

Time-Saving Tips for Teachers

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“You’re doing a good job as a teacher when you take kids from where they are as far as you can go in the time you have.”

—A principal

Four Criterion for a Good Line

- 1) Faces forward.*
- 2) Hands at your sides.*
- 3) Mouths shut.*
- 4) Bodies behind bodies.*

Thanks to Kim Rampmeyer

Teachers:

Some of these ideas may be “old hat” and some may not be a good as what you’re already doing. If even one or two of these suggestions are useful to you and save you time, this newsletter is worthwhile. And please, if you have a great timesaving tip you’re willing to share, something you wish you’d known your first year of teaching, please send it in. We’ll be happy to give you credit in a future edition.

—Susan C. Anthony

During presentations to teachers, a comment I often hear is, “These are *wonderful* ideas, but how do you find *time* to do them? I can’t even get through the units I’m required to teach, let alone do anything else!”

It’s a valid question. My first answer is that I *don’t* do everything in any single year. In this newsletter, I’ll share tested ideas for getting time under better control so you can be freed to realize your potential as a teacher and bring out the best in your students.

Through the years I’ve taught, I can’t remember being told to teach *less* of anything. Instead, I’ve been admonished to teach more and more each year. Reading specialists tell me to have students read more. It’s the cornerstone of literacy. Science specialists say I should involve students in more process science to prepare them for our technological world. Geography specialists encourage me to spend more time on geography. We’re living in a world community now. And so on. Yet nothing has ever been taken *out* to make room for all of this or relieve the burden.

At the same time, I see more and more students coming from unstable and undisciplined homes where their emotional and even physical needs are not met. They are less prepared to learn, yet I’m told to teach them more. I truly tried to meet these unrealistic expectations, but at one point, things reached a breaking point. I had to admit I couldn’t do it all. I was setting myself and my students up for certain failure by attempting to “cover” too much. It was a no-win situation. Something had to give.

Too many units to teach?

The best solution I think is to teach fewer units and teach them well. This requires administrative sanction which will probably be difficult or impossible to get, however.

Another possibility is to teach each unit in less depth. Carefully prioritize what is *most* important for your students to learn from a unit in terms of facts, vocabulary, concepts and skills, then evaluate each suggested lesson and activity as to how easy it is to prepare and how much it will contribute to that essential learning. It is my observation that most published units are “padded” with fun but extraneous lessons and activities which may take a lot of time and result in little real learning. Use them if you wish but eliminate or simplify them if you’d rather conserve that time for something else. If you try something once and it is not a worthwhile use of time, don’t use it again next year.

A third possibility is to teach selected units in depth and give others more superficially. Have students do the readings, view the films, and complete a few quick, easy activities so that they become familiar with and interested in the subject without investing a great deal of classroom time. Introduce books they can read on their own about the subject, and provide incentives for interested students to follow through with projects, reports, etc. Focus on key concepts and teach them as efficiently as possible.

Silent Signals

Sometimes several students have their hands up and I'm taking them one by one, answering their questions as expediently as possible. It was always frustrating to come to a child who'd wasted several minutes with a hand in the air, not because of a question, but because he wanted permission to go to the bathroom, get a drink, etc.

Students can use hand signals for common requests which don't have to do with the assignment, so that you can just scan the room once in awhile and nod permissions. For example, my students raise a pinkie when they want to go to the bathroom, raise their thumb for a drink request, raise two hands for an emergency, etc. If you know sign language, you can teach actual signs for these requests.

Bathroom, Nurse, Library Passes

It's time-consuming to write a new pass every time a child leaves the room. If hall passes are required in your building, cut 4" lengths of 2x4 and decorate them with permanent markers. Make one for the boys' bathroom, girls' bathroom, library, office, nurse, principal, etc. Cut extra blanks for future passes or replacements. Write your name and room number on each pass, and keep all of them in a box near the door.

The advantages of these passes are:

- 1) They're impossible to destroy.*
- 2) They can't easily be used to hit people or things.*
- 3) They can be used year after year.*
- 4) They usually find their way back to you if they're lost.*

Many teachers have kids sign out on the board when they leave the room and erase their names when they return.

Can't get through the texts?

In addition to all of the units, teachers are usually provided with several texts. The unstated understanding is that the texts must be completed as well as the units.

I remember my shock when I transferred from sixth grade to fourth grade. The math texts were virtually identical! Yet few if any of my sixth graders had come to me with proficiency in even basic math. I'd wasted a lot of time in my sixth grade reviewing what kids should have known, and feeling guilty about not making enough progress through the text.

As I previewed that fourth grade text, I realized that there was absolutely no point in trying to "cover" the whole book. If students left my fourth grade classroom having *mastered* addition, subtraction, multiplication, simple division and basic measurement, they would be *far ahead* of most sixth graders I'd ever taught. I'd save some thunder for the fifth and sixth grade teachers as well. By focusing on these priorities, I was relieved and time was freed for doing some of the extra things in math kids love.

My suspicion that texts include more than anyone can realistically be expected to teach in a year was validated when I went to work as a consultant for a major textbook publisher. Publishers are under pressure to include concepts at lower and lower levels because an entire textbook series will be rejected immediately if fractions are included in a local curriculum at the third grade level and they're not in the text. Even publishers expect teachers to use texts as resources, using their professional judgment to decide what suggestions to use and how much to teach. Don't let the text pressure you.

I wish I could recommend relying on texts as a timesaving strategy, especially for first-year teachers. That is what they *should* be. After all, they're developed at great expense by experts who have a lot more time available to plan than a classroom teacher does. Unfortunately, most textbook authors are far removed from the realities of a classroom. Texts often more through concepts too quickly, have too many confusing directions, and provide far more ideas and materials than anyone could possibly use. Scan through them with a highlighter. Pick and choose carefully. If I ruled the world, I'd require textbook publishers and school districts to help teachers by *prioritizing*. The job falls to teachers by default, but it must be done if we're to avoid overwhelm.

Feel pressure to "keep up with the Joneses"?

Teachers and parents frequently fall victim to "snob appeal" and push to expose students to high-level concepts and skills at younger and younger ages with little concern about whether or not children are really achieving mastery. A second grade teacher whose neighboring teacher is already introducing multiplication or nuclear physics will feel tremendous pressure to skip through the basics in order to "keep up." Parents add to the pressure, also because of snob appeal rather than out of true concern for children. As an experienced intermediate teacher, I urge primary teachers to relax and take the time necessary to build *strong* foundations. Be sure all children *master* the basics. It is possible to do this while still challenging and stretching top students. Without strong foundations, all future learning is compromised.

No time to preview films?

The first year I teach a unit, I view most of the suggested films along with the students. Both the students and I take notes, then we compare and evaluate the films according to criterion students develop. For example: Was the vocabulary too difficult? Was the content well-organized? Which parts of the film best supported what we're learning in this unit? In this way, I learn which films are truly excellent and eliminate all the others in future years.

Supply Solutions

A lot of classroom time can be wasted when students don't have needed supplies on hand. Time may also be wasted when students play with supplies, spinning rulers on pencils, playing with glue, etc.

Consider having PTA or Student Council purchase the exact supplies you want and make them available at the school store. I prefer rulers without holes, quality pencils with leads that don't break immediately, college-ruled paper, sharp sewing scissors, colored pocket portfolios and water soluble markers, for example. One year, our PTA sold packets of supplies for each classroom for about \$12.00. Parents could just send in a check and avoid the crunch in the school supply aisles and the frustration of having to run all over town for a particular item which has sold out. Individual items were on sale at the school store as well as the packets. Parents loved this system and students all had their supplies within a week, saving me a lot of time.

Have students each bring in 12–24 pencils at the beginning of the year, preferably sharpened and marked with their names at home. Each student will keep just *two* sharp pencils in his/her desk. Wrap the others with masking tape and keep in a coffee can. In the same way, have students each bring in at least 500 sheets of notebook paper at the beginning of the year. Make a file folder for each child in a box or file drawer so that only 50 sheets or so need to be kept in folders in their desks. Teach children to check each morning to make sure they have paper and two sharp pencils. If not, they can replenish their supplies from the central supply station.

Get class sets of certain seldom-used but essential supplies and keep the sets in coffee cans or boxes in a specific place in the classroom. For example, keep 30 or so rulers, all the same, in a tall can. Keep 30 small bottles of glue in another can and 30 pairs of scissors in another. Sets of crayons, markers, protractors, compasses, meter sticks, etc. can also be consolidated. Whenever they're needed for an assignment, have someone pass them out and collect them back later. These sets can be used over a period of several years. If possible, purchase sets of such supplies with school funds. If that's not possible, have parents each buy one ruler, bottle of glue, etc. and consolidate them. There's no need to mark these supplies with names.

Have students keep all papers related to a subject in a pocket portfolio of a specific color. For example, reading could be coded green, spelling red, math blue, etc. Students should have their folders out during any class in that subject. Near the end of the class, instruct them to put their papers back in their folder and back in their desk. Even students with messy desks can easily find these colored folders.

Bulletin Board Solutions

One reason I wanted to become a teacher was because I liked doing bulletin boards. I still do, but not when I'm under pressure. A solution for me was to buy BIG wall maps, one world map, one U.S. map, one map of my state, and a map of Europe. These go up before school begins and don't come down until the day school ends. I relate anything we learn in *any* subject to the maps when it's appropriate throughout the year, and we use them for geography and games.

Another yearlong display is a long time line extending from 3000 B.C. to 2000 A.D., marked off in 500 year increments. National Geographic photos illustrate the following eras and events: Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, Birth of Christ, Middle Ages, Columbus came to America, USA began. I introduce this rough outline of western history early in the year, and as we study events in any subject, we place them on the time line.

In this way, I just had the hall display and perhaps one or two classroom bulletin boards to change frequently.

File Box

The first day of school, I had each student fill out a 3x5 card with their name, address, city/state/zip, telephone number, full names of parents, teacher the previous year, and birthdate. This goes into a 3x5 file box in my desk drawer which I've prepared with a divider for each of my students. Throughout the year, I use this box to file all correspondence to and from parents, miscellaneous notes concerning special needs, and anything else I wish to keep for any reason.

Hanging Art and Displays

I always like to have mobiles or other hanging displays in the classroom. I put up permanent cup hooks, usually above each desk.

It's time-consuming and dangerous to climb up on chairs and desks to hang or change these displays. Fifth-grade teacher Opal Miller shared this solution:

You need a 1x1 piece of wood and two yardsticks. Attach a yardstick to each side of the square piece of wood. To hang a mobile, put its string over the ends of the two yardsticks. Lift it and loop the string over the cup hook. To take down a mobile, turn the yardsticks sideways and knock it off the hook. With this device, students can change the displays safely, saving you time.

Color-Code Papers

Develop a color-coding system for yourself. Copy all answer keys on yellow paper, for example, all notes to parents on blue paper, etc.

Practice Without Penalty

For the first few years I taught, I thought it was my job to check everything the students did. This took a tremendous amount of time. I still remember the relief I felt when an older teacher suggested that by checking everything I was doing kids a disservice. They need practice without penalty while they're learning.

Now I check and grade only tests or papers used for grading, about one per week per subject. All other papers are checked by kids and there's no real incentive to cheat because no grades are given on these. The kids like this and work harder than before! This helps them view learning as a process.

Minimizing Disruptions

Petition your principal not to allow PA announcements to break into class time except in emergencies or at specified times (five minutes after school begins, five minutes before lunch, recess, or the end of the day). Such announcements can completely destroy students' train of thought when they're writing poetry or struggling to grasp a new concept. Instead, send a messenger who's been trained not to knock on the door but to quietly step inside and choose an appropriate time to seek the teacher's attention so that students aren't overly distracted.

Organize by Number

Assign a number to each of your students at the beginning of the year. The teacher is #1. Students can be numbered randomly, or give them the number of their birthdate when possible. If a student moves away, his/her number becomes available for the next student who enrolls. Here are some possibilities for using these numbers:

- 1) Student texts have their number.
- 2) List students by number rather than alphabetically in your gradebook.
- 3) Have each student write his/her number in the top right-hand corner of each paper before it's turned in. As papers are turned in, students insert their paper in the right sequence in the pile.
- 4) For fire drills or to check attendance, the teacher starts a count by saying "1" (the teacher's number). Students count out their numbers quickly and teacher notes the number of anyone who's missing.
- 5) Use the numbers to keep track of turns. For example, start with #2 one day, #3 the next, etc. Perhaps start with the number of the student which matches the current day of the month.
- 6) Have a can with a small card for each number in it. If you need to choose a student for something special, draw a number for the lucky winner.
- 7) Line up starting with a different number each day.

Solutions for Late Work

Checking and recording late work was a major waste of my time. And it was really no favor to my students. Unless students are held accountable for turning their work in on time, they will learn that irresponsibility is OK.

Nevertheless, I forget things occasionally myself, and few teachers have the heart to be severe when a normally responsible child slips. A solution is to prepare a coupon which can be stapled to a late assignment turned in no later than the following school day. There is no penalty in this case, and no excuse is required. I copy these on bright paper and give one to each child on the first day of school, and on the first day of each succeeding quarter. The expiration date is the last day of school. Students who are able to save one or more of their coupons until the last week of school can redeem them for some special reward or treat. You may wish to give out more than one coupon the first day.

Some students use their coupons immediately and continue to try to turn in late work, which I won't accept without a parent conference. I can explain to parents that I do not expect perfection but I do expect responsibility. A system is in place which allows for occasional forgetting, but not for irresponsibility.

Solutions for Testing and Grading

I used to feel pressed to write or prepare enough to generate a new test or graded assignment each week. I wanted tests to be objective, so that all conscientious students could succeed with effort, regardless of individual talents or abilities. Finally I discovered that if I prioritized what I wanted students to really *know*, I could use tests more than once. Learning takes time and repeated exposure. For example, on a blank map of the world, students label the continents one week, the continents and oceans the next, the continents, oceans and major mountain ranges the third week, etc. This builds in review and holds students permanently accountable as well as reduces the time I must spend preparing tests and assignments to be graded. If a student does poorly one week, he/she can study it and do better the next week. Tests seem less like final judgments and become more a part of the process of learning.