

# Better Teaching<sup>®</sup>

Classroom Ideas to Improve Student Achievement

Secondary  
EDITION

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Bringing Lessons to Life

## 'Whodunit' teaches court procedures



Learning about court procedures is an important lesson to teach in civics class. But a simple recitation of facts can leave the teacher as bored as the students.

Students in Nancy Peterson's government class learned about court procedures as they solved a "crime" in their school. Peterson staged a crime scene. Students in her class took the roles of everyone involved in solving this mystery.

Upon hearing of the crime, the student detectives rushed to the scene. However, before they could collect any evidence, they had to obtain a search warrant. First, of course, they needed to learn about the rules governing illegal search and seizure. Suddenly, the Supreme Court case of *Mapp v. Ohio* seemed a lot less abstract.

Carefully, Peterson led students through the process of collecting evidence and questioning witnesses. Student detectives collected sample

DNA and sample fingerprints. They found a note written in the defendant's handwriting. Eventually, two suspects emerged.

Next, the student police officers needed to know the correct procedure for searching the suspects' lockers and eventually making an arrest. That required them to learn about *Miranda v. Arizona*, a case that addresses the issue of self-incrimination.

Students continued to move through the process of solving the crime. They conducted a trial. The student jury made a decision of guilt or innocence.

Students learned that prosecuting a case is a lot tougher than it looks on TV. They saw how court procedures protect innocent people. Most importantly, they had a better understanding of how the U.S. court system works.

**Source:** Nancy Peterson, "Increasing the Relevance: A Who Done It Mystery," *Social Education*, May/June 2009 (National Council for the Social Studies, [www.socialstudies.org](http://www.socialstudies.org)).

Reading

## What do you do if the textbook is too hard?



Some of your students may have reading abilities more than three grade levels below the reading level in your textbook. If you simply assign them to read a passage in the textbook, they are likely to become frustrated or just give up.

Here are some ways to help these students develop enough background knowledge to read your textbook:

- **Look for easy nonfiction books.** Work with your media center to find books that support struggling readers. Once students are exposed to the vocabulary and concepts of the material in an easy-to-read format, they will feel more confident about reading the textbook.
- **Search the Internet.** You may find easy-to-read articles that can provide an introduction to the content you will be teaching.
- **Write your own.** Identify the big ideas in the assignment. Choose five to eight vocabulary words students need to know to make sense of the text. Then write a short passage (150–200 words) that includes the big ideas and uses the vocabulary words. Write it as you would explain it in class. Have a colleague read the passage to be sure it's clear. Use a readability measure (there's one in Word) to be sure you have matched your students' reading level.

**Source:** Elaine McEwan, *40 Ways to Support Struggling Readers in Content Classrooms, Grades 6–12*, ISBN: 9781-4129-5206-4 (National Association of Secondary School Principals and Corwin Press, [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com)).

**IN THIS ISSUE:** Teach a simple strategy—read questions first, page 2 • Use video recording to analyze your teaching, page 3 • Show students what was right, page 4

Homework

## Vary homework assignments



Homework can be used in a variety of ways. Here are four categories:

1. **Practice homework.** Students reinforce skills learned in class. Consider that unless the homework is differentiated, some students will waste time on skills they've already mastered. Others will try to practice something they haven't learned.
2. **Extension homework.** Students take something they learn in class and apply it to real life.
3. **Preparation homework.** Research shows that having students simply read a chapter before a class discussion is not always the best preparation. Comprehension will be low until students have some background knowledge.
4. **Creative homework.** Often a long-term project, this type allows students to think critically and solve problems.

Look over your homework assignments in the last 30 days. Do you use a variety of methods? Do you make practice homework effective for *all* students?

**Source:** Paula Rutherford, *Instruction for All Students*, ISBN: 9780-9777-7968-0 (Just Ask Publications, [www.justaskpublications.com](http://www.justaskpublications.com)).

Connecting With Parents: Part Three of a Three-Part Series

## Stay in touch with parents on attendance



From the time a student walks through the door of a middle school, some parents seem to think they have “graduated.” Most are not involved in groups at the school. But just because parents seem invisible doesn't mean they don't care. They want to know what's going on at school and they're willing to play a role.

Attendance is one area in which parents must take responsibility. Most parents understand the importance of having a student in every class, every day. And you can get them involved.

To strengthen a partnership with parents on attendance, consider that:

- **Parents can't take action** if they don't know what's going on. Schools generally have a system for informing parents about attendance irregularities. Parents appreciate that information and usually rely on the school to keep them informed.

- **Students often arrive home** before parents do. A call left on an answering machine may be erased before the parent ever hears it. If possible, get parents' personal email addresses or work phone numbers and deliver information about absences to parents directly.
- **Individual teachers can have** a big impact on attendance. A call from a teacher reporting that a student has missed math class sends a powerful message. Parents (and students) know that the student's absence was noticed—and that someone cares enough to take action.
- **Parents are willing to help.** If parents have timely information about attendance irregularities, they are willing to work with the school.

**Source:** Leonard Leon, “Parents and Secondary Schools,” *Principal Leadership*, December 2003 (National Association of Secondary School Principals, [www.principals.org](http://www.principals.org)).

Testing Tips

## Teach a simple strategy—read questions first



Learning to read for comprehension is a skill most teachers emphasize. But a few tricks can also help students do better when they are faced with a reading comprehension test.

Typically, students are faced with a long reading passage and a number of questions to answer in a relatively short period of time. The Princeton Review suggests this very simple tip for students facing a long reading passage: *Read the questions first.*

On reading comprehension tests:

- **Some questions will deal with** a specific fact—a date, a name, a definition. So the student can mark the passage and then quickly return to it.

- **Some questions will ask** the student for big ideas. What are the principal causes? What's the primary purpose? What's the main idea? Again, knowing that these questions must be answered will help students focus their attention when reading.
- **Some questions will require** students to draw inferences. These are usually the toughest. But by saving time on other questions, your students will leave themselves more time to think about these questions.

**Source:** Douglas McMullen, *Cracking the AP English Literature & Composition Exam*, ISBN: 9780-3754-2889-0 (Princeton Review, [www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com)).

## Teaching Thinking Skills

### Teach students how to analyze a point of view



One of the toughest challenges for students is to see someone else's point of view. Here is an activity that can help them use logic to analyze a point of view they do not share:

- **Look for an example** of a well-reasoned article with a point of view your students may not share. This can be an editorial, a blog entry, a news story or a letter to the editor. You can also have students bring in examples.
- **Have students carefully analyze** the passage and think critically about the author's reasoning.
- **Ask them to write** a summary of the important information included in the piece of reasoning without imposing their own points of view.

- **Tell students to use three tests** to be sure their summaries of the article are fair and accurate:
  1. **There should be no words** of judgment in their writing. For example, it should not say, "This terrible idea would lead to bad consequences."
  2. **A reader who agrees** with the position should be able to say, "Yes, that is an accurate summary of what I believe."
  3. **A neutral reader**—one who holds no position on the issue—should not be able to tell if the summary agrees or disagrees with the article.

**Source:** Gerald M. Nosich, *Learning to Think Things Through: A Guide to Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum*, ISBN: 0-131-14152-X (Pearson Prentice Hall, [www.prenticehall.com](http://www.prenticehall.com)).

## Resources



When students lack the academic skills or the English vocabulary to read your textbook, covering content is a challenge. In *Academic Language for English Language Learners and Struggling Readers* authors Yvonne S. Freeman and David E. Freeman provide research-based data and strategies to help these students succeed. (ISBN: 9780-3250-1136-3, Heinemann Publishers, [www.heinemann.com](http://www.heinemann.com).)



Overseas deployments make it hard for military parents to stay involved with their child's education. Student Online Achievement Resources (SOAR) is a web-based program that helps. SOAR also includes assessments tied to state standards. Parents can access SOAR at [www.soarathome.com](http://www.soarathome.com) from anywhere in the world. There is no cost to military families.



Algebra is a gateway course. Students of all ability levels are encouraged (and often required) to complete this class. *Hands-On Algebra* offers games and activities to make algebra more meaningful and fun. Use manipulatives to create physical models and bring abstract concepts to life. Play games that help students apply what they have learned. Most activities include reproducible worksheets or game pieces. (Frances M. Thompson, ISBN: 0-876-28386-5, Jossey-Bass, [www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com).)

## Teaching Tips

### Use video recording to evaluate your teaching



Arrange for a video recording of your teaching—and you'll have a valuable tool.

To evaluate your teaching technique:

1. **Start by watching the video** with the sound off. Look at the way you move your arms. Look at your facial expression. If it's distracting to you, it's distracting to your students.
2. **Watch your interactions** with students. (Keep the sound off.) When a student asks a question, what is your facial expression? Do you look interested or bored? Do you respond differently to some students than you do to others?
3. **Listen only to the audio** with the video dark. What is your voice pattern? Do you speak in a monotone? Is it a singsong pitch,

going from high to low? Do you vary the volume as you speak?

4. **Rewind and listen again.** This time, focus on verbal habits, such as saying "um" or "you know."
5. **Watch the video with the audio going.** This time, focus on specific teaching techniques. Do you use wait time? Do you call on students from only one side of the room?

This information will give you specific things to work on as you teach. Write down your observations. Think about ways you can make changes to address the concerns you notice.

**Source:** Ron Nash, *The Active Classroom: Practical Strategies for Involving Students in the Learning Process*, ISBN: 9781-4129-6086-1 (Corwin Press, a Sage Publications Company, [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.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**, 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 : Setting High Expectations

### Teaching Routines

## Show students what was right



Much of the time you spend grading papers focuses on where students need to improve. But one way to set high expectations is to also ask students to articulate what they did *right*.

When you grade papers:

1. **Keep two pens of different colors** in your hand. With one color, mark the errors you notice, just as you typically would.
2. **Use a second color** to mark things the student did especially well. If there is a well-constructed sentence, a clever use of a phrase or an especially logical argument, circle that portion of the paper.
3. **Hand back the papers** and tell students you want them to focus on the things you have marked in the second color.
4. **Ask students to identify** the reasons you have circled the items you did.
5. **Set aside time** for one-on-one meetings with students. Or have students write you a short paragraph in which they lay out what they did correctly.

Only by recognizing excellence can students continue to build on it.

**Source:** Lisa Dieker, "Blog Buzz—Is Writing an Issue for Any of Your Students?" *Teaching Exceptional Children*, May/June 2009 (Council for Exceptional Children, [www.cec.sped.org](http://www.cec.sped.org)).

### Providing Feedback

## Use voice recorder for your feedback



There's no question that specific and thoughtful teacher feedback is critical to helping students do their best. But sometimes the sheer effort of writing comments on more than a hundred papers is so daunting that teachers write something like, "Good work."

Audio feedback can help. It allows you to provide more extensive comments without spending the time to write them down.

The easiest way to do this is with a voice recorder. When you finish reading a student's essay or looking over an assignment, turn on the recorder. As specifically as you can, list the strong points of the assignment. Then offer suggestions for improvement. (Consider uploading your comments to individual student files.)

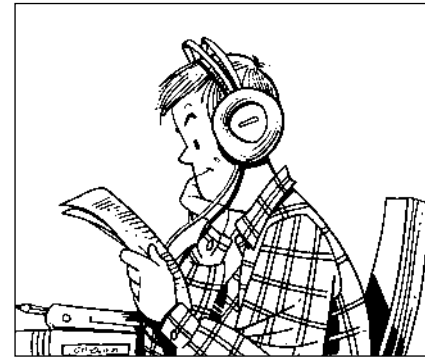


Illustration by Bob George

When you hand back assignments, give students a chance to listen to your comments. You'll find that you can provide more detailed and specific comments on student work in far less time.

**Source:** Robert J. Marzano, *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*, ISBN: 0-871-20504-1 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org)).

### Learning Expectations

## Learning contracts encourage excellence



A learning contract can be an effective tool for encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning. However, not all learning contracts are the same.

Here are some ways to make learning contracts work for your students:

- **Start small.** Contracts are a learning experience for teachers, too. You can expand as your comfort level increases.
- **Analyze and prioritize.** Think about the skills and knowledge you expect students to learn—and how you will accomplish these learning objectives.

- **Teach students how to work independently.** Help students learn to manage their time.
- **Provide plenty of deadlines.** Make it difficult for students to put off work on their contracts until the night before it is due.
- **Offer real choices.** Provide students with a variety of activities that are interesting, but that still achieve your learning goals. Allow students to choose from a variety of ways to demonstrate what they have learned.

**Source:** Scott C. Greenwood and Patrick P. McCabe, "How Learning Contracts Motivate Students," *Middle School Journal*, May 2008 (National Middle School Association, [www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org)).