

chapter **1**

# BEGINNING *the* SCHOOL YEAR

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- Designing a lesson for Day One
  - Learning still more about your students
  - Helping students to know one another
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*I'll never forget my first day of teaching. I was so nervous that I reached into my desk for hand lotion and, instead, poured white Elmer's glue all over my hands.*

**I**t's the first day of school in your district and it is fraught with capital letters for both you and your students. For the student there are The Outfit, The Supplies, The Bus Route, The Locker Assignment, The Lunch Schedule, The Teachers, The Program Schedule, The Seat Assignments. For teachers there are The Class Lists, The Bell Schedules, The Read-on-the-First-Day Announcements from the Principal's Office, The Add-or-Drop Lists of Student Names from the Counseling Office, The Student Handbook, The Fire-Drill Explanation, The Sign-up Sheet for Audiovisual Materials, The Computer Lab Schedule, and The Library Orientation Schedule. For teachers and students alike, the first day of school is

indeed momentous. This is the day students size us up as competent or incompetent, nice or mean, fair or unfair, caring or uncaring.

One of the most important plans we make is the lesson design for the first day of the year. Some teachers spend the entire first class period making seat assignments, handing out books, and reading long lists of classroom and school regulations. If every teacher does this, and many school administrations encourage teachers to do so, a single student may hear a nearly identical set of regulations six or seven times on the first day alone. It is not the tone most schools or classroom teachers wish to set, but it is a tone students perceive and one that's difficult to undo.

Of course, all of us are concerned with discipline. "Be strict in the beginning," they tell us in methods classes and in the teachers' lounge. But what happens when you let up and the students are so intimidated they are afraid to talk? There are guidelines and limits, of course. Your position tells the students you are the teacher in the classroom. How you function will tell them whether you are up to the task, and you will function best if your planning is thorough and organized. Begin setting a classroom tone and atmosphere that is right for you from the very first day of school. If you are required to read school regulations and policies, do it on a subsequent day.

## DESIGNING A LESSON FOR DAY ONE

In setting the tone for your classroom, consider the following plan for the first day.

### Welcome Your Students to the School and Your Classroom

Take note of what is special for students on this day. If, for example, your students are ninth or tenth graders, this may be their first day in high school. They may have come from several junior highs or middle schools or from other communities. They must form new friendships and solve new problems in the more complex, less sheltered world of the high school. If they are seniors, this is the first day of their last year of high school—a time they've looked forward to with anticipation. There may be transfer students who are unfamiliar with the campus and know few classmates. Some students are raring to get busy; others may not want to be in school at all. View your school and classroom through your students' eyes, and acknowledge and honor the emotions and questions they may have concerning the new school year and your class.

### Introduce Yourself

Give information about your own background, jobs you have held, your family, your interests. Explain why you chose teaching English as a career. Show that you are proud to be a teacher and that you value and respect your work.

### Introduce Your Subject

Be positive about the class you are teaching. Explain its benefits, and elaborate on these clearly and specifically. What is it the students can expect to learn from you? What new skills will they practice and acquire? What books or novels can they look forward to

reading? What units or projects do you have planned? What can they look forward to with eagerness? Be enthusiastic and inclusive as you do so. Don't expect students to understand why they should take a particular class. Many are enrolled only because the course is required. Remember that not every student likes English and not every student hates English. However, each needs to know what he or she will learn in your classroom.

Don't qualify your first-day message by suggesting that some students will succeed while others will fail. Be sure your students understand each is beginning a new year with a clean slate. Let your students know they have a responsibility to attend class regularly, attempt each assignment, and participate in the class. Assure them that if each approaches the class in this manner, each can be a successful student.

### Teach a Lesson on the First Day

The first day of school, when motivation is high, is the time for both students and teachers to make a good first impression. Capitalize on this readiness by avoiding a deadly review, and begin with a real lesson that will show off what both you and your students can do. Your goal should be to have your students do something successfully or learn something each can use immediately. The following exercises are a variety of nonthreatening first-day options to foster student success, help set a tone of cooperation and a sense of community in your classroom, and encourage and foster immediate student participation.

#### *Lesson One: Self-Introductions*

Have your students write answers to the following directions. Then have them use their answers as a guide while introducing themselves orally to the whole class.

- Write your name.
- Write the name of the city where you were born.
- Write the name of your best subject.
- Write the name of a subject that is difficult for you.
- Do you have a job? If so, where? Please describe it briefly. What are some good parts of the job? Some drawbacks?
- List three things you can do well.
- Tell one thing your best friend doesn't know about you.

Using their answers for notes, ask students to stand and take turns introducing themselves to the class. The teacher might introduce herself or himself first as a model for others. Encourage students to listen carefully because they may be called on to repeat some of the information they have heard. After each person offers his or her sketch, ask the next person to summarize orally what the previous student revealed. When the introductions are complete, call on individuals to identify someone in the class and give one or two details about him or her from memory. By the end of an exercise such as this, your students will no longer be strangers to one another, and you are likely to know each student by name and also by what they are willing to reveal about themselves.

***Lesson Two: Partner Introductions***

Pair students (preferably stranger-to-stranger to encourage new friendships), and ask them to spend approximately five minutes each interviewing one another. Point out that unusual questions elicit the most interesting information—for example, “What did you learn this summer that you’ll remember for the rest of your life?” Encourage students to take notes during the interview. Give them time to write a brief profile emphasizing the two most interesting things they learned about their partner. Allow students to check their information with their partners. Finally, ask each student to read the profile to the entire class. If students resist speaking or seem particularly insecure about speaking and reading in front of the whole class, you might have them form groups of six to eight students to make their introductions.

A more challenging option is to ask students to recast their profiles into another format, such as a poem, lyric, letter, or story. One format that is accessible to all students is the recipe. Brainstorm with the class for a list of cooking terms, such as *bake*, *broil*, *mix*, *whip*, and *simmer*. After you have listed several terms on the blackboard, suggest they write a recipe for the person they interviewed. The following is a sample:

***Mike Peter Surprise Delight***

To create this exotic senior, combine:

1 family of 8 children

Sift out the third youngest son.

Beat rapidly, adding:

clear, blue eyes

1 pinch of shyness

a heaping love of drums and carpentry

Bake at 350° for 17 years and frost with an application to vocational school.

Serve immediately. Your guests will be sure to ask for more.

***Lesson Three: Props with Introductions***

Another approach to interviewing is to have the whole class interview you on the first day and move on to interviewing one another on the next day. On Day One, bring to class several meaningful personal objects (mementos, documents, and a piece of clothing, for example) and encourage your students to base their questions on these. (What is it? How was it acquired? Why is it important to you? What plans do you have for its future?) Following the questioning, ask the students to write a brief profile of you either individually or collaboratively in groups to read aloud. Near the end of the period, call on students to identify the questions that produced the most information. Questions that pursue a point, for example, garner the most information.

On the following day, students bring to class three items important to each of them. Stress sentimental value as opposed to material value and the importance of keeping the

items stored safely when they are not in use. Students present and explain their items to the class, and class members ask follow-up questions. Additional activities might include student-authored profiles of class members or papers based on the significance of one of the author's possessions. Final polished versions may be read aloud, displayed on a bulletin board, or bound as a class book for everyone to enjoy (Kuehn, 1992).

#### *Lesson Four: Freewriting (or Rush Writing)*

Introduce the concept of freewriting or rush writing (writing without stopping or editing for a specific number of minutes). Give your students a topic such as, "The quality I like best about myself is . . ." or "The best class I've ever taken was . . ." Have students write for approximately five minutes. Be sure they understand they will eventually read their writing to the class. Give them a minute or two to edit briefly and then ask each to read aloud. Some teachers let students read these early writings while seated at their desks to keep the activity nonthreatening.

If someone declines to read, suggest that you will come back to him or her after others have had a chance to read, and do so. Don't let this exercise become a showdown between you and a reluctant student. When this student sees that classmates are reading their writings aloud, she will soon contribute too. After everyone has read, ask the class to recall specific answers they particularly liked and explain to the author why they liked the answer. This is an excellent way to give students positive, supportive peer feedback.

#### *Lesson Five: Creative Excuses*

Students brainstorm a list of four or five chores they dislike, select one item, and then write a creative excuse directed to a parent, teacher, or some other adult explaining why he or she should no longer be expected to do it. Encourage students to be as wildly imaginative as possible, and discourage responses such as, "I don't have my English paper today, because I had to work late at my part-time job." You may want to read the following sample aloud:

1. Washing the dishes
2. Cleaning the bathroom
3. Cleaning the fireplace
4. Cleaning up after the cat
5. Taking care of my younger sister
6. ?

Mom,

I have a cut on my hand. No, it's not bleeding, but it really hurts. I know it doesn't show, but it throbs and aches. I think it could probably get infected if I stick it into greasy dishwater. And, if that happens, I might even end up in the emergency room. Then I won't be able to help you with the dishes for a long time. So you do them tonight, OK? I'll do them when my hand gets better—really. Just let me rest here and watch TV. Please. It doesn't throb so much in this position. —Eric

### ***Lesson Six: Stretching the Meaning of Words***

Write a story that stretches the meaning of one word in every direction. Some possible words to use are:

- Out
- Run
- Down
- Side
- Set
- Back

A student's story based on the word *down* might look like this:

When I lost my bookbag I figured that I was down on my luck. Feeling dogeared and down, I decided to go downtown to visit my best friend, Charlie. He is absolutely the best person to talk to when you're feeling down. On the way to Charlie's house, I decided to down a big container of lemonade. I guess it didn't go down well because when I got to Charlie's house, I had to lie down because I wasn't feeling all that well.

### ***Lesson Seven: Lists***

Lists of ten is a quick scaffolding idea that helps student find topics to write about. It also provides you with the opportunity to get to know your students. Have the students take out a sheet of paper and create lists of ten for each of the following categories. It is helpful to time the students so that they are able to stay on task and more freely write (Passman & McKnight, 2007).

Here are some suggested categories:

- Ten favorite songs
- Ten favorite foods
- Ten places I'd like to visit
- Ten favorite games
- Ten people I'd like to have dinner with
- Ten important goals for the future
- Ten important things I'd like to learn more about

You may have the students choose one idea from their lists that surprised them or is special in some way, write about it briefly, and then explain it or read it to the class. Encourage students to keep these lists as a resource for later writing projects.

By introducing a first-day lesson such as one of these, you will have achieved a number of objectives: your students will have written and shared their writing with a real audience; you will have begun to establish a positive, cooperative atmosphere; you will have eliminated some of the tension and fear associated with new experiences; and, ideally, you will have shared laughter.

## LEARNING STILL MORE ABOUT YOUR STUDENTS

In middle schools, junior high schools, and high schools, we frequently meet 150 students every day even though the schedule breaks them into segments of twenty-five to thirty-five. In addition, we are expected to teach students with diverse ability levels and from varied linguistic backgrounds. To be effective at the secondary level, we need to know our students well and to get to know them as quickly as possible.

### Name Tags or Student Name Plates

To take roll and learn student names, teachers have frequently begun the first day of class with assigned seating, and this arrangement frequently remains the same throughout the year. However, if you want your classroom seating plan to be more flexible, if you are also concerned that students learn one another's names, and if you want to begin moving students from large groups to small groups early in the year, consider distributing name tags or having each student design one of his or her own.

Another option is to have students fold a large sheet of notebook paper into thirds and to have them print their names in large letters on the middle section of the folded paper. The paper will sit upright on a desk, and the teacher and the students are able to read one another's names easily. (See Figure 1.1.) Students may keep these name sheets in their notebooks and begin the first few weeks of classes by placing this identification on their desks. This is also a useful and helpful way to identify students when guest speakers are invited into the classroom.

### Questionnaires

Some information about your students will be available prior to the first day of school in cumulative records, tests results, and discussions with other teachers (but don't let negative comments color your perspective). You may be able to receive information about a student's health status from the school nurse, but you may have to seek it out. It will also be possible to ask for additional information about students during parent-teacher conferences. However, much of this information will come to you later in the school year. Consequently you may wish to design and distribute student questionnaires or inventories at the beginning of the year and at other appropriate times throughout the school year. Forms 1.1 through 1.4 (which you may duplicate in their entirety or use as a basis for developing your own) are useful in surveying student interests, experiences, spoken languages, favorite subjects, friends, classroom expectations, and ability to study at home. This information will help you know your students more quickly and will be an immediate aid in planning your curriculum and in designing both large- and small-group activities.



FIGURE 1.1 Name Plates

FORM 1.1

## Getting Acquainted

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Some of my friends call me by my nickname, \_\_\_\_\_.

Right now, I'm \_\_\_\_\_ years old, and my birthday is \_\_\_\_\_.

I live with (names, and relation to you) \_\_\_\_\_

at the following address \_\_\_\_\_.

My phone number is \_\_\_\_\_.

My best subject is \_\_\_\_\_.

My most difficult subject is \_\_\_\_\_.

One thing that makes me happy is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_, and I am really sad when \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Someday I hope to \_\_\_\_\_

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FORM 1.2

## Getting to Know You

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. Suppose you are a major character in one of your favorite books. What is your name? \_\_\_\_\_
2. In what book do you appear? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Write the names of five people you don't know but would like to.

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4. Name five things that you can do as well as or better than anyone else.

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5. Many authors have used pen names to substitute for their own. Invent a pen name for yourself. \_\_\_\_\_

6. Explain your choice below.

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FORM 1.3

## Reading Inventory

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Reading is one of the most valuable things we do. As we work to develop our skills, it is helpful to understand how our attitudes are formed. Please answer the following questions about your own reading history.

1. When you were a young child, did your parents or someone else read to you or tell you bedtime stories? \_\_\_\_\_ If so, what were your favorites?

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2. What fairy tales or children's rhymes can you recall by heart?

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3. Were there books and magazines in your house? \_\_\_\_\_

If so, who read them? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you see your parents or other adults reading? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Did you go to a nursery school, a Head Start center, or a local library where stories were read aloud to you? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you like the stories? \_\_\_\_\_

5. Did you watch TV as a child? \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, did you watch the reading segments on television shows such as *Sesame Street*? \_\_\_\_\_

If so, did you enjoy them? \_\_\_\_\_

6. If yes, what other kinds of shows did you watch on television? \_\_\_\_\_

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7. Were you given books as presents or rewards? \_\_\_\_\_ If so, please name a book and explain how you acquired it.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. What were some of your favorite childhood books? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

9. Recall the names of some of the teachers who taught you to read in school.

\_\_\_\_\_

Try to remember how they taught you. Explain:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. Did your teachers read to you? \_\_\_\_\_ At a certain grade level, did they stop reading to you? \_\_\_\_\_ Did they ever talk about what they read? \_\_\_\_\_

11. Did you enjoy reading in school, or did you read just because it was required?

\_\_\_\_\_

12. Do you recall having to read aloud in front of the class? \_\_\_\_\_

If so, how did you feel about doing this? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

13. As you entered middle school, did you enjoy reading? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you begin to read more or less frequently? \_\_\_\_\_ Please explain.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

14. Did your middle school friends read? \_\_\_\_\_ Was there peer pressure on you to read or not to read? Please explain. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

15. What is the best book you've ever read? \_\_\_\_\_

What makes it the best? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

16. What is the worst book you have ever read? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you finish it? \_\_\_\_\_

Who or what made you read it? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

17. What magazines or newspapers do you look at regularly?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

18. What Web sites do you look at regularly?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

19. Where and when do you like to read?

\_\_\_\_\_

20. What book are you reading now?

\_\_\_\_\_

How did you choose it? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

21. What books are you considering reading next? \_\_\_\_\_

22. Do you have friends who enjoy reading and with whom you can talk about books?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

23. Do you buy books and keep them? \_\_\_\_\_ If so, where do you keep them? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you like to read books in a digital format (on a computer screen or smartphone)? \_\_\_\_\_

24. Do you listen to audiobooks?

\_\_\_\_\_

25. In general, how do you feel about reading?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

FORM 1.4

## Writing Inventory

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. When you begin a writing assignment, how do you approach it?

*Circle one:*

- a. I look forward to it.
- b. I don't know where to begin.
- c. I'm sure I will fail.
- d. With a feeling I can do okay.

2. What are your major strengths as a writer?

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3. What weaknesses do you have in your writing?

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4. Describe one of the most interesting writing assignments you've ever been asked to do. Why did you find it so interesting?

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5. What is the worst writing assignment you can recall?

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What made it so terrible? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. Have you ever kept a journal? \_\_\_\_\_ Do you keep a journal or diary now? \_\_\_\_\_ If so, explain how you began, and what it means to you.

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7. Do you keep a blog? \_\_\_\_\_ If so, explain how you began and what it means to you. \_\_\_\_\_

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8. Do you text and e-mail your friends? \_\_\_\_\_

How do you define "good writing"? \_\_\_\_\_

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## HELPING STUDENTS KNOW ONE ANOTHER

We often make the assumption that most students in our classes know one another. But they may not, and even if they do, the acquaintance is likely to be superficial. A shy student may sit for months alongside students whose names he or she doesn't know. Short get-acquainted activities at the beginning of a class period are well worth the class time, especially if you wish to promote a feeling of cooperation and trust within the group.

### Opening Exercises

Occasionally, as part of the opening exercise, encourage students to move around the room to talk with one another and find out the answers to one or two questions that you've written on the board at the front of the room—for example:

- Who walked to school this morning?
- Who skipped breakfast this morning?
- Whose first language is not English?
- Who has a part-time job he or she really enjoys?
- Who has an unusual job or once had one?
- Who has an exotic pet?
- Who has an unusual hobby?
- Which student in this class gets up the earliest in the morning?
- Which student in this class works the latest hours at night?

### Improvisation Activities

Improvisation, a discipline within the larger context of theater and drama, develops our ability to create, develop, and share information. Not only do these activities carry the potential to develop a collaborative classroom context, they also can teach important literacy skills (which will be discussed in a later chapter). Here are some beginning-level improvisation activities that can build community (Passman & McKnight, 2007).

#### *A. Mirror*

Group the students into pairs who will face each other and mirror each other's movement. This activity teaches the students focus, concentration, cooperation, and self-awareness and takes only four to five minutes of class time.

#### *B. Who Started the Motion?*

This activity teaches the students how to focus as they work together to conceal the identity of the person starting the motion. Ask the students to stand in a circle. Have one student volunteer to leave the room for a few seconds. Select another student in the circle to be the leader. The leader begins a repetitive movement, and the other students in the circle imitate the movements of the leader. Invite the student who left the classroom to return and stand in the middle of the circle and identify the leader. This person is allowed three chances to make the correct choice.

### A Get-Acquainted Activity for the Whole Class

A series of sequenced questions that encourage students to take risks, respond honestly, and get positive reinforcement for doing so is helpful for setting a positive class climate. This activity requires a full class period:

1. Seat the group in a large circle. The group leader or the teacher participates as well and answers first. Some students may elect to pass temporarily on any question. Come back to them when all the others have answered.
2. Ask each person his or her first name. The students take turns going around the circle repeating the names of every person in the circle. Students usually do this with ease, but classmates may help one another if someone can't recall a name.
3. Ask each person in turn, "If you were a musical instrument, what instrument would you be, and why?"
4. Ask each person, "If you were an animal, what animal would you be, and why?"
5. Ask each person, "What is one thing of which you are proud?"
6. Ask each person in the group to choose one other person's response to the preceding question and tell that person why he or she especially likes that response. Make sure members address each other directly by name: "Tony, I liked your answer because . . ." rather than, "I liked Tony's response because . . ."

If time is limited, stop here and give students time to respond in writing to this exercise (see item 9). If there is plenty of time, continue:

7. Ask each person, "If you could change one thing about yourself, what would you change, and why?"
8. Repeat activity 6 in response to question 7.
9. Ask students to respond in writing to this activity. How did they feel about doing it? What did they like? Dislike? What did they learn? Collect the papers and, without correcting, read them to learn more about your students and their reactions to this type of activity.