

# How To Avoid New Teachers' Five Worst Mistakes

International colleagues have identified five of the most common missteps and offer their best advice for steering clear of them.



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*By Mary Ellen Flannery*

Mary Modder was a student teaching in Silver Lake, Wisconsin, when the school nurses came to deliver “the talk” with her eighth-graders. She recalls that the principal said students might have questions afterward and teachers should be open and honest in their responses. So when one girl asked about contractions, Modder tried her best. She told all about her son’s birth and the necessary role of contractions.

That child listened politely and then asked again, more specifically, about the uses of isn’t, wasn’t, can’t, don’t, etc., for her language arts assignment. Modder’s mistake? Assuming too much.

All new teachers make mistakes—and not all are so funny! But keep this in mind: All experienced teachers do, too. The point is to avoid the worst and learn from those missteps you’ll inevitably make anyway. With that in mind, your more experienced colleagues have identified five of the most common missteps and offer their best advice for steering clear of them.

## **Taking it too personally...**

Some sweetheart in the back row tells you that you're the worst teacher he's had in his life. Your class is BOH-ring! Like, totally irrelevant. And, half the time your assignments don't even make sense, at all.

Now, maybe you're a tough guy and you think, kid... you're really pushing your luck today. Or maybe you're a Mr. Softee and you just think, "I will not cry! I will not cry!" Either way, you can't take the irritating things that students (or parents) say and do personally.

"With experience, you realize that taking things personally is a mistake, because not only are those things not meant to be taken personally, it will just wear you down too much if you do," says Illinois teacher Jackie Quitter.

Consider that a student might have a legitimate beef—even if it has been offered offensively—and you may learn from it. *NEA Today's* discipline expert Kate Ortiz suggests speaking directly, privately, to that student who shouts, "I am so bored!" Say you're interested in becoming the best teacher you can be and would like to hear his suggestions. In similar situations, Ortiz also has told students that they're not required to "like" her class. But disruption won't be tolerated, and they are required to do their work.

Also consider that a student's comments or actions may reflect his problems, not yours. When a kid says he's bored, for example, Ortiz notes that it may be because he's actually not capable of doing the work. Sometimes students make comments because "they are hurting—not to attack you," says Heidi Sagendorph Coffey, an alternative education teacher in New York. Same goes for parents. "You can be the best teacher ever ... and you will still have parents who complain about you. A lot of times they're having their own issues with life or the child," says California teacher Valerie Barnes Doyel.

Her advice? “Just let it wash over you like water over a duck’s back, go on with your day, and be the best teacher you can be.”

### **The Superman complex**

First there are the lesson plans—you need to write them. (Life’s mystery: why does it take 45 minutes to write a 30-minute lesson?) Then, there are the student papers—you need to read them, grade them. Parents must be called. Paperwork must be filled out. And then there’s the small matter of the upcoming benchmarks... So, when your assistant principal says, “We think you’d make a wonderful debate coach next semester and, oh, we’ve also got a slot for you on the school’s technology committee—and, hey, let’s just sign you up to chaperone prom, okay?” You do not say, “Hooray!”

You say, “How nice of you to think of me! But I really can’t right now.”

The truth is: You actually can’t do everything—and do it well. And, in your first few years of teaching, it might be best to concentrate your efforts on... well, teaching. “Don’t try to do it all,” warns Martha Patterson, an experienced Washington teacher. “It is okay to say no to chaperoning dances and organizing fundraisers. Remember you’ve been hired to teach.”

And forget that state college backpack that you’ve stuffed with papers to bring home each night. Teachers deserve personal lives, too. For Patterson, it works better to get to school early or often stay late, but she leaves work at work. She also reminds her new colleagues to make time for themselves—“exercise, read for fun, do a craft, hang out with friends.” Otherwise, you’re taking the straight road to resentment and burnout, she warns.

## **You need to associate**

So you think your union is full of old people. Big mistake! You think its activities are irrelevant to your life. Another whopper! This might read a tad self-serving, but it is a real mistake for new teachers to disassociate with their Association.

For one thing, your union provides you with a community of educators, many of them more experienced than you and willing to mentor and assist a newer colleague. “I have met so many people who have offered inspiration, advice, and insight about education,” says Bridget Zick, a leader of the Young Educators of Clark County, in Las Vegas. “What could be better than getting to know people who care about kids and education just as you do?”

Also, keep in mind that your local union’s work around your salary and working conditions is important to understand. It can help you do your job better. At the same time, consider getting involved in NEA’s work to elect pro-public education candidates and shape policies like the Every Student Succeeds Act—there’s no question it makes a difference in your classroom life.

## **The Discipline Challenge**

Figuring out classroom discipline might be harder for new teachers than navigating the Cretan labyrinth. But if you can avoid the pitfalls, you’ll find a much better reward than that bloodthirsty Minotaur.

One common misstep by new, and especially young teachers is the “I am going to be your friend and then everybody will love me and listen to me,” strategy. No, no, no, and no!

“Be friendly with your students, but they are not your friends,” warns California teacher Valerie Barnes Doyel. “You are an authority figure in the classroom and students appreciate a strong leader.”

You know what else doesn’t work? The “I’ll stand here and talk louder” strategy. When you talk louder, they talk louder. And then everybody gets a headache. But the “I’ll stand here” part is actually worse. First, you’re boring when you stand there and your kids will likely respond better to a more dynamic presence. Second, you can’t see—and stop—most misbehavior if your perspective is so limited.

Try moving around your room instead, stopping to tap a paper here or circle an answer there. Stop in the back of the room to observe. But, says *NEA Today’s* discipline expert Ortiz, do begin your lessons in the same place every day. That will signal your students that you’re ready to teach, and they need to be ready to learn.

If your class gets increasingly chaotic, and you get increasingly desperate, no doubt you’ll turn to the Interwebs and the inevitable “I found this awesome discipline chart and if I just promise pepperoni pizza on Fridays, it’ll all be good” strategy. Ha! Actually, it probably won’t be. While many teachers do like to use group rewards for good behavior, consider that it’s hard to build a learning community if all your kids are sniping at each other about pizza. (What works better, Ortiz offers, is an unexpected reward. Like, “Everybody has been paying attention so well, I think it’s time to take a break and play a game!”) Also, it’s hard to use somebody else’s plan. What works for them and their kids might not work for you.

### **Sweating the small stuff**

In case you didn’t catch it earlier, allow us to say it again: Everybody makes mistakes. Expecting that someday you’ll get everything just right might be the biggest mistake of all!

Listen to your own advice, suggests Dianne Cox, a middle school teacher in Kansas for 22 years. You probably have told your students, repeatedly, as Cox does, that you actually expect them to make mistakes. It's part of the learning process. (When they understand that message, you'll find they raise their hands much more often in class, Cox predicts.)

"I tell my students we're all human. If we didn't make mistakes, we would be aliens," Cox says—and the same goes for you. Relax, take a deep breath, and learn from your mistakes.