

# How to Survive Your First Year Teaching

Written by Hailey Reynolds

Do's and don'ts, resources, and expert advice on how to navigate challenges as a new teacher and make the successful transition from college to classroom.

You've just graduated college, completed your student teaching, earned your teaching credential, been offered a position, and are ready to jump into the classroom head first. But before your first day, it's important to recognise the challenges that await many new teachers. According to research, studies show that between 19 and 30 percent of teachers leave within their first five years due to low pay, lack of administrative support, poor work conditions, and other reasons. And the first year can be the most challenging of all. Teachers like you are the cornerstone of our educational system, but often lack the resources needed to succeed – or aren't sure where to find them.

We're here to fill that gap with this guide, which provides meaningful support through helpful resources and expert tips, whether you're teaching Pre-school children or college freshmen. Read on to learn how you and other teachers can make it through your first year and come out stronger on the other side.

## Biggest Challenges for First-Year Teachers and How to Overcome Them

As a first-year teacher, you'll face a lot of new challenges, but there are things you can do to feel more confident and in control. Teaching expert, Hailey Reynolds, breaks down eight of the biggest ones below, and we provide some helpful solutions to break past them.

## 1. Feeling extremely overwhelmed

“Whenever you’re in school, you have teachers or mentors you watch make decisions,” says Reynolds. “When you get your first classroom, you suddenly have to make 1,000 decisions a day, which can feel very overwhelming.”

### ACTION ITEM

Try to break down your responsibilities into manageable tasks rather than thinking of your day or week as a whole. This can help you feel less overwhelmed and make you less likely to second-guess yourself.

## 2. Finding the middle ground between structure and fun

“In college, you learn all these classroom management skills, but then you get your classroom and want the kids to like you and get along well,” says Reynolds. “It takes a while to find the balance of having stricter management and structure to help with behavioral issues while also maintaining a friendly environment.”

### ACTION ITEM

Strict classroom rules can always be loosened as the school year goes on, if needed. Trying to impose structure after starting the year without many rules will be more difficult.

## 3. Getting a feel for the school culture

“In addition to learning your classroom, management style, and content area, first-year teachers must also adjust to their school’s climate and culture to learn how it does things,” says Reynolds. “The climate at your new school could be completely different

from where you student taught, with every day including some new policy or procedure you need to understand.”

#### ACTION ITEM

The best way to adjust to your new school is to both give yourself time and get to know the environment. Don't be afraid to ask lots of questions and seek clarification if you feel confused by something.

## 4. Starting without pay

“You have to get your classroom ready for the first day of school without having yet received a paycheck,” reveals Reynolds. “For my district, when I started teaching, educators began the last week of July and I didn't receive a paycheck until September 15th.”

#### ACTION ITEM

With this in mind, be careful how much you spend when getting your classroom ready. Are there elements that can be added as the school year goes on? If possible, try to save money from a summer job or look for used items that help get you through to your first paycheck.

## 5. Accommodating student needs

Whether you work in a low-income school or not, you will always have a student with needs,” says Reynolds. “Most people who go into this profession have the kind of heart where when they see a kid needing or lacking something, they will find ways to provide for that student. You end up providing a lot of supplies and materials to ensure kids feel comfortable during their school day and can in turn focus on learning.”

## ACTION ITEM

In addition to working with school administrators, see about developing relationships with local businesses who may be willing to provide school supplies, clothing, and personal hygiene products for students who lack access at home.

## 6. Setting time boundaries

“I realized how much was being asked of teachers on a regular basis outside teaching requirements my first year,” remembers Reynolds. “It starts out small, with asks to cover concessions at a game, stay after school to chaperone a dance, or meet biweekly as a club sponsor, but can grow exponentially.”

## ACTION ITEM

It can be tempting to take on too much and try to get involved your first year, but resist the temptation. Create a prepared statement to let people know that you want to focus on your classroom for now but may revisit the opportunity at a later date.

## 7. Carving out planning time

“When you’re learning so many new things each day while also still transitioning into your role, finding time to plan can be a challenge – especially if your school does not provide adequate planning time,” notes Reynolds. “Many veteran teachers at my school spent their limited planning time socializing, which as a new teacher, I found hard to turn down.”

## ACTION ITEM

Getting to know your new coworkers is important, but so is your mental health. Try to find a balance between both, if possible. Tell yourself you will use four of your five

weekly planning sessions to work on lesson plans and use Friday to catch-up with coworkers.

## 8. Making self-care a priority

“It will be really easy your first year to stay very late at school, bring projects home with you, and let your weekends be taken up with work,” says Reynolds. “Regardless of how much you feel you have to do, try to think only about what you need for tomorrow. You must have healthy work-life balance. If not, you will feel defeated and the burnout will come pretty quickly.”

### ACTION ITEM

As counterintuitive as it may seem at times, leaving work unfinished is the best thing you can do for yourself and your students. You cannot give back to students if you have nothing left, so taking time to engage in self-care is vitally important.

## Making the Jump from College to the Classroom

Transitioning from being a student to a teacher is an exciting time, but it’s not unusual to feel overwhelmed or discouraged in the beginning. When in school, you don’t have to worry about being the lead teacher. When student teaching, you are observing other educators or teaching under the observation of those who already hold their teaching

license. Making the transition to being the person in charge of a group of students can feel terrifying, but there are things you can do to make the move go more smoothly.

## Remember what not to do.

While so much of your college coursework focuses on best practices regarding classroom management and lesson planning, sometimes the lessons you learn come in unexpected forms. “It’s not until you start teaching that you are on your feet all day and seeing what it’s like to be a teacher,” says Reynolds. “My student teaching experience helped me learn a lot about what I didn’t want to do in the classroom.”

## Start strong on your first day.

Despite the many things that may feel outside your control, plenty of components can be planned before your first day. “Try to have your room organized and anticipate what you might need during those first few lessons,” encourages Reynolds.

## Make changes as needed.

After getting through your first few weeks, reassess and consider what works and what doesn’t. The first plan may have served you well during the early days of school, but that doesn’t mean it will work long-term. “I think you need to be willing to make changes and reassess, even though you started your room in a certain way,” says Reynolds. “Don’t be afraid to make changes if you find it’s not working after a couple weeks.”

## Take These 4 Key Lessons with You to the Classroom

Implementing every lesson you learned while in school or during student teaching isn’t possible, but there are certain takeaways worth remembering – especially in your first year.

## 1. Plan, plan, plan.

Many things are outside your control on any given school day. Be okay with that, but also plan for the things within your control.

## 2. Continue learning.

Whether that means joining a local teaching association chapter, engaging with teaching resources, or attending local/national conferences, always keep learning about trends and topics in education.

## 3. Understand each student's learning needs.

Every student is different, so try to keep their uniqueness in mind as much as possible when writing lesson plans and creating assessment metrics.

## 4. Don't be afraid to be wrong.

While asserting yourself as the leader of your classroom is important, it's equally important for students to see how you handle making a mistake. Learn alongside them when possible.

### What You Didn't Learn in School but You'll Be Glad You Know

Some things simply can't be taught, as evidenced by what you learn on the fly after graduating.

## The value of relationships

“My coworkers get me through the day,” says Reynolds. “Knowing I can ask them for advice on how to handle a situation is invaluable, as is knowing that someone else simply ‘gets it.’”

## Not enough time exists.

“There will never be enough time in your day to teach, plan, grade, review data, participate in committees, contact parents, and build relationships with kids,” stresses Reynolds. “You can’t really prepare for that, you just have to try and keep balance as you navigate your first year.”

## Real-life teaching can’t be mimicked.

“The education program I graduated from was amazing, but no degree can fully prepare you,” says Reynolds. “In class, you learn best practices, design elaborate lesson plans, and study theory, but when you’re the teacher you often only have time to think about delivering material that meets testing standards – regardless of how creative.”

## Do's and Don'ts for First-Year Teachers

Regardless of your grade or content area, there are plenty of rules to keep in mind for having a successful first year.

### All Teachers

#### Do's

Figure out the best and most reliable way to contact parents.

It takes extra time to do this, but knowing how to get in touch quickly and reliably can save you lots of time in the long-run.

Ask students to step outside in the hall with you and have them call their parent(s).

This helps with behavior management and lets students know that you will call home if needed. Kids may sometimes try to take advantage of you or play the parent and teacher against one another. When you can get a parent on the phone, you often align regarding how to handle a situation.

Trust yourself and your training.

You will frequently encounter new-to-you situations – especially in your first year – and it can be easy to second-guess yourself. Ask for advice from administrators and other teachers, but know that you have the training needed to make the best possible decision.

## Don'ts

### Worry if you feel overwhelmed.

This is normal in your first year, but colleagues are there to help you learn tactics for organization, behavior management, and effective time management.

### Forget to ask for help.

Consider asking a veteran teacher if you can shadow them during their planning time to understand their routines and how they manage their time. You can take what works for you and leave the rest.

### Feel like you have to be your students' friend.

While this may very well come in time, students need to understand that you also hold authority and they must listen and behave in your class unless they want to face disciplinary consequences. There is a difference between liking you and respecting you. Aim for the latter.

## Elementary / Preschool

### Do's

#### Ease into lessons.

Rather than starting with an activity or lesson the first week, try to focus on procedures. Instead of assigning a painting project, first teach them

your expectations for how paint should be used, cleaned up, and shared with classmates.

### Use visuals.

Sometimes students learn foundational skills more easily when shown them rather than being told them. Look for educational videos on topics such as sharing, keeping their hands to themselves, and helping others.

### Understand what you can expect at this age.

Childhood development moves rapidly during this time, and independence should be encouraged wherever possible. Students must also be given the space to grow and learn in a safe environment that takes into consideration how they are developing.

## Don'ts

### Forget your students' experiences.

Especially in your classroom, it may be the first time a child has been away from home. Even the most basic things must be taught to them, including how to walk in line, respect others, and stay still.

### Try to do too much.

Especially at the beginning, don't feel like you need to have every toy, game, or material out during the first week. Sometimes less is more, especially when it comes to keeping your classroom clean and ensuring students know how to properly use something first.

## Forget to work with parents.

If you notice unsavory behavior in the classroom, contact parents as soon as possible. If you and the parents can get on the same page about expectations in the classroom and at home, these behaviors can change more quickly.

## Primary School and High School

### Do's

#### Learn their names as fast as humanly possible.

This helps students feel known and seen. It also helps with behavior, as you can call them out by name.

#### Be prepared.

If you have weak management, students can sense it. They need to know when they walk in your room that they are there to work.

“Especially in primary school, students are so social, want to do minimal work, and figure out which class is the fun one or where they can get away with things,” says Reynolds.

#### Pay attention to unspoken rules.

Rules that get set in place are the unspoken ones where kids watch what you let others get away with. If there's a behavior you do not want in your classroom, you need to be very clear that it will not be tolerated.

## Don'ts

**Sell your class as easy or laid back.**

Don't try to present yourself as their friend from the beginning. You can get there throughout the year.

**Don't let boundaries slip.**

Figure out what your personal and professional boundaries are so you can shut off work at certain times and have balance.

**Forget to communicate regularly and often.**

Even if you went over classroom expectations at the start of the semester, you may need to review them monthly. You can also put up a poster outlining the proper ways to behave while in your room.

## College/ University

### Do's

**Take advantage of resources.**

Getting up to speed with all the requirements of your institution during your first year can feel overwhelming. Lean on veteran professors and administrators and ask for survival tips.

## Make friends with support staff.

These admin professionals can help you with creating class materials, handling student issues, and navigating the collegiate system. Get to know them early on.

## Consider enrollment when course planning.

Your semester will look very different depending on whether you're teaching a small upper-level class of 10 students versus an introductory survey course of 100 students.

## Don'ts

### Get too involved early on.

Service responsibilities continue growing the longer you teach, especially if on a tenure track. It's okay to say no to these your first couple years as you adjust to being a professor.

### Set unrealistic learning goals.

Doing this will stress out both you and your students. Try to be realistic in your expectations and adjust as necessary.

### Forget to set the tone.

Use your first day of class as a way of setting the tone. Introduce the class, highlight your expectations, and be clear on all rules around participation and attendance.

# Advice for First-Year Teachers from a Teacher Who's Been There

By Hailey Reynolds

How can first-year teachers keep their wits about them in the midst of such a chaotic time?

You need to understand your 'why' behind your choice to work in this field. There will be many days you question why you did this. Your paycheck, at first, will be exciting, but then the next month it sets in how little it is. You're going to be exhausted and overwhelmed. You'll be potentially disrespected by teachers and even administrators. It's important that whenever these moments appear, you have that 'WHY' in your head that you can go to and remind yourself.

How can first-year teachers create boundaries without seeming closed off?

A lot of first-year teachers get taken advantage of because other teachers have already been asked repeatedly to take on extra roles and are maxed out. It's natural to feel like you need to say yes, but I would suggest looking at your contract to see what you are obligated to do for your job. Then, consider how many things are you actually willing to take on. What is reasonable for you? Be upfront and honest with people unless it is something you want to do. I took on a lot my first year, and then it was hard to backtrack and get out of things.

What advice do you have for ensuring you stay connected with others in a job that can seemingly take over your life the first couple of years?

If you have friends or family outside the education world, there will be times you feel isolated and disconnected. It's also really difficult to explain to people the ins and outs of

your day, because so many things happen that seem minor but they add up to how your time is spent. Unless you have teacher friends or coworkers, it is kind of easy to isolate yourself and hold it in your head. It's overwhelming and a lot to process.

What would you say to teachers who are using their breaks to work?

Before you go on a break, try to already have your next week's lesson done. I felt like I was planning day-to-day my first year, but eventually you will get to the place where you can plan weeks at a time. Right before a break you should push yourself to plan that first full week you are back so you can take time away. Use your break for you. Do whatever feels good to you that does not work.