

# Better Teaching<sup>®</sup>

Tips & Techniques to Improve Student Achievement

Secondary  
EDITION

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Northwest MAP Regional Center



Bringing Lessons to Life

## Turn class into a human number line



Your students may have *studied* fractions, but many don't necessarily understand the *concept* of terms like "improper fractions."

Here's a fun way for students to attach meaning to terminology:

- **Ask students** to turn themselves into fractions. Their birth *month* is the fraction's numerator. Their birth *day* is the denominator. So a person born on December 10 becomes the fraction 12/10.
- **Divide the class** into groups of eight to 10 students.
- **Give each group** the same task: "Transform yourselves into a human number line, with the smallest fraction at one end and the largest fraction at the other end."
- **Make sure each group** includes one or more fractions in need of simplifying. Regroup if necessary.
- **Call each group to the front.** Have them get arranged in a number line.

- **Have the rest of the class check** the correctness of each number line. How did they line up? Ask students why they chose the order they did. What types of fractions did they notice? For example:
    - **A student born on January 31** would begin the line. This date represents the smallest possible fraction.
    - **Some might have used common fractions** (such as  $\frac{1}{4}$  and  $\frac{1}{2}$ ) as benchmarks, and then determined if their fractions were greater or less.
    - **Some fractions may have needed** to be simplified. A student born on June 5 would share a place on the line with the December 10 birthday.
    - **Improper fractions** such as  $\frac{12}{5}$  would be at the end of the line.
- Students will gain a better conceptual understanding of fractions.

**Source:** Randi Stone, *Best Practices for Teaching Mathematics: What Award-Winning Classroom Teachers Do*, ISBN: 978-14129-2455-9 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com)).

Classroom Management

## Regain control when emotional students disrupt your class



By the time Anna and Lizzie arrive in your fifth period class, their argument has reached the boiling point. As you begin class, Anna begins shouting. What can you do when a student "loses it" in your classroom?

First, remember to keep your cool. Then focus on helping the student involved regain self-control. Here's how:

- **Be empathetic.** You'll get your students' attention more quickly if you show you understand what is upsetting them. "Anna, I can see that you are very upset with Lizzie."
- **Ask the student to cool down.** "Anna, please take your seat and cool down for a few minutes. When you are calmer, we'll deal with this."
- **Address the most distracting** behavior first. "Anna, please lower your voice."
- **Acknowledge positive behavior** and offer specific praise. "Anna, thank you for lowering your voice and taking your seat."
- **Model using an appropriate tone** of voice.
- **Address the student's behavior,** not the issues that are causing the argument.
- **Schedule time after class** to address the student's concerns.
- **Alert the guidance office** if you need additional help.

**Source:** Michele Hensley, M.S. et al, *The Well-Managed Classroom*, ISBN: 978-1-889322-91-9 (Boys Town Press, 1-800-282-6657, [www.boystownpress.org/Scripts/default.asp](http://www.boystownpress.org/Scripts/default.asp)).

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## Reading Comprehension

## Teach content like a foreign language



Señora García was teaching her second year Spanish students vocabulary related to the marketplace. She introduced key words, then had students say them aloud, use them in sentences and in simulated situations. Her teaching strategy engages students—and can be a model for teaching all content areas.

Consider the traditional way of teaching vocabulary: Students look up the words for the week, write them in sentences and then take a vocabulary quiz on Friday. The expectation is that students learn the words for the test. Often they are never called upon to say the words aloud in class or use them in conversation.

So ask yourself if your students:

- **Have repeated opportunities** to say key terms aloud.
- **Use key words in writing.**
- **Paraphrase key terms** to demonstrate understanding.
- **Explain key words** using examples or analogies.
- **Use key terms in conversations** with peers.

**Source:** Heidi Hayes Jacobs, *Active Literacy Across the Curriculum: Strategies for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening*, ISBN: 1-5966-7023-1 (Eye on Education, 1-888-299-5350, [www.eyeoneducation.com](http://www.eyeoneducation.com)).

## Discipline: Part Two of a Three-Part Series

## Case studies in discipline: Kevin is King



Kevin is cool. He's a good-looking three-season athlete. He's already being recruited by several colleges.

But Kevin doesn't want to do the work in your class. He figures he can charm you into giving him a passing grade (and he *is* pretty charming). Or he'll just get the coach to run interference. After all, if Kevin doesn't play, the school can't win.

Teachers are familiar with "High School Royalty"—kids who think rules don't apply to them. But *you* know that if they applied themselves, they could do well in your subject.

Here's how to handle class royalty:

- **Check assumptions.** Don't let students assume they'll be given special treatment. But don't assume they're going to expect it either.
- **Be clear about your expectations.** Make sure students have copies of

your class rules and procedures.

Hand out grading rubrics whenever you can. And be sure you enforce your rules in an absolutely even-handed manner.

- **Document everything.** Keep a file on each student. Record every contact you make with the family. Include any memos or emails you might have sent to the school counselor or your administrator stating your concerns. Have students fill out "Homework not completed" slips and keep those on file, as well.
- **Keep portfolios of student work.** That way, you can show how Kevin compares with other students.
- **Get to know your students** as individuals. And go to a game or two. Let Kevin hear you cheering!

**Source:** Vickie Gill, *The Ten Students You'll Meet in Your Classroom*, ISBN: 978-1-4129-4912-5 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com)).

## Working Together

## Use peer review to learn from your mistakes



Your lesson on the Bill of Rights was a flop. You thought the small group discussions would lead to valuable insights. Instead, the students ended up sharing the latest school gossip.

No one wants to share the bad news when a lesson goes awry, but a peer review of failures may help you find answers. You will also see that you're not alone.

Here's how it could work:

1. **Organize a group of teachers** to meet once a month. Teacher groups could consist of student teachers, first-year teachers, teachers from one department, etc.
2. **Ask each teacher to prepare** copies of a failed lesson plan to share with the group at a monthly meeting.

3. **Have each teacher describe** how the lesson plan played out in class.
4. **Follow with a group discussion** and suggestions for improving the lesson plan.
5. **Have teachers reteach** their "disaster" lessons using the revised plans based on recommendations from the group.
6. **Have teachers share** "before and after" examples of student responses to the lessons.

As teachers become comfortable with sharing failures, they will benefit from this collaborative approach to improving instruction.

**Source:** Mary Renck Jalongo et al., *Planning for Learning*, ISBN: 978-0-8077-4736-0 (Teachers College Press, 1-800-575-6566, [www.tcpress.com](http://www.tcpress.com)).

## Listening & Following Directions

### Spend time on the most-used learning skill



How do students spend most of their time in class? *Listening.* Yet one study concludes that only 44% of middle school students and just 28% of high school students actually listen in class. And it gets worse.

Immediately after a 10-minute lecture, those students who *do* listen, will retain on average only 50% of what was said. Within 48 hours, they will have retained only 25%.

You expect your students to listen to you and to others, but do you teach them how? Share these tips for good listening with your students:

- **Listen for main ideas** and supporting details. Think of how an outline looks. A speaker will usually make a point and then give examples, reasons, explanations and facts. Listen to separate main ideas from supporting details.

- **Keep your eyes on the speaker.** If you're distracted by something else in the room, you won't be paying attention.
- **Anticipate what the speaker** will say next. If you are right, the point will be reinforced in your memory. If you're wrong, you'll listen to find out why.
- **Take notes.** It will force you to listen for the important facts to record.
- **Do your homework.** You'll listen better if you have read the assignment before you come to class.

Periodically stop your class. Ask students to tell their "neighbors" three main points from the last 10 minutes of class.

**Source:** Dick Lee and Delmar Hatesohl, "Listening: Our Most Used Communication Skill," University of Missouri Extension, <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/comm/cm0150.htm>.

## Resources



Poetry dull? Think again! Your students will love the 180 poems offered by The Library of Congress site, Poetry 180: A Poem a Day for American High Schools at [www.loc.gov/poetry/180](http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180). Selected by former U.S. poet laureate, Billy Collins, the poems are intended for reading aloud. Use them to grab your students' attention during the first minutes of class—or for those last few minutes when their attention is wandering.



Why *do* your students act that way? They often don't have a clue. But you will after reading Raleigh Philp's *Engaging Tweens and Teens: a Brain-Compatible Approach to Reaching Middle and High School Students*. It summarizes the latest research on brain development, then translates that knowledge into practical techniques you can use in your classroom. The section on preventing students from mentally "checking out" is worth the cover price! (ISBN: 1-89046-049-4, Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com).)



Light up February 11<sup>th</sup> by celebrating the birthday of Thomas Alva Edison. You'll find many resources at the website for the Edison National Historic Site in West Orange, New Jersey. Go to [www.nps.gov/edis](http://www.nps.gov/edis). One intriguing offering is "What! No MP3 Player?"

## Writing

### When teaching writing, show—don't tell



Show—don't tell. It's the advice given to every beginning writer.

Students often write, "Jim was nervous about the test." Instead, they need to show Jim's clammy hands and his blank stare when he looks at the test paper. Let the reader hear his sigh as he listlessly looks from the beginning of the test to the end.

Beginning writers find it easier to tell their stories. Learning how to show readers, instead, is a bigger challenge.

It's also a challenge for you. Don't *tell* your students about the importance of revising. *Show* them!

Hand out (or display with an overhead projector) a copy of an early draft of something you have

written. Let students see the good *and* the bad.

Then let them watch you as you revise that first draft. Try out a new word or two. Strike out a sentence or a whole paragraph. Write a new lead.

As students watch you struggle to make your writing better, they'll learn important lessons. They'll see that writing is a process. They'll see that everyone struggles to find the right word or the right sentence structure.

You'll also make it easier for your students to share their own work. Together, you will *all* become better writers!

**Source:** Carol Baldwin, *Teaching the Story: Fiction Writing in Middle School*, ISBN: 0-92989-595-9 (Maupin House Publishing, 1-800-524-0634, [www.maupinhouse.com](http://www.maupinhouse.com)).

## Share an Idea

Do you have an idea to improve student learning that should be in this newsletter?

Send your ideas to [Better Teaching](mailto:BetterTeaching@teacher-institute.com), Editorial Dept., P.O. Box 397, Fairfax Station, VA 22039, fax to 1-800-216-3667 or go to [www.teacher-institute.com/ideas/](http://www.teacher-institute.com/ideas/).

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## Focus n: Testing Strategies

### Testing Tips

### Use test results to boost achievement



According to one teacher, teaching without testing is like “standing at the goal line in a dark gymnasium taking aim at a hoop they could not see.” She began to look at her assessment results as a way to shine a light on what her students still needed to master.

You can't change the fact that your students have to take tests. But you can change the way you use the results.

Sit down with the data from your latest benchmark exam and consider these questions:

- **Are there common errors?**
- **What might be the reasons** for low performance in those areas?
- **Have students been taught** the material covered by the question?
- **Why did students answer** as they did? What was their thinking?

If students consistently missed a topic that you had covered in class, it's time to look at your instruction. Perhaps your students didn't do well on questions related to symmetry. If another teacher found a good way to teach that topic (using mirrors), you could adopt that technique in your classroom.

Share good ideas. Use testing data to help students achieve.

**Source:** Susan Trimble et al., “Using Test Score Data to Focus Instruction,” *Middle School Journal*, March 2005 (National Middle School Association, 1-800-528-6672, www.nmsa.org).

### Study Tips

## Assign outlines to help with testing

**a. —** Outlining is a great study aid. It ensures that students read carefully. It also helps them see the relationships among the ideas presented in a chapter.

Yet, left to their own devices, few students will do an outline before a big test. Here's a way to get more students to use this helpful study tool.

Before the next chapter test:

- **Have students outline** the chapter using the chapter headings and subheadings as their main points. Then have them skim the chapter to look for key details to support the main ideas.
- **Encourage students** to use their outlines as study guides. They can also use them to create flash cards as further study aids.



Illustration by Bob George

- **Motivate students.** Provide class time to get started on the outlines. You could also allow students to attach their outlines to their tests for five or 10 points of extra credit.

**Source:** Scott Mandel, *Improving Test Scores: A Practical Approach for Teachers and Administrators*, ISBN: 1-56976-202-3 (Zephyr Press, an imprint of Chicago Review Press, 1-800-232-2187, www.zephyrpress.com).

### Testing Feedback

## Learning does not stop on testing day



Everyone is aware of the focus on testing today, but don't forget the real purpose of assessment—to improve student learning. Successful teachers know that learning doesn't stop the day the test is given. Research says that learning continues through effective use of student feedback.

How do you use feedback?

Do you:

- **Provide timely and specific** feedback following a test?
- **Go beyond just checking** what's right and wrong?
- **Give supportive feedback** in a way that is encouraging to students?

— **Reteach material** for students who did not make the grade?

— **Offer opportunities** for tutoring or special help for students who perform at low levels?

— **Allow students opportunities** for individual feedback?

— **Analyze questions** that many students answered incorrectly to determine if your wording might have been misleading?

— **Adjust your teaching** strategies based on responses?

**Source:** James H. Stronge, *Qualities of Effective Teachers*, ISBN: 978-1-4166-0461-7 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org).