

Better Teaching[®]

Tips & Techniques to Improve Student Achievement

Elementary
EDITION

Northeast USD 246
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Building Writing Skills

Showcase creativity and wit with tall tales



Your students probably understand the difference between fact and fiction. But do they know there's a whole world in between? It's called *exaggeration*, and exploring this world is an ideal activity for the first weeks of school.

You will learn more about your students and what they did over the summer. It's also a great way to do your first writing assessment.

Here are some suggestions. Adapt them any way that seems appropriate—this is a lesson about exaggeration, after all!

1. **Read a traditional tall tale**, such as a Paul Bunyan story. Or read a story from a tabloid paper—one that does not contain inappropriate content.
2. **Have each student choose** a summer memory or experience to write about.
3. **Have students write** one or two paragraphs about their experiences in a standard, straightforward way.

Tell them to store their papers in their writing folders.

4. **Ask for another piece of writing** that is based on the same story, but is greatly exaggerated. For example: instead of a long trip to Grandma's house by car, the trip took only 30 seconds because the car turned into a rocket ship and crashed down in Grandma's yard, creating an enormous crater! Tell your students you want them to have a lot of fun with this assignment.
5. **Have each student read aloud** to the class—first the real story and then the tall tale.

After the laughing stops, start a discussion about the differences between the two stories. See if your students can think of different ways that the truth gets exaggerated as in "the telephone game," for example.

Source: Gary Hopkins, "Tabloid Tales," EducationWorld.com, www.education-world.com/a_lesson/02/lp255-03.shtml.

Connecting With Parents

Communicate with parents for a great start to the year



The beginning of the school year can be a stressful time for you, your students and their parents. Building a strong relationship now can set the tone for a successful school year.

Use these ideas to get your relationship with parents off to a great start:

- **Introduce yourself** to your students' parents as soon as possible—by phone, by email or in person.
- **Tap the experts.** Parents are experts on their children. So, ask them for specific information about your students. Send home a questionnaire. Have parents list their child's likes, dislikes and interests.
- **Invite parents to offer suggestions**—in particular, parents of children with special needs. Make sure they have different ways to contact you. Invite parents to ask as many questions as they want. Opening the lines of communication now will be helpful if there is ever a problem.
- **Build a classroom community.** Hold a "welcome session" or orientation for parents and students. Break everyone into small groups to make conversation easier. This will allow you to visit several parents at once and will build a sense of community in the classroom.

Source: National Association for the Education of Young Children, "Back to School Time—Tips to Help Children Adjust," KidSource Online, www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content3/back.school.p.k12.4.html.

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Differentiated Instruction

Learn how your students learn best



Learning styles are an important element of differentiated instruction. To determine which learning style suits a particular student best, look for clues.

Auditory learners often:

- Respond quickly to the sound of your voice.
- Talk a lot, occasionally to themselves.
- Enjoy reading aloud and following along on a tape or CD.

Visual learners often:

- Look at you intently when you speak, as if they will miss something by looking away.
- Show relief when you give handouts or write on the board.
- Enjoy reading silently.

Kinesthetic and tactile learners often:

- Fidget, sit in their seats any way but up straight, play with school supplies.
- Look delighted when you announce a science experiment or other hands-on lesson.
- Noticeably *need* recess or P.E. more than other students.

Source: Marilee Sprenger, *Differentiation Through Learning Styles and Memory*, ISBN: 0-7619-3942-3 (Corwin Press, Inc., 1-800-233-9936, www.corwinpress.com).

Understanding Poverty: Part Three of a Three-Part Series

Help students identify a new course of action



Some students misbehave because they know only a few ways to deal with situations that frustrate them. Their choices may work in some settings, but are not acceptable in school.

You can help your students think about different choices. In many cases, these choices involve actions a student has never considered. Here's a technique for helping students identify new and better choices:

1. **Have the student talk about** what happened. "My teacher said I had to put my game away and I cussed at him."
2. **Have the student say why** this happened. "That made me mad." Or, "I don't like being told what to do."
3. **Ask what the student could** have done instead. This may be the most difficult part of the exercise and where you can brainstorm with the student.

4. **Veer away from the current** situation and ask the student to help you brainstorm a hypothetical situation. Example: What could I do if I locked my keys in the car? All answers are okay—the point is to think of alternatives.

5. **Come back to the situation** at hand. Ask in a polite, respectful tone, "Can you think of some other things you could have done instead of cursing?" Listen to the answers.

6. **Ask the student to tell you** what result each action would produce. Through continued respectful questioning—not by saying what to do—you can help the student choose an action that would give a good result.

Consider having the student write down what to do the next time a similar situation arises.

Source: Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D., *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, ISBN: 1-929229-48-8 (aha! Process, Inc., 1-800-424-9484, www.ahaprocess.com).

Building Reading Skills

Make reading aloud a daily activity



Reading aloud to students is one of the best ways to get them interested in books. It boosts listening skills, teaches new words, links ideas to the printed word and gives background knowledge on a variety of topics.

Whether you're reading an old favorite or the latest bestseller, reading aloud can have a tremendous impact on turning your students into readers.

Here are some reading-aloud tips:

- **Read books that relate** to your students' interests. Introduce them to children's magazines.
- **Read books that use** descriptive language, rhymes and alliteration.

- **Try chapter books** or long picture books that can span a few sessions. End each session at a suspenseful point.

- **Encourage students to predict** what might come next in the story.

- **End each read-aloud session** with a discussion. Talk about why characters said the things they did or acted a certain way.

Link art projects or writing assignments to the stories you read. Have students paint pictures of the characters or write their own endings.

Source: "Tips for Reading Aloud with Elementary-School Children," Reading is Fundamental, www.rif.org/educators/advicetips/tip.aspx?View=11.

Teaching Responsibility

Help young students become responsible



Building responsibility might sound like a job for parents, but you can also do things in your classroom to help your students learn to be responsible. And that can start as early as kindergarten.

Young kids enjoy being responsible. Kindergartners enjoy the feeling of accomplishment they get from completing a task or making a choice—even if you had a hand in setting them up for success.

Here are some things you can do to foster a sense of responsibility in your students:

- **Allow students to make choices**—from which stories to read, to coloring in a book or drawing their own pictures. Show children that their opinions are valuable.

- **Assign simple chores**, such as holding the flag, taking a note to the office, watering classroom plants and cleaning up after activities. Keep a colorful chore chart posted to keep track of everyone's jobs. Rotate the jobs often so that each student can experience success in a variety of ways.
- **Encourage children** to do their best. Even if it's lining up to walk down the hall, your students will feel proud of themselves when they are successful at doing what's expected of them. Be sure to recognize success.

Source: "Teaching Responsibility in the Early Childhood Setting," LSU AgCenter, www.lsuagcenter.com/en/family_home/family/character_education/character_critters/for_educators/Teaching+Responsibility+in+the+Early+Childhood+Setting.htm.

Resources



Looking for activity sheets and printable handouts for your elementary students? Abcteach.com has a wealth of resources. Check out their back-to-school section at www.abcteach.com/directory/theme_units/back_to_school. You'll find back-to-school-themed postcards, spelling pages, coloring pages, memory games and much more. Other theme units include colors, literature and sports.



Science teachers: Check out the Curriculum Center at Discovery School.com (<http://school.discovery.com/curriculumcenter>). You'll find quizzes, glossaries, puzzles, games, experiments and more on the most popular science topics for upper elementary classrooms—bacteria, oceans, the universe, genetics, weather and more. The Quick Facts section of each topic presents interesting gems of information that you can use as starters for lessons. Did you know that frog legs helped create the first battery?



Take your little readers to the Reading Planet! This fun, interactive site (www.rif.org/readingplanet/) allows kids to explore the world of books online. One feature, Book Zone, lets children meet authors, browse book lists and listen to stories. Another feature, Express Yourself, lets kids write stories, review books and share their favorite websites with other kids.

Keeping Classrooms Safe

Establish an emotionally safe classroom



The start of a new school year, or a student's first day of school—ever, comes with an array of emotions: anxiety, excitement, joy, fear. That's just the nature of new experiences.

Remember, you can do some things to keep your students happy, calm and feeling safe in their new environment.

Try some of these ideas to create an emotionally safe classroom:

- **Be aware of students' feelings.** Lots of interaction or too many new things at once can be too much for some young kids to handle. If you notice a child appearing overwhelmed, let the student take a "breather." During the first few weeks, schedule regular breathers for all your students.

- **Keep it simple.** The first few weeks of school should be a lesson in routines. Try to make the days exactly alike until students feel comfortable with the schedule. Then you can add new activities or make other changes.
- **Provide opportunities** for every child to succeed.
- **Keep parents informed.** Remind them how important it is for their child get plenty of time to relax, extra time to sleep and good nutrition at home. Children can't learn on an empty stomach or when they're too tired.

Source: Jane Bluestein, "Create a Caring Classroom—Use this checklist to help ensure that your classroom is an emotionally safe place—for every child," *Instructor Magazine*, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0STR/is_2_110/ai_65103733.

Share an Idea?

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

Send your ideas to **Better Teaching**, 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 n: Classroom Management

Next Focus On:
At-Risk Students

Creating a Classroom Community

Strive to achieve a cohesive class



Part of classroom management is making your students feel like they're part of a group. This will foster a sense of security and togetherness, which will lead to positive attitudes and motivation to learn. Sounds great, right? Then put these ideas to work:

- **Happy classroom.** Have students brainstorm a list of things that would create a "happy" environment in their classroom.
- **Group contribution.** Give students strips of paper and have them write down what they can contribute to the classroom.

Post these items on the bulletin board so students can see how everyone has unique talents to contribute.

- **Class spirit.** Ask students to vote on symbols, songs and words that can serve as the class spirit or logo. Perhaps it's a bird, a nursery rhyme, a cartoon character or a particular design on a flag.

Use this symbol on your classroom newsletter and any other papers you send home or display. It will remind students that they're part of a special group.

Source: Vernon F. Jones and Louise S. Jones, *Comprehensive Classroom Management: Creating Communities of Support and Solving Problems*, ISBN: 0-205-31850-9 (Allyn and Bacon, 1-800-666-9433, www.ablongman.com).

Planning Ahead

Keep lesson activities on hand



Illness, meetings or family emergencies all have a way of cropping up, demanding your swift exit and leaving your students to do—what?

Plan for this now so neither your students nor the substitute or colleague who steps in for you will be left at loose ends.

Prepare a folder with an all-purpose activity to keep on your desk. It should be something that can be easily applied to whatever lesson your students are working on at the time.

One idea is to make a grid full of different activities and have the substitute instruct your students to select from them. When they are finished, they can share some of their work with the class.

Here are some ideas for the grid:

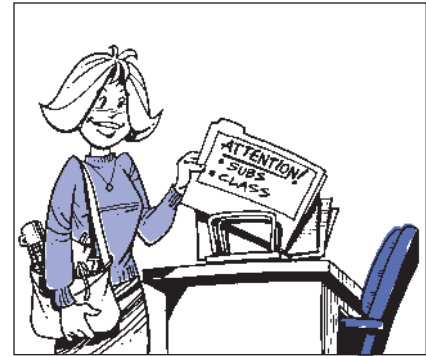


Illustration by Bob George

- **Make up a play** about the lesson.
- **Make a Venn Diagram** about two ideas in the lesson.
- **Make a graphic organizer**, such as the main idea of the lesson in the middle with details around it.

Source: Leah A. Moorefield, "Connect Three," *Teaching preK-8*, May 2007 (Early Year, Inc., 1-800-678-8793, www.teachingk-8.com).

Classroom Discipline

Watch for signs of academic dishonesty



Upper elementary students these days have high-tech devices such as cell phones and MP3 players. What you may not realize is that a few students use these for less honorable purposes than talking to friends and listening to music.

Both devices can be used to cheat on tests. And there's more. Put your radar up if during a test you see:

- **Cell phones**, especially those with cameras. Students may use them to take pictures of their notes before class. They can also "help" their friends by text-messaging answers to them.

- **Headphones on MP3 players.** A student may be listening to test answers recorded at home.
- **Clear water bottles.** A student may peel off the label, write notes on the back, glue it back to the bottle and look at the notes through the water.
- **Different colors of candy.** Yes, really. Students may agree that a red candy means answer "A," a yellow candy means "B" and so on. They can then arrange the candies in order on their desks and share answers.

Source: Amanda Jones, "Cheat Sheet," *Teacher Magazine*, May/June 2007 (Editorial Projects in Education, 1-800-728-2790, www.teachermagazine.org).