

Classroom Management

Your ability to manage your classroom and, of course, the behavior and actions of the students in it in useful and productive ways can mean the difference between surviving (and even enjoying!) your first year and having to fight the desire to run for the hills. Students learn more and teachers sleep better at night when a classroom is a safe and smoothly functioning place. Classroom management is, in general, the biggest hurdle first year teachers have to face and you will have good days and bad days but careful thought and preparation can go a long way to ensuring that you start off on the right foot.



In this section, Jessie Gerson offers a thorough crash course in what you can expect behavior wise in your classroom, what preemptive actions you can take to avoid the most common snafus and what to do when the going gets rough.



Ask Ms. Gerson!

Classroom Management Maven...Of Sorts

So Ms. Gerson...what do you know about classroom management? Will it apply to me at my school?

Good question. I teach at Meyzeek Middle School in located in Smoketown. The school has a strong magnet program and so about half the school (and two of the five classes I teach) are for A.P students. The other three classes I teach are called comprehensive classes which is code for kids-from-the-neighborhood. These students are drawn from largely from Smoketown and the Shepard Square housing project as well as Butchertown. The neighborhood students are overwhelming low SES and roughly 80% African-American. When I discuss classroom management I am generally referring to what worked and didn't work with my neighborhood students who will, in all likelihood be a better match for the demographics of the schools where you may end up teaching.

So...were your kids perfect?

Ha! I wish. Classroom management is an imperfect art and as a new teacher in a challenging school it *will* be a struggle. It was a struggle for me too, but I found some techniques that really helped me so I'm going to share them with you.

What's all this crazy talk about classroom management? Why is it so important. Hey! I know my content area inside and out.

Ah young grasshopper. While I am sure that you graduated with honors this will not prevent your adorable youngsters from eating you for breakfast. If you can't control your kids you can't teach and, more to the point, you will rue the day you accepted your teaching position.

What exactly does classroom management mean?

I think about classroom management as having two main components: the management and the discipline. Or in other words: what you can do to avoid trouble and what you can do when trouble (inevitably) comes to you. I'm going to try to give you some ideas and tips based on what worked for me and what I wish I'd known plus a few stumbling blocks you may face.

Management? Doesn't that just mean procedures? I've already learned about that!

I know that you have procedures coming out your ears at this point, but humor me. It really is important! You have probably spent a great deal of time in your masters classes this summer going over specific procedures to use with your students so I will try to be brief and review the tactics that I found the most helpful.

A. Dealing with space and furniture (Hey! All good advice columns have sub-headings...)

- You all are started off way ahead of the eight ball because you have already read Fred Jones. My copy is dog-eared and covered with post-it notes and exclamation points because it is THAT GOOD. He is especially good when it comes to dealing with space. So read him. Love him. Use him.
- One of the rules of thumb—especially in the beginning—is that your desk is NOT your friend. While it can feel safer to huddle behind it, possibly in fetal position, you can make your life exponentially easier by pretending it doesn't exist. Roam your classroom. Do it incessantly. Do it while you are lecturing. It keeps students on their toes. It helps keep their ever-flapping lips still and it helps you keep an eye on potential hot-spots. Of course to roam you need to carefully plan your classroom layout. I use a modified version of a Fred Jones set-up that I kept all year and found highly effective. The two walkways were broad enough for me to walk in comfortably. The students could see me from anywhere in the room. And the center group kept the two side groups from starting with one another. It looks pretty strange at first but I highly recommend it.
- Assign seats. Assign seats. Assign seats. I found it helpful to seat kids who's behavior was problematic in the midst of a clump of easy going kids. Of course...this only works when you have enough easy going kids and, honestly, they are precious commodities.

B. Using your body.

- Warning! You should not touch your kids. You will be told explicitly in New Teacher Induction not to touch your kids. You can absolutely get in trouble for touching your kids. That said, many, many, many teachers occasionally put a hand on a student's shoulder etc. and if you decide to be absolutely strict about the no-touching you will spend a lot of time dodging hugs because kids apparently missed the no touching memo. But! You do not have to touch your students for the techniques I am describing here to work.
- First things first: You are roaming. You are keeping an eye out for hotspots. You are a wild lion patrolling her savannah. Wait! What's this? Little Deidra is about to commence hostile action against Kyle! Now is the time to spring into action although it will not look like much action at all. Go stand near Deidra. Do not stop lecturing or explaining or if you are just roaming while students work, don't say anything yet. Give her a chance to deescalate on her own but let her know you are aware of the situation. If you need to you can put a hand on the back of her desk but usually the proximity alone is enough. You will occasionally have students with whom proximity techniques are inappropriate you will recognize this by the fact that they FREAK

OUT when you get too near them. Unfortunately, they probably have ample reason to feel this way. Make a mental note of it and give them a bit more space. Consider checking out their file to see if there is something you should know.

- In my own classroom I took roaming to whole new levels. I don't think I sat down at my desk except for during my planning period during the first three months of school. I was amazed by how easy it was and how much it kept kids on task. Plus when you do have to discipline a kid it is easier to keep it quiet and personal if you don't have to yell from the front of the room (although as a first year teacher I of course did that sometimes too!)

C. Using your voice and your eyes.

- My first week of school a veteran female teacher told me I was in luck because I had a low voice for a woman. I thought she crazy. It turns out she was (kind of) right. I noticed that when I was angry with students my tone changed (even when I wasn't yelling) and became shrill and my kids responded to it like fingernails on a chalkboard, which in turn ticked me off even more and made me actually raise my voice and then I was out of management and into the land of discipline, a land I do not enjoy. I actually began to consciously drop my voice and control my tone when I was ticked off. I still occasionally flew off the handle but in general it seemed to keep the situations from devolving. And it had the added plus of making the kid look silly if they continued to try to escalate the situation as I calmly stared (daggers) at him or her.
- Speaking of staring. Eye contact is another big one. While we are all trained to know that hands-on-activities are key, when you are explaining a new idea the brief mini-lecture is your friend. It can also be an immensely frustrating time when students throw caution and brain-cells to the wind and begin acting up. Eye contact helped me a lot. Once I knew the kids who struggled to cope with even a five minute lecture I would address my comments to them and look directly at them as I did so. Not in a scary "you're in trouble way" (although I occasionally did that too!) but in a personal, "I'm addressing this whole thing to you" kind of way. And they liked it. You will also learn the fine art of staring a kid down. I can't tell you how to do it but I can tell you the first time you succeed it will be a beautiful thing.
- Back to voices. I'm not a big yeller- although it can be an effective for shock value. When I give a student a verbal warning I use a combination of proximity and voice. I hunker down right near their desk and I whisper to them something along the lines of "You may not realize that this is a problem but I need you to stop banging your desk/talking to your neighbor/cussing under your breath because it makes me want to commit myself/you are distracting your classmates/it isn't appropriate for school. Thanks!" I try to use the *You may not realize but....you need to stop...because...thanks!* model because it doesn't unnecessarily antagonize the kids off and it is very very very specific. Plus, I am trying to get the kids to say "Thank you" so I use it after pretty much every sentence. This can feel really forced. Especially because after the 500th kid starts doing drum beats on his or her desk "Thank you" is not the foremost thing in your mind. That's alright. Fake is your friend! Really.

D. Your first week.

- My two weeks of school I did little but train my kids in my procedures. I did in fact have various L.A related activities but basically they were all just tools to allow me to practice my various procedures again and again and again. Every single solitary morning we reviewed pencil procedures, morning procedures, expectations and consequences. They are somewhat pliable in those first weeks...get 'em early!
- A quick personal note.—I knew that I wanted procedures my first year and I knew I wanted them tight and streamlined but I had no idea which procedures would work and which would crash and burn. A lot of procedures sound wonderful but are just too labor intensive for a first year teacher. Or are even just straight up silly. For example— my read aloud procedures. I HAD A PAGE OF PROCEDURES GOVERNING READ ALOUD EXPECTATIONS. A page. A whole page. And I made my kids learn it. And we practiced. And practiced. And took a quiz on it. And I reprimanded kids who didn't follow my expectations (which included illustrated note-taking. Really.) and then realized I was crazy about a month into school and dropped that procedure and just expected them to be quiet, pay attention, and fulfill any accountability expectations that went along with the reading. So you might think that I wasted my time teaching that procedure, and myriad others, to my kids. But it really wasn't a waste at all. In the first week of school it showed my students that I meant business, that I had structure, and that I had high expectations. Kids have very short memories. My point is practice your procedures into the ground that first week. Even if your procedures don't stay wholly consistent over the year you will have imprinted the kids with the knowledge that you know what you are doing—even if you don't!
- Get yourself a kitchen timer. It is so helpful in helping kids understand how long they have to work on an activity. Try timing them during transitions and giving them a small reward for beating their best time.
- Some indispensable procedures to drill in your first week:
 - 1) **how will you get their attention?** What kind of wrath from heaven will you rain down if they don't get quiet? I practiced my attention signal at least five times during my first day of class and multiple times daily over the course of the first two weeks. I would explain to the kids what it was (modified champs signal plus 5-4-3-2-1 attention count down.) I would tell them we were going to play a game like musical chairs. They could talk with their neighbors but as soon as they heard the attention signal they needed to be silent. I mentioned repeatedly how the last class had done it perfectly and I wanted to see if this class could too. If I thought they needed still more buttering up I told them their last period teacher had reported great things about them and I wanted to see if it was true. I concluded by telling them that unlike musical chairs if anyone abused this game and got too loud or was disrespectful when I did the attention signal they would get a silent work packet.
 - 2) **Bathroom? Pencils?** My answer to these two questions during the first half of the school year was NO. You could sharpen your pencil during sponge and you could go to the bathroom during your break and other than that I didn't want to hear about it. It got me a reputation as being a bit tough and there is

nothing wrong with that! (For the record, I softened up a bit mid-way though the year and started a selective-bathroom-going and shoes-for-pencils policy..)

- 3) **How should they enter and leave your classroom?** I highly recommend some form of sponge, or bellwork every day. I found word scrambles to be quick and effective. About mid-way through the year, I gave students jobs which I posted every six weeks such as passing out folders and notebooks and taking attendance. It made my class run so much more smoothly. In the first few weeks be death on talking as they come in because it will only get worse. Don't be afraid to turn everyone around and march them back out of the classroom. And do it as many times as necessary. I did it five times one morning and they were good as gold the next time they came in. Think about if you want your kids to line up in the hall before they come in or if they can come in as they arrive and begin the bell work (there are advantages to each). In terms of leaving your class the mantra is: "The bell does not dismiss you, the clock does not dismiss you. I dismiss you." I won't dismiss until the class is silent, my classroom is neat, and the desks are where they need to be. Hint: you have particular leverage on this issue before lunch and last period. End class very early the first week to give ample time to rehearse exit procedures. I post the exit and entry rules on the wall before the kids ever arrive to make it clear that it is a non-negotiable.

F. Relationship Building:

- Not only is this key to success, it is also a pleasure. Why else did we get into teaching? It is amazing how much slack your kids will cut you if they know that you genuinely care about them (mind you, they also have to know that this does not prevent you from being dictator-in-chief...). That said, relationship building—like most of teaching—is harder than it sounds in large part because you are going to be sleep deprived, frustrated, and overwhelmed and it is hard to make friends and influence people, including the under 15 crowd in that state of mind. Here are some ideas that may help:
 1. **There is no such thing as too much positive reinforcement!** I swear I would compliment my kids on their *breathing* if I could. Initially, I felt like a big faker... "Ooh! Good job John. I like how you didn't hit Theresa!" But extremely quickly I *did* begin to feel grateful that a kid was doing what he or she needed to do. I don't even notice how often I give compliments these days. I was watching a videotape of myself teaching the other day and it made me wince. I sounded like a PBS Special ("Mmm. I really like how Cortiona has her notebook open and is working on her sponge.) but it was amazing too watching kids respond. (Three kids immediately opened their notebook after I complimented Cortiona.) Try to focus especially on the kids who don't get a lot of positive reinforcement. Initially they'll look at you like you are crazy but I got amazing results from some so called "problem" kids using this technique.
 2. **Parents: Use them and Love Them.** I know you have heard this a lot already but parents love teachers who love their kids and kids love teacher who report positive things to their parents and taken together those two things can make you life much easier. Once again, this can initially involve some less than sincere action on your part but it is worth it in the long term.

Call home, call home repeatedly, write letters home, give kids letters to deliver themselves, call granny or auntie too. The kids talk about it together and it becomes a huge incentive for good behavior but it means you have to do it fairly consistently which takes time.

3. **Sports Are Your Friends:** I didn't miss a sixth grade basketball game this year and the impact that had on my relationship with some of my tougher boys was marked. This extends beyond sports. Find out what your kids love and get involved with it. Before the talent show I let my girls sign up to come to my room and practice their dance performances during lunch and after school. A lot of kids who struggle academically are superstars in some other arena and it is good for you and for them to have you see that.
4. **Talk to your kids in the hallways.** (self-evident but easy to forget to do!)
5. **Write your kids notes and letters:** I keep nice note cards at home and in my desk at school to correspond with kids who seem like they have something on their minds. This has been particularly effective with my boys who are less likely than my girls to come to me in person with a problem. It's amazing how much they appreciate it.
6. **Warning!!** Even though relationship building is important it should go hand in hand with respect not replace it. I love my students but I try not to let them get away with anything. One of my students once told me, "Ms. Gerson, you like two teachers. Nice Ms. G and Tough Ms. G" and I thought to myself. "I'm doing something right!"

Great Ms. Gerson! Now that I know all about management and procedures, my kids will be perfect angels and I shall sail through my first year of teaching with the greatest of ease.

(Ms. Gerson attempts to respond but is incapacitated by laughter.)

What? What?!

Sadly, no matter how good a manager you are, no matter how good your procedures may be and how studiously you have drilled your kids. It is still a crapshoot. You may end up with a class of students with whom even an experienced teacher would struggle (if this happens to you, say with me: "it's not that they're bad kids and it's not that I am a bad teacher" and then hunker down and hope for the best.) or, more likely, you will end up with a class of normal middle schoolers who are incredibly challenging to control like...oh...say...normal middle schoolers. No matter how hard you work or how good you are, you need to know how to discipline your class. Here are some ideas to get you started.

When do I move from management to discipline?

There are four main ways to end up in the wild world of discipline:

- 1) a kid trespasses on one of your non-negotiable rules i.e. physical violence or hateful speech.
- 2) a kid is doing something petty and annoying but does not respond to your management techniques and continues to escalate the situation.
- 3) The whole class comes in and is just bonkers.

- 4) You come in and are just bonkers. (Try to avoid this one but, truly, we all have our days...)

O.K so lets say I have a student who has to be dealt with. The proverbial poop has hit the fan. Now what can I do?

This was the hardest thing for me as a first year teacher. I simply wasn't aware of, or confident in, my resources. I'm going to make a list for you of all the possible disciplinary tactics and resources you may have in your school beginning with the most innocuous and ending in writing a referral.

1. *Writing sentences/doing the multiplication table*: a lot of teachers swear by this. I never really liked it. If a kid is out of control or really angry it is hard to make them do it and it can get loud and messy.
2. *Behavior Reflection Sheets*: once again, a lot of teachers use these with some success. I would keep them as a resource to use when appropriate rather than give them out to every kid every time.
3. *Call Home/Have the kid call home*: I think this is a really potent tool because it addresses not only the immediate behavior but, if you have a pre-existing relationship with the parent, can have a more long term impact as well. Only have the kid call home if you know that the parent is on your side. If you tell a kid you are going to call home you **MUST DO IT**. I suggest you do it quickly so that you can get to the parent before the kid does. Keep parents' work and home phone number handy. This is a great tool but don't abuse it. It loses it's impact if the parents hear from you every single day and it makes you look like you can't control your kids.
4. *Detention*: Very effective in my experience but a big pain in the butt to enforce if you don't have the students last period. (They sneak out.) Many teams have a team detention plan. If so, thank your lucky stars. If not, talk to a friendly team member about starting one. Have a back-up plan for if kids do not show up and be very clear regarding what is detention worthy. When a class was acting up I would tell them we were entering the detention zone which meant any kid who behaved inappropriately got his or her name on the over head projector. A check next to their name meant detention. Some schools where students are bussed require a days notice prior to detention. I think this really lessens the impact of the lesson and would think about other consequences such as lunch detention.
5. *Lunch Detention*: I like this even better than after school detention because it is immediate. I find that it only works with classes I have before lunch because I like my consequences to occur on the same day as the infraction. Some teams have a detention table at lunch. I bring kids up to my room which they find even more annoying. Of course it does mean dealing with a frustrated kid on your lunch break...
6. *Clipping*: An incredibly helpful tool. Clipping involves sending a student to another class and can be paired with any of the other disciplinary measures. Caution!! Your students need their instructional time and often students who act up need instructional time most of all. That said, clipping is an excellent tactic when things are getting heated between you and a student. I will sometimes say "Listen. I am not writing you up for this yet, but you and I need to not be in the same room right now.

I'm sending you to Mr. Shultz for the rest of the period/next ten minutes and when I see you next you had better have a different attitude." Clip students to teachers who they do not like, or teachers in another grade for maximum impact.

7. *Silent Work Packets*: This was my disciplinary method of choice. I photocopy exceptionally boring but on topic worksheets and staple them in advance (make them huge and have other worksheets in reserve for students who work fast.) I often include a behavior reflection component. Students are lined up in the hall and informed that they have lost the privilege of actual language arts and will be given silent work for the duration of the class. I tell them that any talking will result in a referral and that the packets are worth an obscene amount of points. (I actually just flip through them and trash them.) I often use silent work packets the day after a class has been truly obnoxious but I can also use them with individual students. Often when I clip a kid to another teacher I send them with a silent work packet to be completed by the time they return to me. Once when a class was truly hideous I photocopied basic math fact problems and informed them they had lost the privilege of L.A all together! My kids generally enjoy my lessons and activities and hate silent work packets. The threat alone will make them hush one another.
8. *ISAP*: ISAP refers to the In School Atonement Program or In School Alternative Program. It is basically an in school suspension in a separate classroom with a full time adult in charge of it. Most often only an A.P can put a kid in ISAP but often a team has a certain number of ISAP spaces at their disposal as well. Find out how your team decides who gets to use that space.
9. *Referral*: You can write a referral to your counselor or to you're A.P. How useful this is really depends on your administration and your A.P. There is a space on your referral to write down both what you have done and what your recommendation is. Your A.P may take your advice or s/he may not. The strange thing about referrals is that in many schools (mine included) it doesn't actually get the kid out of your classroom. Plus the A.P often doesn't get to dealing with your student until the next day or even the day after by which time I wonder 'what's the point?' Plus, it's good for your kids to perceive you and not the A.P as the person in control. That said, there are times and situations that call for a referral—often as documentation of a serious infraction. I think I had my school's record low—three referrals all year! Of course, that's not because my kids were great. It's because I didn't get referral forms at the beginning of the year. Don't make that mistake! Sometimes just taking the referral form out and looking pointedly in the direction of a trouble-making kid can be enough to straighten the child out. A final warning...be aware that referrals go on a student's permanent school record and can affect their chances of getting into a competitive high school.

Listen...you've gone on for eight pages now! Are you almost done?

Yes. I am. Just a few more things. Classroom management is really hard. And you can know that rationally now but once you get into the classroom it takes on a whole new meaning. You *will* freak out. You will occasionally scream both at kids who deserve it and kids who don't. You will get angry, and sad, and frustrated because none of us got into this line of work to yell at kids. But you will also persevere and figure out techniques that work for you. And you will have moments where you realize that you are important to your students and that they are important

to you. It's a tough job but someone's gotta do it! I hope you have an incredibly rich, challenging, and successful year. Good luck.

Glossary of Terms: Classroom Management

- **Clipping** – Refers to sending a student to another teacher's classroom as either a consequence or a de-escalation measure.
- **Consequences** – Refer to the penalties you have in place when students break rules or behave inappropriately. Consequences are often hierarchical—working from least severe to most severe depending on the size or frequency of the infraction.
- **Consistency** – Means behaving the same way in the face of stimuli. This regularity will add a predictability to your actions as a teacher and will prove to students that you mean what you say.
- **ISAP** – An acronym for In School Atonement Program. It is an in-school suspension room to which students are sent for serious infractions.
- **Reinforcement** – Refers to the use of targeted compliments to create an incentive both to behave correctly and to continue behaving correctly. An example of positive reinforcement could be “Wow, I really like how Arielle/the class/Table A has their notebooks out and ready to go this morning.” There is no such thing as too much positive reinforcement! A good rule of thumb is 3 positives for every one negative and many suggest making that 6 positives for every one negative.
- **Proximity** – Refers to nearness or closeness. In the context of classroom management, this usually means using your classroom space to offer non-verbal redirection to students who are off-task or misbehaving. You can accomplish this by moving to stand near a student who was talking.
- **Procedures** – Refers to the routines you set for activities in your classroom. An example would be: “How and when do I want students to sharpen their pencils? Enter my classroom? Arrange seats during group work?” The trick with procedures is to have them planned out in advance and to truly teach them to your students.
- **Referral** – Refers to a school document which has the effect of sending a student either to a counselor or to the assistant principal. Referral slips include a carbon copy for your file and go on a student's permanent school record.
- **Time-on-Task** – A measurement that refers to the number of occasions in which students are working diligently. The ultimate goal of classroom management is to increase time on task.

Suggested Further Reading: Classroom Management

Delpit, Lisa. *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*.

Jones, Fred. *Tools For Teaching*.

Michie, Gregory. *Holler If You Hear Me*.

Payne, Ruby K. *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*.

Wong, Harry and Rosemary T. Wong. *How to be an Effective Teacher*.