

# Better Teaching<sup>®</sup>

## Classroom Ideas to Improve Student Achievement **Elementary** EDITION

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Bringing Lessons to Life

### You've got mail? You've got learning!



Kids are fascinated by mail. They love to send letters. And they love receiving

something in the mail box. You can turn that into a unit that incorporates learning in many subject areas.

Set up a mailbox for every student in your classroom. Ask parents to send in a collection of mail they've received and don't mind sharing. Ask for a good variety—everything from "junk mail" to advertisements to birthday cards. Remind parents this mail will be shared with the class, so they should not send in anything that contains personal information.

Have students take turns being the "mail carrier" to distribute mail to each mailbox as it comes in. Then use the mail in student mailboxes to teach:

- **Language Arts.** Ask students to find specific letters of the alphabet on envelopes. Or have them look for combinations of letters, such as "Mr." Or identify the name of their

city on envelopes. Students can also look through brochures and catalogs to find items that begin with certain letters of the alphabet.

- **Social studies.** Look for letters that come from other countries or other parts of the U.S. Examine the stamps. Locate the areas on a globe or atlas.
- **Science.** Place a collection of picture postcards on a table. Have students sort them, creating their own categories. Learning to categorize is an important science skill.
- **Math.** Use envelopes as measuring devices. How many envelopes long are their desks? How many manila envelopes wide is your classroom? How many different stamps could they use to come up with a specific amount of postage—say, \$1.32?

**Source:** Gwen Snyder Kaltman, *Hands-on Learning: More Than 1,000 Activities for Young Children Using Everyday Objects*, ISBN: 9781-41229-7094-5 (Corwin Press, a SAGE Publications Company, [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com)).

Reading

### Find ways to connect boys with books



Scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that girls are generally better at reading than boys are. At age nine, girls score seven points higher than boys. By age 17, girls score 12 points higher.

Those differences show up at the college level, as well. Female students are generally better readers and writers than their male counterparts. Often, that's because they have spent more time reading.

So how can you get more boys to read? Here are some tips:

- **Acknowledge that boys and girls** often have different interests. Be sure books in your class library appeal to both boys and girls.
- **Check resources** like the Guys Read website ([www.guysread.com](http://www.guysread.com)) for books that have high interest for boys. If all else fails, "find some guys" and ask them what they like to read," says Jon Scieszka, creator of the website and author of *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*.
- **Look for nonfiction**—books on technology, biographies of sports heroes and books that explain how things work.
- **Try humor.** Joke books and books of riddles often appeal to boys.
- **Don't avoid emotional content.** Boys want to read about how other boys have dealt with emotional issues.

**Source:** Mary Ann Zehr, "Authors Share Tips on How to Hook Boys on Books," *Education Week*, July 2, 2009 (Editorial Projects in Education, [www.edweek.org](http://www.edweek.org)).

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## Overcoming Apathy

### Find new qualities in your students



The end of the first quarter is a time for assessment. Here's one assessment you may not have considered: Which version of each student are you teaching?

Are you treating each student according to what you've read in the student's file, or are you looking for new qualities in every student?

Here are some ideas on how to elicit the best from each student:

- **Surprise a student** with a responsibility. If the "rap" on a particular student is that he can't stay seated, make him a messenger. Is another student a doodler? Ask her to design a border for your bulletin board.
- **Compliment a student** you haven't engaged much so far. Write yourself a note to call or email the student's parents with something positive.
- **Dig deeper.** Is a physical problem or other situation leading to a certain behavior? Talk to the student, speak to parents or consult other professionals at your school.

**Source:** Elizabeth Breaux, *How the Best Teachers Avoid the 20 Most Common Teaching Mistakes*, ISBN: 978-1-59667-109-6 (Eye on Education, [www.eyoneducation.com](http://www.eyoneducation.com)).

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

### Should you keep your grade book online?



You spend hours evaluating each student's homework, tests and other assignments. When it's time to do report cards, you spend many more hours with a calculator (and a pot of coffee) figuring out grades. Wouldn't it be great to automate some of that work?

Yes, say teachers who have used electronic grade books. But they point out that while there are some real advantages to online grade books, there are also some issues teachers need to consider. Here are tips on making the most of an online grade book:

- **Check it out.** If your school district does not have an electronic grade book, check with your principal to be sure you can use this type of record-keeping.
- **Start slowly.** Mastering any software program takes time. Teaching is stressful enough without adding the challenge of learning an entirely new way of keeping grades.

- **Plan ahead.** Think carefully about the features that are important in a grade book. Set them up from the beginning.
- **Keep current.** Many programs give parents a chance to check on their child's progress regularly. However, this means that you will need to stay up to date with grading and entering student scores.
- **Be especially careful** about security. Even if you don't ordinarily use password protection, set up extra security on your school computer. Protecting the privacy of each individual student is critical.
- **Remember Murphy's Law.** Keep back-up copies—even for print-outs—so you don't find yourself recreating an entire grading period the night before grades are due.

**Source:** Michelle R. Davis, "Gradebooks Take Virtual Approach," *Digital Directions*, Spring/Summer 2009 (Education Week, [www.digitaldirections.org](http://www.digitaldirections.org)).

## Keeping Students on Task

### Movement can keep your students on task



When students have worked at their desks for any length of time, they can start to fidget. Experienced teachers recognize when students have been sitting still long enough, and this is a signal that learning is most likely coming to a halt.

What's the solution? Find a way to incorporate some movement into your class activities. Here are some ideas to try:

- **Give your students permission** to make themselves more comfortable. They can continue to sit at their desks, but if they want, they can also stand up and keep working while they stand.

It doesn't seem like a big change. But even that small amount of motion can be all it takes to keep students focused on the task at hand.

- **Incorporate movement** into your teaching. Have students come up with hand motions to represent math operations. These motions will help transfer your lesson into their brains. You'll know this association has been successful if you see students repeating the motions as they start to work problems on your next math test.

**Source:** Rich Allen, *Green Light Classrooms*, ISBN: 9781-4129-5610-9 (Corwin Press, [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com)).

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## Building Responsibility

### Let students draw on their common sense



Self-reliance is a major part of responsibility. The student who wants you to walk her through every step, every time, is not taking any responsibility for her own learning.

Encourage students by giving them daily opportunities to rely on what you know they know, or what they can deduce if given a chance.

This common sense knowledge, is a great tool for gaining responsibility.

You can:

- **Refuse to provide answers** when you *know* students can come up with the answers themselves. Sometimes students just don't feel like doing the extra thinking. You are letting them off the hook if you do it for them. Instead, ask, "What do *you* think?"

- **Be neutral.** A student may supply certain answers just to see what your reaction will be. Even if your negative reaction causes the student to change the answer, you are the one who has been the impetus for the change. Make the student responsible for the change with a simple, "Hmm. Does that make sense to you?"
- **Avoid playing traffic cop.** There are certainly times when you need to direct a student's next move. But when you have offered them choices in advance, they must be self-directed. Say, "You decide" or "I know you can make a good decision here."

**Source:** Merrill Harmin with Melanie Toth, *Inspiring Active Learning: A Complete Handbook for Today's Teachers*, ISBN: 1-4166-0155-4 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org)).

## Resources



Teachers who are new to differentiating instruction for all students may want to read *Lesson Design for Differentiated Instruction, Grades 4–9*. Author Kathy Tuchman Glass shows teachers how to plan activities, lessons and units. Look for ways to make content, activities and assessments work for all students. (ISBN 9781412959810, Corwin Press, [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com).)



American Education Week is celebrated this year from November 15–21. Schools across the country will celebrate by inviting the community into the school—and by opening up the classroom doors to show what students are learning. For a suggested list of activities for each day, visit the National Education Association site at [www.nea.org/grants/19823.htm](http://www.nea.org/grants/19823.htm).



Classroom management, dealing with ADHD, technology in the classroom, organizing curriculum and many other topics are covered in *What Successful Teachers Do: 101 Research-Based Classroom Strategies for New and Veteran Teachers*, a manual from Neal A. Glasgow and Cathy D. Hicks. Note "research-based" in the title. After discussing a strategy, the authors offer a "What the Research Says" section. Sourcing is very strong. Navigation is easy. (ISBN: 978-1-4129-6619-1, Corwin Press, [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com).)

## Discipline

### Teach students six steps to keeping their cool



Managing frustration and anger is challenging for some students. Having a plan to deal with situations that arise can be tremendously helpful—for you, for a student having difficulty and for the entire class.

Experts in student discipline recommend using the following six-step plan:

1. **Stop.** Give students a strategy, such as taking deep breaths, to prevent the situation from escalating.
2. **Think.** Once students are calm, encourage them to think. "What was about to happen? Why?"
3. **Decide.** Have students decide how to proceed. "What should I do? Should I continue going down this path? Or should I turn

myself around? What are the consequences of each choice?"

4. **Create a backup plan.** Make sure you also have a backup plan, such as having a safe place for students to go to calm down further.
5. **Act.** Students can try out an appropriate decision. Example: Avoid for the rest of the day someone who was name-calling and inciting anger.
6. **Evaluate.** Talk with students. Did the solution work? If not, what might be done differently if another problem crops up? Or better yet, how could the problem be avoided in the first place?

**Source:** Brian D. Mendler et al., *Strategies for Successful Classroom Management: Helping Students Succeed Without Losing Your Dignity or Sanity*, ISBN: 978-1-4129-3784-9 (Corwin Press, [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 : Differentiated Instruction

Teaching Every Student

### Design tiered assignments



You can use tiered assignments as a tool for addressing different learning needs in a variety of ways.

To make assignments relevant for all students, consider:

- **Level of difficulty.** Assign some students work that is concrete, such as collecting information and presenting it in a chart or list. Have other students try more abstract concepts, such as comparing, contrasting and analyzing the collected information.
- **Reading level and interest.** Assign all students to do a book report, but provide different lists of suggested readings. Tailor the lists according to your students' reading levels and the type of reading material each student most enjoys and responds to.
- **Learning style.** Students often welcome this type of tiered assignment, and it's no surprise—it plays to their strengths and what they love to do. Auditory learners could record themselves making a presentation or speech. Visual learners could create a slide show. Kinesthetic learners could create a dance or a short skit.

**Source:** Diane Heacox, *Differentiating Instruction in the Regular Classroom: How to Reach and Teach All Learners, Grades 3–12*, ISBN: 1-5754-2328-6 (Free Spirit Publishing, www.freespirit.com).

Assessment Strategies

### Save time with preassessments



There never seem to be enough minutes in the school day to accomplish everything you plan. So why waste time teaching something that your students have already learned?

Teachers who are working to differentiate learning for their students say that preassessment is a great time-saver. It allows them to group students according to what they know and to save time by not reteaching what students have already mastered.

Here are some ways to preassess:

- **Use the previous unit's** assessment. This end-of-unit assessment will tell you what students know.
- **Check the assessment** for the end of the unit you are planning. In math, if half your class already knows how to subtract two-digit numbers, don't spend time making

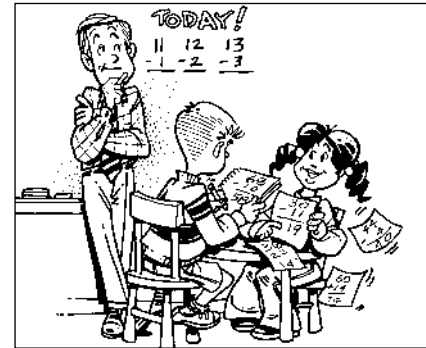


Illustration by Bob George

them practice that skill. Let them move on to another skill.

- **Create a K-W-L chart.** This will not only help you see what students know, but it will also allow you to design instruction around what students want to learn.

**Source:** Julia L. Roberts and Tracy F. Inman, *Strategies for Differentiating Instruction: Best Practices for the Classroom*, ISBN: 9781-5936-3357-8 (Prufrock Press, Inc., www.prufrock.com).

Testing Tips

### Practice different types of testing questions

**a. \_\_\_\_\_** If you teach students  
**b. \_\_\_\_\_** in third grade or above,  
**c. \_\_\_\_\_** chances are you will be preparing them for federally-mandated testing later this year. You will spend a lot of time teaching and reviewing content.

But remember that students may also need help on actual test-taking skills. As a bonus, practicing these skills can help students sharpen their listening comprehension.

Here are some ideas:

1. **Provide students** with several index cards.
2. **Practice true/false questions.** Ask students to write *True* on

one index card and *False* on another. Make several statements—some true, some false. Have students hold up one of the cards in response to each statement.

3. **Practice multiple-choice** by having students label four index cards *a*, *b*, *c* and *d*. Read a short passage. Give four possible answers with the letters. Repeat the answers. Have students hold up the letter they think best represents the correct answer.

**Source:** Char Fosten et. al., *The More Ways You Teach, The More Students You Reach: 86 Strategies for Differentiating Instruction*, ISBN: 1-884548-93-8 (Crystal Springs Books, www.crystalsprings.com).