

Better Teaching[®]

Tips & Techniques to Improve Student Achievement

Secondary
EDITION

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Improving Study Skills

Eliminate 'The dog ate my homework'



You've heard the laments a million times: "I left my homework on the bus." "I forgot to bring my book home, so I couldn't do the assignment." "I knew I had to do it, but I just didn't know how." How do you handle this? Are you still kind-hearted and forgiving or have you become jaded and inflexible?

Take a few minutes to discuss some of the most common excuses with your students and, together, brainstorm solutions to each one. Write the excuses on yellow 5" x 7" file cards. Write the remedies on blue 5" x 7" file cards.

Here are some examples:

- **Excuse:** "I didn't have my book with me. I took the wrong book home."
Remedy: Get a supply of sticky notes. When you know you'll need a book to do homework, put a sticky note on it. Then at the end of the day, put all the books with sticky notes in your backpack.

- **Excuse:** "I had soccer practice and when I got home I was too tired."
Remedy: Keep a time sheet of your day and your week. Then analyze how you can restructure your time. Completing homework is always a priority, so figure out what else needs to be cut.
- **Excuse:** "I just didn't understand how to do it."
Remedy: Get a study-buddy. Call your study-buddy for advice if you're having trouble getting started. Look at the examples in the book. Try doing some of the sample problems.

Your students are sure to come up with many more excuses and remedies. Take all the cards and have your students arrange them on a bulletin board. Ask an artistic student to complete the display with some colorful illustrations.

Source: Jeanne Shay Schumm, Ph.D., *School Power*, ISBN: 1-57542-096-1 (Free Spirit Publishing, 1-800-735-7323, www.freespirit.com).

Teaching Every Child

Autistic students can be achievers, too



According to the Centers for Disease Control, the number of children diagnosed with autism in the United States has grown—and in the coming years, teachers will see increased numbers of autistic students in their classrooms.

Often misunderstood, autism is a sensory disorder that affects how a child functions. In particular, it affects social interaction and communication skills. With accommodations, autistic students *can* and *do* learn.

To help your autistic students:

- **Meet their parents.** They're the best source of information about what will work with their child.
- **Create structure.** Provide a written, visual schedule for students to see every day.
- **Establish routines.** Routines are especially important during transition times at the beginning and end of class.
- **Have a quiet area.** Stimuli in the classroom that do not distract other students can put an autistic student on sensory overload.
- **Know the legal issues.** Anticipate questions about an autistic student. But you must have parents' permission before you can say anything about an autistic student to others.
- **Recruit a peer buddy** to help an autistic student interact with others or to help if the student becomes overly agitated.

Source: John Franklin, "Achieving with Autism," *Education Update*, July 2007 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, www.ascd.org).

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Research

Metacognition can boost achievement



Metacognition refers to an awareness of the process of learning. And research says successful students apply it when they *monitor their progress* and *adapt their learning strategies*.

Students respond to strategies that engage their learning styles. For example, to help her kinesthetic learners remember the parts of speech, one teacher had students:

1. **Stand up.**
2. **List the eight parts of speech** to the student next to them.
3. **Identify a part of speech** with a body part:
 - a. Noun = head
 - b. Pronoun = shoulders
 - c. Adjective = heart
 - d. Adverb = hips
 - e. Pronoun = thighs
 - f. Preposition = knees
 - g. Conjunction = ankles
 - h. Interjection = feet

4. **Say the parts of speech again.** This process helped students identify what they didn't know and gave them a strategy for learning it. And, it gave students a memory technique they could apply again.

Source: Marcus Conyers and Donna Wilson, Ph.D., "Just Do It: Putting Brain Research to Work in the Classroom," *Brainsmart.com*, www.brainsmart.com/JUST_DO_IT_2001.pdf.

Cheating: Part Three of a Three-Part Series

Implement five strategies to prevent cheating

a. _____
b. _____
c. _____

The previous articles in this series have discussed ways to detect cheating. But most educators would agree that the best course is to prevent cheating in the first place. Here are five tips:

1. **Use tests in a positive way.** The best tests give students a chance to show what they have learned. They also show teachers what they may need to reteach. As often as possible, tell students in advance what you plan to cover on the test. Also give them a chance to practice with any unfamiliar types of questions.
2. **Surprise your students.** Let's face it—students often think teachers are clueless. So if you are assigning a term paper, show students an example that you downloaded from the Internet. Just knowing that you are aware of these websites may discourage some students from using them.

3. **Be serious and attentive** during testing. Most teachers wouldn't dream of leaving the room during a test. But if you sit at your desk grading papers, you are mentally absent. Circulate through the room. You will also gather helpful information about what seems to be causing problems for students.
4. **Give many different grades** for a research project. If you've watched (and graded) a student's work, from choosing a topic through to the final draft, you will know if the work is original.
5. **Be clear about your values.** Tell students that you believe cheating is not just against school rules—it's wrong. Losing your good opinion can often be a strong deterrent.

Source: Gregory J. Cizek, *Detecting and Preventing Classroom Cheating*, ISBN: 0-761-94655-1 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Technology

Grab attention with powerful presentations



PowerPoint[®] allows you to prepare class presentations in advance, have control over the pace of the class and engage your students. It's a great tool.

As you prepare your next PowerPoint[®] presentation, ask yourself:

- **Is the font large enough** to read? A chart or table that was originally a print document may need a larger font so every student is able to read it.
- **Did I use the bells and whistles?** PowerPoint[®] includes lots of fun options. For example, try the special transition effect that has the screen fade to black between slides. Add crazy graphics. Use different fonts.

- **Have I used too much text?** Include just a few key points on each slide. Fill in the details as you speak.
- **Did I use bullets?** PowerPoint[®] allows you to add bullets one by one by having them "fly in." Using a variety of "fly in" options makes the presentation more engaging.
- **Should I post this presentation** on my website? You'll keep students who are absent informed and provide a great study aid when it's time for review.

Source: "Wow your students: PowerPoint tips for teachers," Microsoft Corporation, www.microsoft.com/mac/otherproducts/officex/using.aspx?pid=usingofficex&type=howto&article=/mac/LIBRARY/how_to_articles/officex/ppt_TeacherTips.xml.

Bringing Lessons to Life

Don't argue the issues—debate them!



By the time they reach middle school, students are able to understand that many issues have two sides. But far too often, they have no models for discussing an issue. On TV, they see political discussions degenerate into yelling contests. Teaching them how to debate can help students consider different viewpoints.

Think about an issue that could legitimately have two differing answers. “The use of atomic weapons at the end of World War II was justified” will make a good debate topic. “Who won World War II?” will not.

Here's how to get started:

1. **Divide students** into roughly equal sides (or let them choose).
2. **Guide students** to responsible websites to research facts and figures that support their positions.
3. **Teach students how to plan** their arguments. A little brainstorming

will make it easier to lay out a logical sequence of arguments.

4. **Give each side a chance** to present constructive speeches, laying out their positions.
5. **Make sure students listen** carefully. How can they refute the arguments of the other side?
6. **Let students give rebuttal** speeches, carefully and respectfully challenging the arguments of the other side.
7. **Have the rest of the class** take notes. They will see where students talked *at*, not *with*, each other.

For suggestions and debate guidelines, check the Middle School Public Debate Program at www.middleschooldebate.com.

Source: Elizabeth A. Martens, “The Instructional Use of Argument Across the Curriculum,” *Middle School Journal*, May 2007 (National Middle School Association, 1-800-528-6672, www.nmsa.org).

Resources



Artifacts—the objects people have made or used—are part of history. When students know how to look at these objects, they can better understand how people lived in other times. That is the purpose of The Object of History (www.objectofhistory.org). The site gives students a close-up view of some of the objects in the Smithsonian's Museum of American History. Included are lesson plans to help you interpret these items for students.



Ah, the magic word—FREE! You'll find more than 1500 great free resources provided by the U.S. Department of Education's “Federal Resources for Educational Excellence” (FREE) at <http://free.ed.gov>. This well-designed site offers resources for science, math, history, language arts and more. Type “lesson plans” in the search option and you'll find suggestions for using maps, historic documents, solar observatories, oral history and more. Ask students to review this site.



Engage students with a quotation a day. Some sites for quotes include: Great Expectations (www.greatexpectations.ok.org/implementation_quotes.php), Education World (www.education-world.com/a_lesson/TM/WS_back_to_school_quotes.shtml) and Educational Quotes (www.favorite-famous-quotes.com/educational-quotes.html).

Time Management

Use 'microwave minutes' to manage time



“I'd like to get organized, but I don't have time.” If you're like most teachers, you *never* have enough time.

But there is a solution. Use “microwave minutes”—the small bits of time you might otherwise waste. At home, when you're waiting for popcorn to pop, you might just stare at the expanding bag through the window of the microwave. Or you could tackle a small task and finish it. The same applies to your classroom.

Don't wait for big chunks of time—they might never come. Challenge yourself to see what you can get done in those smaller slivers of time.

For instance, if you have only three minutes before your next class starts, you could:

- **Go through the pile of papers** from your inbox. Throw away anything you don't need.
 - **Clean out a drawer** in your desk.
 - **Collect books** you need to return to the library.
 - **Write a short note to a parent** reporting on a student's success in your class.
- In 15 minutes, you could:
- **Check your email.**
 - **Enter the grades** for a quiz into your grade book.
 - **Set out materials** for tomorrow.

Share an Idea

Do you have an idea to improve student learning that should be in this newsletter?

Send your ideas to [Better Teaching](mailto:BetterTeaching@teacher-institute.com), Editorial Dept., P.O. Box 397, Fairfax Station, VA 22039, fax to 1-800-216-3667 or go to www.teacher-institute.com/ideas/.

Full credit will be given with each article published. Materials sent cannot be returned.

Focus : Motivating Students

Overcoming Apathy

Review facts with 'I have/Who has?'



There's a big test in two days and you're trying to help students review. But you get the same comment in every class: "This is boring."

Here's a fun way to help students review. This technique works well with virtually any subject:

1. **Compile a list of questions** and answers that cover facts and information the students need to learn.
2. **Create a series of flashcards** to give each student. Each card has an answer to one question at the *top*. At the *bottom* is another question.
3. **Start by asking** one of the questions yourself. For example, if you're studying the French Revolution, you could ask, "Who has the name of the execution machine that beheaded people?" The student with the correct answer calls out, "I have *the guillotine*."
4. **Have that student ask** the question on the bottom of the card. "Who has the person who said, 'Let them eat cake?'"
5. **Continue the activity** until someone asks the first question you asked.

Students can also brainstorm to create review questions.

Source: Gayle Gregory, *Designing Brain-Compatible Learning*, ISBN: 1-412-93717-5 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Role Models

Let struggling students be role models



You can't teach what you don't know. So if you have students struggling to learn, try turning them into teachers.

A Florida high school identified students who were struggling with the state's testing requirements. Those students were invited to be visiting teachers in a nearby elementary school.

The high schoolers planned fun activities for their young friends. They figured out interesting ways to introduce students to words they'd need to know. They found ways to bring characters to life.

It wasn't surprising to learn that the younger students became more excited about reading. What did surprise teachers was that the older students also recaptured some of their excitement about learning.



Illustration by Bob George

If you're looking for a way to motivate your struggling learners, turn them into tutors. Match each student with a younger student who needs help. As the older students work through the material, they may also master some skills they missed.

Source: Alison Posner, "Role models encourage younger students to read," *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, January 25, 2007 (HeraldTribune.com, 941-953-7755, www.heraldtribune.com).

Capturing Students' Attention

Find ways to renew old teaching strategies



It's 2:00 and snowing outside. Instead of listening to your lesson on solving linear equations, your students are gazing out the window.

As one successful teacher said, "... *how* we teach is as important as *what* we teach." To grab attention:

- **Consider your lesson plan.** Will the approach in the teacher's guide work best? If not, adapt it!
- **Be enthusiastic.** If you're upbeat and excited, your students will be, too.
- **Be a booster.** Tell students about the fantastic learning environment they have created.

- **Turn the tables.** Don't expect students to simply "download" information from you. Ask them to explain a concept to you.
- **Get physical.** Use hands-on "props." Make math models with play dough or straws. Use costumes for skits in English or a foreign language class.
- **Teach it again.** Present the information one way and then again—to reach students with different learning styles.

Source: Linda Lumsden, "Motivating Today's Students: The Same Old Stuff Just Doesn't Work," Clearinghouse on Educational Policy and Management, College of Education, University of Oregon, <http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/text/portraits1.2.html>.