Meeting a class for the first time

There is no second chance to make a good first impression! First impressions are crucial in any work with people and none more so than with new pupils. The old adage ‘don’t smile until Christmas’ held a grain of truth – it’s always easier to loosen up later than it is to start to lay down the law once your class has decided you’re soft!

1 Don’t forget to introduce yourself – and spell your name out on the blackboard if necessary. Pupils in Primary School usually know their teachers quite well, and see the same teachers for a greater proportion of the time than in secondary education. It can be quite stressful for pupils to start a new school, or a new year, in which they may encounter 20 new teachers in the space of a week.

2 State clearly what you expect of your pupils – what they can and cannot do in the classroom. Establish a few simple rules of behaviour and always stick to them. You may also wish to invite from pupils their own suggestions for additional groundrules.

3 Learn your pupils’ names as quickly as you can – any instruction is much more effective if directed to an individual. Your work will also be more effective if you never forget that your class is made up of individuals, and know them as such.

4 Help pupils to learn each others’ names if they don’t know them already. One way of doing this is to form them into a large circle, and ask each pupil to say (for example) ‘my name is Cheryl, and this is my friend Mark, and this is Clive, and …’ seeing who can say the most names. This helps you learn their names too!

5 Help pupils to get to know each other (at the same time helping you to get to know them). For example, conduct a class round along the lines of ‘My name is Jean, my favourite thing in the world is pizza, and my pet hate is spiders.’

6 Show your pupils where they’re heading. Give your pupils a clear idea of what they will be doing in the next few weeks and why they are doing it. Help them to see how your work with them fits in with the syllabus, National Curriculum programmes of study and so on.

7 Make sure your pupils know how they will be assessed. Which pieces of work are more important for assessment, which areas are revision of material they have already covered? Emphasize the need for them to look after their own work and take responsibility for their own progress, especially where there is continuous assessment.

8 Use the first lessons to find out what pupils already know about the subject and build on this in your planning. You could make this into a quiz or get them to write something which is personal to them which will help you get to know them.

9 Explain which resources are available for pupils to use; which they can access themselves and which resources are to be obtained from the teacher, or in the library or resource centre. Encourage pupils to take responsibility for the resources in their classroom, for example keeping an eye on the numbers of rulers, rubbers, and so on, ensuring that the stock lasts all year.

10 React firmly if any of your rules of behaviour are transgressed. This is especially important in the first few weeks. Show the class that you notice everything that is going on and are not willing to ignore anything. Name the pupil who has done something you don’t like, but be aware of individual personalities and notice if what you say is having an extreme effect on anyone. You may need to tread carefully with pupils who feel insecure or nervous. Don’t be drawn into arguments; when you know pupils better you can be more flexible.
2

Gaining attention and settling a class down

Nice as it would be if all pupils were sitting quietly, ready to learn, and attentive at all times, this is not the nature of the young of the human species! Here are some tips to overcome human nature – but remember that different things work for different people, so find your own styles.

1 Try doing nothing first. Stand there, very still, absolutely quiet. The pupils closest will notice, and the word will gradually spread. Give it a moment or two before you decide that another tactic is needed!

2 Don’t shout (yet)! If all is not quiet, avoid the instinct to shout ‘be quiet’ at the top of your voice! Start a quiet conversation with two or three pupils who already look ready to listen to you.

3 Take advantage of human curiosity. It sometimes pays to whisper! Human nature includes not wishing to miss anything. Whisper to those closest to you, and many of the rest will stop talking and listen.

4 Drop a non-attender in it! Ask a question to those who are already listening, but end with the name of someone you know has not been paying attention. Watch as all eyes turn to this pupil, the effect of someone being found out by their peers not to have been listening.

5 Have ways of making pupils listen. Start with something that needs careful listening – for example a tape-recording or video played back quite quietly.

6 People love praise. Praise those who are paying attention, particularly if they don’t normally, rather than grumbling at those pupils who are not yet paying attention.

7 Begin with a task. Start a session with something for pupils to do. Have printed instructions on handout materials, or write them on the blackboard in advance.

8 Select some targets. Pick on some ‘known’ live-wires in the class by name, giving them particular tasks to do at the start of a lesson, as leaders of groups of pupils.

9 Don’t take chaos as a personal affront. Don’t regard initial chaos as disrespect to you. Regard it as human nature, and natural until something interesting comes up.

10 Few want to be left out of some fun! If you can do this (we’re not good at it!) start a lesson by very quietly saying something really amusing to those who have already ‘settled down’. The rest will soon become eager to be included in this.
Coping with interruptions

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If only I could just get on with my teaching!— how often have we thought this. When we’re interrupted, it’s natural to feel emotions including anger and frustration. However, at these times, all eyes tend to be on us – not least to see how we react. The following suggestions may help you deal with interruptions with dignity.

1 Accept that you are in fact being interrupted. Trying to carry on as though the source of the interruption was unnoticed tends to do more harm than good, as most pupils will probably be concentrating on the interruption, and how you react, rather than on what you had been saying or doing just before the event.

2 Keep track of where you were. Make a mental note of exactly what you were doing just before an interruption, so that when you have dealt with it, you can pick up the threads without having to say ‘now, where was I?’ Also, check whether there are connections between things you do and the probability of interruptions.

3 Accept that some interruptions will be important and necessary. When this is so, make sure that anyone responsible for the interruption is not criticized or made to feel embarrassed.

4 Be patient with colleagues. Be particularly careful when interrupted by a colleague or other member of staff. Even if the interruption is unwelcome and unnecessary, it is best to have a quiet word with the person concerned later, rather than let any frustration be noticed by your pupils.

5 Turn interruptions into positive learning experiences. When possible, draw useful learning points from interruptions by pupils. The more they feel that their interruptions are taken notice of, the more likely they are to avoid making unnecessary ones.

6 Keep individual feelings for individuals. When a particular pupil is making too many interruptions, try to have a private word later, rather than a public show of annoyance.

7 Have something to do ready for anyone who interrupts. Have a list of relevant questions about the topic of the day, so that anyone who interrupts can be put on the spot if necessary with a question to answer. This can work well at discouraging interruptions!

8 Watch your distance. Move up close to anyone who has made an unwelcome interruption. Pupils are much less brave when you’re standing over them than when you’re at the other end of the room.

9 Look for the causes of interruptions. If there are frequent interruptions, it could be that pupils are tired of listening, and need to be given something definite to get on with. Avoid the ‘I’ve started, so I’ll finish’ approach.

10 Learn from colleagues. When you have the chance, observe how colleagues cope with interruptions. The more techniques you have at your disposal, the more versatile your approach becomes.
Learning names

You will know yourself how irritating it is when people forget your own name. Calling someone by name makes any message you wish to communicate all the stronger and more personal. However, we often seem to have a whole bunch of new names to tackle at once: the following suggestions may help you with this task. There will always be some names that are very hard to remember, but it's worth making the effort: you may be the only person who does learn such names.

1. **Let pupils decide their names!** Ask your pupils to tell you the version of their name they wish to be known by and attempt to call them by it unless it is too daft for you to cope with. Michael might hate being called Mick, but Salim might prefer Sal.

2. **Be careful with nicknames.** Be cautious about using nicknames that seem innocuous enough to us, but cause the class to fall about hysterically every time you use it. It may well be that you are unwittingly being drawn into using an unknown (to you) vulgar expression!

3. **Address questions to named pupils.** To help you to get to know some names, choose people from the class list to answer (easy) questions and bit by bit memorize the respondents' names.

4. **Make a map of the names.** Use a seating plan to note names of pupils next to where they are sitting and try to encourage them to sit there for the first few lessons until you are more familiar with the class.

5. **Once you've got them, use them.** Once you know some names, use them every time you speak to those pupils (without letting them feel they are being picked on!).

6. **Make names visual.** Some pupils will be happy to wear name labels for the first few days of a session, or you could use folded cardboard name labels on the desk: remember to get them to write their names in really large letters.

7. **One step at a time!** Concentrate on first names for the first part of the school year, and pick up the surnames as you go on.

8. **Take care with the repetitions.** Find out any pupils who share a first name and learn these first, once you have learned the three Matthews, two Traceys and four Alis you have made a good start!

9. **Make sure you have their names right.** Check you are using the correct names for pupils and encourage them to correct you if you get them wrong. Also check out how to pronounce unfamiliar names. It's dreadful to find out at the end of the year that you have been getting one wrong from the beginning.

10. **Be persistent.** Don't expect to learn all the names all at once: build up gradually over the weeks. Don't be too hard on yourself if you never master all of the names, especially if you teach lots of different groups. But do your best: pupils do tend to be critical of teachers who don't make an effort to learn names.
5

Avoiding disruption in your class

This is an area a great deal easier to write about than to follow through – but we all keep battling against the unpredictability of the human factor!

1 Establish a few, clear rules for behaviour in your class. If possible involve the pupils in the development of these rules. The more ownership you can allow them to feel regarding the rules, the more likely they are to at least try to follow them.

2 Reward good behaviour immediately with positive feedback – a smile or a few words of praise or encouragement. Try also to ensure that you are quick to reward the good behaviour of any pupils who are often guilty of bad behaviour – they may really respond to some positive feedback.

3 Deal with any misdemeanours before they become major incidents. Often, it is best to deal with minor incidents as privately as you can. Public confrontations arouse too much interest!

4 Establish what the sanctions will be for transgressing the rules. Ensure that such sanctions are reasonable and practicable.

5 Avoid unreasonable expectations of pupils – but don’t demean them either. Ensure that the level of the work you set is suitable for all the individuals within the group, and that pupils experiencing difficulties have manageable targets. Direct the emphasis of your comments towards the work or lack of it. This involves getting to know what each pupil is capable of, and setting realistic targets.

6 Look for signals. Be adaptable – change the pace or content of a lesson as soon as you realize it is not working well. Changing approach on the basis of feedback you receive is a strength, not a weakness!

7 If a particular pupil is causing problems, immediately remove this pupil to another part of the room. This is a way of demonstrating that you have observed the problem, and also provides such a pupil with the opportunity to start afresh.

8 Provide ‘cooling-off’ time. If you – or a pupil – lose your temper, try to allow a few minutes for you both to calm down: take the pupil involved out from the room for a short while. It can pave the way towards progress to say something along the lines ‘I’m sorry this happened. How can we make sure that this sort of thing doesn’t happen again?’

9 Investigate the causes of bad behaviour. Talk to a pupil who has caused problems away from the class, on a one to one basis and try to find out the reasons for misbehaviour. Sometimes, the reasons (once known) will be very understandable and forgivable.

10 Have ready something interesting to give the class to do. This can be invaluable when you need time to calm down yourself, or when you need to have those few quiet words outside the door with an individual pupil who has been causing problems. Prepare a verbal quiz or game for the last ten minutes, either as a reward for work well done, or because you have finished a useful activity and need a change.
6

Using blackboards

There's a blackboard or whiteboard in most teaching rooms. We sometimes feel so close to this in our professional lives that the term 'life at the chalkface' is in common use! How we use the most straightforward of our visual aids can make a big difference to how much our pupils learn.

1. How visible are your etchings? Check that the size of your writing is such that the pupils who are furthest away from the board can read what you put on the board.

2. Aim for the top! Ensure that you make good use of the upper half of the board, and only use the rest of the board if you know that pupils at the back aren't screened from viewing by those closer to the board.

3. Show your agenda. Use the board to write questions that you will be discussing, so pupils can continue to see the questions as you develop with them the answers.

4. If you are left-handed, you may find writing on the blackboard difficult. This is not your ineptitude, but because you are pushing the chalk. It has taken some teachers years of distress to discover this! Left-handed chalk-users (e.g. PR) sometimes find that standing a little more to the right than usual, and pulling the chalk that bit more, helps improve the situation.

5. Be heard as well as seen. Don't talk to the class while you're writing on the board with your back to your pupils. When possible, arrange the room so that you can maintain eye-contact with most of your pupils even while you're writing on the board.

6. Be prepared! Whenever you have the chance, prepare a blackboard in advance for a class, so that pupils can see an outline of the things you're going to talk about in the forthcoming lesson straightaway.

7. Get your pupils' words on the blackboard. Whenever you can, use the blackboard to write up things that pupils tell you in answer to your questions, so that they can see their thinking being valued and acknowledged by you. When pupils see you write up their words, their ownership of what is going on is increased, and their attention may improve.

8. Let pupils have a turn with the chalk. Make the blackboard 'everyone's' territory. Ask pupils to write things on it, for example, questions they want to ask, ideas they want to discuss, and interesting things they want to talk about.

9. Use the blackboard as a classroom resource. Give groups of pupils 'blackboard tasks', for example when starting a new topic, ask groups to compose and write up 'ten questions we want to know about it'.

10. Be careful with the rubber! Before you erase comments suggested or written by pupils, give a further acknowledgement of the value of these comments.
Organizing practical lessons

Practical lessons can so easily turn into chaos if not well organized, however well planned the content is. Don’t try anything new with a class unless you have done it yourself in advance and know it works – and save time in demonstrating by showing ‘the one you made earlier’.

1. Put safety first. There is a wide range of safety legislation, particularly covering equipment and materials that are potentially hazardous. If your work involves dangerous things, take every opportunity to get yourself some relevant safety training. If something were to go wrong, the buck could rest with you.

2. Check through the materials you require before the lesson starts. Ensure they are prepared for use. You can waste many minutes (seems like hours) trying to unscrew a jar whilst the class gets bored and runs riot.

3. Assemble your materials in labelled boxes or trays. This is well worth doing when it is a lesson you will repeat, and can save you much time organizing the same materials in future.

4. Engage the help of the class. Let pupils help to distribute materials and equipment, and in cleaning up at the end of the session. It will save you time and help pupils learn how to look after resources. Allow plenty of time for clearing up; it may take much longer than you think in the early stages.

5. Make sure you have enough materials for everyone. Or at least have enough for pupils to work in pairs. When pupils are not fully involved themselves, they tend to experiment in ways of which you would not approve!

6. Give short, clear instructions about the task required. Ask questions of those pupils who seem not to be concentrating to ensure that they have understood. Their repetition of the requirements of the task will reinforce the instructions to the others.

7. Make demonstrations snappy. When you are demonstrating an activity or an experiment it is easy to take too long explaining the ‘right’ way of doing something that pupils who are itching to try it themselves at first become turned off.

8. Establish firm rules of behaviour. Disruption or silliness may prove not only counter-productive to learning, but can turn out to be very dangerous, for example if your class is working with chemicals or electrical equipment.

9. Avoid the necessity for pupils to queue for your advice or opinion. Teach pupils to be self-reliant and resourceful, and to help each other if they can’t do something or find something.

10. Bring the class back together at intervals. Talk to the whole class during activities. Everyone may be working at a different rate, and some pupils will need this structure to avoid being left behind.

11. Evaluate the activity. Make time towards the end of a practical lesson for some kind of evaluation. You may not have had time to get round to every individual, and in this way you can ensure that all pupils receive some feedback.
8

Doing yard/bus/break duties painlessly

‘Oh no, not all this as well?’ you may have exclaimed, when first you discovered that you were expected to do such duties! Sadly, being a teacher is not just about teaching. We also need to help keep the school going during the times when we’re not teaching. The following suggestions may help you tackle this with equanimity!

1 Get a whistle! Don’t worry that they are a bit old-fashioned. They can help you gain attention in noisy circumstances — as long as you don’t over-use them.

2 Make sure you know the rules. Know what is allowed and what is not. Try to get a thorough briefing from an experienced colleague who can show you the ropes.

3 Be seen, and heard! Should you need to enter the toilets or go behind the bike shed, announce your presence loudly. You are less likely to have unpleasant surprises that way!

4 Wrap up warm on cold days — and be prepared for rain! Such duties are made more miserable than ever if you are unsuitably dressed. If you can get a hot drink as well, so much the better.

5 Try pairing up with a colleague. If your duties turn out to be a hard chore for you, you can either keep each other company or cover each other for short periods so that you each get some sort of break. A 20-minute yard-duty can feel a lot longer than two 10-minute half-duties. If possible, shadow a colleague on the relevant duty before your actual turn comes up, so that you know what may be expected of you before you tackle it on your own.

6 Pave the way. Try to be especially well-prepared in advance if you know you will be teaching immediately after a duty. This can ensure that you are not too flustered at the start of the ensuing lesson. Give the class something to do that really keeps them busy while you get your breath back!

7 Have contingency plans for what to do if things go wrong. Check out what the school policy is on minor accidents or incidents. With younger pupils, it may be useful to have readily available supplies of antiseptic wipes and plasters.

8 Keep your eyes peeled! It isn’t possible to have your eyes everywhere, but you can often prevent trouble by stepping in before it happens. The price of peace is eternal vigilance!

9 If fights break out, think carefully about your interventions. You can restrain pupils using ‘reasonable force’ where the safety of a pupil or a colleague is threatened, but these conditions may not be easy to interpret. Under no circumstances should you ever strike a pupil.

10 Use such duties as occasions when you can build up good relations with pupils outside the classroom. Be careful, however, not to put yourself at risk of seeming to have favourites, or of giving excessively exceptional attention to particular individual pupils.