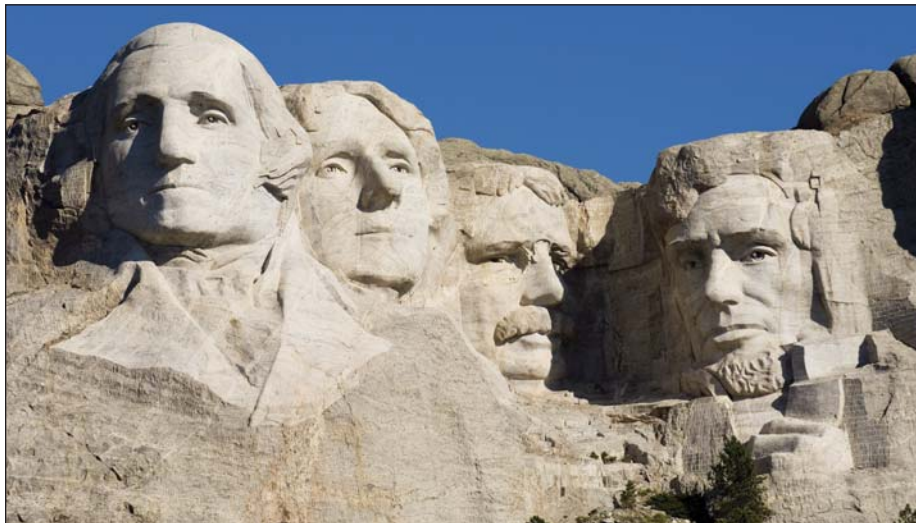


# Better Teaching<sup>®</sup>

Tips & Techniques to Improve Student Achievement

Elementary  
EDITION

Northeast USD 246  
Making Success Our Business



Bringing Lessons to Life

## Expand knowledge of U.S. presidency



The presidency is a vital and fascinating aspect of American history. This Presidents' Day, help your students expand their knowledge and understanding of this premier job and the men who have held it.

Here are three projects to consider:

- 1. Presidential Facts.** Assign each student a different president to research. Charge them with finding a surprising (to them) fact or accomplishment. Example: Grover Cleveland was the only president to be married in the White House.  
Hold your own "Presidents Day." Have each student give a brief presentation about their president and include the little-known fact or accomplishment.
- 2. Presidential Monuments.** Washington, D.C., features major monuments dedicated to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D.

Roosevelt. Mount Rushmore, near Keystone, South Dakota, features Washington, Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Lincoln.

But who else deserves a major monument? Let your students choose! Have them make the case for their favorite presidents. Then bring the issue to a vote. Have students design a monument for the winning president.

- 3. President for a Day.** Pull five student names from a jar. Each gets to be "president for a day" during one week in February. The other students are "members of Congress." Set aside class time each day for the "president" to propose two laws he or she would like to enact. Have the "Congress" discuss these laws, make changes and vote on them.

**Source:** Lois Lewis, "Presidents' Day Activities," Education World, [www.education-world.com/a\\_lesson/lesson223.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson223.shtml).

Building Responsibility

## Add a new twist to your classroom jobs



There probably isn't a teacher in the world who hasn't doled out classroom jobs. To expand this activity and teach students more about real-world skills, ask students to *apply* for these jobs!

Here's how:

- 1. Create a list of jobs** you would like students to complete. You might make some jobs more appealing by giving them jazzy names. The person who waters the gerbil could become the Animal Trainer.
- 2. List specific skills** required for each task. Emphasize the importance of each job to the functioning of the entire classroom.
- 3. Go over the list** with the class, asking students to think about which jobs they might like. Tell students that they won't always get their first choice.
- 4. Design a job application form** so students can indicate which job they would like and the skills they possess that will help them meet the requirements of the job.
- 5. Monitor job performance.**
- 6. Rotate jobs regularly** so every student gets a first-choice job at least once.

Teachers who have tried this method say students take their jobs more seriously. In addition, students practice the skills they will need to apply for real-world jobs later in life.

**Source:** Beth Lewis, "Classroom Jobs—Why and How," About.com: Elementary Educators, [http://k6educators.about.com/od/classroommanagement/a/Classroom\\_Jobs.htm](http://k6educators.about.com/od/classroommanagement/a/Classroom_Jobs.htm).

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Homework

## Boost homework completion rate



You're a fortunate teacher if all your students regularly turn in all their homework assignments. Most students need a little prodding once in a while—and some need a lot. Try these strategies:

- **Ask parents** to sign homework.
- **Send a note** home explaining the homework.
- **Email parents** and provide a website where they can access homework assignments.
- **Require students** to bring in a signed note explaining why homework was not completed.
- **Send homework supplies** home with students. Provide a bag for them to be returned the next day.
- **Reduce assignments** or change the format if a particular student has put forth effort but is truly unable to complete the assignment in a reasonable amount of time.

Ten minutes of homework for first grade, 20 for second, 30 for third, and so on, is generally reasonable. This excludes assignments to read for pleasure.

**Source:** Sydney Zentall and Sam Goldstein, *Seven Steps to Homework Success*, ISBN: 1-8669-4122-X (Specialty Press, Inc., 1-800-233-9273, www.addwarehouse.com).

Motivating Students: Part Two of a Four-Part Series

## Impress on students: Mistakes are essential



A parent was helping in her son's fourth grade class one afternoon when she heard the teacher pose a question: "What is a mistake?" Several hands went up. The teacher called on a student. "It's when you do something wrong," said the student. "It's when you mess up," said another. The teacher asked again and received similar answers. Then the teacher gave the correct answer: "A mistake is an opportunity for learning." The students looked astonished.

This story illustrates what research shows: Students view mistakes as failures, instead of as a necessary part of the learning process.

You can turn this around. Mistakes are something to celebrate. They show the student has made an effort. Next time, the effort may produce the result the student was hoping for.

Here are some ways to show students that mistakes are welcome in your classroom:

- **Point to your own mistakes** and make the connection to learning. "Oops, I have some incorrect dates on the slide show I made for our history lesson! Did I do enough research? Where can I find the correct information?"
- **Praise students** for making thoughtful attempts, for partial problem-solving (that shows the student has worked at thinking it through) and for taking academic risks. Focus less on results.
- **Make this a key rule** in your classroom: Never, ever laugh at or ridicule another student who gives a wrong answer or makes another kind of mistake.
- **Post a sign.** "Welcome to Ms. Wilson's Learning Lab! We Encourage Trial and Error!"

**Source:** David A. Goslin, *Engaging Minds: Motivation & Learning in America's Schools*, ISBN: 0-8108-4713-2 (Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1-800-462-6420, www.scarecrowpress.com).

Writing

## Use 'beginning-middle-end' graphic organizer



Too often, students tell stories from a "bed to bed" perspective. ("I woke up and it was sunny. I played outside with my dog. After dinner, it started to rain. I went to bed.")

A simple "beginning-middle-end" graphic organizer can help them focus on the most important action—and write a more compelling story.

Have students:

1. **Turn a piece of paper sideways.** Draw three large boxes. Label them "Beginning, Middle, End."
2. **Start with the middle box.** Sketch a scene or a character in an important situation. Then write a sentence below the sketch to describe what is happening.
3. **Picture the ending.** Sketch it in the third box, adding a sentence or two of description below.
4. **Do the same for the beginning** of the story. What could have led to the situation that is depicted in the middle drawing?
5. **Add details** to expand their sentences, once they have these three scenes clearly in mind.
6. **Connect the sentences** for an interesting descriptive narrative. After they have written the final draft, students can use their sketches as a reference for final illustrations.

**Source:** Jane Roberts, *25 Prewriting Graphic Organizers & Planning Sheets*, ISBN: 0-43951-369-3 (Scholastic Inc., 1-800-724-6527, www.scholastic.com).

## Building Reading Skills

### Increase phonemic awareness with games



Once you've introduced students to the sounds that make up words, you'll want to give them plenty of practice isolating those phonemes. Here are two fun games that can help:

**1. Phonemic Dominoes.** Use 5" x 8" index cards to create "dominoes" with two pictures on each card. The pictures should be of objects that start with a variety of phonemes students have learned.

Have students join the tiles that share the same beginning sounds.

Later, they can join tiles that share ending sounds.

Still later, they can match a picture that starts with the same sound as the ending sound of the previous picture.

**2. Card Match.** Put pictures of objects with easy-to-recognize beginning and ending phonemes on index cards. Place the cards face down in a pile.

Each student draws a card from the pile and places it face up. Students continue drawing cards and placing them on the face-up pile. The first student to match the beginning (or ending) sound of the drawn card with the face-up pile says the sound aloud and wins the pile.

This is a great opportunity to get parent volunteers involved. Have them help create sets of cards. They might get inspired to play at home, too!

**Source:** David A. Sousa, *How the Brain Learns to Read*, ISBN: 1-41290-601-6 (Corwin Press, 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

## Resources



"Love is like Pi—natural, irrational and very important!" That sentiment, offered by Lisa Hoffman, is the foundation of a fun series of math activities for grades K–5. The Valentine's Day Math section of the Teachers First website features "Will you Be My Math-en-tine?" Here you'll find basic math computation problems with a Valentine twist. It also includes some hands-on activities (using cinnamon candies to create a number line) that will teach or reinforce basic math skills for students. ([www.teachersfirst.com/20/getsources.cfm?id=7904](http://www.teachersfirst.com/20/getsources.cfm?id=7904)).



Nearly every teacher is faced with the challenge of teaching a struggling reader. *Effective Instruction for Struggling Readers, K–6*, a new book by Barbara M. Taylor and James E. Ysseldyke, brings together the best research on struggling readers in grades K–6. The book includes an analysis of how to help all students succeed in reading and strategies to improve vocabulary and comprehension. There is also a section on school-wide practices to improve reading in high poverty schools. (ISBN: 978-0-8077-4821-3, Teachers College Press, 212-678-3929, www.tcpress.com.)

## Teaching Thinking Skills

### Write 'Dear Abby' for a solution to a problem



One of the best ways to teach problem solving is by having students search for a solution to a real situation they are facing. One teacher involved her students by taking a page out of her daily newspaper—and found an answer to a vexing question.

The students in her class were having trouble getting organized in the morning and often left for the day without everything they needed to do homework.

So one day, she wrote a letter describing the problem. She signed it, "A Frustrated Teacher." Then she showed students some of the advice columns that appeared in the local newspaper.

"Would you be willing to act as my 'Dear Abby' and write back to

me with ideas on how to solve this problem?" she asked her students. They were delighted.

The students:

- 1. Took the assignment seriously.**
- 2. Met in small groups** to read one another's advice.
- 3. Assembled lists of possible solutions** in their individual groups.
- 4. Agreed on a plan of action.** "Both the group sharing and the solutions were impressive," wrote teacher Kay Nelson. Her students came up with creative solutions to the problem. And *the students* took over the responsibility of putting those solutions into action.

**Source:** Paula Rutherford, *Why Didn't I Learn This in College? Teaching & Learning in the 21st Century*, ISBN: 0-96633-361-6 (Just ASK Publications, 1-800-940-5434, <http://askeducation.com>).

## Tell us what you think!

We'd love to hear your ideas on how we might make your *Better Teaching* newsletter even better at helping you improve student achievement.

Which topics would you like to see covered more/less? Are there issues we are not addressing now that you would like to see included?

Other suggestions? We'd like to hear from you. Send your ideas to *The Teacher Institute, Editorial Dept., P.O. Box 397, Fairfax Station, VA 22039*, 1-800-216-3667 (fax), or email [betterteaching@teacher-institute.com](mailto:betterteaching@teacher-institute.com).

## Focus : Helping Students With Tests

### Testing Tips

### Practice using an answer sheet

**a. —** Test taking is a skill and, like other skills, it improves with lots of practice. One of the best ways to prepare your students for the state tests they will be taking later in the year is to give them experience with the kinds of testing formats they will face.

One of the toughest things for many children to handle is having to use a *separate answer sheet*. Looking back and forth between the booklet with the test questions and the sheet where they fill in their answers can be a real challenge.

So try giving students one of your class tests using this format. Give students an answer sheet that asks them to fill in bubbles for the correct answer. You will do your students a big favor if they can say on testing day, “We’ve done this. It’s no big deal.”

You should also remind your students that a test is not a race. The first one finished is not necessarily the winner. Encourage students to take a few minutes to check over their answers before turning in their papers.

Incorporate different formats in your personally-created tests throughout the year.

**Source:** Scott Mandel, *Improving Test Scores: A Practical Approach for Teachers and Administrators*, ISBN: 1-56976-202-3 (Zephyr Press, an imprint of Chicago Review Press, 1-800-232-2187, [www.zephyrpress.com](http://www.zephyrpress.com)).

### Test Anxiety

## Help students overcome test anxiety



No one enjoys it, but test-taking is a reality in today’s education environment. As a teacher, part of your job is to help your students perform as well as they can on these evaluations.

For many students, this takes little effort, but others need more coaching and options for success.

Here are some ways to help students become more confident:

- **Offer students a choice** on your tests. “Choose one of these three essay questions to answer.” This gives students a chance to show what they know and to be more confident.
- **Give students a rubric** that shows exactly what you expect. They will feel calmer and more reassured when they have clear expectations.

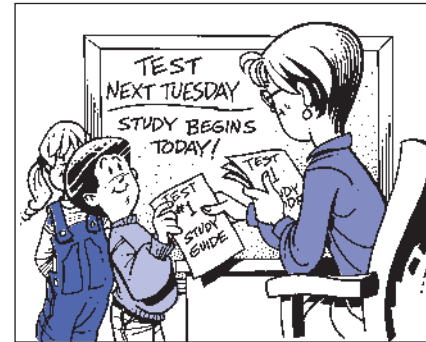


Illustration by Bob George

- **Allow students to retake tests**, especially if you notice that they seem particularly anxious.
- **Give lots of practice tests.**
- **Pass out study guides**, especially if a test covers more than one chapter.

**Source:** Merrill Harmin with Melanie Toth, *Inspiring Active Learning*, ISBN: 1-4166-0155-4 (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723, [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org)).

### Testing Tips

## Descriptive words improve writing scores



Compare these two sentences: “A girl with pretty blue eyes ran up the steps.” “A girl with sparkling turquoise eyes bounded up the steps.” They mean the same thing, but the second sentence offers a better “view” in the mind’s eye.

Writing sentences that use descriptive language can make a significant difference in your students’ writing scores.

Here are some ways to practice:

- **Read aloud** and stop when you come to a particularly descriptive passage. Read it again. Ask how the strong verbs and adjectives encourage use of the senses.

- **Create worksheets** in which students must fill in their own verbs and adjectives. Require at least three choices for each blank.
- **Have a thesaurus** and dictionary available at all times so students can look for strong words.
- **Keep a word wall** of vivid verbs and adjectives. At the top of each group of words, place a common, “tired” verb or adjective such as *ran* or *bad*. Underneath the tired word, list as many alternatives as you can.

**Source:** Jane Bell Kiestler, *Blowing Away the State Writing Assessment Test*, ISBN: 0-929895-93-2 (Maupin House Publishing, Inc., 1-800-524-0634, [www.maupinhouse.com](http://www.maupinhouse.com)).