The Don’ts and Don’ts of Teaching
Gary Rubinstein

Here are 10 mistakes a rookie should avoid.

One piece of advice that I’ve seen in numerous books about teaching is to always phrase classroom rules positively. Instead of phrasing a rule as “no talking,” for instance, teachers should phrase it as “talk in turn.” The theory, I suppose, is that when students are told not to do one thing without being told what they should do instead, they may not know their options. Proponents also argue that phrasing rules in the positive is less confrontational; rebellious students will be less apt to break a positively stated procedure than a negatively worded rule.

I don’t buy this. For new teachers, especially, classroom rules need to be rules, and a rule should be stated in the clearest way possible. Many of the most important rules adults have to abide by are written in the negative: No parking. No dogs allowed. Do not disturb. Do not pass go. Do not collect 200 dollars. Thou shalt not kill.

The same books that suggest this positive approach to rule making often take a similar approach to the rules they suggest new teachers should abide by. But just as it’s wrong to be too subtle when instructing children, it’s wrong to be too subtle when instructing new teachers. This is particularly true when the teachers are trained through a crash-course alternative certification program.

As a product of the second-ever Teach for America institute back in the summer of 1991, I was taught the essentials of teaching in this indecisive way. As a new teacher, my classroom performance suffered partly because of this lack of clarity. I was told that there are many correct ways to do something. Although this is true, there are also many wrong ways to do something. Rookie teachers, who struggle to sort out right
ways from wrong, would be better served by a clear list of behaviors to actively avoid.

I made all the mistakes I describe here in my first year of teaching. As nobody clearly warned me about these mistakes, I had to learn for myself through trial and error. Unfortunately, by the time I realized that I’d made these blunders, I’d already lost my students’ respect. It was too late to convince them that I knew what I was doing.

Sherlock Holmes always maintained, “Eliminate all other factors, and the one which remains must be the truth.” We can apply this principle to teaching: It’s a lot more efficient to learn a few mistakes that you should avoid than to learn all the things you should do right. When I compare my awful first year with my very successful second year, the main difference was not so much what I did as what I didn’t do. Here are 10 rookie teacher mistakes I wish I’d avoided.

1. Don’t try to teach too much in one day.

This is an easy mistake to make because it’s intertwined with another rule for new teachers: Have high expectations. Of course teachers should always expect students to do their best. But the oversold exhortation to “have high expectations” needs further explanation. If it were only that easy, every teacher would be hugely successful.

New teachers, particularly those without extensive student teaching, take this advice too literally and create lessons that are too difficult, too long, or developmentally inappropriate. Even as a veteran teacher, I still often attempt to do too much in one day. It comes from my desire to not bore students by doing too little.

But the risks of overpacking a class period are too high; better to split a lesson originally planned for one day into a two-day affair. If you rush your lesson, it might not be received well by students. Then you’ll have to spend the next day doing the dreaded reteaching.

2. Don’t teach a lesson without a student activity.

One problem new teachers have is that they think they need to plan each lesson “chronologically.” First they plan their opening exercises, then their direct instruction and classroom discussion questions, and, finally, their activity. The problem is that
they frequently spend so much time thinking about all the great things they’re going to say in their direct lesson that they use up their planning time—or fall asleep—before creating the most important, most time-consuming, component. **I advise new teachers to always plan their activity first, even if it’s the last thing that will occur.** We can wing direct instruction and discussion if necessary but not a thoughtful learning activity.

**When a lesson has no activity, students get restless and tune out.** And I find I’m more enthusiastic and efficient with direct instruction when I know I have a great activity coming right after my instruction.

3. Don’t send kids to the office.

No matter how many times a principal says, “just send them to me,” it’s not a good idea. When you send kids out, it soon becomes the only thing they’ll respond to. In some schools, the office is nothing more than a place where disruptive kids hang out with one another. In my first teaching year, I intercepted a note that said, “Get sent to the office 6th period. I’ll meet you there.”

“So,” you might be thinking now, “what should I do when students are misbehaving?” I have no pat answers about the complex question of how to handle challenging behavior, but I do know that if you avoid the mistakes I mention here, you won’t have as many discipline problems. And, unfortunately, if you do make these mistakes, anything you try to do to fix your discipline problems will be as ineffective as sending kids to the office.

4. Don’t allow students to shout out answers.

Watch any current movie about a transformational teacher and you’ll notice the lively discussions that go on in her class. She’ll pose a question. One student will call out a poignant response, another will chime in, and then yet another. These scenarios could make a novice teacher feel that in a well-run classroom students don’t need to raise their hands to make comments.

But novice teachers need to know that it takes a fictional teacher-hero or heroine to get away with letting students call out. Other students in the class often zone out when
they know there’s no chance that the teacher will call on them, so what feels like a class buzzing with discussion is really just a few kids speaking up while the rest pretend to listen. Instead, **expert teachers pose thoughtful questions, wait for plenty of hands to go up, and then call on a volunteer—or even a nonvolunteer.**

**5. Don’t make tests too hard.**

Although teachers use tests to gauge how well students are learning, students often use a test to gauge how well the teacher is teaching. If you accidentally—or purposefully—make a test too hard, neither thing will be accurately measured. You might realize that the students underperformed on your too-difficult test, but students might just assume that you didn’t teach well. This will make them less enthusiastic about learning from you.

When I finish making a test, I often cut out about 25 percent of the test to make it more manageable. One way to do this is to assign a priority level of 1, 2, or 3 to each question, with 1 being high priority and 3 lower priority. Then you can keep all the 1s and cut all the 3s. **Kids are not insulted by an “easy” test. It gives them confidence.**

**6. Don’t be indecisive.**

Although this could certainly be phrased more positively (“be decisive”), I phrased it this way to emphasize that teachers must actively avoid indecisive behavior. When a student asks a question like, “Can I do my test in red ink?” you have three seconds to pause, consider the question, and answer yes or no. There is no wrong answer, only a wrong way of saying it.

**If you conclude you’ve made a bad decision, it’s possible to reverse it the next day.** Even your reversal, however, must be done decisively: “I thought that, but now I think this. Let’s move on.”

**7. Don’t tell a student you’re calling home.**

When you’ve decided, in your mind, that you’ve had enough, keep that information to yourself. **Calling home is one of the best things you can do to respond to student misbehavior, but it must always be a surprise.**
When you warn a student you’re calling home, that student often increases his misbehavior because he wants his classmates to think that he doesn’t care, even if he does. Also, if you warn a student, she will get a chance to intercept your call, warn her parent, or distort the facts. Finally, you’ll look like someone who can’t follow through on a threat if, for whatever reason, you are unable to reach the parent that evening.

8. Don’t try to be a buddy.

Another mistake we learn from inspirational movies is that to get through to certain kids, you’ve got to be their buddy. Although all teacher training programs warn about the problems with trying to be a student’s friend, it is still a common new teacher mistake.

New teachers may follow the prohibition in the beginning of the year but let up on it way too soon, when things are going well. I suggest you mark on the calendar a random day, some day in February, to be the first time you carefully cross the buddy line for a short visit before returning back.

9. Don’t dress too casually.

New teachers often intentionally dress so that they don’t look like the typical teacher, believing that a traditionally looking teacher will have trouble reaching certain kids. A new teacher with a casual personal style outside the schoolhouse may genuinely believe, “If I’m not myself, these kids will pick up on it immediately.” I disagree. If you look like a teacher, they will treat you like a teacher. Not appearing like a professional is way too big a risk.

10. Don’t babble.

New teachers are usually nervous, and nervous people often babble. The more words you say, the less value each word has. I once heard that teachers get to say about 10,000 words before the students stop listening, and that new teachers use up their words in the first week. Choose your words carefully.

Fewer Mistakes = More Learning
The urgency of avoiding mistakes is stronger in teaching than in most professions. The only profession where it’s more difficult to salvage your mistakes is tightrope walking. Because we deal with students, who hold on to first impressions, teachers don’t get to start over with a fresh slate after making numerous mistakes, the way a waiter might.

Being aware of these 10 mistakes doesn’t mean that you’ll never make them. Even after 20 years of teaching, I still struggle daily to avoid these blunders. But every mistake you avoid will lead to a better learning experience for your students. As teachers, we might learn from our mistakes. Our students won’t.

Gary Rubinstein teaches math at Stuyvesant High School in New York City. He is the author of Beyond Survival (McGraw-Hill, 2010).

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