



WELCOME TO YOUR PROFESSION!

After years of training for your chosen profession, you're finally getting a classroom to call your own. You should take tremendous pride in that fact, but the truth is most beginning teachers also experience a lot of butterflies—maybe even some sleepless nights—as the school year approaches.

Relax. Millions before you have survived their first year and gone on to thrive as career educators. Preparation is the key. Time you spend planning your units of instruction and myriad details, from how you'll take attendance to your grading policies, will smooth the way. Moreover, your skill at planning and organizing your classroom will pay off not only in terms of student achievement; it should allow you needed time to recharge your batteries. That's critical, because many first-year teachers struggle to maintain their enthusiasm and morale, so caught up are they in meeting the demands of lesson planning, parent contacts, paperwork, and so on.

Counting down the days

So how do you get off to a good start in the classroom? *Countdown to the First Day of School*, published by the NEA Professional Library, walks you through comprehensive checklists of tasks you need to complete before you walk through the classroom door. **Among the guide's tips:**

- > **Do your homework before preparing instructional units.** Ask for, and consult, your district's curriculum guides, textbooks, and other instructional resources for your grade and subject. Find out about any mandated district or SOL tests and get sample copies or questions, if possible, to help you plan your instruction.
- > **Get the lay of the land.** Get a map of the school district and school attendance zones, and take a drive through the neighborhoods your students live in. Of course, you'll also want to review the layout of your assigned school and walk the building as early as possible to get a sense of where the copier, computer labs, nurse's office, and other facilities and equipment are.
- > **Go by the book.** As early as you can, obtain a copy of the school and/or district handbook and begin to review it. It will spell out what your duties are and go over rules and procedures for everything from bomb threats to how to deal with tardy students. Can you possibly memorize everything in the handbook(s)? Of course not. But developing a passing knowledge of the material before school starts will greatly reduce the confusion during your first week and month on the job.

> **Consider your classroom procedures, routines, and rules.** Consistent with school rules and procedures, you'll need to figure out myriad issues such as how you'll handle missed assignments, the collection of grading and homework, and many other classroom situations. In the weeks leading to your first day in the classroom, you'll want to figure out what role you want students to play in these classroom rituals. If you serve younger students, will you use "line leaders" or "lunch count recorders"? If you teach in high school, will you have student volunteers doing filing or setting up computers? Will you involve students in developing classroom rules, or will you draw up the rules and distribute them the first day of classes? And how will you handle common problems like late assignments? Don't put off developing plans to handle these circumstances, and ask a colleague or mentor for help if you're getting stuck. Chapter 3, "Tips for Your Journey," contains many time-tested tips from veteran teachers to assist you.

> **Put it in writing.** You'll want to write at least a couple of handouts to give to students your first week of class. The first is a set of behavioral expectations or (unless you plan to involve students in rule-writing at the start of the school year). For older students, plan to make the course syllabus and academic expectations (including grading and homework policies) available in writing as well. And don't forget parents! You may wish to send a variation of your classroom expectations and objectives, written in an inviting and jargon-free style, home with students the very first day. Part of your letter should invite parents to share any educational ideas and concerns with you, and you should be sure to let them know how best to reach you.

> **Get decorating.** Bulletin boards should convey information about your curriculum and your students, and the way you prepare and update them says a little about you as well. Kids—and parents—will notice. Keep them functional as well as decorative. If you have space for more than one bulletin board, consider preparing one with only a nice border and use it the first week of school to help students get to know one another or to display their work. You may want to involve students in decorating or updating your bulletin boards. But don't overdo it: too much content and color can be distracting, especially to younger students.



The First Days of School

“Your success during the school year will be determined by what you do on the first days of school.” So states Harry Wong, classroom management guru and author of *The First Days of School*, a popular book that aims to prepare new teachers for their first assignment.

Wong makes a convincing case. On the very first day, during the first few minutes of class, students are forming an impression of the classroom—and of you as the classroom’s leader. Establish that you’re organized and know your stuff, and the kids will buy in. Stumble badly and you’ll probably spend months trying to regain your footing.

Consistency is the watchword. Your first meeting with your class should establish in their minds that you’ll be providing a consistent, productive, and (even) fun environment for the lessons you’ll be learning together the whole year long. You’re gaining control of the classroom, establishing that you’ll be firm but fair.

So what are the secrets to getting off to a great start those first days of school? Among Wong’s many ideas:

- > **A warm welcome.** Most kids have a very basic question the first day of class: Am I in the right place? Literally, they need to know that they’ve arrived at the right door. And, in the broader sense, they need to feel that the classroom is a place they’ll be welcomed and accepted. Wong’s suggestions? Put a sign outside your door with your name, the name of the class or grade level, as appropriate, and a warm greeting. Make sure to greet each child outside the classroom door that first day; introduce yourself and direct students to their seat.
- > **Seating: To assign or not?** Wong strongly advises that you assign seating, especially for the first day. Doing so will reduce confusion and create a predictable pattern that will help students get to work more quickly. You’ll vary seating patterns throughout the year based on your instructional aims (for group work, presentations, or other activities), but having assigned seats with desks placed in rows is likely to make the class run more smoothly out of the gate.
- > **On the blackboard or bulletin board.** Have your name and class title on the board, as well as your class rules and that day’s first assignment. As a general rule, it’s best to place the day’s schedule and first assignment in the same location each day so students can find it easily.

- > **Getting right to work.** Introduce students to the routine of finding the day's first assignment on the board (or on their desks, as appropriate) and getting right to work as soon as they're in the classroom.



- > **Your first words.** As you take your spot in front of the class, Wong suggests your first words to students should cover two items: your name (and how it should be pronounced) and your expectations for the year. Don't try to jump into explaining every rule or procedure at first, but sketch out your broad expectations for the class, and say a little about your background that prepares you to make this a great school year.■