

## CHAPTER ONE

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# *Odds and Ends for Beginners*

### PUT LOVED ONES ON NOTICE

The first few weeks of teaching are probably going to be filled with stress. Plead with your friends and family to bear with you. You may be short with them, and you may perhaps even use them to vent what you didn't vent in the classroom. Warn them that you will probably fall asleep the second you get home and perhaps sleep through a good part of the weekend.

There will be days when you will have loads of "adorable" stories about "adorable" students. I will warn you of something your loved ones may be too kind to tell you. You may be *boring* them. It's like someone telling you about a neighbor running off with someone else. Unless you know the neighbor, who cares? If you notice their eyes rolling, it may be time to change the subject. But don't worry; there really are many people who will love to hear your stories. (Other teachers who know your students serve as fine audiences.)

### YOUR STUDENTS DIDN'T SLEEP LAST NIGHT EITHER!

You may have not slept a wink before your first day, but neither did many of your colleagues and most of your students. No matter how

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many years we have been teaching, the first day of school always arouses some anxiety and always feels like the first year all over again. There is a good chance you will toss and turn and then be panicked that you will fall asleep right at your desk. Relax! When the adrenaline kicks in, you will be just fine. The reality is that your students are so focused on themselves that they won't notice your anxieties.

### THE MENTOR TEACHER

Student teachers always ask me how I suggest they tell their mentoring teacher that what he or she is doing is wrong. *Well, don't even think about it!* You are a guest in your mentor's classroom and should behave that way. We have to look at our mentor teachers as we would our parents. You know we are stuck with them unless they are absolutely awful, and only then can we usually do something about it. However, a good idea might be to offer "suggestions" or to ask if you may try something a little different. A good mentor teacher usually asks for your input, at which time you may feel free to express yourself. You are there to learn from, not to teach, your mentor even though we both know you have so much to share.

One of my student teachers had a wonderful outlook. She had taught under a rigid autocrat who terrorized his students and even scared her. She said, "I learned from him what not to do!"

### DRESS LIKE A GROWN-UP

Oh, I can't believe I'm saying this! When I began teaching, I prided myself on being a nonconformist and insisted on wearing jeans to school. But this was a problem because I was young when I began teaching and I looked close in age to my students. And guess what? They treated me as if I were one of them.

It may sound nice, but as the authority in the classroom, you have to distance yourself a bit. One way to do so is to dress the part. Dressing like a professional gives you a head start in your classroom. It says, "I am the teacher and you are the student." Studies have shown that discipline techniques work better when a teacher looks

more professional. I didn't believe them until the day I had to get dressed up to go somewhere after school and found an indefinable difference in how my students reacted to me. It was definitely positive.

A friend of mine who teaches junior high school students was told by one of his students, "You must really like us. You come to school all dressed up, as though you are going someplace special."

Eventually you can dress however you feel is appropriate, but in the beginning I suggest you dress like the professional you are. Also, keep in mind that some adolescent students develop "crushes" on their teachers, so I'm even going to go so far as to tell you to err on the conservative side.

### **STUDENTS DO GET CRUSHES**

It happens! No matter how young the student, you may become the object of his or her adoration. Please be sensitive to this, as these fragile little hearts are easily broken by a patronizing laugh. Be careful to keep a distance because students often become very possessive and even get upset at the thought of you having a social life.

I had a student (who came up to my waist) who told me his dream of beating up my husband. When I asked him why, he said he just didn't like him. (By the way, he'd never met him!)

With older students, especially high schoolers, teachers have to be especially conscious about not sending out signals or responding to those being sent.

### **OVERPLAN**

As a new teacher, it is impossible to gauge how long your first day's lesson plans will last. You should have your introductions, course expectations, classroom and school rules, temporary seating arrangements, and some homework assignments prepared. It's a good idea to have additional lessons "just in case." I have had years when I never even got up to the rules and other years when I seemed to be done in a minute and a half. The dynamics of a group vary so much that it is impossible to plan a 45-minute lesson and expect each

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group to react the same way. Remember, it is hard to “wing it,” especially with a brand-new group. There are always perceptive students who know you are not prepared and can make you look as if you are not in control.

Have two hours of lessons for your one-hour class. It’s a great habit to get into. Remember, if you aren’t prepared, how can you expect your students to be? My money is on you, though, because a new teacher usually overplans in the beginning.

### **FLEXIBLE PERSONAL EXPECTATIONS**

Please go easy on yourself if your students are not reading and writing at the level you think they should be. Too often teachers set goals for their students that are unrealistic. Before you are convinced you are not teaching your students anything and are about to quit to work in a bakery, find out what limitations your students might have. Read their records, speak to their other teachers, and discuss their progress, or lack of progress, with their parents. Some children may improve slightly while others learn in leaps and bounds. You cannot expect all your students to learn at the same pace, and sometimes you have to be content knowing that a slight improvement is what they are capable of at this time. If a student is not showing progress and you believe she should be doing better, you should speak to the guidance counselor or the resource teacher to see what can be done to help your student . . . and that doesn’t include devaluing yourself and your teaching ability.

### **EVERYONE ELSE’S PLANS ARE BETTER**

While we are talking about plans, I hear so many new teachers tell me they are sure everyone else has better lesson plans. They always feel theirs are not good enough. Don’t fret. Those you admire are probably wondering what great ideas you’ve got up your sleeve. Your plans are probably fine, but self-doubt can be a great motivator. Whenever I hear people complain about inexperienced teachers, I chuckle to myself. You see, I love working with new teachers because I usually think their plans are better than mine!

## **THE CLERICAL WORK BLUES**

Many of us are “organizationally challenged.” I have seen teachers allow paperwork to overwhelm them, and I hope you do not allow that to happen to you. Do not procrastinate. Get those reports in on time. You do not want your principal or department head hounding you (especially when we demand that our students have their work in on time). If you do not get your attendance reports in on time, it holds up the school secretary. If you do not get the report card grades entered, it holds up your colleagues. If you do not get your lesson plans in on time, you may get a letter in your file that will not please you. Get yourself into a routine and know when things are due and do not leave them for the last minute. (Okay, we may not be able to do that all the time, but we have got to try!)

## **ASK TEACHERS FOR HELP**

Never hesitate to ask another teacher for help. I have discovered that some teachers claim they never need help, even though their classrooms may be in total chaos. It is usually the most confident teachers who ask for help. So quick, while you are new and humble and your ego allows you to admit when you need a hand, reach for it! Teachers love to help newer teachers, and you may learn someone else’s “tricks of the trade” and use them in your classroom. Very often a teacher will be able to tell you just how to handle the girl who hums off-key just to annoy you or that boy who specializes in “snowing” teachers. I am sure that when you are experienced you will extend the same courtesy to some new protégé who is insecurely entering into our profession.

## **OBSERVING OTHER TEACHERS**

You are new and will develop your own style, but it often takes a few years to learn what works and what doesn’t. The first year you are sure to have both great successes and a few disappointments.

I have suggested that you ask other teachers for advice, and hopefully you will do that. To take it one step further, I suggest you

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ask your principal if you can observe another teacher, assuming it is all right with that teacher. Very often, you wonder why all the students love a particular teacher, and observing his style might help you refine your own.

### TEACHER NEGATIVITY

As I visit new teachers, I hear a complaint that has me dismayed. They complain that some teachers are not happy in the profession and seem to criticize everything. Hopefully this doesn't happen too often, but I know it exists, especially from teachers who have burned out and are counting the days till retirement or from teachers who thought teaching would be an easy job. If by chance you are in the cafeteria where teachers are in the middle of a gripe session, take your lunch and move to a different table or find other enthusiastic teachers like yourself and dine together in someone's room. Negativity is contagious, but then again, so is enthusiasm. To veteran teachers, I ask you to share the positive experiences and help encourage the newbies to flourish.

### JUST SAY NO

New teachers are wonderfully idealistic and often bite off more than they can chew. Couple that with a principal who needs a job done after every veteran teacher turned her down, and there you have it—the ingredients for a dismayed teacher, who just cannot say no.

The first year in the classroom is a lot different from your last year spent as a student teacher. You are now in charge of the classroom and the buck stops with you. Sometimes you just have to be able to say no. I have met many new teachers who are afraid to turn down their administrator's requests for fear they will think they are not good teachers. I have also met new teachers who believed they could do it all, only to find that grading papers and doing lesson plans can keep a teacher up into the wee hours of the morning.

I know it is not easy to say no, especially when you are so filled with energy and enthusiasm. I have seen too many teachers burn out in their first few years because they were overwhelmed by all they volunteered to do, not realizing that the everyday classroom responsibilities can take up to twice the amount of time they anticipated.