

“Planning for the First Weeks of School: Making Preparations and Starting the Year Off Right”

by Angela Powell

Excerpted and adapted from ["The Cornerstone: Classroom Management That Makes Teaching More Effective, Efficient, and Enjoyable"](#).

If it's any consolation to a stressed-out teacher in August, let me assure you, the start of school is definitely the hardest time, and things WILL get easier as the school year progresses! I think that's good news, because we as teachers get the worst part over with right away. There are days in the beginning of the year in which you want to collapse by noon because you are so exhausted/ That's totally normal, even for veteran teachers! So if you're close to having a nervous breakdown and school hasn't even begun yet, be encouraged. There will be other stressful points in the year, certainly- but by the end of September, you'll be over the first- and biggest- hurdle. There is light at the end of the tunnel!

Two Misconceptions

When preparing for their first job, new teachers often talk to people and find resources that guide them to make two mistakes in their thinking:

- 1) Planning for the very first day is the most important thing
- 2) Having back-to-school activities is essential

The truth is that creating, introducing, modeling, and reinforcing your procedures and routines is the most critical task you will need to focus on and accomplish in the beginning of the year. You will be setting the tone for your class throughout the first several weeks of school. You will be constantly reinforcing your rules and routines because you can't teach all of your procedures on the first day, and students need lots of modeling and practice. Plan ahead- what will you do on the SECOND day of school? It's important to think out how you will reinforce your routines the following week, and the week after that. (Don't worry, I'll go into more detail about how to do that below!).

The second misperception comes from the wealth of resources about what to "do" with the kids on the first day of school. You teach them, that's what! Rules, routines, procedures, and then academics as soon as possible. You don't need a bunch of cutesy get-to-know-you games mixed in with "curriculum lite"- in fact, many principals are cracking down on this tradition and insisting that new curriculum be taught on the first day of school. Whether you think that's too extreme or not, the best teachers do get procedures in place quickly so they can get down to business right away. You only have your children for 10 months- you cannot afford to waste a week or two on back to school activities. The exception to this is when those activities are educational, but that is seldom the case- the purpose is generally to get kids acclimated and ready to learn. If students know your expectations and procedures, and your classroom tone is safe and inviting, students will adjust easily within your regular curriculum and routines.

Preparing for Classroom and Behavior Management

Planning When and How to Teach Routines and Procedures

The most important thing you can do is plan out your routines (the regular procedures. All of them. Pencil sharpening, bathroom privileges, passing in papers, even stacking chairs on desks at the end of the day. Figure out exactly what you want kids to do, and how to communicate those expectations to them. The more specific you are, the less room there will be for students to misinterpret or push the limits of what is acceptable. Write down the procedures you plan in case you forget or if you are put on the spot, and leave the list for substitutes so they can reference it when needed. Don't worry, you can always change things later. It's better to say to students, "You know? I don't think this way is working, let's try this" than to let the classroom be a free-for-all until you have it all figured out. (By the way, even after thirty years in the classroom, you won't EVER have it all figured out. I still try new procedures and routines every year, looking for the optimal way to make my classroom run smoothly. That's part of the art of teaching- enjoy the possibilities!).

You can't teach it all the first day. You have to prioritize which routines must be taught first thing, which can be taught later in the day, and which can wait for later in the week. How to move about in the classroom (no running), where to hang coats and backpacks, and hand-raising policies are things you will probably cover as the situations arise naturally within the first half hour of the children being in the room. Later, you can practice hall behavior, bathroom expectations, pencil sharpening routines, and rules/ conflict resolution. (With my Pre-K children I would talk about friendship and respect as soon as the class was settled down, so that I could begin to model problem solving, rather than spend the day intervening in conflicts. Young children are in school to learn social skills, so I think that is appropriate. With elementary-aged kids, I generally wait until the afternoon or the second day because they already have some knowledge of what is appropriate and what isn't in school). In the afternoon, you can teach them how to head their papers, homework procedures, and dismissal routines. On the second day, you will explicitly reinforce what you have already taught, and add things such as how to pass in papers, distribute supplies, and participate in teaching techniques you plan to use (think-pair-share, partner reading, noise level monitoring devices, three-before-me, etc.).

Rules vs. Procedures

Let's clarify what purpose rules serve and how they differ from routines. Rules set the tone for the classroom. They provide broad guidelines about what should or should not be happening as a whole in the classroom. Procedures and routines are specific steps that kids are supposed to take in specific scenarios.

A possible analogy for this difference can be made using our federal speed limit laws. The *rule* on a particular road may be for cars to go no more than 55 miles per hour. But the *procedure* is to keep an eye on your speedometer. The procedure is to keep both hands on the wheel and stay focused on the road ahead of you, not talking on a cell phone or listening to really loud music that will distract you from monitoring your speed. The procedure tells you how to be successful at keeping the rule. The procedure is practiced over and over until it is automatic. The rule will be broken and consequences will need to be enforced far less often if the procedure is practiced diligently.

Similarly, you will get better results with practicing how to line up quietly (over and over and over) than with saying, "Running in the classroom is against the rules". Rules are what help set the general tone for your classroom, but routines are what keep your classroom running smoothly.

You will need rules so that students have a framework for the routines you set. Children should follow the routines for keeping their desks neat because that's part of the rule about being a responsible student. They should follow the routines for passing in papers without disrupting others because that's part of the rule about respecting other people. They should follow the routines for raising their hands because that's part of the rule about respecting the teacher.

Instead of Rules, Make Goals

Another way to think about and explain rules is to set them as goals (i.e., Goal #1: Respect Yourself, Goal #2: Respect Others). The routines and procedures help children meet those goals successfully. If you phrase things this way with the children, the statement "Hitting is against the rules" changes to, "Our class goal is to be respectful to our friends. Hitting does not help us meet our goal." Following the 'rules' then becomes a team effort to meet the goals that children agreed upon from the beginning of the year.

Creating Rules/Goals

Some teachers like to make rules as a class. I've done that with great success, but if you know much about me, you've figured out that I like to do things differently every year so in recent years I have usually had the rules already made up. Normally I select three rules that pretty much cover everything from talking out to fighting to writing on desks:

1. Respect yourself.
2. Respect others.
3. Respect the school {you could include "and everything in it"}.

On the first day, we talk about the meaning of the word respect using a chart like the one below. Students describe what a respectful classroom looks and sounds like, and we refer to the chart as needed during the first few weeks to analyze whether certain actions are respectful or disrespectful. Respect is usually a 30 minute lesson broken up into 2 days (15 minutes each day) but I have taught in places in which only one lesson was needed because most students came from homes in which parents had already instilled this value in their children.

If I feel like my class needs to explore the concept further, on the second day I put scenarios on scraps of paper, have students draw them out of a box and read them, and we discuss. I try to choose situations that are 'gray areas' and not obvious to encourage high-level thinking, moral reason, and lots of group discussion! It gives me a good idea of who has the higher-order thinking skills in place and what their value systems are. We also talk about disrespect (a term that most of them are familiar with from home, music, etc.). They can easily name all the disrespectful behaviors that take place in the classroom, but need help brainstorming a list of alternative behaviors.

What does RESPECT...	
Look like? [picture of eye]	Sound like? [picture of ear]

I taught at a school that had an awesome set of 5 "Rules of Respect" that I thought were perfectly phrased. They can serve as powerful classroom goals:

- 1) I will reflect RESPECT.
- 2) I will be a RESPONSIBLE student.
- 3) I will display GOOD MANNERS.
- 4) I will practice acts of KINDNESS.
- 5) I will promise to ALWAYS DO MY BEST!

Working With District Guidelines

Some schools already have a system of rules and consequences that they will expect you to use, such as check marks or tallies, which track misbehavior and enforce punishments such as time-out, filling out problem-solving sheets, missing recess, phone calls home, suspension, and so on. For legal and accountability purposes, I think these decisions are best made with your grade level team and administration, if they are not already mapped out by your school system. Some districts have general guidelines, which each grade level in the school modifies as appropriate, and meets to agree on the plan together. The rules and consequences are then signed by the principal, parents, and students, so that if problems arise, everyone already knows the expectations and consequences.

Choosing Logical Consequences

In general, consequences should be logical and related to the offense. It is typically more effective to tie a misbehavior to a natural consequence than a teacher-derived one. For example, if a student loses his crayons, he can't color his paper. If a student continually disrupt the others around her, she should have to sit in a place where she can't bother others. Logical consequences make sense to children, especially when explained calmly to them and enforced consistently. In a young child's mind, pushing someone during reading groups is totally unrelated to missing recess at one o'clock. It would make more sense to have that child talk about what happened, and then move his/her chair apart from the group to keep the other children safe.

Punitive and Rewards-Based Behavior Management Systems

If, like most teachers, you choose to have a punitive system, make sure you have also set up a simple but effective behavior management plan that rewards positive behavior, and explain it the first day. You may be able to tie it into your

punitive system, but if the reward system is set up properly, you can rely on that much more heavily, rather than focusing on misbehavior. This does not have to be complicated or time-consuming. I have created a [token system](#) and a [bead system](#) which I and many other teachers have used successfully, so feel free to visit those two pages if you would like some ideas to modify for your own classroom. Also check out the [Behavior 101 page](#) for guidelines on how to handle misbehavior. (Note: These links are temporarily linked to mspowell.com until all of the site content is transferred here).

Preparing Activities and Lessons

Guidelines for Choosing Back-to-School Activities

Remember the purpose of your back to school activities- to set up an environment conducive to learning and reinforce procedures and rules so that you can begin to teach the curriculum as soon as possible. If an activity does not contribute to that goal, why use it?

- **If you are a beginning teacher (or a veteran who gets easily stressed out), keep it very, very simple.** You can always try those elaborate lessons later in the year, or next school year.
- **Pick activities that require very little planning and prep work on your part, and that use few materials.** You don't want to be in the middle of a project and realize you don't have tempera paint or pipe cleaners, because your students will require your constant and full attention on the first day of school.
- **Choose several activities which your students can do independently, even if it's a simple word search or coloring page.** You may not plan to use them, but if an urgent issue comes up, you need to have something to engage the students. You may also need a few minutes of 'down time' for yourself.

When to Start Teaching Academic Concepts

You can introduce academic concepts on the first day if you and your students are ready, the second day at the latest. Your activities could be as simple as a Mad Minute addition drill kids that love, a spelling game, or map activities- you don't have to get into the text immediately, but do start working. The children are there to learn, not to get to know each other- after the second day, let that part happen naturally.

Procedures and routines can be built right into academic lessons. For example, plan a shorter-than-normal writing prompt so you can spend fifteen minutes teaching how to head papers. Plan a brief math lesson using manipulatives so you can introduce the items to the children and practice using them correctly first.

When and How to Start Reading Group and Center Routines

This will depend on your comfort level, how well you have established routines, how mature your group is, and of course, the requirements of your administration. Usually, between the third and fourth weeks of school is about right. However, this is a slow process. It's a critical part of two of the most important tasks you will tackle this year: maintaining order in your classroom and teaching your students to read. It takes considerable time and attention at the beginning of the year to make the process run smoothly. I would advise you not to worry about reading groups before school starts, because you've got more immediate matters to attend to.

Frequently Asked Questions

***What if I've forgotten to plan for a procedure or routine?**

While it's important to plan things out in advance, it just isn't possible to prepare for every eventuality. The good news,

whether you realize it or not yet, is that teachers are good at thinking on their feet! Handle new situations as they arise--it's better to have to change a procedure than to not introduce one at all and let the kids run the show however they want. Just remember that your students will have to un-learn any routines you create (or don't create, and therefore don't enforce) once you know what you want them to do.

***How do I prepare when I don't have a classroom or can't access it yet?**

Sometimes you won't be able to do much until the last minute because you don't know which school or grade level you'll be in, or you can't access your room for some reason. (One year my school was being painted and the contractors were behind schedule. The estimated completion date was August 16th--the students' first day of school!)

In those situations, the best thing to do is gather your ideas and plan your routines. That year, I used my summer to do lots of research on word walls and morning messages, plus I made centers that I knew second graders would need no matter what the curriculum looked like (since I didn't have the documents yet). Try to get in contact with other teachers in your district who can explain things to you. You can also go to your school and school system's website. Take a look at your union contract (which is probably available online) and take some time to get to know the district expectations--and your rights. If you read your contract, you can most likely find out how many hours your workday is, how much planning time you are entitled to, how many mandatory meetings can be held, and other info that is important to keep up with. You won't have time to read that once school starts, so it's a good thing to do early on. There's no point in stressing out or worrying, so take a deep breath and try to relax!

***Help! I'm panicking! There is no way I'm going to get this all done before the first day of school!**

I think every new teacher (and most veterans!) feel this way at the start of the year. Teachers always go around asking each other, "Are you ready? Are you ready?" and we all roll our eyes and say, "No, even if I had another week I would still have a million more things to do." The good news is, not everything has to be done before the first day of school.

Remember: You don't have to grade anything right away. Don't stay after school the first week marking papers--get your room and lessons together! It's important not to let things pile up, but prioritize. You have eight more weeks before grades are due.

***What do I do with the supplies students send in?**

Children come in on the first day of school with all kinds of cool supplies, half of which weren't on your list. They'll also continue to bring in supplies during the first few weeks of school, especially in impoverished communities in which parents wait to shop until the payday after school starts. Have notebook paper and pencils ready to loan to those who come to school with nothing in their backpacks and decide how you will handle returning supplies you've lent out and the possibility of borrowing from other students.

***What if school is starting and I feel like my classroom still isn't set up or organized the way I want it?**

That's okay! Everything doesn't have to be in place right away. Setting up takes awhile, and you'll want to change things as you figure out how you want to use materials and space. I like to rearrange all year long. It takes the pressure off me in August because I know nothing is permanent, and I get to adapt things to accommodate the children's changing needs.

***Is it normal to develop an eye twitch because I'm on complete information overload?**

YES. Even veteran teachers who have been at the same school teaching the same grade for years feel this way every August...if you don't believe me, ask them! Teachers have a TON of information thrown at them during the fall, and between technology glitches, curriculum gaps, and procedural omissions and misinformation, EVERYONE feels like they're getting way more information than they could ever possibly retain. Take good notes and keep your handouts organized and easily accessible (try taking your notebook and teaching guides home at night to review). It won't be like

this forever, I promise! Usually by the second week, I feel like I'm in my groove, and most new teachers begin feeling this way sometime during the first quarter. There is an end in sight!

The beginning of the year is the most physically and intellectually draining for everyone, but you won't be falling into bed exhausted EVERY night for the entire year. Be prepared to work extra hard now and you will reap the benefits quickly. And whatever you do, remember that feeling overwhelmed is completely normal, and that even if other teachers aren't showing it, they're experiencing beginning-of-the-year stress, too. You're not an idiot because you're unable to process everything the first time you hear it. It's okay to do things wrong the first time, make lots of inadvertent mistakes, ask questions that have already been answered, have people repeat themselves, and get them to remind you of their names 'one more time'. 😊

There's more! The first chapter of [The Cornerstone](#) ('Classroom Arrangement') will show you the 8 components of room arrangement, the most effective desk set-ups, and how to design your instructional areas. The second chapter ('Planning for the First Weeks of School') provides three pages of sample lesson plans for teaching procedures during the first week of school. The chapter will also outline the 11 things that HAVE to get done before the first day of school, and suggest what to buy (and what NOT to buy) for your classroom.