

How To Teach Routines

by Michael Linsin

Anything you ask your students to do repeatedly should be made into a routine.

For example, whenever your students enter your classroom, transition from one activity to the next, or line up for recess, they should do so in the same efficient manner.

The reason, simply put, is that routines save learning time. They also make your life a lot easier. You see, it's during these repeatable moments when most misbehavior occurs.

The idea, then, is to standardize these moments into routines your students can do quickly and independently.

But here's the thing. Most teachers don't teach routines very well, and the timesaving value gets lost in the stress of reminding, reteaching, and repeating yourself over and over again.

The key is to teach routines in a way that compels your students to perform them correctly—and without your input—every single time.

Here's how:

1. Model how to.

Start your lesson seated at a student's desk—or wherever the routine is to begin—and simply *show* your class what you want them to do. Make it simple and straightforward, but highly detailed. Play the part of a student and act out each step, down to the smallest detail.

2. Model how not.

Call upon your experience in the past and model how not to perform the routine. It's okay to have fun with it. In fact, exaggerating poor behavior makes the strategy more effective because it underscores the absurdity of misbehaving in your peaceful classroom.

3. Have a student model.

Now choose one student to perform the routine from start to finish. If you see even the smallest mistake, the smallest deviation from the script, have the student go back and do it again. Ask for a few more volunteers, and again, hold each one to the highest standard.

4. Have a group model.

Select four or five students to model the routine as a group. Observe carefully and continue to be exacting in your expectations—even if it feels like you’re overdoing it. (You’re not.) The smallest, most insignificant details are what resonate with students the most.

5. Practice with the whole class.

Now ask your entire class to perform the routine together. Use your ‘go’ signal and have them practice until they perfect it. Once they’ve proven they can do it without any guidance, be sure to let them know. Your students must experience what success feels like in order to repeat it.

6. Go live.

As soon as you’re able, have your students perform the routine as a regular part of the school day. Again, you want them to get used to the feeling of success, of doing things the right way. And if it’s not perfect, then send them back where they started and have them do it again.

Note: Perfection does not mean robotic or militaristic. It simply means performing the routines as taught. You can make them as casual or informal as you wish.

Pursuers of Excellence

Routines save time, dissuade misbehavior, and make your teaching life a lot easier, to be sure. But their real power comes from their ability to transfer excellence to everything you do.

Pushing in chairs, lining up for lunch, behaving politely, dividing fractions . . . it’s all the same steady drip, drip, drip of excellence you require of your students.

It’s your calm insistence on doing things the right way, starting from the first day of school and cross-pollinating from one routine and one subject area to another.

Until it clicks.

And your class of disparate individuals . . . becomes a class of students, of scholars, of pursuers of excellence.