

CHAPTER 3

THE FIRST WEEK OF SCHOOL



Jason

Dear Ms. Mentor,

I'm teaching two different subjects (high school physics and middle school physical science). How can I organize and manage my lesson plans and other resources?

Dear Jason,

Creating a system for lesson planning is time-consuming at first (even for one subject), and you'll modify it as you discover what works best for you. It's worth the effort—at the end of the year, you'll have a complete record for the next time you teach the courses. It's much more efficient to revise and adapt rather than re-create the lessons.

My colleagues used to call me the binder queen of planning (I've since progressed to electronic files). Rather than storing the intact curriculum document on the shelf, I took it apart and put the unit plans in a binder (a separate binder for each course). I then inserted my lesson plans and other documents for each unit.

For lesson plans, the best thing I ever did was get rid of the spiral "Plan Book" with its 2 × 3 in. block for each class period. There wasn't enough room to record the plan for an entire lesson other than a cryptic "pp. 52-56, #1-5" or "Algae Lab," which was not much help the following year.

Find out if your school has a lesson plan template. If you're using a framework such as Understanding by Design or the BSCS 5E Instructional Model, there may be lesson templates posted on the project website. If you don't have a suggested template, create one for yourself electronically. Here are some features to include (noting that a lesson may span several class periods):

- Lesson title and dates
- Unit goals (or themes, essential questions, big ideas, standards) supported by the lesson
- Lesson objectives or goals
- Description of the lesson's content topics and key vocabulary
- Introduction to activate prior knowledge (e.g., warm-up activity, recap of previous class period, an interesting anecdote or story)
- Instructional activities (discussions, lab investigations, cooperative learning activities, informal assessments, opportunities for practice or application, readings, multimedia use, homework)
- Lesson assessments and rubrics (quiz, summary, group presentation, lab report, checklists, notebook entry, observation) correlated to the objectives
- Materials needed (web resources, supplemental texts, technology, handouts, lab materials, notebooks, office supplies)
- Adaptations for students with special needs or extensions for students beyond the basic objectives

During the lesson, annotate the plan, reflecting on what went well and what did not work (and what you did to fix it). Describe any modifications you made to activities or assessments.

Use the organizational features on your computer (and save backups on a flash drive, the school server, or an online file-sharing site). Have a color-coded folder for each course and subfolders for each unit and lesson. Archive your presentations, photos, podcasts, and video clips, as well as copies of lesson plans, handouts, and assessments.

In addition to electronic files, I still like the concept of binders where I can flip through an entire unit without opening lots of files. Once a binder queen, always a binder queen!

—Ms. Mentor

THE WAY YOU begin the school year will affect everything that occurs in your classroom and with your colleagues for the remainder of the year—and beyond. When you were student teaching, your cooperating teacher had already set the stage for you. But now starting the school year is your responsibility. Therefore, it is important to dedicate time and energy to this important start.

First Day Fears

It's normal to feel nervous about the first day of school. Many teachers feel nervous their entire career, not just their first year. The best way to dissipate this nervousness is to be prepared (or even overprepared). Consider more tasks to accomplish the first day or two than you believe will be possible to complete. Consider the topics that are most important to cover, then add a few more.



Heather

I'm getting nervous about the first day. Is this normal?

Students will have fears on the first day as well. They have no idea what to expect from you. Stand at the door as they enter your classroom and welcome them to your class. Look happy to see each of them. If you have learned any names, use names when greeting the students. Make them feel comfortable.

Try to get rested before you begin the first day. Expect to feel exhausted at the end of this day and every day for the next week or so. In this new routine, you will expend a lot of energy not only working with your students but also in preparing for them each day.

The First Day Celebration

The first day is the most important day of the school year. This is the day you will set the tone and let your students know what to anticipate for the coming year. It is also the day you begin to establish your reputation as a teacher. You cannot be overprepared.

Find out what the school's schedule and procedures are for the first day. Will there be a schoolwide assembly or an extended homeroom period? If so, how long will the class periods be?



Tanya

What should I do during the first class period? Will I have enough time to go over everything?

On the first day, you should not focus on a list of rules and regulations. The day should be a celebratory occasion. You may begin your first day with the first lesson of the year, or you may find there are so many things you want to do with your students (some of which could be required by the administration) that your first lesson will take place the following day.

I have had the same dream every year for 30 years the night before the first day of school. I dream that I am in front of the class the first day in my nightgown. I know why I have this dream—it's because I'm worried about being prepared for my students.

—Sharon, grade 5 teacher

Give students something to look forward to. If you are in a lab setting, create displays of interesting science equipment they will use during the year. You may not have anything accumulated yet, but in the future you will be able to display student work from previous years—the more interesting and creative, the better. Celebrate what the year in your science class will provide for your students.

- Introduce yourself. The students may know one another, but they don't know you. You should not take the entire time to tell the class about yourself, but you should let them know where you went to college, where you are from, what wonderful things you have heard about them, the positive things you have heard about the school, how much you enjoy learning and doing science, some interesting science-related experiences you've had, and why you selected science teaching as your career. Exhibit the passion and enthusiasm that made you want to be a science teacher.
- Assure students that they can be successful in your class. Don't insinuate that it will be easy to do well, but emphasize that with work and dedication, everyone will be successful. You may not have success stories to share yet, but be sure to include them in future years.
- Be confident in yourself and show students that you know what you are doing. Project your knowledge of the science content as well as how to present it. (→ See Chapter 6, "Your Attitude Matters.")
- Discipline will probably not be an issue the first day. Most students are on their best behavior initially; some teachers say they are sizing you up to see what they can get away with. But if there is a discipline issue, be sure to deal with it. Remember that you are setting the tone for the entire year. (→ See Chapter 4 for more on classroom climate.)
- Establish an atmosphere that is both serious and fun. Be sure students know there will be rules to follow but that all rules are for the purpose of providing them with a safe environment that will support their learning. There may be several rules to share this first day, such as those dictated by the school concerning tardiness to class, but this is not the day to overwhelm students with rules. Don't try to share every safety rule with them on the first day. (→ See Chapter 5, "Safety in the Laboratory.")
- Consider a quick hands-on science activity, demonstration, or discrepant event to engage the students. Use it at the end of class time to have them leaving your classroom with the feeling of anticipation for the rest of the year. Or end the class with a funny story. Have them leave your room with an upbeat feeling.

First Day Checklist

Be prepared with these materials:

- Copy of class lists
- Bell schedule posted

- Additional notices and documents from the front office posted or ready to hand out
- Safety equipment in place
- All supplies ready
- Paper and pencils for students who did not come prepared
- Something nutritious to eat to get you through the day
- Comfortable, professional clothes and shoes
- Lesson plan for the day
- Enough chairs and materials for each student
- Your name written carefully on the board

Plan to do nothing socially tonight or the rest of the week and get lots of rest. Breathe deep, relax, and enjoy the day!

One of the things I promise my students on the first day is that I will do anything I can to help them in any way. The harder they work, the harder I work to help.

—Dwayne, grade 9 science teacher

First Week Orientation

Set the stage during the first week. Provide students with a clear concept of what will occur every day in your class. They need to know they can expect specific classroom characteristics such as fairness, learning opportunities, engaging lessons, interaction with their peers, a caring teacher, support, and understanding. During the first week, you should aim to accomplish the following tasks:

- Introduce your website to your class, if you have one.
- Provide the class with a syllabus or list of major science concepts they will learn. (→ See Online Appendixes 3.1a–e for sample syllabi.)
- Explain where they can find things in the room that they will need.
- Gradually introduce basic routines and rules that allow all students to learn.
- Explain and provide a safety contract that students will sign and return. (→ See Chapter 5, “Safety in the Laboratory.”)
- Introduce your homework policy and what you expect from students for makeup work.
- Explain how students can contact you if they need help and inform them of your office hours or times when they can see you to discuss their work.
- Stress student routines that will be followed in class.
- Establish a climate that promotes work by individuals and groups. (→ See Chapter 4, “Creating an Environment for Learning.”)

Getting Organized

Students will know if you are organized. It’s particularly important during the first few weeks to have everything ready for students as they walk in the door. Later, you may engage some of them in setting up materials, distributing items, or collecting things from others. But initially, you need to have all papers, materials, and plans well prepared.

Many teachers find a seating chart beneficial in creating an atmosphere of organization. A seating chart can benefit students and your instruction in several ways:

Consistency is key. Most students perform best with consistency in expectations, schedules, and processes used in class. This is especially true for students with learning disabilities.

—Shayna, special education teacher

- There will be no argument about who sits where.
- Students who have difficulty focusing and staying on task can be placed in a location in the room where you will have quick access to them and can provide them with on-task behavior suggestions.
- Students with special academic needs can be seated with others who are supportive and in a location you can easily access.
- It will be easy for you to take attendance simply by spotting empty seats and knowing who is missing.
- You will be able to learn student names more quickly and can remind yourself of a name if you are having difficulty.
- You will be able to give students an opportunity to work with a variety of people.
- Lab partners and teams can be selected based on student strengths and needs.
- Students will have a clear message about who is in charge of the class. (→ See Chapter 4 for more on classroom management.)

Getting to Know Your Students

When students are asked about the most important characteristics of a great teacher, the one item that is on nearly all lists is “The teacher knows me and cares about me.”



Sherrie

I'm learning the names of my students but I want to really get to know them. Since I'm new to the community, I'm challenged to know their interests and activities. How can I accomplish this in a timely manner?

There are several strategies you can use to learn the names of students quickly.

- If your school has a yearbook, get a copy from the previous year and look up your students. If you don't have a large number of students, you can also look at their cumulative or online folders to see their pictures.
- Make a seating chart.
- If your students don't know one another, play a name game to start the first few classes.
- While students are working and you are helping them, look at their names on their papers or notebook covers.

- Use students' names often in class. "That's a good idea, Otis" or "What do you think of that, Stephanie?" are ways to help you anchor your learning of names and also let students know you are getting to know them.

Getting to know students really goes beyond simply learning their names. You can learn other academic information about students by reviewing their cumulative folders and IEPs. But other information may be harder to find. The time to start gathering information is the first week of school.

- Some information about individual students can be found in the yearbook, as you see them pictured in photos of teams and clubs.
- Ask students or parents to complete an information questionnaire. You could also use an index card or online tool to gather information about students' interests and previous experiences. See the online resources for a sample to get you started. (→ See Online Appendixes 3.2 and 3.3 for sample questionnaires.)
- Stand in the hall in the morning and/or between classes and greet students. Encourage more conversations as you see students each day.
- Get to know students in a different setting than the classroom by attending concerts, sporting events, plays, and other special events at school and in the community.
- Consider having lunch with students or chatting with them in the lunch line.

It's easy to connect with the students who demand our attention: the hand-raisers, the outgoing personalities, those who are genuinely interested in science, and those who use negative behaviors as attention-grabbers. Getting to know every student is a challenge but it is one of the most important things we can do as teachers.

—Joclyn, grade 7 science teacher

Motivating Students

The first day of school is the best time to begin developing a positive self-image for individuals and groups. When students begin to think of themselves in a negative way, it's almost impossible to change their opinion. Thus, it's important to praise and reinforce the positive things that occur in your class. At the same time, it's important to not give false praise or overpraise students. They have excellent radar and will know if praise is phony or contrived.

- If you sense a negative self-worth on the part of a student, group, or entire class, let them know you don't agree with it.
- Praise positive attributes such as friendliness, creative thinking, cooperation, politeness, motivation, and caring. Then be more specific and connect the attributes to lessons. (→ See Chapter 8 for more on providing informative feedback.)
- You may find that some students do not respond well to public praise. A brief nod or quiet comment may be more appropriate.
- A quick note telling students of something positive they have done will go a long way.
- Students enjoy praise from teachers, but parents seem to appreciate it even more. A positive phone call, postcard, or e-mail to parents can have a major impact on student learning. Many parents have received phone calls

A positive comment to a parent can be the highlight of a child's day.

—Shayna, special education teacher

only when there is a problem, so they welcome the good news, which is readily passed on to their child. (→ See Chapter 10, “Parent as Partners.”)

- As you plan lessons, consider how you might differentiate them to provide opportunities for all students to be successful. (→ See Chapter 7 for more on differentiation and motivating your class.)

Time Management



What should I do if I have planned a lesson that I thought would take the entire class time but I have time left at the end of the period?

It’s certain that you have heard this previously: You should overplan for your classes. Have more materials and ideas for any block of time than you believe students will require. Even given that, there will still be times when you have more time left over at the end of class. This is the 5–10 minutes that is not enough time to begin the next lesson but too much time to have students idle, which provides opportunities for misbehavior. Be prepared with an extension of the lesson, such as any of the following suggestions for assignments for students:

- An open-ended question about a topic you’ve been covering that students will hand in when the bell rings
- A question that ties together several ideas you have been studying or applies the work of the day to a different situation
- “What if” questions that encourage critical thinking about the subject you are studying
- A problem that students can pair-and-share
- Simulations or brief video segments related to the lesson
- A “bell-ringer” (→ See Chapter 7 for more on class starters and wrap-up and Chapter 4, “Creating an Environment for Learning.”)

Your Professional Appearance



Much of my clothing consists of the jeans and T-shirts I wore to classes. Can I wear that type of clothing while teaching?

You must separate your leisure appearance from how you want to be perceived as a professional. It’s important to project a professional image while at school. If you can create a strong image of yourself as a teacher, your students will respond with respect, as will other teachers and administrators.

You are an adult and a professional. Schools have dress codes or various expectations for the appearance of faculty members. As a first-year teacher, it would be wise to step it up a notch. Don't dress too casually or in styles that are more appropriate for teenagers. That does not mean you must spend a lot of money on a new wardrobe, but try to avoid these errors:

- Dirty or unkempt hair
- Distracting jewelry, slogans, or symbols
- Inappropriate makeup for day wear
- Bad breath, body odor, or too much perfume or aftershave
- Clothing that does not fit properly or cover up appropriately
- Dirty, torn, or crumpled clothing
- Inappropriate footwear (e.g., flip-flops, dirty sneakers)
- Anything that violates the student dress code or lab safety rules, including open-toe shoes in the lab

Clothing cannot make you a better teacher, but your appearance can be a contributing factor to how students perceive you. Your image and reputation begin on the first day of school. Think of the first impression you want to make.

Lesson Planning

Immediately begin creating your collection of lesson plans and plan ideas. Your lesson plans should not be set in stone and will not be used in exactly the same manner each year, but having a file of them available will save you a great deal of time and energy in the future. Use three-ring binders, a file cabinet, or your computer to keep all of the materials for each lesson together. Whatever system you select for organizing your materials, be sure they are clearly labeled and in the correct location. You will want to be able to locate specific lessons again next year.

- If this has not already been done for you, begin by organizing the science concepts you will teach in chronological order based on developing conceptual understanding and building knowledge. The new *A Framework for K–12 Science Education: Practices, Crosscutting Concepts, and Core Ideas* (NRC 2011) will help you determine the progression of learning that is important as you consider this order (→ see Resources).
- Determine if your school or department uses a specific model for developing lessons, such as *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins and McTighe 2005), the Madeline Hunter model (Hunter 1994), the BSCS 5E Instructional Model (Bybee 2006), or Marzano's *Art and Science of Teaching* (2007). These resources will provide you with guidelines for preparing your lessons (→ see Resources).
- Consider possible formats for your lesson plans. You may decide that you want to break the activities surrounding a science concept into class session blocks, organize them in a 5E plan, or create an open plan that allows for shifting ideas and activities around within a set time frame.

I keep a pair of my most comfortable, classic shoes at work. If my feet are uncomfortable in my dressier shoes or if I need closed toes to go into a lab, I simply change into my comfortable shoes to get me through the day.

—Lisa, high school principal

Reflection is the most important component of lesson planning. At the end of every class, I reflect on what occurred and jot myself a couple of notes concerning how that might impact subsequent lessons for that class or for an individual student.

—Dwayne, grade 9 science teacher

Be sure to include formative and summative assessments as part of your plan. Your schedule, students' needs, and your personal work style should all be taken into consideration as you formulate your plans.

- Begin gathering information based on science concepts and skills that you want students to develop. Search the web, find print materials, and speak to colleagues to locate investigations, labs, multimedia resources, inquiry topics, readings that are at your students' levels, possible field trip locations, and guest speakers. Join a Listserv to acquire information concerning what other teachers do to address specific science concepts and skills. (→ See Chapter 9, "Creating Professional Development Opportunities.")
- Sort through your collection and organize the selected components in a sequence compatible with the needs of your students. But don't discard the other materials—you may decide to use or modify them as you work through the unit of study.
- Write your lesson plan using all of the selected materials in the format you have chosen.

Conclusion

Subsequent chapters will provide more in-depth information concerning the topics and issues you have encountered during the first weeks of school. If you find there is not enough information in these first three chapters to support your needs, go to the issue-specific chapters now. However, you have plenty to do before delving into the intricacies of each component, and much of the information can wait until you have more time.

Resources (www.nsta.org/riseandshine)

Frameworks

- Bybee, R. 2006. *The BSCS 5E instructional model: Origins, effectiveness, and application*. Colorado Springs: BSCS. www.bscs.org/pdf/bscs5eexecsummary.pdf
- Hunter, M. C. 1994. *Enhancing education*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Marzano, R. J. 2007. *Art and science of teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Design.
- National Research Council (NRC). 2011. *A framework for K–12 science education: Practices, crosscutting concepts, and core ideas*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. http://books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=13165

Models

- Bybee, R. 2006. *The BSCS 5E instructional model: Origins, effectiveness, and application*. Colorado Springs: BSCS. www.bscs.org/pdf/bscs5eexecsummary.pdf
- Hunter, M. C. 1994. *Enhancing education*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Marzano, R. J. 2007. *Art and science of teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Design.

Wiggins, G., and J. McTighe. 2005. *Understanding by design*. 2nd ed. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Design.

Lesson Plan Formats and Templates

Lesson Planning: www.personal.psu.edu/scs15/idweb/lessonplanning.htm

Madeline Hunter's Lesson Plan: <http://template.aea267.iowapages.org/lessonplan>

Overview of UbD and the Design Template: www.grantwiggins.org/documents/UbDQuikvue1005.pdf

Online Appendixes

- 3.1a Sample Sixth-Grade Syllabus
- 3.1b Sample Seventh-Grade Syllabus
- 3.1c Sample Physics Syllabus
- 3.1d Sample Honors Chemistry Syllabus
- 3.1e Sample Earth Science Syllabus
- 3.2 Student Questionnaire
- 3.3 Parent Questionnaire