

Chapter 10



*Start Strong
Finish Strong*



In the classroom, how you start is just as important as how you finish.
Not starting strong could cause you to quit before the finish.

-Ms. Ussin

The Warm-Up / Bell Ringer

Do you remember my reference in Chapter 5 to the teacher I credit as one of the most influential in my career, the one who said she didn't smile with her students until Christmas? It turns out she wouldn't be the only teacher I would hear say that. I heard it several times throughout my first few years, and if you've been a teacher even one month, I'm willing to bet you've heard it too. Again, these teachers weren't saying we shouldn't smile with our students. That would be unrealistic and, quite frankly, unnecessary and vile. They weren't saying we shouldn't have fun with our students. What they were saying, though, is that it's necessary for a teacher to go into his/her classroom on Day One and firmly establish the order for the classroom that is expected to persist throughout the school year.

Students should know, on Day One, that the classroom is, and will be, a place for learning and growth, and though there may be fun activities to facilitate learning, the classroom is not a playground. It's important for a teacher to make clear who the authority figure is in the room and not only explain rituals and routines, but also demonstrate and practice them. Teachers should make classroom rules clear and rewards and consequences for following or not following those rules even clearer. And most importantly, once all has been set in place, the teacher must stand firm and remain consistent in maintaining every order, every rule, and every expectation. Otherwise, disaster is inevitable, and a playground is likely to ensue. The start matters! It will determine if you'll even be able to finish strong.

Work Session, Part 1: Ms. Ussin's Suggestion

Take the time not only to read through the following list, but also to complete it and check everything off as done before starting your next school year. These are things that should be covered with your students on Day One, or at least during the first week of school. Other questions are sure to arise as you work through this list. Write those questions in the Homework section.

1. How will students enter your classroom each day?
2. Will students have assigned seats? If not, how will seating be determined?
3. Will your seating change based on the activities for the day? How will students know where to sit?
4. Will students be expected to begin working on a bell ringer or warm-up upon entering the classroom? If not, what is the expectation for them upon entering the classroom?
5. What is the required location for all book bags when students enter the room?
6. Are there consequences if book bags and other belongings are not in a particular place?
7. Will students be allowed to write in pencil in your class? What is the pencil sharpening procedure? What are the consequences if the procedure is not followed?
8. How will students dispose of their trash in your class? What is the procedure?
9. Will students be allowed to get up at any time to get tissue, hand sanitizer, etc.?
10. What is the procedure for using the restroom?

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11. Will students walk assignments to you when they're done? Will they submit the assignments to a particular place in the classroom? What is the procedure?
12. Is there a particular way you want them to write a heading on their papers?
13. If students finish an assignment before others are done, what will they do while they wait on the others to finish?
14. In keeping with your district's and school's policy on the use of technology in class, what will the procedure for technology use be in your class? Will students have to drop their technology at the door on days when it's not in use, or can it remain on their person?
15. When technology is no longer in use after an activity is done, will students be required to place their devices in the "Off" position?
16. Will there be a designated drop-off station in your class for cell phones?
17. If your district/school does not have a Bring Your Own Technology (BYOT) policy, what is the procedure for unauthorized technology use in your classroom that is in accordance with your district's/school's policy?
18. Will you have group leaders for activities? How will leaders be determined? What other jobs will be assigned in groups? How will students know what their jobs entail?
19. What is the homework policy?
20. How will students be expected to exit your room? Are they allowed to leave when the bell sounds, or should they wait for you to dismiss them?
21. What is the expectation for your students when you travel as a class together in the hallway? How will you exit the classroom?

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- How will you travel? How will you enter into the final destination?
How will you re-enter the classroom?
22. What, in all of this, is necessary to be printed in your class syllabus? On your class website?
 23. What are your classroom ground rules?
 - a. Is eating allowed in your classroom?
 - b. How will students be expected to treat one another? You?
 - c. Are there any areas in the classroom that are off limits to students?
 - d. Do students need always to raise their hands to speak, or are there times when that's not necessary? If so, when are those times?
 - e. Are students allowed to leave their seats at any time?
 - f. Are students allowed to talk during presentations (student, teacher, guest)?
 24. Will you have classroom assistants: president, office runner, roll caller, etc.? What will their responsibilities be? Will students hold the positions for the whole school year? Will there be an election?
 25. What are your classroom disciplinary procedures? What are punishable offenses? What behaviors simply warrant a warning?
 26. What will be the Step 1 Consequence? Step 2? Step 3?
 27. Will you have a student self-serve station with a stapler, hole puncher, sharpener, tissues, hand sanitizer, etc.? If so, what are the procedures for accessing that station?
 28. Will you have set procedures for how students should work in groups? Will specific tasks be assigned to the first member of the group? The second? And so forth? What are the tasks?

29. Keeping your school's fire drill and tornado drill procedures in mind, what will be your specific classroom guidelines for these drills?
30. Keeping your school's lockdown procedure in mind, what will be your specific classroom guidelines for a lockdown?

There could be 100 more questions added to this list! Again, these are to get you thinking, and as you're answering them and planning for your year, other questions will naturally arise. Answer them! Plan, plan, plan! You'll be glad you did. Every detail matters for a strong start.

Work Session, Part 2: Ms. Ussin's Story

The incomparable, educator extraordinaire, Ron Clark, wrote a New York Times Best Seller titled *The Essential 55* that I highly recommend for beginning teachers. The book is a compilation of 55 rules and practices that, after implementation over time, through trial and error, became the very things that made Clark the award-winning teacher and leader in education he is. His practices also allowed him, as the subtitle of his book reads, to discover the successful student in every child. Every rule he details in the book is noteworthy, but there is one that has always stuck with me. When I read it, it reminded me so much of a couple of my own examples.

Clark's Essential Rule 9 reads: "Always say thank you when I give you something. If you do not say it within three seconds after receiving the item, I will take it back. There is no excuse for not showing appreciation."

Clark admitted that establishing this rule was easy. Maintaining it, however, was more challenging than he anticipated. In teaching his students the importance of being kind and appreciative, he would

reward them with small gifts and treats for their achievements and accomplishments. Most students would say “thank you” immediately upon receiving their rewards. There were those, however, who didn’t, of course. Every time a student didn’t say “thank you” within the three seconds after receiving something from Mr. Clark, he, as promised, would take it back and keep it moving. There were times, he explained, that it broke his heart to have to do it, but “they knew it was a rule, and I had stated explicitly the way it worked from day one.” Because of this, his students rarely complained about the rule. In fact, they even helped Mr. Clark enforce the rule when they noticed a fellow classmate hadn’t said “thank you” immediately. One such case was with a little girl who, along with a few others, won a set of books for having the highest score on a test. The girl was so excited at receiving the books that she jumped up and down with glee. Her classmates pointed out that she hadn’t said “thank you,” though, and Mr. Clark had to take the set of books back.

Heart-wrenching! For her and for Mr. Clark. But it was a rule, and the rule was the rule.

It had to be upheld.

Sure Mr. Clark wanted to ease up and let the kid have the books, and in other instances he detailed in the book, he would’ve liked to just forget the rule and let his students have the rewards, but the respect would’ve gone down the drain and everything he’d worked so hard to build would’ve come crashing down right before his eyes. He wanted to teach them how to appreciate when someone does something for them, and if the lesson was to be learned, he couldn’t let up.

In my English class, I required students to write only in ink on any assignment that would be submitted to me for a grade or feedback of any kind. I didn’t accept work that was written in pencil. I explained every year, on Day One, that nothing in professional work settings or in

the “real world” is accepted as final when written in pencil. I explained how pencil could be erased and changed. I told them that when applying for jobs or signing documents to purchase a home, ink is what seals the deal. Not pencil. And my athletes always sat up with squared shoulders and wide eyes at attention when I reminded them that they wouldn’t be allowed to sign a contract in pencil to play on any professional team.

My students and my parents knew pen only was the expectation. My syllabus and class website detailed that work written in pencil would be returned to be redone and resubmitted in ink. Naturally, I had to return many papers throughout the years because middle schoolers will be middle schoolers. I had some complaints from students when I would return the work to them, but for the most part, students just did what was expected—they would redo the work in ink and resubmit. In my class, as was the case in Mr. Clark’s, if students saw their classmates doing the opposite of what was prescribed in the rule, they called it out. If a student was writing in pencil and a classmate pointed it out, they would stop working and start over in ink.

There were times when I hated this practice because some days, students just didn’t have pens. They would ask their classmates, and classmates wouldn’t have any extra pens for them to borrow. Then, they’d ask me. Most times I would be able to supply them with pens, but there were some rare occasions when I couldn’t. This song and dance would waste so much of the student’s work time. I would feel bad and almost allow them to just write in pencil, but if I had, I, like Mr. Clark, knew the respect would’ve gone down the drain and everything I’d worked so hard to build would’ve come crashing down right before my eyes. I wanted to teach them the importance of professionalism and how some standard practices in our world are just that—standard—if we like it or

not. If they were to learn the lesson, I couldn't let up. And I didn't until my 14th school year.

As I mentioned, this rule gave me headaches some days. My students would be consistent in following the rule at the beginning of the school year, but as we approached Christmas break, they'd get lazy and write with whatever they had. They didn't go the extra mile anymore to make sure they had ink pens for class. That school year, as the newness wore off of our days, and students got "comfortable," some wrote in pencil and submitted assignments. Sometimes I would return the work to be redone in ink, and other times I wouldn't, and because I wasn't consistent, I met my own demise.

How was I going to enforce using only ink on assignments for the rest of the year if I allowed a few students to write in pencil on that one assignment in November? I wasn't! I couldn't! It was a done deal the moment I eased off the rule. You better believe, that school year, I got more work submitted in pencil than I had in all of my career. I started strong with the rule, but I didn't follow through and uphold it. I loathed reading work in pencil, but I'd brought it on myself. There was no way I was going to try to start over with them, either. I wasn't going to make some grand announcement and tell them we need to begin again. Nope. I allowed myself to live through the woes of not being consistent, and I'm glad I did so I could have this example to share with you. I've experienced starting strong and finishing strong with the pencil rule and every other rule and practice I had in place. I've also suffered the devastating brunt of the blow that comes with starting but not finishing strong, with the pencil rule and other guidelines.

The Closing / Lesson Wrap-Up

Teacher, you hold the key. Students will respect you and your classroom all the more when they see concrete systems in place and when they know they're held to a standard. There's less "push back" when they know what the consequences are and that they've committed the crime that deserves the consequence. If you allow one student to forego a rule, you will have to grant everyone else the same privilege. It will be inevitable. They'll never let you forget how you allowed one child to get away with murder. You'll be seen as unfair from that day forward, and before you know it, because you have no leg to stand on, your classroom is no longer yours. It's their playground. Those little people will become a unified army against you if they see you've bent the rule for one student and won't bend it for everyone else. Or, they'll be a mighty militia for you when they see you're consistent and don't show partiality. They will enforce your rules for you with their classmates, and you won't have to say a word. You saw it in Mr. Clark's example. You saw it in mine.

No matter how badly it hurts...no matter how you may have to cry (when you get home)...no matter how much they hate you (which never lasts forever, trust me), they'll be okay, and they'll be much better because someone stood firm with them. These are the students who come back years later to thank you for being hard on them and helping them to grow in discipline.

Consistency is key, just as it is with anything in life. Working out for two weeks and quitting for two months isn't the way to see results with your body. Practicing a couple of days a week for one hour with hopes of competing in the Olympics isn't the way to get the gold. Starting strong by enforcing rules but falling off on them in the middle of the school

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year is a setup for failure. Don't just start strong. Maintain throughout so you can finish strong too.

The Experts Agree

Teachers set the tone for the year on the very first day. The students should experience a routine sequence of activities from the outset.

The Teacher's Guide to Success, 2008

Dr. Ellen L. Kronowitz

Most students realize that discipline is necessary to keep order in a classroom. In fact, some of them are even desperate for order and discipline at school because they have none at home. So, in many cases, they will actually welcome a good classroom management plan. Students want to feel respected just like teachers do. A fair classroom management plan that does not simply rely on anger and intimidation from the teacher is a welcome addition for students as well as teachers.

Discipline without Anger:

A New Style of Classroom Management, 2012

Doug Campbell (the Discipline Doctor)

Great teachers establish clear expectations at the start of the year and follow them consistently as the year progresses.

What Great Teachers Do Differently:

17 Things That Matter Most, 2012

Dr. Todd Whitaker

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