



TIPS FOR TEACHERS AND CLASSROOM RESOURCES

Insights I Wish I Would've Had During My First Year of Teaching

By Jennifer Gunn

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Almost a decade ago, on the first day of my first year teaching, I sat and stared at a circle of high school students. On my desk was a lesson plan that I'd spent weeks preparing. I'd decorated my classroom to perfection. It was a veritable Pinterest board of beauty and inspiration. I'd carefully arranged the desks in a circle so that my students would face each other and learn together. Everything was in place exactly as I'd planned.

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At 8:45am, thirty-one 10th graders entered the room, taking in their new English teacher. They whispered to each other, giving me adolescent side-eye. I smiled back, knowing these first few moments were critical. They settled into their seats. It was showtime.

I looked down at the attendance sheet full of faceless names and back up at the expectant faces of my students. Suddenly, it hit me: “There’s been a mistake. Surely, I can’t be the one in charge of all of these teenagers right now. No one is checking on me? No one is making sure I don’t mess this up? I am just supposed to BE a teacher now?”

The answer was *yes*. I was now officially a teacher, and like a million educators before me, it was time to dive in and start creating the magic. And so, I did.

The first year of teaching is the hardest. While being an educator is never without its struggles, the first year is by far the most challenging — pieced together with idealism, confusion, good intentions, excitement, fear, and expectations. But fear not. We’ve gathered some amazing wisdom from teachers around the country. Here’s what veteran teachers wish they would’ve known their first year.

On the first day of school

“Make a point to greet each child. They are just as nervous as you are!” – Carolyn

“Look ’em in the eye, say “how are you?” and mean it. Ask students to pronounce their names and say one thing about themselves. It saves you the embarrassing mispronunciation of names, and shows respect when you use their name correctly. Also, you won’t be the only one talking.” – Jeri

“Always remember that you are not the only one who is scared. There are 30 scared kids too. Empathize and relax together.” – Jeremy

“Enjoy the ride! Smile and breathe. You only get one first day [with these students]! Don’t worry about accomplishing all your goals in one day.” – Janice



About making connections

“Make establishing relationships with students a priority.” – Tyson

“Do not fall into the “Pinterest/Instagram-worthy” classroom snapshot. Make your curriculum and student connections be [what] stands out and is remembered. All of the other stuff is just smoke and mirrors.” – Tina

“Greet each student by name with a smile every day. Your smiles may be the only smiles they see.” – Brenda

“Write a letter to yourself describing the year you are looking forward to, the kind of teacher you will be, and the success of your students. Save this letter in a sealed envelope and read it at the end of the year.” – Wanda

“Create positive relationships with the maintenance staff, the librarian, the office staff, and anyone else who is in the trenches with you and is often overlooked. They are the most amazing people, and can make your life so much easier, and certainly more pleasant.” – Amy

After a long day

“Every day is a new lesson to learn and grow from. Mistakes are proof you are learning!” – Anabel

“Be patient with yourself. Go home before dark, and keep fighting the good fight!” – Samantha

“Don’t try to do it all and be perfect. Students want to know you care and they want you to be honest with them. Don’t be afraid to see that the lesson is not working and change it up.” – Sherry

“Take deep breaths. Everything is not an emergency. It only gets easier from here.” – Sabrina

“It’s OK to not finish everything. It’s OK to not fully know the answers, and it’s OK to be overwhelmed. Just love the kiddos the best you can.” – Amy

better person. Leave the bad in the past and step forward to the future — for you and for your students!” – Mary

“Pick your battles. Everything is not worth fighting over. You’ll just end up exhausted and spread too thin. Don’t forget the importance of self-care.” – Allison

When it comes to planning and teaching

“Don’t be afraid to wait. Leave a question lingering. Wait for kids to formulate a thought. Wait for them to settle down. Wait time is golden! Be planned and prepared (because admin. can walk in at any time!) but don’t be afraid to go with the flow of the classroom. If a good conversation is happening, don’t cut it short on account of time or “it’s not in the plans.” It’s usually moments like that where students really get the most out of what you’re doing anyway!” – Laura

“Expect the unexpected. Have plans for when:

1. The network goes out
2. The Smartboard bulb blows out
3. The copier breaks down
4. You schedule a test for the last day before vacation and instead there’s an assembly.” – Kevin

“Any work you assign will come back to you tenfold. Choose wisely.” – Jeff

And living the teacher life

“Going to bed early, getting a full eight hours of sleep, and getting to work early to prep for the day is a much better routine than staying up late and showing up five minutes before first period.” – Andrew

“Be prepared to have kids call you Mom — some on purpose and other by accident. Either way, take it as a compliment.” – Bridget

“Make the payroll secretary your BFF.” – Chiara

“It’s OK to take time for yourself at lunch! Although it’s important to build relationships with students, figure out what time you need to recharge and block that out for yourself. If you need a midday break, make lunch a ‘grown-up only’ time.” – Stephanie

And being a role model

“You don’t have to know everything; modeling curiosity and the ability to find answers is one of the most valuable lessons you can teach.” – Lori

“Plan, prepare, have fun and be a role model, not their friend. Always be kind. Listen first and model being a lifelong learner.” – Darlynn

Hopefully you gained some insight and a few new ideas from these very knowledgeable teachers. Being a teacher isn’t easy but it’s incredibly rewarding. And to that end, keep in mind the powerful words of Nobel Prize laureate, Malala Yousafzai.

Jennifer L.M. Gunn spent 10 years in newspaper and magazine publishing before moving to public education. She is a curriculum designer, teaching coach, and high school educator in New York City. She is also cofounder of the annual EDxEDNYC Education Conference for teacher-led innovation, and regularly presents at conferences on the topics of adolescent literacy, leadership, and education innovation.

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