professor David Berliner of Arizona State University views teachers as executives who each day make more important decisions affecting the lives of others than some chief executive officers make in a month or a year. The only way teachers can do that, he explains, is to manage by routine. Many decisions become automatic as teachers transform patterns of activities into smooth routines.

Routines differ from teacher to teacher and class to class. Routines are an individual thing, says Barbara King-Shaver, adjunct professor at Rutgers Graduate School of Education and supervisor of English at South Brunswick High School in New Jersey. “You use what works best for you and your students.”

Routines also eliminate many potential disruptions and problem situations, for example, the common problem of getting the teacher’s attention and help.

Typically, students who need help must raise their hands, wait to be acknowledged by the teacher, state their needs, then receive an oral directive. This very public request for help not only may embarrass some children or be used as a controlling mechanism by others, but it also disrupts the entire class every single time it occurs.

Many teachers list the daily routine, reminding students to sharpen pencils before school begins and directing them toward certain assignments and activities.

Especially important, say veterans, is the morning routine, or opening exercise. Effective teachers have an activity posted for students to start working on as soon as they enter the classroom. Their students know the procedure because they’ve been taught to follow it, and no time is wasted directing students on what to do. Not only does the morning routine establish an
orderly, efficient atmosphere, it forces students to take responsibility. They know it is their job to get right to work.

Routines Facilitate Transitions
One of the biggest payoffs of classroom routines is smooth transitions. Students following routines move quickly and efficiently from one activity or lesson to another, minimizing the time off-task.

Many teachers give children verbal warnings about how much time they have left to complete an activity. “You have five minutes to finish this science experiment,” they say, or “Three minutes more and it’s time to clean up your art projects.”

Jim Henry’s technique is a little more systematic. He winds down an independent activity by alerting students that in ten minutes, he’ll ring a bell. When the bell sounds, students have learned that they should put their pencils down, put materials away, and look up at Henry to show him that they’re ready.

Barbara King-Shaver refers to a kindergarten teacher who rings a soothing chime to signal to children that it’s time to move from one activity group to another. The children work at stations and simply rotate from station to station.

“Effective transitions are effective routines,” says Pamela Shannon. “For example, the children know that right after recess we read a story, so they are prepared and know just what to do.”

Deborah Charles rings a bell to signal the beginning of sustained silent reading, times students for 15 minutes, then rings the bell again to signal the end.

“Everything is a routine,” Charles claims. She describes the daily reading and writing workshop, where students gather together on a rug to hear a story, then receive a mini–writing lesson (using quotation marks, for example). Finally, Charles tells them that it’s time to get out their writing folders, and they automatically know how to do this.

Practice Makes Perfect
Whatever procedures you decide to use in your classroom, remember to practice them numerous times with the whole class, giving children an opportunity to demonstrate that they know and understand them. This practice is critical. We can’t assume that children know how we want them to behave until we’ve actually taught them the desired behavior, demonstrated how a child would look engaged in the behavior, and provided students the opportunity to practice.

“You have to teach the routines to the students,” Pamela Shannon stresses. “If you don’t, you suffer.” Shannon and other experienced teachers spend the first several weeks of school teaching, modeling, and practicing classroom routines.

Your job as an effective classroom manager is to develop procedures for all major classroom activities, then teach and have students practice those procedures the first few days or weeks of school until they become established routines. For new and seasoned professionals alike, the beginning of the school year is the time to teach and reteach classroom

**SIGNALING FOR HELP**

Educators Harry K. Wong and Rosemary Tripi Wong, who also write for and instruct teachers, suggest several excellent procedures for students to signal when they need help.

- Give each student an index card folded and taped into a three-sided pyramid. One side is blank, one side reads, “Please help me,” and the third side reads, “Please keep working.” The blank side normally faces the student. But when the student needs help, she signals by turning the “Please help me” side toward the teacher. This, in turn, puts the “Please keep working” side toward the student as a reminder to continue quietly until the teacher can come. This silent procedure secures the necessary help without disrupting the entire class.

- Establish hand signals. Students raise their index finger if they wish to speak; they raise two fingers if they wish to leave their seats to sharpen pencils, get books, and so on; and they raise three fingers if they need the teacher’s help. Again, the teacher can respond with a nod or hand gesture, and the class works on undisturbed.

The Wongs suggest it’s a good idea to post this hand signal procedure on the wall as a reminder to students.
routines. It usually takes several weeks for these to become firmly entrenched, but the initial time invested pays huge dividends throughout the year.

Before a new school year, decide which procedures you need to help you operate the classroom most efficiently. You may wish to use the checklist on page 30. Circle several of the procedures you want to teach on the first day. Plan for students to practice those procedures until they become routines. You will probably want to designate signals to alert students to follow certain procedures. (For example, the T-sign could indicate that a student should get back on task, and a raised arm could signal that you want students’ attention.)

6. Do not disturb people who are working.
Experienced teachers agree that it’s best to select only a few rules—those that contribute to successful learning and an orderly environment. (No one can remember a long list.) Make your rules as clear and specific as possible. Then decide with students’ help the consequences for breaking those rules.

Teach rules as you would a regular lesson. (Indeed, many veterans agree it should be your first lesson.) Discuss each rule individually, explaining the rationale behind it and asking for examples of how it could be broken. Explain that rules help make everyone’s time in school more enjoyable; use examples to illustrate this point. It’s a good idea to post the

OPENING EXERCISES

The opening exercises vary considerably in the primary classrooms featured here. But in each case, the exercise is a well-practiced routine. The children know exactly what to expect, and they start their day feeling safe and secure.

• The morning routine in Deborah Charles’s multiage classroom revolves around students taking responsibility for all of the housekeeping details. Charles pairs a first and second grader together for each of the classroom jobs she assigns. The class secretaries take attendance, the librarians check in the books children return, the scientists record the temperature and tend to any pets, the class managers hand out student folders and lead the class in daily physical exercises.

• Jim Henry’s opening exercises occur in the ten minutes between the morning bells. At 9:05, a bell signals for children to enter their classrooms. Henry’s first graders know that this is the time to put their homework and notes from parents in a designated spot, put their lunches and book bags in the proper place, sharpen their pencils, and begin working on the morning’s “fast math” problem. When the bell rings again at 9:15, students clear off their desks, stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, and listen to the morning announcements.

• Pamela Shannon views the opening exercise as a chance to make personal contact with each of her students. “When I call roll, I have each of the kids respond by saying ‘Good morning,’ then I ask them if they have anything they’d like to share—a good movie they saw the night before or something else,” says Shannon. This way, she explains, each child gets her undivided attention at least once that day. The opening exercises vary considerably in the primary classrooms featured here. But in each case, the exercise is a well-practiced routine. The children know exactly what to expect, and they start their day feeling safe and secure.
rules as a reminder (many schools require this) and send a copy home with each student.

First-grade teacher Susie Davis suggests posting “picture” rules for kindergarten and first-grade students.

Kathy Wesley finds that with her primary-age students, it’s best to “teach only the most important rules the first day, then add a few and review the following days. This is the most important time to be consistent with implementing rules. Often, a ‘rule offender’ will not have to be spoken to again about rule infractions. Fast, Firm, Fair really does work!”

Older students might write their own copies of the rules; just the act of writing the rules helps children remember them better.

It’s also a good idea to have students help determine classroom rules. Experience shows that students who have “ownership” are much more likely to follow classroom rules. Deborah Charles can attest to that. Each year her primary students establish seven or eight rules revolving around two basic questions:

- What does it mean to be in a safe environment?
- What does it mean to get along together?

By teaching rules and routines and consistently enforcing them at the beginning of the year, you are establishing good discipline. After all, good discipline and student behavior start with good classroom management. The key is to prevent problems before they occur. (You’ll find more on discipline and student behavior in Chapter Five.) Being a good manager does not mean ruling with an iron fist but, rather, providing leadership and a strong example of how to behave.

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**Routine Courtesy**

When the class secretary (a rotating job) takes roll in Deborah Charles’s multiage first-and-second-grade class, the children say, “Good morning” as their name is called, and the secretary replies, “Good morning.”

“I insist at the beginning of the year that students exchange these pleasantries every morning,” Charles explains. “It sets the tone for the whole day.”

Every Friday, as Laura Fendel’s first and second graders line up to leave, she turns to them and says, “At the end of the week, the children say to the teacher…” And students respond by bowing and replying, “Thank you for teaching me.” Then Fendel responds with a bow, “And the teacher says, Thank you for teaching me.”

This simple routine not only teaches common courtesy, it encourages the teacher and students to appreciate each other, and it reminds students that their teachers are learners, too, Fendel explains.

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**One Teacher’s Experience**

After a five-year leave from teaching, Texas teacher Michelle Baker returned to the classroom to find that she felt like a beginner again—with all of a beginner’s classroom-management problems.

“By Christmas I knew there was a problem in my room,” said Baker. “The off-task behavior was getting out of control, and teaching effectively was becoming increasingly difficult. A slow change began within me. I started having tension headaches daily. Clockwatching became habitual. In the mornings I would lie in bed dreading going to school in fear of what the day would be like.”

Baker characterizes that first year back as a “devastating failure.” But the very next year was “a rewarding and enriching experience”—a complete success!

What happened? Baker learned to establish rules and routines. And more importantly, she took time to teach them to her students.

“I spent a great deal of time modeling what I expected from the children,” she reports. “I used children to role-play each time a special direction was given. Those first two weeks of school resurrected me from a disastrous year and laid the foundation for a successful one. Always before, I took for granted that my students understood what I expected.”
# Procedures Checklist

Use these categories as guidelines to create your own checklist for classroom procedures.

## Beginning Class
- A. Roll call, absentees
- B. Tardy students
- C. Get-ready routines
- D. Distributing materials
- E. ____________
- F. ____________

## Work Requirements
- A. Heading papers
- B. Use of pen or pencil
- C. Writing on back of paper
- D. Neatness, legibility
- E. Incomplete work
- F. ____________
- G. ____________

## Instructional Activities
- A. Signals for students’ attention
- B. Signals for teacher’s attention
- C. Student talk during seatwork
- D. Activities to do when work is done
- E. Student movement in and out of small group
- F. Bringing materials to group
- G. Expected behavior in group
- H. Expected behavior of students not in group
- I. ____________
- J. ____________

## Ending Class
- A. Putting away supplies, equipment
- B. Cleaning up
- C. Dismissing class
- D. Checking planners/agenda
- E. ____________
- F. ____________

## Behavior Standards
- A. Rules
- B. Talk among students
- C. Turning in work
- D. ____________
- E. ____________
- F. ____________

## Other Procedures
- A. Lunch procedures
- B. Student helpers
- C. Fire drills
- D. Emergency procedures

## Room/School Areas
- A. Shared materials
- B. Teacher’s desk
- C. Water fountain, bathroom, pencil sharpener
- D. Student desks
- E. Learning centers, stations
- F. Playground
- G. Lunchroom
- H. ____________
- I. ____________

## Communicating Assignments
- A. Returning assignments
- B. Homework assignments
- C. ____________
- D. ____________

## Checking Assignments in Class
- A. Students exchanging papers
- B. Marking and grading assignments
- C. Turning in assignments
- D. ____________
- E. ____________

## Grading Procedures
- A. Recording grades
- B. Grading criteria
- C. Contracting with students for grades
- D. ____________
- E. ____________

## Academic Feedback
- A. Posting student work
- B. Communicating with parents
- C. Written comments on assignments
- D. Handing back assignments

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Excerpted from a list developed by the Mid-continent Regional Education Laboratory, 2550 S. Parker Rd., Ste. 500, Aurora, CO 80014.
Paperwork (Making a Molehill Out of a Mountain)

Lisa Roe recalls her biggest shock during her first year of teaching: “When I was going to college, I was never told how much grading and record keeping there’d be. As a student teacher, I wrote the lesson plans and my supporting teacher did all the grading. I was just never exposed to all the paperwork. If you’re not on top of it daily, you’ll be swamped.”

The late Doris Dillon reported that the first-year teachers working with her team of mentors in San Jose consistently ranked paperwork and grading as the most overwhelming aspects of teaching.

And they’re not alone. New teachers and veterans alike are besieged daily with what seems like a never-ending stream of paper. There are daily attendance records, lunch counts, lesson plans, subject-area testing, report cards, homework and seatwork to check and record, information to gather for emergencies, records for parent conferences, students in special pull-out programs to keep track of, and much more.

These aren’t tasks you can just ignore. But short of hiring a secretary or working 24 hours a day, what can you do?

Teacher educator Tamara Glupczynski recommends that novice teachers seek out the expertise of veteran teachers to figure out the best paperwork practices—their years of experience can save you hours of unnecessary paperwork.

“Teachers should work smarter, not harder,” said the late educator Madeline Hunter, who suggested the following ways to cut paperwork to a minimum:

- Get help from students. Instead of developing and duplicating practice pages, have students make their own practice problems. Here are some samples:

  1. List ten words in your reader that are objects you can touch (boy, ball) and ten words you cannot touch (in, new, the).
  2. Using the same facts as those in the story problem in your text (or on the chalkboard), write one question that requires you to add to find the answer, one that requires you to subtract, one that requires you to multiply, and one that requires you to divide.
  3. Make up five questions to test whether someone understood this chapter. Star the question you think is best. (This lets you examine just one question, reserving the others for verification if you doubt the student’s understanding. Also, get double mileage here by choosing several of the best questions to give to the rest of the class.)

- Give quick and random quizzes. Instead of correcting every homework assignment, give quick quizzes to assess what’s been learned. The quiz should include one or two questions from the assignment and one or two different questions of the same type. Collect and grade them on some days, and on others, give students the answers to evaluate their own quizzes. (Keep students guessing so they will always be motivated to learn from the homework.)

Writing About Rules

As an early-year activity, ask students to write and share their opinions about why rules are necessary. Here are two examples of student opinions.

Rules are important because they help keep us from having accidents.

Rules are important because then everyone gets a chance to talk and we all learn more.

Testing and Diagnosis

- Measure student achievement formally by preparing short quizzes that test specific skills and concepts. These are easy to correct, and they give information you can use immediately.
Informally diagnose by having students sign or signal answers. A simple head shake, raised hand, or hand signal can indicate answers to your questions. Deviant signals stand out. If you suspect they are copying, ask students to close their eyes and signal their answers.

Verbal responses, individual or in chorus, are another way to diagnose learning. Tell Your Neighbor exercises (Think-Pair-Share, learning partners, reciprocal teaching, and other student-to-student methods of response) give each student the chance to respond, and a peer will usually correct wrong responses.

(You’ll find more on evaluation and alternative assessments in Chapter Four.)

Checking Assignments
Homework and in-class assignments serve specific purposes. Students need practice with new skills or concepts, or they need to brush up on old ones. These are activities you want students to take seriously. And they will, if you do. Such work doesn’t always have to be graded. But show students that you value their efforts. For example:

On worksheets, mark a circle near each problem students answer incorrectly. When they correct their mistakes, simply add a K beside the original circle to give the children an OK on the end product.

Use an all-purpose chart (see the sample on page 34) to keep track of completed assignments on a daily basis.

Have students mark their own or each other’s papers when possible. (Check your district’s policy before you use this idea.)

Have students help you collect papers.

Use a pen of one color to record work that is handed in on time, and another for work that comes in late.

Start Off Right With Parents
First impressions count with parents, too. Good public relations at the beginning of the school year can improve parental support. Experienced teachers suggest it is a good idea to contact parents even before school starts. You can set a positive tone for the whole year by mailing a back-to-school kit to each student’s parents. Include such items as:

a welcome letter to both child and parents or other caregivers. Tell parents they may make appointments to discuss special concerns or observe the classroom. (Explain that appointments will help you avoid interruptions during those critical first few days.) Also, ask parents to schedule children’s medical appointments for after school or weekends whenever possible.

a form to return that lists home and office contact information, emergency numbers, and the best times and ways to reach parents.

a request for room parents and volunteers.

a request for parents to write you a note detailing their child’s strengths and accomplishments and any other information to help you make the child’s year successful.

a form for writing out special instructions regarding medical and other considerations.

a copy of your policies, including late-work policies and the consequences for late work. (It’s best to have parents and students sign off on these policies.)

a list of supplies students should bring the first day. This demonstrates to both parents and students that you mean to get down to learning right away.

With her back-to-school letter, first-grade teacher Susie Davis suggests that students bring something personal to go along with the beginning-of-the-year theme, such as a teddy bear. It’s a “security blanket” of sorts that helps new students feel more confident, Davis explains.

It’s important to include non-English-speaking parents in your back-to-school communications. Check with your school’s administration and your district for resources such as translators, forms in other languages, and policies for having documents translated.

(See Chapter Six for more ideas on fostering good home-school relations.)
Planning

Planning is the most important aspect of organization and management. Your entire life as a teacher revolves around planning. Everything you do before the first day of school constitutes planning. Arranging the physical environment; deciding about rules and routines; collecting materials, supplies, and ideas; contacting parents—these and more are planning activities. You are planning for a productive school year.

The “other” side of planning, of course, is the actual preparation for teaching academic content. Planning lessons, weekly units, and an entire school year is a big task. Many of us find it the most intellectually intensive activity of teaching and a tremendous creative outlet.

Good planning takes practice. It’s the key to professionalism. When you plan, you use your professional judgment to match ideas, activities, and materials with students’ interests and abilities. Planning is not simply a matter of making a to-do list. Planning is deciding when, where, why, and how a certain lesson is taught.

Couldn’t a good teacher just “wing it”? No way. A plan offers direction, confidence, and security. And plans help you use classroom time more efficiently by reducing confusion and wasted time. Generally, the more thoroughly you plan an activity, the less time it takes to complete.

What Experienced Planners Do

In studies at Michigan State University, researcher Christopher Clark and his colleagues found that experienced teachers generally use a four-step process when planning an activity:

1. Understand the total activity.
2. Imagine using it in the classroom.
3. Think of ways to avoid potential problems and modify accordingly.
4. Create a mental image of the revised version.

Effective teachers also:

✓ set aside a regular time for planning.
✓ make their daily and weekly plans fit into large units and yearly plans.
✓ correlate lesson objectives and activities to state standards.
✓ find out what students already know about a particular topic with formal or informal pretesting before planning lessons and units.
✓ overplan a lesson, because it’s easier to cut than to stretch the lesson.
✓ plan for interruptions and unexpected events to maintain order and minimize disruptions.
✓ plan transitions from one activity to another. This minimizes wasted time, confusion, and behavior problems.
✓ clearly communicate the plan to students.

Teachable Moments

Clark advises teachers to think of their plans not as rigid scripts but as “flexible frameworks for action.” Plans, he says, are devices for getting started in the right direction. Good teachers sometimes depart from their plans and often elaborate upon them as they proceed. They take advantage of those unplanned “teachable moments”—times when learning potential is high because student motivation and interest are high.

Veterans reflecting on their first few years of teaching often report that they were slaves to their plans. While it is important to develop and follow instructional plans, don’t be so rigid that you pass up unexpected opportunities.

Suppose, for example, that a migrating flock of Canada geese lands briefly in a field outside your window. The students are excited and have lots of questions. Where are they going? Where did they come from? What are they eating? In response to the students’ questions and enthusiasm, why not fly with a science unit on birds and migration?

One urban teacher turned the noisy disturbance of a nearby building demolition into an exciting class discussion about machines, building materials, and the people who had lived in the building. Another teacher used an incident of student littering on the playground to involve her students in an extended ecology, conservation, and recycling unit.
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</tbody>
</table>
### Must-Do List

Make a copy of this list to use before school starts each year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make bulletin-board decisions: where to post announcements, menu, and calendar; what kind of welcome-back display to make; which boards will be for subject-area work and which boards students will design; where to display students’ original work.</td>
<td>Prepare packets for students to take home the first day. Include:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set up learning centers.</td>
<td>emergency forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make signs for room.</td>
<td>school rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare class rolls and permanent records.</td>
<td>supplies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make class list to post on door.</td>
<td>bus or transportation rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put your name outside the door.</td>
<td>note to parents/request for room parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make student name tags for desks or have them make their own.</td>
<td>_________________________________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find out schedules for lunch, gym, art, music, library.</td>
<td>_________________________________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtain supplies.</td>
<td>___________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>textbooks and supplemental materials</td>
<td>daily schedule (fill in as soon as possible)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plan books</td>
<td>seating chart (fill in as soon as possible)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>storybooks for read-alouds</td>
<td>reproducible activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attendance materials</td>
<td>_________________________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>paper clips</td>
<td>_________________________________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>construction paper</td>
<td>_________________________________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manila folders</td>
<td>_________________________________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>different kinds of tape</td>
<td>_________________________________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extra writing paper</td>
<td>_________________________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>grade book</td>
<td>_________________________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>rubber bands</td>
<td>_________________________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>stapler and staples</td>
<td>_________________________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>handwriting paper</td>
<td>_________________________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>spare pencils/pens</td>
<td>_________________________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>tissues</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Prepare a file for correspondence from parents.

Prepare a file for faculty bulletins.

Get a copy of state and district curriculum standards.

Write tentative lesson plans for the coming week.

Duplicate materials needed for the first few days.

Write your name and other important information on the board.

Make a checklist for returned forms (can be used later for report cards and other items).
Fourth-grade teacher Penny Strube relates an incident involving one student’s biography on Ulysses S. Grant. Instead of flipping immediately to Grant in the encyclopedia he was using, the student began perusing. Suddenly, he asked Strube if she knew that there had been a gold rush in 1849. Failing to grasp the connection, Strube asked him what president he was working on. But he just continued excitedly, suggesting that that’s where the 49ers football team must have gotten their name.

“The excitement of seeing that connection was felt all over the classroom,” relates Strube. “I stopped what I was doing to grasp that teachable moment with the entire class. Ryan’s comment started a discussion in which another student pointed out that the Pittsburgh Steelers got their name from a natural resource in that state, and another student mentioned the Oilers.”

Teachable moments crop up often, especially if you stay alert for ways to build on students’ interests, needs, and moods. In fact, it’s a good idea to capitalize on student interests whenever possible. Effective teachers don’t hesitate to solicit lesson ideas from students. Asking students what they would like to learn about can help you generate high-interest lessons. You can match their ideas to the concepts and skills you want to teach.

Three Types of Plans
Basically, there are three types of plans: 1) long-range (grading period, semester, or year), 2) the weekly schedule, and 3) daily lesson plans. In her book *The New Teacher’s Complete Sourcebook: Grades K–4*, Bonnie Murray offers tips for each of the three types:

**Long-Range Plans**

- Referring to state and district standards, objectives, and benchmarks, determine an appropriate sequence for teaching required skills and concepts.

- With a blank calendar, mark in all holidays, grading periods, testing times (including time to practice test-taking skills), and schoolwide activities to determine actual instructional time.

- Determine the best time of year to study specific content. (You wouldn’t schedule a unit on plants in January, for example.) Then write the corresponding objectives in appropriate places on your calendar.

- Use themes to integrate subject matter.

- Review long-range plans when you develop weekly lesson plans.

**Weekly Schedule**

- Find out what a schedule for instruction should look like according to your state or district.

- Have a copy of any recommendations or requirements for time to be spent on each subject.

- Make several copies of your weekly schedule planning form.

- Place lunch and recess, special classes, and pullout program times on one copy of the form.

- Think about how you would like to begin the day. (Journaling, singing, and independent or paired reading are among the many possibilities.)

- Think about what type of activity would be appropriate right after lunch. (Murray schedules independent writing to let students calm down and give her a chance to confer with individuals about their writing.)

- Think about how you would like to end the day. (Many teachers have students reflect on what they’ve learned that day.)

- Begin placing subjects at appropriate places in the schedule. (Murray suggests scattering “active” subjects such as science among “sedentary” subjects such as writing.)

- Recheck the minutes of instruction you have scheduled against any state or district requirements.

- Get feedback on your plan from colleagues and administrators. Adjust it as needed throughout the year.

- Use your weekly schedule to create a generic frame for your daily lesson plans.
Daily Lesson Plans

- Detail specific activities and content to be covered.
- Include objectives, instructional procedures, assessment procedures, student groupings, and materials.
- Check with your principal for planning guidelines or requirements. (Many principals check plans each week and ask to see lessons outlined in a specific format.)
- Balance grouping strategies, and include activities that meet the needs of all learning styles.
- Remember that effective planning is done in concert with assessment—knowing exactly where a student is on the learning continuum and how he or she learns best give your planning purpose and direction. (For information and resources on assessment, see Chapter Three.)

Planning for Substitutes and the Unexpected

Sometimes, even careful plans and well-designed lessons are not enough. What about the times when you are unexpectedly absent from the classroom or a situation demands your immediate time and attention?

With advance planning, you can be prepared for the unpredictable. Build a file of emergency activities and “sponges” to soak up time lost to interruptions or unexpected situations such as a child getting sick in class, a parent knocking on the door, or a school assembly starting ten minutes later than scheduled. By planning meaningful “instant” activities, you can turn lost time into learning time. (You might start your emergency activity file with the ten-minute think sessions suggested on page 39 by teacher Susan Petreshene.)

You can also plan for those times when you must be absent from the classroom.

“I never leave my classroom when the day is over without having the next day’s plans and papers laid out on my desk, along with directions for the parent volunteers,” says Washington teacher Kathy Wesley. “I don’t want them to be without something to do if I end up with a sub the next day.”

You can use the checklist on page 40 to prepare a file of information and ideas for substitutes.

“My school developed a schoolwide substitute procedure packet that every classroom has on hand,” notes Utah teacher Tim Bailey. “In addition, I have a substitute folder on the wall behind my desk that has enough in it to get a substitute through a day if an emergency prevented me from preparing for a sub.”

Don’t forget to prepare students in advance for the possibility of a substitute. Discuss the conduct you expect from them when you are absent. Remind them how they can help the substitute and why their cooperation is important.

Washington teacher Judy Lee Dunn explains to her students that different teachers have different ways of doing things. Dunn suggests switching classes with another teacher for a day to allow children to experience different teaching styles and changes in routine. Dunn also suggests that you can reinforce the substitute’s teaching by asking students to describe at least three new things they learned in your absence. She gives extra credit to students who can do so.

Florida veteran teacher, Instructor columnist, and author Mary Rose underscores the point that advance planning absences will make your day out of school, the students’ day without you, and the substitute’s experience much easier. In The Substitute Teacher Resource Book, she recommends, “As you plan for your absence, think through your substitute’s day. . . . Picture your morning routine and how you automatically reach for lunch count forms and the attendance folder. Then think of the order of subjects that he or she will be expected to teach. Leave specific instructions about what students should and should not do, such as ‘Use crayons or colored pencils to complete the graph, no markers please.’ Let the substitute know where you keep supplies in case a student does not have his or her own.” She also suggests these advance planning tips:

- Keep handy in your personal organizer or address book your district’s substitute center phone number and the names and substitute ID numbers of preferred substitutes.
Show one or two responsible students where you keep your materials for the substitute.

Contact another teacher at your school and ask him or her to check on the substitute for you. In case of major emergencies, ask this trusted colleague to explain your absence to your students.

Finally, thank the substitutes who do a good job in your classroom. Call them or write a note. Let the principal know you were pleased, and ask for them again.

**Seatwork**

Seatwork—the tasks and assignments students complete while working independently at their desks—can be an important classroom management tool. Children learn at different rates, and you can’t help all of them at once. So seatwork—whether it is independent writing, silent reading, workbooks, or some other assignment—helps keep the class engaged in meaningful learning tasks while you work with individual students or small groups. At least, it’s supposed to work that way.

Picture this scenario: The classroom fairly hums with concentration. Students pore over their reading workbooks. Pencils meet paper with a furious scratching sound as the children race to answer the questions on each page. Their teacher works quietly with a reading group in the back of the room.

No disruptions, no socializing, everybody’s busy. There’s a lot of learning going on in this classroom. Or is there?

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**JUST FOR SUBSTITUTES**

If you are a substitute teacher yourself, you probably have already realized that you need your own “bag of tricks” to have a successful and satisfying school day. You’ll pick up many ideas from other teachers, both substitute and full-time.

“Keep a file folder of activities for each of the grades in which you substitute,” suggests Wendy Buchberg, a substitute from Ithaca, New York. “This way you’ll have backup material if the teacher left insufficient lesson plans.”

Buchberg also keeps a pad of stick-on notes to place on students’ desks, in case there is no seating chart. “Knowing everyone’s name makes management easier.”

Substitute teacher Amy Gotliffe from San Francisco has a list of “must-dos” for her teaching assignments. First, she establishes the class rules by asking students to restate them in their own words. Then, she tells students her own rules, if they are different from the class rules. Gotliffe also asks students how their teacher gets their attention (for example, raised fingers, flashing lights), then she chooses one method and practices it with them. Finally, she offers something of herself to her temporary charges.

“It’s not often students have a guest,” Gotliffe points out. “Tell them about your hobbies, bring an instrument, or tell a story. You are a wonderful new resource.”

Veteran teacher Martine Wayman, currently teaching sixth grade, also has some advice for substitutes. When a student misbehaves, says Wayman, put your hand lightly on his or her shoulder. If the problem persists, send the child to an area away from the other children. “Then talk to the child and invite him or her to help you with something. It works,” she insists.

Here’s a behavior-management technique used by a substitute teacher in Baton Rouge, Louisiana: When she enters the classroom, this substitute puts a note on each child’s desk saying, “I was good for the substitute teacher today.” Then, throughout the day, she stamps the papers when children are behaving well or are on-task. She leaves the stamped notes on the desks for the teacher.

Dolores Chaot, from Chickasha, Oklahoma, suggests giving students “Fast Five Problems” while you take roll and collect lunch money in the morning. The Fast Five might include fun math puzzles, riddles, geography or current affairs questions, or a short creative-writing assignment. Substitutes can then get to know students by reviewing their answers to the Fast Five.

There are many different strategies to take as a substitute teacher. The important point is that you have a strategy. Like any teacher, you must plan for a satisfying and productive day. The key to good teaching—even substitute teaching—is good planning.
Ten-Minute Think Sessions

These activities will help sharpen students’ organizing, imagining, observing, patterning, questioning, and other thinking strategies. They’ll also show children that you value original thinking.

More than one “right” answer!
Have students think of as many logical answers as possible to each of the following questions. Stress that there is no one right answer and encourage a variety of responses by showing that you value diverse and unusual thinking.

1. How could you know someone had a fire in a fireplace if you hadn’t been there at the time? (Fireplace still warm, wood pile lower . . .)
2. “It’s important you don’t lose these,” said Kenny to Carl as they left on a weekend backpacking trip. What might Kenny have handed Carl? (Maps, matches, glasses . . .)
3. What sounds could you recognize without seeing what made the noise? (Cat’s meow, car horn, telephone ring . . .)
4. Some words name numbers, such as three, ten, or twenty. Other words do not directly tell you a number, but when you hear them, you often think of a number. For instance, week and the number seven go together. What other words make you think of numbers? (Duet, triangle, dozen, century, shutout . . .)
5. “There must be an accident on the highway,” said Mrs. West. What might cause her to say this? (Traffic backed up, police car speeding by, flashing red lights . . .)

Here’s the answer; you give the question.
There are many possible questions to answers such as “the Dodgers.” For example: Who won the game? What’s your favorite baseball team? What’s the name of the major league baseball team in Los Angeles? Help students think in “reverse” with these practice answers, then make up your own.

1. A: Under the bed. Q: Where are your shoes? Where did that sound come from? Where does the cat hide?
3. A: In the morning. Q: When is your house the busiest? When do you eat breakfast? When are you the grumpiest?
4. A: Yes! Q: Would you like to go to the movies with me? Would you like an ice-cream cone? Is she coming over?
5. A: My dad. Q: Who taught you to play the trumpet? Who drove you to school today? Who likes popcorn better than anyone you know?

“Adverbially” speaking
Name a verb and ask students to give you an adverb that “goes with” the verb. For example, if you said cried, a student might say loudly. Say the phrase back to students as a whole to emphasize a word picture. Ask for only one answer for each verb and specify that adverbs can’t be repeated. List the answers given so students can avoid repetition. The activity becomes progressively more difficult as common adverbs are eliminated. Suggested verbs: slept, dropped, tiptoed, played, stood, stopped, sailed, waved, touched, yelled, zigzagged, whispered, flew, carried, banged, disappeared, drove, wrote, walked, worked, paced, leaned, maneuvered, stared, coughed, floated, giggled. Ask students to suggest more possibilities.

1,001 uses for...
This activity allows students to practice divergent thinking by asking them to give practical, nonhumorous responses to the question: “How many ways can you use a . . . ?” Encourage students to think of uses they’ve never thought of before and ask them to explain their responses. How many ways can you think of to use a: cup, lightbulb, button, birdcage, plain piece of paper . . . ? Take turns suggesting new items.

Is that a fact?
Prepare a list of simple statements. Read a few to your class and discuss whether they are facts or opinions. After children understand the concept, tell them to stand if they think the statement is a fact, remain seated if it is an opinion, or cross their arms if they are uncertain. Allow time to think before you call for a response. Indicate with a hand signal when to begin.

How is a _______ like a __________?
Teach older children about similes and get them to practice divergent thinking at the same time by comparing unlike things. Make two lists of common nouns. Randomly choose one item from the first list and another item from the second list. Brainstorm to think of all the ways they are alike. For example: How is a tree like a child? (Both need water and sunshine to grow. Both grow taller every year. Both can be damaged by insects. Both need to put down roots. Both are important to society.)
Preparing for Substitutes

Many teachers develop a file for substitute teachers. Use this checklist of teacher-tested ideas to prepare for substitutes in your classroom.

- Let your principal know the names of substitutes who work well with you and your classroom situation.
- Prepare a form letter to students explaining the situation and encouraging their good behavior.
- Draw up a sheet that familiarizes subs with daily procedures: lunch and attendance counts; other duties; classroom routines and discipline procedures; the schedule for aides, special-area teachers, and students in pull-out programs; and the names of helpful teachers, students, and staff members.
- Provide a building map with exits clearly marked and a list of emergency procedures (fire drill, tornado drill, etc.).
- Leave seating charts, including your arrangements for small-group activities.
- Prepare name tags for students to wear. This tends to reduce misbehavior.
- Include a daily schedule, indicating the times for lunch, recess, and school beginning and ending, as well as the academic schedule.
- Describe the special-needs children in your class and indicate the classroom-management strategies that work well for you.
- Leave detailed lesson plans. If your substitute has the proper credentials, give him or her the freedom to teach. Most substitutes can and want to undertake genuine teaching responsibilities.
- File away several books you know your students will love. Hearing a good story read aloud is an activity sure to please students, and it's a productive way to fill extra time.
- Include a few reproducibles and short activities to be used in spare moments.
- Develop a report form for the substitute to fill out on how the day went. Remind the sub to list both problems and positive outcomes.
Appearances can be deceiving. Students may be sitting quietly and working intently. But that doesn’t mean they’re learning. Researchers claim that many children complete seatwork assignments with little or no idea of what they’re doing or why.

Critics charge that some teachers use workbooks, worksheets, and similar materials as busywork—something to “kill time” and keep students under control. Sadly, such abuse of instructional time does occur. But that doesn’t mean we should just discard these potentially powerful teaching aids. Instead, we need to identify where it is that we go wrong and try to use seatwork more effectively.

**What You Should Know**

Researcher Linda Anderson and her colleagues in a Michigan State University study found that students care more about getting their work finished than doing it correctly. When assignments are too difficult or don’t make sense, they complete them as best they can—by copying answers from friends, guessing at answers, leaving blanks, and so on. They’re doing them, but they’re doing them wrong. Yet teachers are fooled into thinking that students are working productively and learning.

Anderson suggests that the emphasis on staying busy, combined with assigning tasks that are too difficult, communicates to children that the important thing is simply completing the task, no matter how. The researchers found that some children just haven’t learned to detect when they need help. Or worse, they’ve come to expect school tasks not to make sense, and so they give up trying to understand. Even many of the children who complete the assignments correctly have no real understanding of why they’re doing them.

To use seatwork more effectively, it’s important to examine and refine techniques for selecting, presenting, monitoring, and evaluating it. As with any tool, seatwork’s effectiveness depends upon the skill of the user. Expert teachers know that children don’t learn to read poems by filling in worksheets. But they can practice math skills effectively with worksheets, or use worksheets as reading guides for a textbook chapter in science or social studies.

**Tips for Using Seatwork**

Following are some tips experienced teachers and researchers suggest for using seatwork effectively:

- **Always match seatwork to the material already covered during a lesson.** Seatwork should never replace direct instruction of new material (except for enrichment activities).

- **Make sure students know the purpose of the assignment.** You can’t assume children will figure it out; be specific. Give explanations such as, “This exercise will help you practice the new rules for sounding out words with ou in the middle so you can get faster at doing that and read more new words on your own.”

- **Guide students through one or two think-aloud examples to model strategies they need to complete the assignment.** Guided practice should always precede independent practice, say researchers and expert teachers. Otherwise, children risk practicing their mistakes. Lower-ability students may need even more guided practice than other children.

- **Match seatwork with ability level.** Whole-class assignments are rarely effective; they’re too difficult for some children and too easy for others. Instead, try to customize by offering high-ability students optional extension activities and lower-ability students extra practice in areas where they need it. It’s not always possible to differentiate assignments, but some good examples include math worksheets that vary in difficulty and guided free choice on books to read.

- **Select seatwork that allows all students a 95-percent success rate.** In situations where students must progress independently, such as seatwork and homework, students need a very high success rate. As Michigan State University researcher Jere Brophy explains, skills must be “mastered to the point of overlearning” so they can be retained and applied to more complex material.

- **Limit the amount of time students spend working on seatwork.** Intersperse seatwork with opportunities to move around.
Carefully monitor seatwork. Before you begin a
group lesson or become occupied, circulate
through the room for a few minutes to make
sure that everyone has started, paying special
attention to children who often have problems.
Later, take additional time to circulate the room
and offer help where it’s needed. Get students to
think about what they’re doing by asking them
how they got a certain answer. They’ll soon
realize that you value how they think, not just
whether or not they have the right answers.

Teach students to recognize when they don’t
understand something. Many students aren’t
aware that they need help, while others may
seek unnecessary support. Make clear the
difference between needing help and being
overly dependent. Working independently is a
skill children need to practice.

Establish routines or procedures for
seeking help. Hand signals, “help cards”
propped on desks, and buddy systems are
all effective procedures.

Seatwork is a tool designed for a specific
purpose: helping to meet the individual needs of 25
or 30 students while providing them with
important practice opportunities. Used properly,
this tool really works.

Time Management
Teaching takes time. And in school, as
elsewhere, there’s never enough of it. Like any
executive responsible for the efforts of others,
you will find that managing time—yours and
the students’—is one of your biggest
challenges.

Time management is the thread running
through almost all aspects of teaching—
organizing the day, organizing the classroom,
deciding how long and how often to teach
various subjects, recording student progress, or
keeping time-consuming behavior problems to
a minimum. Students have only so much time
to learn in your classroom, and you have only
so much time to teach them.

Effective use of school time begins with efficient
classroom organization and management—and
vice versa. Almost every topic covered up to this
point has involved time management in some way:

- paring down paperwork
- planning
- establishing routines that eliminate wasted time
  and confusion
- using learning centers
- independent assignments and seatwork to give
  you time to work with small groups.
- classroom environments that allow students
  and activities to move smoothly from one
  activity to the next

Increasing Teaching Time
You may have less time to teach than you think.
Lunch, recess, breaks, downtime between lessons
and activities, moving from one classroom to
another, interruptions, and other periods of
noninstructional time account for at least 27
percent of an elementary school day. In many
classrooms, that figure climbs beyond 40 percent.
Incredible as those statistics may sound, they have
been confirmed by separate studies at WestEd
(formerly the Far West Laboratory for Educational
Research and Development).

Sure, lunch, recess, and restroom breaks are
important. But too much teaching time is lost. Add
to that the time that slips away when students
stare out the window or are otherwise disengaged
during instruction, and you get the point.

Here are some ways beginners and veterans
alike can substantially increase teaching time:

- Decrease the time allotted for breaks and
  social activities. Contrary to popular belief,
  students do not need a lot of break time to
  refresh themselves. In fact, research shows that
  long or frequent breaks may actually lower
  their involvement with academic work.

- Find out which aspects of school time you can
  control. In some schools, teachers discover they
can change the scheduling of class periods,
pull-out programs, lunch breaks, extracurricular
activities, planning time, and outside
interruptions. Ask your principal to help you
control time-wasters such as unexpected visitors and frequent intercom announcements.

✔ Schedule solid blocks of teaching time for each day. You might hang a “Do Not Disturb” sign outside your door during those times. Also, secure your principal’s help in scheduling pull-out programs around those blocks and ask parents not to schedule medical or dental appointments then.

✔ Plan for smooth transitions between lessons and always try to have materials ready for each lesson or activity.

✔ Assign homework to extend practice time. Homework should allow students to practice skills they have already learned.

✔ Reconsider how you schedule restroom breaks.

✔ Improve student attendance. Attendance has a big effect on teaching and learning time. Impress upon parents the importance of good attendance and teach an actual lesson on how it hurts to miss school. “At the end of each day, I try to tell kids what we will be doing the next day,” notes first-grade teacher Susie Davis. “I emphasize the kinds of activities they look forward to, such as hands-on activities. This seems to encourage attendance.”

Delegating Tasks

Good classroom managers know how to delegate. Aides, volunteers, and students can handle many classroom tasks and save you enormous amounts of time. Learn to use these valuable helpers.

If you are one of the lucky ones assigned a full- or part-time aide, draw on that person’s special strengths and abilities. Aides can work with small groups or tutor individuals. They can make instructional games and resources, keep bulletin boards current, monitor seatwork and learning centers, read stories to the class, and assist you with assessments. They can also help with clerical and housekeeping duties (those the children can’t do for themselves). And their assistance with field trips, special programs, and class parties is invaluable. Help your aide become increasingly responsible and involved in the classroom.

Volunteers are another valuable asset. Volunteers generally can take on any responsibilities you would assign to an aide—the amount of supervision and guidance you may need to provide depends on the individual, of course. (Make sure to check your district policies on the use of nonlicensed volunteers in the classroom.)

Volunteer programs can not only provide teachers with much-deserved help, they can also improve home and school relations. Parents, grandparents, businesspeople, and other volunteers become sympathetic to the problems facing schools and supportive of better budgets and improved opportunities. Also, they learn to play an active role in educating their children. It’s a winning proposition for everyone. (See Chapter Six for more about school volunteers.)

Here are some ideas for securing volunteers:

✔ Parents and relatives of your students are your best bet. Send home a recruitment flyer on the first day of school. Be sure to mention that grandparents are welcome, too. Solicit volunteers at school functions and ask them to fill out a volunteer application. Also, ask your students’ teachers from the previous year for the names of parent volunteers. Many parents like to move along with their children.

✔ Senior citizens organizations are good sources for volunteers. Service-minded groups such as the Retired Seniors Volunteer Program and the American Association of Retired Persons look for projects in which their members can participate. Take the initiative and contact these groups; ask to be included on a meeting agenda.

✔ PTA members and other parent clubs have lots of volunteer experience. Don’t forget to recruit from their ranks.

✔ High school and college students can help, too. For college-age volunteers, get permission to post recruitment information around the campus. Check with the college’s volunteer bureau, or talk to the instructors of education courses and ask them to nominate likely candidates. At your local high school, check with the guidance counselors, individual teachers, or service organizations. Many high
schools now have a service component built into graduation requirements, and school volunteering would certainly qualify.

- **Employees in business and industry** have become an integral part of school volunteer programs in recent years. Many businesses actively encourage employees to help out in the community and give them the release time as well.

- **Your students** can also be effective classroom helpers. Students can accomplish many of the tasks that adult volunteers do, and teachers nationwide routinely employ students to take lunch count, run errands, manage the classroom library, take care of classroom pets, and even photocopy materials—so long as these jobs do not interfere with their participation during instructional time. Obviously, student assistants save us valuable teaching time. But the experience also gives students the chance to be responsible and to be depended upon. These are important confidence- and character-building opportunities.

**Cross-Age Tutoring: Students Helping Students**

The Teacher Assistance Program at New Hope Elementary School in New Hope, Minnesota, encourages students to apply for such “jobs” as stocking supplies or tutoring peers. They fill out applications, undergo an interview, and receive job training. Other school programs are less formal. But the intent is the same: to give students added responsibilities and participation in the daily working of schools while simultaneously increasing the time teachers have to teach.

It’s important to note here that students can function as academic helpers, not just as clerical workers or “grunt” labor. For example, one valuable time-saver is the use of cross-age tutors. Here, older children help younger ones practice academic skills such as reading, writing, or math. Cross-age tutoring resembles a real-life or family situation in which older children help younger children.

Consider the experiences of resource teacher Jacki Lamb as she worked with low-achieving students. When her first and second graders were hard-pressed to finish their writing assignment, Lamb enlisted the help of her fifth graders. What happened?

“I listened to the fifth grader who had the worst handwriting and spelling of all the older students in the resource room encourage in a positive manner his young charge to write clearly and legibly, saying, ‘You are doing a good job of keeping the words on the line, but look at your spacing. Use your finger between the words so they don’t run together. I can’t understand what you’re saying otherwise. Check to see how you are holding your pencil. That’s important, you know.’”

A few minutes later, Lamb was amused to hear the boy say, “Let’s look at this word. Do you really think this is how to spell ‘because’?” Says Lamb, “This was the same boy who could not spell ‘because’ himself! He continued to tutor his student in the merits of good handwriting and correct spelling, and they both felt successful when the young writer was finished.”

Lamb continues: “My attention was drawn to the shy fifth-grade boy who usually was reluctant to participate either in the resource room or in his classroom. In his gentle manner, he was involved with his student by reading aloud what the second grader had written. ‘Tell me if you like what you hear.’ Together they made the necessary changes until the second grader was satisfied.

“I was excited by what was happening,” Lamb notes. “The fifth graders were moving from student to student, helping each one until the young author was pleased with the final product. The older students exhibited patience, motivation, and surprisingly, knowledge of writing skills. The primary students gave the older students an opportunity to share their individual writing skills, limited as those skills may seem.”

**Managing Your Own Time**

Don’t forget to make time for yourself, too. The following time-management tips are gleaned from several sources, including ideas shared by Michigan-based staff-development specialists Janice Hammond and Dennis Sparks, and Barbara Samuels of the University of Calgary in Canada:
Set goals, both professional and personal, and review them periodically.

Make a to-do list every day, including only items that are not part of your daily routine.

Do your toughest task early in the day, if possible, so you don’t spend time and energy worrying about it.

Work within your personal time needs and periods of highest productivity. Could you accomplish more by arriving at school a half hour earlier each day than by working an hour or two after school?

Learn to say no to committee work, volunteer work, or social functions for which you don’t have the time.

Learn to concentrate. Establish a quiet work space and uninterrupted work time.

Avoid procrastinating.

Avoid perfectionism. The extra hours you spend making that slide show just a little better may not be worth it.

Put to use the time you spend waiting—in the doctor’s office, on the bus or train, for meetings to begin.

Set time limits for tasks. Remember Parkinson’s Law: Work expands to fill the time available for its completion.

Set deadlines for yourself and your class, and stick to them.

Never do anything a student can do just as well: taking lunch count, running errands, filing completed assignments.

Decorate the classroom walls with students’ work instead of your own time-consuming masterpieces.

Cross-age tutoring helps the tutor as well as the tutee. To initiate your own cross-age tutoring program in reading:

• work with a teacher from a different grade level, higher or lower, depending upon whether you want your students to be tutors or tutees.

• help the tutors communicate in a sympathetic and nonjudgmental way.

• when possible, select tutors who are low-achieving readers. They can benefit from what they learn about proper reading behavior, they are most likely to be sympathetic to others having difficulty, and the responsibility of helping others gives them much-needed confidence.

• use tutoring as an alternative to silent reading or enrichment activities, not to replace a student’s free time or your instruction.

• celebrate each success, such as an advance in reading level.

You might also teach your tutors the three-step Pause, Prompt, Praise system. This method, developed by Kevin Wheldall of Macquarie University in Australia, and Paul Mettem of the University of Birmingham, England, helps students read at a higher level and with greater accuracy than students who read alone or with untrained tutors.

The first step, pause, requires the tutor to delay attention to a reader’s error for at least five seconds, or until the end of a sentence. This encourages the reader to self-correct more often, which, in turn, increases overall accuracy and comprehension. If tutors correct errors immediately, readers may lose the meaning of what they’ve read. Also, they fail to learn self-correcting behavior.

Second, tutors should offer prompts or clues instead of correcting an error outright. If the reader still can’t correct an error, the tutor must model the use of clues to predict words and meanings.

The third step is praise. Praise is important. Tutors should praise when readers correct their own mistakes. And they should praise for general effort and progress.

You can teach this system by modeling it yourself. Then let students practice it as you play the role of tutee. Later, students can practice on each other. In one study, a group of low-ability students learned the technique in just two 30-minute sessions.

While many teachers can cite personal evidence of the effectiveness of tutoring, researchers have documented proof. Studies show that the tutors often make greater gains in achievement than do the students they tutor. Is this proof of the old adage, “You don’t really know it until you can teach it”?
Team up with other teachers for special projects and events.

Handle each piece of mail only once. As you pull it from your box, toss into the wastebasket (or recycling bin) those that require no response. Those that do, attend to immediately. This also applies to e-mail.

Enhance your work space. Organize materials. Move your desk from view of the door and colleagues who may be prone to drop by for a chat.

Make all your phone calls in a set block of time.

Energize during break periods. A brief change of pace (walking, reading the newspaper, or chatting) can increase concentration and efficiency.

Take time to play. Everyone needs regular exercise, recreational activities, and social events. Renewal increases your effectiveness.

Time can be your enemy or your ally. If you learn to use it effectively, the payoffs will be big—for you and your students. Time management is not an easy skill to master. It takes time. But it’s time well spent.

The First Day

Your advance preparations are completed, and now you’re ready to put your plan into action. Or maybe you’ve had only a day or two to prepare for your new teaching assignment. In either case, get off to a great start by making the first day much more than a chance to recount summer vacations or to get acquainted.

The first day is the most critical point in the critical first few weeks. This is the first time students will see you in action. And what they see will color their perceptions for the whole year. Your role as teacher and classroom manager will be much easier if you create a positive first impression.

Students can detect your attitude, expectations, and demands within the first few hours. If classroom activities flow smoothly, students will expect that’s how things should go; if activities are disorganized, they will think chaos is the norm—and will behave accordingly.

From the first minute of the first day, make sure students have an assignment. And from the first, post the assignments in the same place every day so students know exactly where to find them. It is important to get students to work as soon as class begins. This means planning in advance for legitimate activities—not handing out busywork or irrelevant worksheets—that contribute to the day’s lessons. Don’t take roll, do lunch count, or do anything else until you have students productively engaged.

Educational consultant Adele Fiderer describes one primary-grade teacher who begins each day by writing a message on the board. She leaves out some letters, asking children to use context and phonetic cues to figure out the missing letters and interpret the message.

An important part of learning to teach is striving to achieve that level of productive engagement throughout the day: A master teacher sets goals for transitions, lunch, recess, and dismissal as well as allotted instructional time. For example, on the first day you might incorporate a community-building activity during lunch in which student partners must discover one unique thing about the other person and one thing they share in common. Pairs may present their unique and different traits when they return to the classroom.

Providing meaningful activities right from the start is a form of role modeling. Be organized and prepared if you expect the same from your students. And be work-oriented and businesslike if you expect students to be serious about learning.

Tips for the First Day

The following list represents the accumulated wisdom of many different practicing teachers. These are the strategies the experts use:

1. Arrive early.

2. Write your name on the board so students can learn it immediately.
3. **Have an activity laid out** on each child’s desk so children can be productively engaged from the start and you can take care of “housekeeping” details. Try a simple drawing or writing activity. First-grade teacher Susie Davis uses dot-to-dot or word-search activities. “These are things the children already know how to do.”

4. **Greet students at the door** with a smile and a pleasant “Good morning!”

5. **Ask students to sit when they arrive.** They can wait to sharpen pencils, recount their summer, or ask questions. This helps you create a good working climate right away.

6. **Conduct a get-acquainted exercise.** (This could be combined with roll call.) For older children, Judith Rio suggests creating a class dictionary. Children write a three-part definition of themselves that includes physical characteristics, personality traits, and favorite hobbies or interests. Definitions could also include a pronunciation key to last names. Make sure to do one for yourself and compile the definitions into a book.

7. **Enjoy a good story and a good laugh together** to create a pleasant mood and ease students’ fears and anxieties.

8. **Introduce the important features** of the room and the school.

9. **Present the most important classroom routines** in a positive way, as you would a regular lesson. Explain, discuss, and give students a chance to practice such routines as opening-of-day exercises.

10. **Work with students to develop classroom rules.** Discuss the consequences for disobeying the rules. Post the rules. (Have older students copy them.)

11. **Post a general schedule** for lunch, music, physical education, recess, and class work. Emphasize and teach the routines that will help students move into these periods quickly and efficiently. (Remember, they won’t learn it all in a day. Continue to emphasize and practice classroom routines for the first few weeks.)

12. **Post a daily schedule** stating academic goals for the day. Note interruptions in the daily schedule, such as class pictures, programs, or speakers.

13. **Begin simple academic activities**—short reviews that guarantee a high success rate. These will boost confidence and ease fears. And they can serve as trial runs for practicing such routines as turning in completed work or asking for assistance.

14. **Monitor and maintain constant contact** with students. Don’t spend time on clerical work the first day. And never leave students unattended. In an emergency, get another teacher or school adult to monitor students.

15. **Deal promptly with behavior problems.** Offer a lot of positive reinforcement to students picking up on routines quickly.

16. **Generate interest and enthusiasm** by hinting at exciting new topics you plan to begin later in the week.

17. **Issue books and discuss their care.** (Making book covers is a useful first-day activity.)

18. **Take students on a tour of the classroom** and explain what is in all the cupboards and drawers. Show them what is accessible and what is off-limits. Areas in which students will work independently, such as a listening center, should remain off-limits until you’ve had a chance to fully explain the purpose of the area and model how students will use it.

In general, make a good impression and keep enthusiasm high with first-day activities that involve students, provide success for all, create a working climate, maintain a whole-group focus, establish you as leader, focus on content, and communicate something about you and your positive expectations.
Tips for the First Few Weeks

1. Make a list of important rules and routines. Post the list prominently and make sure parents have a copy.
2. Be fast, firm, fair, and predictable in enforcing rules.
3. Make sure students understand the consequences of breaking rules.
4. Always have materials and activities ready.
5. Reinforce good behavior by acknowledging it.
6. Use student helpers.
7. Closely monitor students, giving clear instructions and directions.
8. Be calm.
9. Make sure students know what to bring to class.
10. Teach academic routines as well as “housekeeping” routines.
11. Hold students accountable for their work.
12. Eat lunch with students during the first few weeks.
13. Do not leave students unsupervised. If you must leave the classroom when students are there, make sure a colleague or qualified aide can watch your class.
15. Make sure parents understand your goals and objectives.

In Summary

Effective teachers get the year off to a good start before students ever enter the classroom. These teachers know that certain factors will set the tone for the entire school year: the way the classroom looks, the routines and procedures established, the learning centers prepared, the steps taken to ensure students’ comfort, the contact made with parents and colleagues. Well-organized classrooms set the stage for teaching and learning. They help to motivate children, enhance learning, prevent behavior problems, and create a stimulating classroom environment. And they help teachers make that important positive first impression.

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