

111 Brass Tacks for Beginning K-12 Teachers

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A Survival Manual for Beginning K-12 Teachers
(111 Brass Tacks)

Dear Teacher,

The following “brass tack” suggestions for beginning teachers are based on a fresh and innovative approach to the teaching-learning process called Invitational Education. These ideas will help to make your classroom “the most inviting place in town.”

While not all beginning or experienced K-12 teachers will agree with all of the following 111 suggestions, we believe these ideas will be of great benefit to those entering the most noble profession on earth.. .to be a teacher.

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Off to a Good Start

1. Always dress for class like you are going somewhere important.
2. Be over-prepared for this first class and all the following classes.
3. Arrive early for class and ask early-bird students to assist you in arranging an inviting learning environment.
4. Ask students to help you distribute and collect materials.
5. At the beginning of each semester or school year, tell students how honored you are to share their company.
6. Suggest that students call you by your last name, with “Mr.” “Ms.” “Mrs.” or “Dr.” before it. (The playing field is not level, and dual relationships are the major source of ethical misconduct).
7. Obtain a complete data-sheet on each student in case there is a need to make out-of-school contact.
8. Politeness is a high classroom priority. Use “please” and “thank you” often.

Caring for Students

9. Treat your students like they are guests in your living room.
10. Make a special effort to learn students’ preferred names, and use the preferred name at every opportunity.
11. In large classes, create permanent nametags or place cards. (This is also a great way to take roll.)
12. Check your student data sheets for birthdays, and wish students happy ones.
13. Insure that you have some time to talk with individual students during every class meeting.
14. If you learn that a student is ill, send a note, make a phone call.
15. Write a welcome back note to students who are out, and have the whole class sign the note.
16. Share your out-of-class experiences with students (appropriate self-disclosure is not exhibitionism).
17. Keep a box of facial tissues available in case of a teary student.
18. Pay special attention to classroom temperature, lighting, and seating arrangement: everything adds to or subtracts from a good lesson.
19. Make students comfortable: A stand-up stretch is welcome if students have been seated for some time.
20. Demonstrate respect for students by using guiding suggestions: “Have you tried...” “Would it work to...” etc.

Course Requirements

21. Keep requirements simple, complexity is the natural enemy of comprehension.
22. Consider using the contract grading system, with performance goals clearly stated.
23. Go over the grading system early, and review it regularly.
24. Insure that any grade of “A” you assign represents superior academic performance.
25. Help students to organize study loads, and explain how to get the most out of the class.
26. Consider encouraging entrepreneurial classroom activities, such as group projects, research studies, or cooperative activities.

Beginning Each Class

27. You may not be happy when you enter class, but you can be cheerful.
28. The first thought that you should have as you enter your classroom is: “What can I learn from my students?”
29. Begin class with outside topics and/or a review of the last class meeting.
30. State the purpose of the lesson at the beginning of each class and place agenda on the board.
31. Making teaching look easy is the hardest part, for it requires painstaking care, planning, and discipline.

During Each Class

32. Love what you are doing and it will rub off on students.
33. Communicate to students that they are thinkers.
34. Relax and enjoy teaching: if you are comfortable, the class will be.
35. Avoid ‘appearing too nonchalant in class: good teachers are passionate about their subject.
36. Use humor in your classroom, but never at the expense of students.
37. Remember to laugh at yourself: Students don’t mind seeing you in difficulty if you take yourself lightly.
38. Be willing to say: “I don’t know, but I will find out for you.”
39. When using audio-visuals, always talk facing your class: some students are lip-readers.
40. Be sure to preview unfamiliar films, recordings, and videos before using them.
41. Use lots of multi-media to keep the students attention.
42. Summarize the completed lesson at the end of each class.
43. Ensure that each student has something to take away at the end of each class.
44. End the first class, and all other classes, with an assignment for the next meeting.

Class Lectures

45. Collect “chunks” of material (incidents, stories, anecdotes) for your own use and polish them constantly.
46. Where possible, arrange the seating so that everyone can see everyone else as well as you.
47. Deliver lectures COD: Content (academic), Organization (logical), and Delivery (interesting).
48. Teaching is physically demanding, so stay in shape.
49. Think about what you are presenting, and your hands and feet will take care of themselves.
50. The four characteristics of the effective lecturer are enthusiasm, energy, presence, and courage.
51. A good anecdote is powerful in summing up and illuminating concepts.
52. Emphasize key concepts through repetition, the mother of learning.
53. Avoid offending by crudeness: no joke is worth insulting even one student.
54. Teach half as much, twice as well, and cut out the clutter and underbrush.

55. Look for those students in the class who are most attentive, and deliver the lecture through those students.
56. Speak clearly. Beware of swallowing your own words with a lazy tongue.
57. Discover your own unique style as a teacher; imitation is death.
58. When giving a lecture it is easier to go long but better to go short.
59. Don't try to cover too much material in a single period: the lion that tries to catch two rabbits gets neither.
60. Stop during the lecture and ask everyone to write about the topic at hand: then ask for responses from those who have not contributed comments.

Small Group Activities

61. In the middle of a presentation, pause and ask students to turn to a neighbor for a minute or so and talk about what you have presented (one minute seminars).
62. Divide the class into small groups sometime during every class: students learn by talki as well as listening.
63. In dividing the class into small groups, do it randomly or cliques will form.
64. Require that each small group report out to the entire class, otherwise the small group5 will simply "shoot the breeze."

Classroom Interactions

65. There is no such thing as a dumb question.
66. Don't give up on a student easily: you might make a proud ditt~rence in a student~s lite.
67. When it comes to touching a student, when in doubt, don't.
68. Use students to help teach the class; on some days students will be better teachers than you.
69. Take full advantage to whatever windfalls might appear, include student resources.
70. In describing class activities, use collective pronouns such as "we," "us," and "our."
71. Manage your classroom by delegating responsibilities, including setting up audio-visual and writing on boards.
72. Role playing, when properly supervised, is a powerful teaching tool.
73. Try to make yourself liked by students, but don't try too hard.
74. Place a clock on the classroom wall directly behind where students sit.
75. Use every minute of class time wisely.
76. Develop courage to wait: give students time to relish a thought or think through a question.
77. When asking a thoughtful question, give students a full minute of silence to think about it before you ask for a response.
78. Keep things moving. The cardinal sin of a teacher is to bore students to death.

Grading

79. Avoid giving extra credit for it can lead to endless regressions.
80. Grammar, syntax, and spelling always count.
81. It is better for students to take advantage of you than for you to take advantage of students.
82. Be quick to apologize, slow to accuse.
83. Never miss an opportunity to compliment students for good work or effort.
84. Teach to pass: consider student failure as a personal insult.
85. Always return student work promptly.
86. Ask a student to "log in" all student work collected. This will avoid the argument: "But I turned it in!"

87. Staple papers whenever possible, don't trust paperclips, they steal.
88. Sniff out catastrophe before it happens: be prepared to improvise at a moment's notice.
89. Never leave a class unattended without appointing a student assistant.
90. Use your newfound authority sparingly: no one is without power.
91. Don't wait too long to address student behavior that is bugging you.
92. Solve classroom concerns at the lowest possible level: don't cut a rope that can be readily untied.
93. If you have a concern with a student, always talk to that student in private.
94. Never argue with a student in the presence of other students.
95. Never make a threat that you cannot carry out.
96. Form relationships with parents.
97. Seek parental assistance when the situation warrants it; typically, parents are excellent resources on issues pertaining to their children.
98. Develop linebacker eyes: don't get so involved that you don't see what is happening around you.
99. Don't wait until the end of the course to find out how well you are doing as a teacher.
100. Constantly work to improve your teaching, for there are only two kinds of teachers, growing ones and declining ones.

Collegial Relationships

101. Be loyal to the school or district that sends you a check regularly, for this is an ethical commitment.
102. Always start and end on time.
103. Erase chalkboards, pick up litter, and rearrange chairs before leaving.
104. Leave your classroom neater and cleaner than the way you found it.
105. Seek out a teaching mentor, and ask for advice.
106. Establish close relationships with other beginning teachers.
107. Use the teacher's lounge for rejuvenation, not to be critical of students, other teachers, administrators, and so forth.
108. Enliven the class by bringing in colleagues as guest presenters.
109. Be clear with invited guest presenters what it is that he or she is expected to do, and how much time is allocated.
110. Be sure to write a thank-you note to your guest presenters.
111. Finally, trust your intuitive sense while teaching: later you will discover that you know more than you think.

Reference:

Purkey, W. W., & Novak, J. (1996). Inviting School Success. New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company.