



**Preparing for a
New School Year/Term**

for

**Middle and Secondary School
Teachers**

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Introduction

This document is part of a series of papers focusing on various aspects of effective teaching. (All documents in this series are available from the [IDOE Learning Connection](#)). The goal of this series is to address specific teaching-learning challenges to help new and less experienced teachers and teachers with limited preparation in instructional methodology become more effective in their classrooms. This material may contain useful reminders for more experienced teachers as well. The purpose of this paper is to help teachers prepare to capitalize on teaching-learning opportunities at the beginning of a new school year/term.

A basic component of being an effective teacher is having depth and breadth of knowledge in one's content area(s). However, that alone is not adequate preparation for teaching. Harry K. Wong and Rosemary T. Wong (*The First Days of School*, page 9, Harry K. Wong Publications, Inc., 1998) state that teachers must be proficient in three characteristics; namely, (1) have positive expectations for student success; (2) be extremely good classroom managers; and (3) know how to design lessons for student mastery.

What is done (or not done) on the first few days of school will have a major impact on how effective a teacher will be during the entire school year/term. Planning for a successful beginning to the school year/term should begin days—even weeks—prior to the first day of school!

General Preparation for a New School Year/Term

Thorough preparation for a new school year/term is important for all teachers. However, some things will not go as planned. A teacher's ability to be flexible and to draw upon "Plan B" is enhanced when comprehensive plans have been developed.

Prior to making specific plans for the first days of school, teachers need to prepare themselves more broadly for the upcoming year/term. Through the following activities, new teachers can learn important information which they can assimilate into their planning for the school year/term: (These items are based on the experiences of the authors and writings of other professional educators.)

- Become familiar with the neighborhood in which the school is located. Be aware of resource possibilities for classes.
- Visit the school, become familiar with the school's layout and meet the office personnel.
- Check out your classroom and determine what materials and supplies are there. Pick up the teachers' editions and supplementary materials for your classes and begin studying them. Become familiar with on-line resources pertinent to your classes.
- Meet the custodians and those in charge of materials, supplies, and the equipment room. (Throughout the entire school year/term, show appreciation for the help they provide you.)
- Assess your wardrobe. Learn the stated or expected dress code for teachers. Appearance is important; make sure clothes fit well, are clean, and matched in color and pattern. Teachers' attire has an impact on how they are perceived and received. Dress affects the respect students have for teachers. Recognition of the credibility and authority of teachers is influenced by dress, also. Select attractive, but comfortable shoes. Set a good example for students in dress and conduct.
- Become familiar with the school handbook, school procedures for obtaining books and materials, disciplinary procedures, use of the copy machine, school policies, etc. Order material needed for the classes you teach.
- Take notes during pre-school meetings; introduce yourself to others in orientation meetings, etc.
- Obtain a schedule for the first week of classes; find out how many students are enrolled in your classes; obtain class rolls for your courses and learn students' names. Read through materials available on special needs students to become familiar with information about their IEPs and any academic, behavioral, or medical concerns.
- Explore the school website and learn valuable information about the school and the community.

- Become knowledgeable about school and state curriculum guidelines and standards; study the standards applicable to the courses/grade level you are teaching.
- Learn how to use the school's Learning Management System software (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard, Desire2Learn, Pearson Learning Solutions, etc.) Take advantage of any training programs available.
- Familiarize yourself with the computers, software, and media technology available.
- Prepare your classroom: organize it; use posters or other decorations to make it appealing to students. Make effective use of bulletin boards.
- Obtain a list of school faculty and staff; take advantage of opportunities to get to know your colleagues. Avoid participating in groups where teachers are negative in their attitudes toward students, colleagues, and/or administrators. Avoiding this kind of negativity may mean you will not spend much time in the teachers' lounge.
- Obtain the school calendar for the district and begin the development of a desk calendar for your use during the school year/term.
- Become familiar with the forms and routines used for attendance and other school procedures.
- Join a professional organization(s) in your academic discipline, for example, the Indiana Business Education Association and the National Business Education Association. Make good use of their publications and in-service activities.
- Put together a personal "survival kit" to keep in your desk. Include: tissues, safety pins, Band-Aids, hand lotion, a snack or two, tea bags or coffee singles, bottled water, breath mints, hand sanitizer, pain reliever pills, a stain-remover stick, a small flashlight and any other items that may be needed on the spur of the moment.
- Ask questions of more experienced teachers.

As you look at your individual circumstances, additional items can be added to this list.

Specific Preparation for the First Days of School

The challenges of planning are complicated by the many unanticipated situations that may arise during the first days of school. It is important to have detailed plans but to be flexible and have alternative plans to draw upon when the unexpected occurs. Keeping a journal of things to remember each day may be helpful in planning.

The first days of school set the tone for the entire school year/term. Lesson plans set the tone for each class session. In addition to assuring that state standards and school objectives are being adhered to, they serve many other important purposes. "Preparing Effective Lesson Plans for Middle and Secondary School Teachers," a paper in this series, contains helpful lesson planning information. This document is available on the [IDOE Learning Connection](#).

The following Web sites provide helpful information pertaining to the first days of a new school year/term:

[55 Things a New Teacher Should Know](#)

This list of enumerated items includes some things that a new teacher should know AND do prior to the beginning of a new term and other items that can be accomplished during the first days of the term. Teachers should select the items that apply to their situations.

[Your Checklist: Get Ready for the First Day of School!](#)

The 23 items on the checklist included in this article range in appropriateness for elementary through high school classrooms. The checklist is designed to help the teacher be ready for the first day of a new term.

[How To Avoid New Teachers' Five Worst Mistakes](#)

Mistakes that any teacher can make and pointers for learning from them are presented in this article. "Zick's List of Mistakes," at the end of this article, focuses on common new teacher errors and ways to confront them. Click on the link to "A Beginner's Guide to Teaching" to access additional advice for beginners. Classroom management, which is the topic of a separate paper in this series, is closely related to much of the advice given in this article.

[10 Things New Teachers Should Do for the First Day of School](#)

Bypass the ads embedded in this article and focus on the 10 numbered items that cover such things as school policy and starting student learning on the first day. Several items have links within them for additional helpful information.

Teachers should never cease their efforts to improve. Harry K. Wong noted: "Inside every great teacher is an even better one waiting to come out. Teachers are the sculptors of the human race."

Another important component of preparing for a new term is the creation of a syllabus for each course to be taught. An important function of a well-prepared syllabus is helping clarify expectations for students.

Preparation of a Syllabus

It is not unusual for students to miss important points the teacher gives orally about assignments and expectations for successful completion of a course. Questions about how grades will be determined sometimes surface after the last test and project for the course have been graded. Some students may be “surprised” to learn at the end of a course that attendance is a factor in determining grades. These questions and misunderstandings occur even though the teacher has explained (more than once) how grades will be calculated and the role of attendance in successfully completing the course. Course syllabi can improve the effectiveness of the teacher’s communication with students, parents, and administrators regarding important aspects of the course.

Expectations of the teacher and of the student regarding what a course includes and what a student should know and be able to do as a result of completing the course have a tremendous bearing on the amount and quality of learning that takes place. In *The First Days of School*, page 40, Harry K. Wong quotes from a U.S. Department of Education publication *What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986, page 7): “Students tend to learn as little or as much as their teachers expect. Teachers who set and communicate high expectations to their students obtain greater academic performance from these students than do teachers who set low expectations.”

A course syllabus serves as documentation of what was taught and teacher accountability.

Important purposes of a syllabus include:

- Serving as a contract between the teacher and the students—through reading the syllabus, the students learn what is expected/required of them and how the teacher will help them become more effective learners.
- Conveying to students important information about the teacher and the teacher’s approach to teaching—the tone and organization of the syllabus should show that the teacher is approachable and organized. Good format; correct grammar; neatness;

clear, logical writing; and completeness of information are important to set an example of good writing and to show the teacher values these qualities.

- Providing a course description and explanation of the purpose/objectives of the course, including satisfying school requirements and the relationship of the skill and knowledge learned to further academic and employment success; there should be a focus on the value of the course to students.
- Providing a course calendar and tentative timeline that makes clear what the student is expected to do and bring for each class session (using a digital learning management system, e.g., Google Classroom, Moodle, Canvas, Angel, or Blackboard can be helpful); course calendars should include announcements regarding study assignments, when to be prepared to discuss specific topics, dates for bringing certain materials to class, due dates for projects/assignments and tests, and reminders to be prepared for guest speakers, etc. (Putting “tentative” in the title of a syllabus recognizes the need for flexibility for circumstances that may arise.)
- Specifying the number/categories/kinds of projects, tests, etc., and the grading and weighting procedures that will be used to determine grades for each grading period and for the final grade should be included in the syllabus—examples of rubrics that will be used to evaluate assignments can be discussed in connection with this point. (The preparation of rubrics is included in “Fundamentals of Student Learning Assessment and Grading Procedures for Middle and Secondary School Teachers,” another paper in this series, available from the [IDOE Learning Connection](#).)
- Presenting policies dealing with class participation, attendance and tardiness (including their impact on grades), late assignments, missed tests, opportunities to resubmit work, etc.; such policies should not be “guidelines”; they should be implemented and adhered to as stated.
- Specifying penalties for cheating on assignments or tests, including plagiarism; clarification of what constitutes cheating and plagiarism should be included in the syllabus.
- Providing a syllabus attachment of pointers for good listening and note taking and for effective writing may be helpful to students.
- Organizing the syllabus information in a logical manner is important: the title of the course, the semester/or year (e.g., Fall, 2016 or 2016-2017), course meeting times, and the teacher’s name and e-mail address (or other contact information) should be included at the beginning of the syllabus; next, course goals/State standards should be listed. (See the web sites listed on page 7 for additional information on this point.)
- Making the syllabus available to students is critical; the syllabus should be distributed to students and posted on the digital learning management system (LMS) used by the school.
- Requiring each student to keep a course binder for the syllabus, papers, handouts, notes, assignments, etc., may be useful in teaching students to be organized.

The following web sites may be helpful in developing a syllabus (by using the preceding bullet points, each example can be adapted to help teachers prepare syllabi for their classes):

- [Syllabus Example—Classroom Course](#)
This example is for a community college mechanical drawing class; however, it could be adapted to fit subjects in middle and high school.
- [Personal Finance Syllabus](#)
This syllabus from another state contains information about receiving cross credit for a course as well as other valuable content.
- A syllabus template is presented on pages 8 and 9 of this document. This [syllabus template](#), prepared by the Teaching Center, Washington University, St. Louis, was adapted to make it correspond to the needs of middle and secondary school students. Bold subheadings are used to identify essential components of a syllabus. For each subheading, provide the information needed so students can understand and abide by your policies..

Remember, as these examples are adapted for use in your classes, points listed on pages 5 and 6 of this document should be considered. Also the document in this series titled “Fundamentals of Student Learning Assessment and Grading Procedures,” available on the [IDOE Learning Connection](#), contains points that may provide ideas for assessment procedures for your courses; your syllabus should inform students about your assessment procedures. In some schools, as you may have observed from the syllabus examples, the final page contains blanks for the parent/guardian and the student to sign. These signatures should be assurance that both students and their parents or guardians understand the course requirements and expectations of the teacher.

As noted previously, the syllabus should be distributed to each student in the class and should be available online. When the syllabus is distributed, it should be discussed with a friendly tone and an attitude of helpfulness. (Make smiling a standard part of your countenance.) Points in the syllabus should be referred to frequently during the course; students need to understand how to use it.

Syllabus Template, Prepared by the Teaching Center, Washington University

This template has undergone major revisions to make it correspond to the needs of middle and secondary school students.

Course Title

Name of School

Semester/Year

Teacher:

Email address:

Other contact information

Course Description:

Give the course description and an explanation of the purpose, including satisfying school requirements and the relationship of the skill and knowledge learned to further academic success and employment/career success. Focus on the value of the course to the student.

Course Goals/Objectives:

List what the students should learn/be able to do at the end of this course. Bullets expressing specific measurable competencies are helpful in listing goals. Information on expressing measurable objectives can be found at the following sites:

<http://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching-resources/effective-practice/revised-blooms-taxonomy/>

<http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>

http://www.aps.edu/re/documents/resources/Webbs_DOK_Guide.pdf, especially pages 7-13

Course Texts, Materials and Supplies:

List texts and school supplies that students are expected to bring to class daily.

Course Calendar/Schedule:

Develop a complete daily course calendar that makes clear what the student is expected to do and bring for each class session; a two-column table or spreadsheet listing the date of each class meeting in one column and specifying the following kinds of information in the other column can be helpful in doing this: study assignments; class discussion topics; dates for bringing specific material to class; due dates for projects and assignments; test dates; guest speaker dates, etc. In the heading of this schedule, indicate that it is tentative; changes announced in class will take precedence over what is printed on the calendar. (The “Tentative Schedule” on the last page of “[Syllabus Example—Classroom Course](#)” includes an example of a daily course calendar for a mechanical drawing class. This calendar can be modified to fit a variety of courses.)

Policies:

Use school policies as the basis for your policies; build on them specific applications appropriate for your class. Bulleted points under the following kinds of headings may be an effective way to draw attention to policies.

Attendance:**Hall Passes:****Student Conduct Expectations, including chewing gum, food, beverages, etc.:**

Conduct expected during tests and quizzes:**Class Participation Expectations:**

Homework, Assignments, and Exams: Describe types of quizzes, exams, and projects that will be included. Cover basic quality expectations, late work; missed exams, requests for extensions, academic integrity, plagiarism, cheating, etc. Attach a document that makes clear what constitutes cheating and plagiarism.

Grading Policy: Include determination of grades for grading periods and for the course; include the numerical scale corresponding to each grade and weighting be that will be used in determining grades; examples of rubrics that will be used may be included.

Expectations for Organization of Materials: Include using this syllabus, retaining and benefiting from graded papers, etc.

Electronic Devices:**Items Prohibited in the Classroom/School:**

I am looking forward to helping you attain success in this course and in your academic program. 😊

Another important part of planning for the first days of a school term (and beyond) is the preparation of lesson plans. Information on preparing effective lesson plans is the focus of a separate document in this series of papers. It is available from the [IDOE Learning Connection](#).

Other aspects of planning for the first days of school (and beyond) are included in the document in this series titled “A Classroom Management Primer for Middle and Secondary School Teachers,” available on the [IDOE Learning Connection](#).”