

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Exploring how teaching compares to other occupations
- » Understanding the unique demands teachers face
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Chapter **1**

What Have You Gotten Yourself Into?

Most new teachers are shocked by how different their perception of the teaching profession and teaching itself tend to be. In order to reduce the transitional shock from perception to reality, this chapter focuses on some of the biggest unexpected adjustments that you'll need to make as you earn your stripes as a teacher. As you read this book, you may find that not every single thing applies to you directly, but you can still find underlying commonalities that affect all teachers. In addition, remember that even though teaching probably won't be exactly the way you pictured it, by no means should you fear those differences. The little unanticipated variations from the expected are often what make teaching the job that so enticed you in the first place.

Real World versus School World

The world inside the school walls is vastly different from the world outside those walls. However, a haunting, underlying similarity exists between the teaching profession and every other job that you could have taken. These differences make

people refer to the “real world” in class, as in the common apologies, “You’ll need to know how to divide decimals in the real world” and “In the real world, people use these spelling words, so unless you want to embarrass yourself, you need to know what they mean.” In this section, we show you how both worlds you’ll be living in compare and contrast.

How teaching is like other jobs

Though teaching has more dissimilarities than parallels with the so-called real world, you’ll find universal laws that hold true in both. Understanding how your new world stacks up to the one you’re used to is a necessary first step in preparing for the teacher’s life.

» **Your performance will be evaluated based largely on numbers.** There are many, many books written about the little emotional things that make an entire career “worth it” (*Chicken Soup for the Retiring Biology and Life Sciences Teacher’s Soul*-type books), suggesting that a teacher is a good one if they make a difference in *just one kid’s life*. The reality is that your proficiency in the classroom will be judged according to numbers, just like in most professions. Ultimately, test scores, grade distributions, and standardized assessment scores speak more loudly than anything else when it comes to administrators, especially early in your career. However, if your numbers aren’t quite up to the par they set for you, especially at first, never let that blind you to the good, albeit immeasurable, things that you’re accomplishing in the classroom. Just because you can’t quantify something doesn’t make it any less worthwhile of an objective.



CAROL
SAYS

I was blown away the first time my supervisor called my team together and then projected our test scores onto the smartboard. I never gave much thought to how I was stacking up to my colleagues because my school often assigned me students whom other teachers called the “bad kids.” I loved teaching them because they were a challenge, but it meant that my scores weren’t always at the top. I couldn’t have cared less. If my boss wanted to boil my life’s work down to a number with no context then so be it. That didn’t mean I would. The fact that my students were even *generating* data points meant that I was doing my job. You know in your heart that you’re making a difference — you don’t need a test score to tell you that.

» **You’ll get both praise and blame that you don’t deserve.** Take it all in stride. The good days and the bad days will eventually offset each other. So, if things look bleak, give it a week or so and the clouds will begin to clear. However, this works both ways. If you’re feeling on top of the world, don’t get too big for your britches. Even the most experienced teacher is bound to wind up in extremely sticky situations, and they always come out of the blue.

Always be on the lookout for problems and try to head them off before things get ugly.

» **Most people don't want to hear about what you do at work.** Even though everyone's been in school and can relate to your job, don't assume that people want to hear about your great lesson plan on teaching condensation to elementary school science students. As much as you may be changing the future and exciting kids about learning, realize that other people's apathy is nothing personal. In fact, keeping most educational opinions to yourself is usually to your benefit. If prodded, many people will launch into a diatribe about "what's wrong with education."

Teaching is an admirable career, full of sacrifice and too often bereft of the reward and recognition it deserves. But be sure that you don't slip into the mindset that you're doing society a favor by teaching, and that society should, in turn, pay you back in spades. We know that teaching is one of the few truly humanitarian professions left, but trust us when we say that the rest of the world would rather us not belabor the point.

How teaching is unique



My first job was a corporate job; I was a quality assurance analyst with a corner office. Business suits, elevator music, the whole thing. I can't possibly overstate the culture shock when I transitioned into teaching physical education. I thought, "How hard will this be? We'll just have fun and play all day!" And then I stepped foot into the classroom. It was so loud. There were 30 little bodies running around, all of them with their own needs, and they are all screaming. Susie's feelings got hurt. Johnny just barfed, and eight kids need to go to the bathroom right now. I had a moment where I questioned all of my life's decisions all at once. My dream of marching into a room of perfect angels eager to learn from me evaporated instantly.

Teaching is undeniably as unique a career as they come, and in many ways, it's completely, utterly, and shockingly different from other jobs. Most of these differences are practical rather than philosophical, and if we sound like we're starting to get a little bit too deep into academic speak here, let us dispel that perception with the first stark contrast we make between the real world and the school world:

» **You don't get to eat or go to the bathroom when you want.** You haven't lived until you're forced to eat lunch at 10:05 a.m. or until you've sweated out the last ten minutes of a class period, with a dire urge to (ahem) relieve yourself. Biological needs play a bizarre starring role as you get used to teaching. Veteran teachers are so used to this schedule and are so well



TIP

adapted to it that you can set your clock to the time that they use the restroom (not that you'd ever want to do that, but you get the point).

Do yourself a favor: If at all possible, find out what your schedule will be the summer before you start teaching and govern your life by it. Eat lunch at home when you'll eat it at school. Practice a little self-control in the bathroom department, and only go at the times allotted by your upcoming schedule. You may consider this preparation to be a little ridiculous, but if you're not used to such rigidity in your schedule, it may be an unwelcome surprise later.

» **You'll be expected to do a lot that has nothing to do with your training.**

Even though you've spent years preparing for a life of teaching, you're also going to have to serve as the police. Some schools have a safety advocate, security force, or police presence these days, but, in most cases, the system is miniscule at best. You'll be expected to police kids as they eat, play, walk in the halls, use the restroom, attend sporting events, attend school-wide assemblies, and so on. In addition, you'll most likely be asked to participate in a school-based activity, sponsor a club, or coach a sport *even if you have no experience in that club or sport whatsoever*. Flip to Chapter 16 for more discussion of extracurricular activities.



WARNING

» **Your free time is going to take a huge hit.** Most teachers use the term *9-to-5 job* very contemptuously. They curl their lips and produce spittle when they talk about people who can just leave work at 5 p.m. and not have to grade, plan, and wonder what to do about that weird kid in social studies who keeps licking the textbook. You should expect to give up lots of your own time (and spend lots of your own money), especially if you're going to make fun and engaging lesson plans. You can find tons of lesson plans in books and online, but you'll find that none are ever *quite* right for you. You'll spend a lot of time tweaking these plans so that they work better for your kids. Plus, don't forget that you have to master the material before you can hope to teach it — you're about to find out just how much you really forgot from your own schooling!

» **Your summers are "work free."** This difference is no longer true universally, as it once was. We never taught at a "year-round school," and we're thankful for it. All that time you spent at school and at home, grading and working yourself to the bone, is rewarded with a little more than two months of vacation. Don't be surprised, however, that your summers are rarely, if ever, actually vacations at all. Don't forget that you have to stay certified, and that takes a lot of classes and workshops. Furthermore, you're not earning a king's ransom, so most people take extra jobs during the summer.



TIP

You actually earn all your pay only during the academic year, so summer is technically an unpaid vacation. Many school systems will take your annual pay and divide it up so that you receive the same pay during the summertime as you did during the school year. However, some systems will offer you a choice. If money

management isn't exactly your strong suit, don't elect to take larger paychecks that end when the school year does. If you're given more money, you may end up spending it. On the other hand, if you know yourself well and you're confident you can set enough aside to make it through the summer without having to bum meals off your friends, you'd be wise to take the larger paychecks that end when the school year does. That way, you can be earning interest on your income that much sooner.



FLIRTISHA
SAYS

PRACTICAL POTTY TALK

If you're someone of weak composure, bear with me for a moment. Most teaching books don't address this issue, but it's one that most first-year teachers wonder about and are hesitant to address. What if they *really* need to go to the bathroom, and they can't wait until the end of class? This topic is actually a very important legal issue. The key point is *supervision*. You can't leave your class unsupervised, even for a moment. Therefore, making friends with one of the teachers in a classroom adjacent to yours is essential. If you're a *floating teacher* (you change classrooms some or every period of the day), you have more work cut out for you; you'll have to find a buddy teacher for every classroom you're in.

If things get dire, give your class a good excuse for why you have to leave the room (the principal asked to meet with you quickly after the period got underway, or you have to deliver a note to another teacher), and ask your buddy teacher to keep an eye on your class while you're gone. (By the way, make sure that the excuse matches the length of time you expect to be gone.) This practice is applicable for all reasons that you may need to leave the room, even if you're just going into the hallway to speak with a student you've sent out for disciplinary reasons. Don't shut your door behind you as you leave! This cuts you off from the rest of your students, and anything can happen in your absence. Leave the door open and make it a point to keep looking in on them. Keep this question in mind: "If this were ever brought into a court of law, could I prove that the students were in some way supervised?" If so, you'll be fine. You're allowed to go the bathroom if you have to.

Except sometimes it's not so simple. I used to teach in a school that wouldn't let you leave students unattended, but neither would they do anything to help you in the face of a personal emergency. Plan A was "you can't leave your room ever," and there was no Plan B. Because I was teaching in the gym, a building detached from the main school building, it was impossible to communicate with, let alone get coverage from, another teacher. Even inside the building it was a challenge. The reality struck me when one of my colleagues actually urinated on herself during class because no one would come to her room and monitor her students for five minutes. She was humiliated.

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The administrators at the school did nothing to change their policies after The Event. Adults were still not allowed to use the bathroom if they needed to, and no one would respond to requests for coverage. It was up to me to protect myself, so I went to my doctor and asked her to write me a note that basically said, “Please let this grown woman pee when she needs to,” but to make that sound as medically professional as she could. The school had to make a medical accommodation for me at that point, only because the law required it.

Finally, and then I *promise* we’ll move on from this topic: Look out for your colleagues. When you have a planning period, pop into someone’s classroom and ask whether they need a break. One of my schools had a long (110-minute) instructional period because of lunch shifts, and I can tell you for a fact that there were days near the end of that nearly two-hour stretch that I wished someone had checked on me.

Bearing the Instructor’s Burden

Teaching is a unique profession in that you’re basically isolated from your colleagues from the first minute of the first school day and are expected to learn as you go with little or no help during the day. It’s a difficult chore and a heavy burden to carry, especially when things aren’t going well. You’d think that you could lean on your experience as a student teacher in these times, but you’d be surprised how different your actual teaching experience will be from your time as a student teacher.

Sink or swim!

Have you seen those TV shows where they demonstrate that babies can swim without instruction as soon as they’re born? They toss infants into a swimming pool, and the little ones just swim like tadpoles without a care in the world! That’s what it’s like to teach. You get tossed right into the water, and everybody stands back and watches. “Are they going to make it? They may be in trouble, but let’s just watch what happens. Maybe they’ll pull through after all, and if they don’t, we’ll drag them out and throw somebody else in instead.”



WARNING

Stop and think about that for a second — it’s actually pretty scary! School systems aren’t interested in making you a good teacher. They expect you to be good based on your college training, without a whole lot of experience under your belt. Even worse, you’re not going to swim very well when you first get tossed in. Teaching your first class based on what you learned in college is like being asked to swim

across the Atlantic Ocean with nothing more than those little inflatable armbands. Even if you manage to stay afloat, you're going to swallow a lot of water along the way.

One of the new teachers we interviewed relayed this story. He was leading his class to the media center for the first time. The class was deemed a “behavior problem” (or more appropriately, a powder keg ready to explode), so the thought of simply walking the group as a whole to the library was a daunting exercise in itself. After they arrived with no calamity to speak of, he sat his students down at the available computers and had, what he considered, a rather successful lesson explaining how to use the school's electronic and online resources. However, the librarian contacted him the next day, enraged. Evidently, his class was so quiet and focused because they were in the process of stealing pieces of the computer. Of the 30 computers in the lab, 23 were no longer functional, and the librarian held him flatly responsible for not keeping an eye on his kids.



REMEMBER

That sort of thing is quite a wake-up call, and it's the result of a common practice among principals. (By the way, that teacher-principal relationship is a tricky one, so we discuss it more in Chapter 12.) You'd think that as a new teacher with little experience and a lot of learning to do, your administration would remove as many obstacles as they possibly could to ensure that you'll be as successful as possible. Unfortunately, this probably isn't going to happen, and it all falls under that sink-or-swim mentality. In their view, putting you in a rough situation is the best thing that they can possibly do. That way, you have “ample opportunity to gain experience.” How generous! Here are the most common adversities you'll face as a newbie:

- » **You'll probably have the “problem kids.”** If veteran teachers have any input in the scheduling process, they'll do everything they can to make sure that they get a well-behaved group of students or classes for the following year, which means you won't. Before you get too bitter, just remember one thing: They were in your shoes once, and they had to go through the same thing you're going through. They're more than content to let you experience the joy and fun of tough classes. Remember that even challenging classes can be transformed using effective discipline tactics, which we describe in Part 2.
- » **You won't have the greatest classroom if you have a classroom at all.** When it comes time to choosing classroom space, veteran teachers will leave you slim pickings. If there are more teachers than available rooms, the new teachers usually draw the short straw and become *floaters*, the stoic nomads armed with only an audiovisual cart (the one that's so hard to drive because it always swerves to the right when you push it) to hold their meager possessions and stacks of papers to grade.

» **You won't get to teach the cool classes.** Don't forget that you're not coming into a fresh ecosystem when you start teaching. Most likely, that school has been around for a while, and so have most of the teachers — and they've all carved out their little niches. The upper-level courses and electives already have teachers whose names are synonymous with them, so don't expect to march in and assume leadership of the classes and coursework that you've always dreamed of. Even if you have terrific qualifications in a given subject area and are actually more qualified than the current instructor, that doesn't amount to a hill of beans, so eat your humble pie and wait your turn. Something will eventually open up, even though you may have to wait a couple of years (or more).



REMEMBER

Don't let any of this discourage you. Most of the negatives we've laid out here are true, in one form or another, in any job that you take. Having to pay your dues is simply the way of the world. Although all these things are frustrating and sometimes overwhelming, most people survive and even have great success in the face of such obstacles. It's through the struggle that you gain the respect of your coworkers and students alike. Only through the refining fire of the sink-or-swim trial do you gain professional stature and experience.

JACK OR JILL OF ALL TRADES

Pretend for a second that you're an accountant ready to begin work in a prestigious office. On the morning of your first day, the CEO of the company comes into your office and greets you. "We're glad to have you on board," he says. "It's tough to find a good Certified Public Accountant these days, and we feel pretty lucky to have you on the team." You grin inwardly, knowing that you excelled in all your studies for just such a moment as this. You're wanted; you're *needed*. And then, he says something baffling. "I know you're an expert in foreign currencies, exchange rates, and that sort of thing, which is exactly the reason we hired you. No one else can chug those numbers with quite the proficiency you can." So far so good, but his look is somber. "Here's the problem. Between the hours of 12 and 2 p.m. each day, we really don't require your skills, so we'll need you to do some electrical wiring work around the office. We saw that you took some physics in college, and we've got an electrician's hat for you and everything. Welcome to the office — and can you fix my lamp when you get a chance?"

As ridiculous as that scenario may sound, it happens all the time to teachers. For example, a choir teacher we know had to teach Spanish classes, even though she had just taken a few Spanish classes in college. Even if you have no formal training in a subject, you just may find yourself teaching it! This isn't such a big deal to elementary school teachers, who teach just about every subject there is, but if you're a middle school science teacher, don't be surprised if you're asked to teach a class or two of language arts! Most state certifications allow a teacher of one subject to teach "out of content area" for a couple of class periods each instructional day.

Facing adverse conditions

Even though first-year teachers have it tough, they're not the only ones. You'll share some challenges with all the teachers in your building, rookie or veteran. These common frustrations aren't only a little annoying — they are actually detrimental to learning. Among all the teachers we interviewed, two common complaints arose time and time again: the lack of supplies/resources available to teachers and the temperature in the school building.

You probably already know that you're going to have to buy most of the things you'll need in the classroom. We're not talking about paper clips and staples or overhead projectors — those items are usually provided by the school system. Supplies for in-class experiments and projects, stickers or awards, and even the constant and pressing need for boxes of tissues will have you constantly reaching into your wallet or purse. Furthermore, your classroom is going to be as boring as a sensory-deprivation tank if you don't have some colorful, fun, and engaging decorations on the walls. Although your school may have some posters that you're required to display, the bulk of the decorating will fall to you.



TIP

You can offset some of the costs you face. Many elementary schools publish a list of materials that students are required to bring with them on the first day of school. Anything the kids bring from home is one less thing you have to provide. Among the most important items of which you'll need an endless supply? Boxes of tissues, so make sure that those are on the list and stress those with parents. Once you establish a stockpile, put out a box at a time to help ration its use. That should keep your kids swaddled in tissues until the end of the year. Furthermore, when parents buy tissues, they're usually softer than the industrial 120-grit sand-paper tissues schools buy in bulk. Why are we focusing so much on facial tissue? You'll understand in February when all the students in your class are oozing out of all their facial orifices and the office is out of tissues for the rest of the year. High school parents are much less keen on the idea of sending tissues, but Mike motivated his students to bring in boxes by offering small bits of extra credit. (High school students would rob a bank for extra credit.) You may want to try this tactic yourself if you have trouble getting people to pitch in to the tissue stash.



CAROL
SAYS

Tissues aside, one year I carefully tracked all of the expenses I incurred as an elementary school teacher, and the final tally surprised me. The total was just north of \$1,000, and by that time I was an established teacher who'd already bought most of her decorations and other classroom accoutrements. Some of the expenses came from everyday consumable items, once we'd run through the stockpile purchased by parents or provided by the school, but a good chunk of the expenses came from little things I would buy for my kids throughout the year, like little gifts on holidays (especially Valentine's Day, the mother of all holidays in elementary school) and supplies I'd need for fun projects as inspiration hit throughout the year.

The second biggest complaint about school conditions is the temperature of the classrooms. Let us set the stage for you using a true tale from Mike's teaching experience. It's late October, and mornings have just begun to get chilly. Sweater weather is here at last. As you enter your classroom, you feel the door stick a little bit in its frame. "Hmmm," you think to yourself. "That's odd." The little mystery is soon explained by an agonizingly hot gust of wind that assaults you, literally blowing your hair back as the door swings open. The room is so obscenely hot that the tape you've used to hang your posters has warped, sagged, and ultimately surrendered to gravity. All the decorations in your classroom are lying in heaps on the floor, many curled and bent beyond recognition.

You know that learning will be difficult in such an atmosphere. Actually, staying awake will prove just as tricky. How are you going to teach that day in a volcanic cave full of desks? You call the office to report the atmospheric anomaly, hoping that (at the worst) it can be rectified by lunchtime. But alas, there is no quick solution. Something in the heating system is broken, and tracking down its antique replacement will take months in the best-case scenario. Maybe by April, they say, as your eyes boggle out of your head. April? Are they serious? Are we talking about six-months-from-now April, half a year away? You are liquifying even as you hold this conversation, or are you just crying now, struck helpless by the circumstances?

You eye the outside door knowing that just beyond it lies the chilly weather that you dressed for this morning, but you also know that propping open that door is not safe in this day and age. Even the air in the hallway would be a reprieve, but school rules and safety guidelines require that door be shut and locked. You spend months sweating through your clothes every single day, squinting into high velocity, oscillating hot air propelled by an army of fans you purchased, fans that might as well be blow-dryers stuck at the highest heat setting. It is a nightmare. Your kids are miserable, and you actually feel yourself resenting them just a little bit, because they get to leave after 45 minutes but you have to stay here. Deep down, you know this is an unfair and slightly insane reaction, but you feel your sanity melting away, day by day, through the sweat that drips down your forehead and runs down your nose onto the test papers you grade, so that each has noticeable water damage and salt residue that flakes when you brush at it with your hand.

Those students actually have it worse than you. Some of them travel to a classroom a mere 90 feet away from yours, and the heating problem has manifested itself differently there. Your colleague is living in an Arctic horror-cape, a victim of your room usurping their desperately needed warm air. The room is so cold, students complain that it hurts to breathe after a few minutes. The teacher is wearing a ski parka and gloves but still shivers so hard that their body aches.



TIP

Whether they be from an oppressive classroom temperature or a debilitating lack of supplies, you'll have plenty of woes. Is there an upside to all this? Believe it or not, yes. These issues are undeniable, affecting everyone, and, therefore, offer you a chance to speak frankly and honestly to your students about something other

than, for example, mitosis. Dealing with these issues and your feelings about them help you to form a bond between you and your students in the same way that you can walk up to anyone on the street and start a conversation about the weather. Allowing them to voice their opinions, to vent frustration, and to cope as a group is an invaluable experience, so don't miss an opportunity to bond with your students, even about so mundane a topic. This is an essential task when you are cultivating a healthy learning environment. When you build transparent and honest relationships, the benefits are manifold. We will return to this strategy time and time again throughout the book.



REMEMBER

Of course, you can also find other adults in the school with whom you can commiserate over your shared plights. However, there are very specific politics wrapped around the relationships you'll have with your colleagues and administrators. Knowing where to complain, how to voice your concerns, and whom to trust in the faculty lounge are just a few of the skills you'll need to develop. We focus on how to get along with everyone else in your building in Part 4.

You're the Adult Now!

When you exit college (or graduate school) with all your training complete, to say that you're familiar with how the educational system works is an enormous understatement. If teaching is your first career, you've been hip-deep in schooling for your entire cognizant life. If you're entering teaching as a second career, surely the coursework and training you had to undergo for certification purposes was enough to remind you of the joy of taking classes. There's one big difference now, however: You're in charge, and things look a lot different from this side of the big desk.

Performing six shows a day

First and foremost, you need to understand your role as the grown-up. Your bosses think that you're there primarily to teach content and secondarily to provide a classroom atmosphere fertile for learning. Your students, however, know that you're really there to entertain them and (if you have to) teach them something. You're the Kevin Hart of Language Arts now.

The bell rings. Boom! You're on. Go out there and have a great show. Try the joke with the funny voice and manage to squeeze in how, exactly, to diagram a sentence while you're at it. A little while later, the bell rings again, and you have two or three minutes to compose yourself before the next showtime. The only differences between you and a Vegas entertainer are that you have to perform more

often, to a captive audience (instead of people who *pay* to be there), and you actually have to teach while you're at it.

The elementary school teachers we interviewed accepted their role of entertainer far more easily than did the secondary teachers. Younger kids need constant pizzazz to keep them alert and on track. Things have to be quick, constantly shifting, vibrantly attention grabbing, and always exciting, but secondary school teachers often fail to realize that older kids want many of the same things. Even during group activities, you're the center of the students' attention for the majority of the time they're in your classroom, and your mood and actions hold sway over everything that happens. Many teachers feel that they're not paid enough to entertain the kids — and that's unfortunate. These faculty always seem to be the same group that complains when in-service meetings are boring, or if they feel that they're being “talked at” rather than actively engaged when they're not the one in charge. Try to teach your class in a way that would keep you both interested and entertained if you, yourself, were a student.

Does this mean that you need to begin every lesson by jumping through fiery hoops while juggling on a unicycle? No, but we'd pay to see it, especially if you could teach the finer points of the French and Indian War while you did it. You can do all sorts of little things to spice up your lessons, which we discuss in Chapters 9 and 10, but you need to remember that holding your students' interest is just as much your job as making sure that they pass their quizzes and tests. You'll grow to see that entertained students and successful students are often one and the same.



TIP

Make no mistake about it. Whether you're a secondary teacher and you have a bunch of distinct shows every day, or you're an elementary teacher and all those shows blend into one long performance, it's exhausting and often thankless work. The more involved your lesson plans and the more interactive your activities, the more draining it is. But as your kids figure out that you design your classes first and foremost with them in mind, they'll grow to trust you, and your relationship will begin to turn from teacher-student into mentor-student, with the ultimate goal of becoming allies in the educational process. Although it's mentally, physically, and emotionally taxing, developing a strong trust relationship with your students provides benefits that far outweigh the inherent challenges.

Working in Neverland

Remember Neverland, the home of Peter Pan and the Lost Boys? The land where no one grew up and everyone could fly? Well, school will be your own personal Neverland, where only you get older, but each generation of kids stays exactly the same age. (And you'll swear that they can fly based on their limitless well of

energy and enthusiasm.) It's a land with rules unto itself that don't apply anywhere else in the world. For example, chewing gum is rarely allowed in Neverland, and in Neverland you have to ask permission before you use the restroom.



REMEMBER

Always keep in mind that the rules of Neverland and the rules in the adult world aren't at all the same. For instance, regardless of how old the students are, most of Neverland's residents suffer from a severe lack of perspective. Tears flow freely and often within the bounds of this magical land, no matter how old the resident. Each test is the end of the world and causes severe stress and panic. Every emotional or interpersonal crisis can actually make time stand still for those involved. We defy anyone to try to teach the quadratic equation to a student after their boyfriend or girlfriend of six whole months broke up with them just before your algebra class began.



REMEMBER

THE SPOTLIGHT'S ON YOU!

If you piled up everything that you've discovered, accumulated, and experienced during your student-teaching term, the heap would be considerable. However, the one thing that student teaching doesn't offer you is a chance to do things from scratch. You were always working within your sponsor teacher's guidelines, in a room that was already prepared for you, with a plan of action that was already in place.

You'll feel overwhelmed when you walk into your new job and everything depends on *you*. We talked to a teacher who arranges student-teaching placements and then follows up after those student teachers find jobs. She happened to walk in on one of her students who'd just been hired as he stood alone, in the dark, in his future classroom. He evidently didn't hear her enter the room because nothing broke his unblinking gaze as it swept back and forth across the desks piled along the walls and the vast, open floor. As he turned, he looked at her with wide, unblinking eyes and said, "There's nothing here . . . *nothing*. Where do I start?" She had no response other than to comment to herself that perhaps she hadn't expressed to the teachers the enormity of the task before them.

When you arrive on your first day, there are no rules, lesson plans, seating arrangements, or decorations. The task of putting together a successful school year is truly daunting because it is made up of so many individual composite parts. You may get a feeling of abandonment as you pass from the nurturing embrace of student teaching to the full immersion of professional teaching. Therefore, your best bet is to find allies among your new colleagues as soon as possible so that you feel you still have a support structure in place.



WARNING

You need to remember one key rule during your visit to this exotic and strange country: You're only a visitor to Neverland, not a resident yourself. You're only an ambassador from the adult world, and you're there to (in some fashion) help these children transition into a world where people get older, time gets faster, and trapping lightning bugs in jars slowly loses its allure. In plain and bold terms, always act your age because you're the adult, and you can't have a successful classroom if everyone, including the teacher, acts like a child.

Facing the Daily Grind

Each and every day, you'll be faced with quite an impressive, if not intimidating, list of things that need to be accomplished. First and foremost, you have to provide competent, meaningful, and (if you have time and energy left) engaging lessons for each of the classes that you're teaching. On top of that, you have to grade the results of those lessons, tutor, make parent phone calls, hold administrative and parent conferences, and participate in whatever extracurricular events you're tied to. Throw in any detentions or punishment assignments that you have to supervise, your duty assignments, and the chin-high stack of paperwork that you need to fill out, and it's enough to make you want to quit your job and become a pizza delivery person (unless you already are one during the evening to help pay the bills, that is). Just making it through every school day is a chore in and of itself.

Managing the school day

What one word would best describe the typical school day? How about *hectic*? No, that's as giant an understatement as describing the pain that you experience when being impaled as "a brief, tingling sensation." The best word that we've ever heard used to describe the school day is *triage*. If you aren't familiar with that word, picture in your mind's eye a war-torn battlefield, cluttered with wounded soldiers. The injured fighters suffer from a variety of different wounds, and they're each in a unique state of emergency. Some require immediate care, and some can be stabilized and receive medical attention later.

The triage doctors attend to each of the wounded and decide, on the spot, the order in which everyone will be helped. The most seriously injured are taken first, but only if there's a good chance of saving them (some are too far gone to be worth the effort, as callous as that sounds). However, the triage doctors do more than just order the casualties. They also must tend to those waiting, to keep them alive

until more specific attention can be given them. In other words, the triage doctors and nurses are jugglers of lives, keeping hundreds of balls in the air at the same time until each can be attended to.



REMEMBER

We admit that's a gory metaphor, but it describes exactly how it feels most days during instructional hours. You will be asked to do too many things, and you probably won't be able to accomplish them all. You're going to have to prioritize, organize, and reorganize every moment of the school day. The hardest thing is deciding what has to go because your time is limited. Usually, your coolest and most innovative lesson plans are the victims of triage, and that's natural, so don't sweat it. Not all your lessons are going to be powerhouses. After all, there are many years ahead of you to fine tune the lessons that didn't go over so well.

Lesson plans and grading

Week to week, all kinds of different paperwork is going to pop up that will need your attention. However, as unavoidable as death and taxes, lesson planning and grading are two kinds of paperwork that will become part of the daily routine. They're the bookend activities to your time in the classroom. You must plan before lessons to both ensure your understanding of the material to be covered and to consider the most effective method of presenting it. Grading is the byproduct of assessment, to see just how effective that lesson was in retrospect. In order for your time in the classroom to be most productive, you must be fully immersed in both planning and grading.

One thing we don't talk much about in this book is how to write a lesson plan. If you've been through a teacher-training course, you know the important elements of a lesson plan and what your professor or cooperating teacher required. After you've taught for a year or so, you'll probably also discover that typing up lesson plans like you did in college is absolutely ludicrous. This is way too time consuming, and you'll find a style that better suits your individual needs as you gain experience.



TIP

Find out whether your school requires you to turn in your lesson plans. Some schools require lesson plans on file, while some only require you to file lesson plans on the days you're being observed by an administrator. Others, thankfully, are more relaxed, and only want you to have "evidence of planning" if a supervisor ever requests it (and you'd better hope it's not requested, because that usually means that somebody thinks that you're slacking).

The style of lesson plan that you use doesn't really matter. As a math teacher, Mike's lesson plans were usually lists of important topics to cover with illustrative examples of each. This list of talking points combined with unstructured time to troubleshoot student confusion worked well.

We've known teachers who get stressed out unless their lesson plans go into extraordinary detail, because they are nervous to have to think on their feet, especially when faced with a new curriculum or a difficult topic. Their lesson plans are nearly word-for-word scripts of what they'll say in class. "Today we're going to define and talk about circles. First let's talk about what a circle is . . ." — that sort of thing. There's nothing wrong with this type of lesson plan, because it makes the teacher think about how the class discussion may flow ahead of time, and it helps build confidence right out of the gate. Of course, this type of scripting is very time intensive. Neither of these styles is better than the other; it's just a question of what you need to do in order to be prepared.



WARNING

The further into your first school year you get, the more you're going to hate writing lesson plans, and the more tempted you'll be to fly by the seat of your pants. *This is a very bad idea*, no matter how comfortable you feel with the material. There's no feeling quite like the cold chill of panic running down your spine when you realize that you've been teaching something wrong for the entire class period, and that class period is about to end. Furthermore, anticipating and preparing for student questions makes you look a lot smarter in front of your class, which is a key element to gaining their respect. They need to know that you know exactly what you're talking about.

After you've set up your plan and delivered the lesson, you eventually have to assess the students' understanding. It's hard to quiz or test too much; in fact, most new teachers assess too little because they feel that it breaks up the flow they have going in class. One new teacher we knew looked back at the end of the nine-week marking period and realized that he'd only given one quiz, and he'd even forgotten to grade it!

Don't let assessment be an afterthought, because it's the one piece of evidence that is visible to parents and administrators (who are not in your classroom with you) that proves that you're actually doing your job. If you end up fudging with the grades a little because you didn't have enough real numbers to base grades upon, you're heading for trouble. However, you have to keep one thing in mind, and that's the volume of papers you'll be grading. One assignment in each class each day translates into between 500 and 900 papers to grade by the weekend! Just like everything else that we've discussed in this chapter, the name of the game is anticipation, preparation, and, finally, commitment, after you've formulated a plan of action.



MIKE SAYS

THE SCHOOL-DAY MARATHON

Most adults don't remember just how tiring the school day is once they graduate. At the high school where I taught, the school district switched from an appointed to an elected school board. The result? A ton of "innovative" ideas to improve education. One elderly gentleman insisted that kids should be in schools longer. My school dismissed at 2:20, but he insisted that students should be held at school, kept active in one way or another, until 6:00 p.m., so that parents could get home from work before their kids. I understand the benevolent motivation — reducing the number of "latch-key" kids. However, I think he forgot how long and exhausting a school day is.

He, with all the other candidates for the school board, was permitted to "shadow" a student for one day. That is, they followed a student to all her classes and even had lunch with her in the cafeteria. The gentleman with the (in essence) day-care plan shadowed a student who attended my class at the end of the day. When he came in, he looked a little ruffled — I think the day had been rough — but I looked forward to speaking with him after I got the students started on their assignment.

Unfortunately, I never got my chance because he slept soundly (and loudly) for my entire class. I didn't have the heart to point out to him the irony of the situation, because a school day of regular length was even too much for him. However, I was pleased to see that he was defeated soundly during the election.

