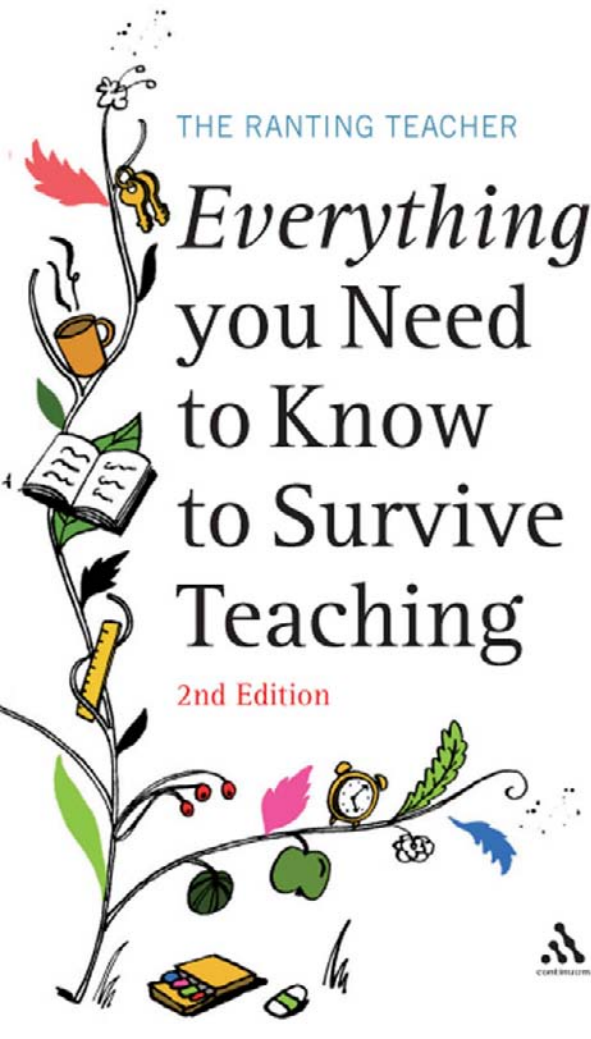




THE RANTING TEACHER

Everything you Need to Know to Survive Teaching

2nd Edition

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Second edition

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Second edition

THE RANTING TEACHER



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For my mum
– an expert in resourcefulness, inventiveness, creativity
and taking the piss

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Preface to the second edition

The world of education moves at a fast pace – the stock cupboards may tell a different tale, with their dog-eared textbooks familiar to not just the current pupils but also their parents; however, orders for change from on high come thick and fast. As any teacher wading through the latest government initiative will tell you, it's hard to keep on top of all these changes for much of the time, and there is some comfort in the sanctuary of the stock cupboard, with its very familiar books that are still in use because the school can't afford to buy any shiny new software. The news seems to be dominated by talk of educational reforms, and although we may listen to them with cynically raised eyebrows, there's no denying that these changes eventually make their way through the education hierarchy to the classroom teacher. And this is why it was decided to produce a second edition of *Everything You Need to Know to Survive Teaching*.

Probably the biggest change since its publication in 2005 is the teachers' Workload Agreement. Of course, there are so many other issues going on: 14–19 reform, shifts in pay scales, establishing trust schools and academies, and White Papers full of other big ideas, but the Workload Agreement is one thing that has had a major impact on every teacher's working life. Some have felt this impact more than others, of course: for some it's seismic and for others it's a whimper. By the time this book is published, the staggered implementation to reduce teachers' overall hours should be complete,

so that the emphasis will have moved back to raising standards in the classroom, rather than being bogged down by paperwork and bureaucracy. So bearing this in mind, some parts of *Everything You Need to Know to Survive Teaching* needed updating to reflect these changes, meaning there would no longer be a need for games to relieve the boredom while invigilating exams, because this is something that teachers are not supposed to do any more. Covering for absent teachers should now be a reduced burden, and we should now have guaranteed planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time.

Therefore, in this edition you will find some familiar themes amongst the rants and their associated tips, because we all know that some moans are perennial favourites, and in addition there are some new issues raised now many of us are a little further down the teaching road.

Introduction: Why do you want to be a teacher?

This is a question that you, the potential teacher, or trainee teacher, or practising teacher, will have been asked. Your response will vary, depending on whether you are trying to impress somebody, are being honest, or you've just had a bad day.

At first, it may just be your friends, incredulous and drop-jawed, who choke on their pints as you celebrate the end of your finals, after you have dropped the bombshell of your plans for life post-graduation. You may have just left school yourself, and while your friends are off plugging the gaps in their year, you have decided to enrol for an education degree. It could be your parents asking this question, after you've informed them that you're giving up your go-getting job in marketing for something less soulless. Or your partner, detecting a mid-life crisis after twenty years of boring yet lucrative banking or brokering, or travelling or child-raising, or whatever it is you've been doing with your life.

Maybe you are that partner or friend or parent of a teacher, who sees the teacher in their life come home exhausted, shell-shocked, angry or sometimes elated, and has uttered that question on a regular basis as the teacher you know settles down to mark a pile of coursework or run through some statistics when they could be spending quality time with their own children, or down the pub with their mates, or doing something more sporting or cultural than correcting spelling mistakes.

Teachers are asked this question throughout their careers. You, the teacher, must know your true answer. Maybe you can't really articulate why you want to be a teacher, but you should also have an answer ready to trot out for every situation. You will be asked by interviewers, who will be looking for certain qualities. You'll be asked by the children that you teach, especially when you look harassed and fed up. And you'll ask yourself, frequently, especially after a bad day.

The truth is, there must be a million ways to answer this question. Interviewers must have heard myriad responses and variations. Is there a correct answer? Probably not. Maybe they're just curious, feeling a little jaded themselves, having lived through times when behaviour is getting worse, demands are getting tougher, respect is plummeting, and the salary won't cover the mortgage on a garden shed.

You may pick up this book expecting it to be full of rants. You'll be right. Think of it as a worst-case scenario handbook for teaching. However, this is not the extreme edge of teaching; rather, this is the kind of thing that teachers put up with every term, or week, or day. You may be the Mary Poppins of teachers, who never has any problems and whose intentions are only ever of the noblest kind, but look around your staffroom: someone in there may well be asking themselves on a daily basis if it's all worth it. Maybe you should slip them a copy of this book to cheer them up, to make them realize they're not alone, or to remind them of some of the tricks of the trade that are buried deep down and can be tapped into to get a handle on a situation.

In *Four Essays on Liberty: Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1969), Sir Isaiah Berlin wrote, 'Injustice, poverty, slavery, ignorance – these may be cured by reform or revolution. But men do not live only by fighting evils. They live by positive goals, individual and collective, a vast variety of them, seldom predictable, at times incompatible'. I can't promise you reform or revolution.

But I can help in fighting evils, and you don't even need a superhero costume. The positive goals in this book take the form of 'top tips', to be found in each section, so that for every negative there is some kind of positive, or, as the twee phrase goes, you can turn your frown upside down.



Top Tip!

So we come back to the original question. Why *do you* want to be a teacher? Why do you want to start training? Why do you want to carry on in your job? Why do you want that promotion, when you know it means more hours, more hassles, and not much more pay? Define your own answer. If you don't know what your answer is, it's easy to lose your way. Know your answer, recite it like a positive affirmation, even if all you can think of right now is, 'Well, the holidays are good'.

Enjoy this book. You may empathize, sympathize, or know far better, but hopefully it will give you some ideas that you can use or adapt in the classroom. Or if you aren't a teacher, it may make you appreciate your own slice of life a little bit more.

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1

On your marks: The trials of training

The peculiar process of interviewing

Interviews for teaching jobs are in a league of their own when it comes to tiring and unnecessary trials. Attend an interview for a teaching job and you would never believe that teachers are in short supply or that there is a hint of the so-called recruitment crisis we are always hearing about.

Teaching interviews are designed to be demoralizing, tiring, and very often tests in toadying – in short, all the things you will come to expect from the job once you secure it.

First of all, there's the application form. Or CV and covering letter. Or both if you're unlucky. Each form can take a couple of hours to fill in, with personal details and statements about why you want to teach, your experience, your philosophy on education, and many more hoops to jump through before you can be considered for a shortlist.

Schools often have a quick turnaround between the closing date and the interviews, sometimes only a couple of days. This can come as a shock when you first start applying for jobs, and if you apply for several with the same closing dates then you may find yourself asked for more than one interview on the same day. Worse than this is the school's expectation that if you are offered the job, you will have to accept or decline there and then. Many schools do this, which means that if you have interviews lined up for Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, for example, you have

to take a gamble. If the first school offers you the job, but you liked the sound of the third school best, do you stick with the first offer or throw it away and hope you get offered the job you really want? Of course, you could risk offence or denial by asking for a couple of days to think about it, or even risk being struck from a local authority's good books by accepting a job and then withdrawing your offer.

At the end of a day's interviewing, candidates are often not of sound mind to make such weighty decisions anyway. This is because of the trials they must endure during the day. Many interview days will be variations of the following scenario.

First, there's the arrival. Suited and booted, you arrive at the school and are dumped in reception or the staffroom along with the other candidates, with whom you will be expected to make polite conversation for the rest of the day, while hiding your interview strategies and trying to glean any information they have. This is by far the worst part of the whole process. Some candidates are masters in undermining your confidence and appear certain to get the job from the start. They may sicken you with their constant sucking up to existing staff by asking intelligent or obvious questions. They may tell you horror stories about situations they have deftly handled, rumours they have heard about the school, and boast of a wide range of experience all gained in the first few months of teaching practice.

You will normally have a timetable of things to do during the day, which could include making a positive impression on your possible future colleagues, and looking cool to the kids who may have a say in whether they want you teaching them. You could well have to teach a short lesson to a random class in front of senior teachers who will keep your immaculate handouts for their own use and expect you to

believe that all the children are as well behaved as this specially selected lot.

Then there are the actual interviews, which could be called informal chats or formal interviews and could be with just two people or up to a dozen. These range from heads of department to headteachers and governors, and this is where you are expected to trot out your carefully prepared answers on anything and everything to do with teaching and yourself. Once you attend your fifth school interview you should have a pretty good idea of every possible question that could arise, but also the horrible feeling with your answers that this is purgatory and you have to repeat your actions again and again until you get it right. You will also notice that your answers sound more and more like a script.

After a day of school tours, informal and formal interviews, short-lesson teaching where you demonstrate every style and groovy trick you've picked up so far, smiling with gritted teeth at the other candidates to show you're a team player, asking interesting questions, looking keen and eager as the kids barge round the canteen at lunchtime, enjoying the weak coffee and even weaker salad that is your day's subsistence, there comes crunch time. The interview panel take another hour deliberating over which candidate looked like they could handle the children, sucked up the most, and could last the longest without rushing to the toilet (one of the most essential skills in teaching), during which time you have to engage in more small talk with your sweaty-palmed co-interviewees. If you have lasted this long, you will be so sick of hearing about the school and staring at the same bit of staffroom wall and smiling at the existing teachers in case they have a say in your appointment, and will be so eager to leave, that if you are turned down for the post it will feel like a relief anyway.



Top Tips!

Be aware that you're playing a game like some ancient courtly ritual. There are procedures that the school will follow during the recruitment process that only get dusted off for that particular tradition, and equally you will be expected to carry out procedures that seem obvious or obscure. Go with the flow. It's all good practice at working under pressure.

Learn to read between the lines and decide if the school sounds like the kind of place where you want to teach anyway. If the school secretary has sent you out the wrong information, or just an application form with no departmental information, then consider how this most important first impression has failed. And then remember that this will be the same secretary who will be responsible for passing on important messages to you, submitting your bank details to the local authority, and so on. Fair enough that you are trying to make a good first impression on your potential employers and colleagues, but if the school, with all their experience in recruitment, can't get it right, then why waste your time?

You may be lucky enough to be flexible about the region where you want to work, and then you can be choosier about where to take a job. Inner cities will always give you more choices of schools than rural areas. Then you can even look at the minor details, from your chances of getting sixth form teaching to whether the school day starts and finishes early or later. Be aware that competition for jobs in schools outside cities is very fierce and you will have to compromise on your demands and desires.

Adapt your details according to the school. Don't include statements emphasizing your firm belief in mixed ability teaching if the school sets pupils from the moment they enter. You may have to do your research here. If you're not sent enough information about the place, then look up their website or last inspection report.

As for surviving the day itself, you will learn to formulate your own strategies once you've attended a few interviews. Or you may get lucky and only ever attend one interview, in which case any further advice isn't required! Just be prepared for an exhausting day, and practise smiling sincerely.

The mentor – make or break time

When you train to be a teacher, and are thrown to the lions that are 7B just before lunchtime on a wet Wednesday, you are given somebody to hold your hand and guide you along the rocky path that leads to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). This is your mentor, an existing teacher of the subject or age group, and this person will have an enormous effect on your personal development, approaches to teaching and paperwork, and, to be frank, whether you stick it out at all.

To understand why the mentor can be so influential, we have to look into the mindset and motivation of the mentor. Why do they take on board these duties? There could be several reasons, or a combination of them all.

The mentor could be the philanthropic sort. An experienced and successful teacher, this mentor does her job well and knows it. She looks at some of her colleagues who struggle to interest the pupils, and knows that if she passes

on her wisdom to the next generation of teachers, everyone will benefit. There is nothing boastful about her, however; she is calm in a crisis, constructive in her criticism, as well as being encouraging, organized and resourceful. If you are about to embark on a school placement, then pray that you are assigned a mentor like this, who is not tainted by any of the other, more negative traits that a mentor could possess. This mentor will bring out the best in you, and you will carry her worldly wisdom with you throughout your career.

The egotistical mentor may share many traits with the ideal mentor, but her motivation for taking on this responsibility does not spring from the same still waters. This mentor may well be a very good teacher, and as such, her demands will be high. She doesn't suffer fools gladly, neither will she see that there are many ways to deliver the same learning objective, because she knows that her way is best. If she silences a class because her reputation precedes her, she will not understand why you struggle. She may well be glad to see that her trainee charges cannot command silence with one raise of an eyebrow, because this only reinforces her feelings of self-importance and belief that she is perfect and universally respected. Any advice may be given to the student teachers in a very patronizing way, but saccharine-coated, because deep down she is conflicted. She wants her trainees to do well, of course, because this reflects well on her mentoring abilities, but at the same time she could not bear to see any of them put into practice their fancy college ways, enlightened by teaching theories that she hasn't had time to swot up on. Probably because she spent too much time practising raising an eyebrow in front of the mirror.

One step beyond the egotistical mentor is the patronizing mentor. This teacher probably didn't want the role of looking after student teachers, maybe because he feels he has far too much on his plate without anything else, even if it does give him an extra free period each week. He could well

seize the opportunity to offload his most difficult classes on to his trainees, telling them that if they survive this, then everything else will be a doddle. He will overuse the phrases 'Told you so' and 'See what I mean'. His advice and criticism may well hinder your progress, and he will dismiss any of the new teaching methods you learned about at college as just a fad, preferring as he does the 'chalk and talk' approach. The worst thing you could do with this type of mentor is argue back. The best thing to do is to ignore his arcane advice, take on board anything of use that he may come up with (there's bound to be something in there somewhere), listen to why the kids complain about him and ensure you don't do the same thing.

Another unfortunate situation with a mentor is the personality clash. This happens in any walk of life, but in a mentor-trainee relationship, it can be damaging. Training to be a teacher is a stressful course, and mentors may not always understand every shock to the system that their trainee is experiencing. They may have their own agenda. Maybe mentoring is just a stepping stone for them, a way to achieve a promotion or to gain release from some of their teaching duties. Similarly, you, as the trainee, may not understand their disbelief when you fail to set a homework task yet again, or didn't get the worksheets for your lesson photocopied on time, or didn't prepare for your lesson properly because you felt the need to have a beer with your fellow trainees to discuss how awful your mentors are. Personality clashes happen, and if you find yourself in this situation, then don't do anything to antagonize it.

The school-based mentor has a huge influence over the trainee's success, even down to whether they pass or fail the teacher training course. The college tutor will visit the trainee in the school, watch them teach, inspect their paperwork, interview them about the way they are developing, and so on, but the tutor will also liaise with the mentor, and

only tick the right boxes with the mentor's approval. The mentor keeps records, writes out lesson observations, and continually assesses the trainee's every move, from planning schemes of work to interacting with the pupils.

Not only this, but the working relationship between mentor and trainee can sometimes influence the trainee's decision as to whether to complete the course or not. Many trainee teachers drop out of the course not because they find the course too difficult, or the kids too demanding, but because their mentor is a bitch.



Top Tips!

Be aware that the school mentor may have their own agenda for taking on mentoring duties. The sooner you realize that their constant criticisms of the way you do things could well be down to their own insecurities, then the happier you will become. Or maybe you do need to look at how you're doing. You will have to accept criticism as a trainee, but how you choose to act upon it will determine how successful you'll become.

Teachers can become set in their ways, and trainees can be a breath of fresh air in a department, with their newfangled ideas and free lessons to prepare great resources. Many teachers will embrace these contributions, taking copies of all your worksheets and giving you invaluable opportunities to upgrade their schemes of work to incorporate the latest literacy and numeracy strategies. After all, this will save them a week or two of getting to grips with it all over the summer.

Some teachers will be extremely wary, eyeing these methods with caution. Some departments may already

use all the teaching methods you're learning about in college, and you may be lucky enough never to realize that some schools prefer more 'traditional' methods. However, remember that your relationship with your mentor is going to be hugely important, because of the influence that person will have over your progress, even down to whether you pass, fail or quit.

To be a teacher you must have what are called 'people skills'. Getting on with your mentor could be the biggest test of this, and forcing your face into a smile from a grimace could be good preparation for everything from parents' evenings to covering drama lessons. Learn to become as organized and efficient as your mentor. Don't wait for them to ask you to prepare handouts for the next lesson; do it in advance. Don't wait for them to tell you that you're crap at handling the special needs kids; ask for advice before it comes to that – the egotistical types in particular love this. Accept the criticism and ask how you can improve. Then meet up with the other trainees from your course and compare notes about your mentors. However bad you think yours might be, there will be somebody else on your course with worse stories to tell.

If it really is getting to be an unbearable situation, talk to your course tutor. Your tutor may already be aware of problems with particular mentors. It's a sad fact that places have to be found for trainees wherever they can, and tutors don't want to jeopardize those placements by rocking the boat too much. But if you report the problems then your tutor can bear these in mind when assessing you. They might even be able to move you to a school where you can flourish without the added stresses of an unfit mentor.

Look at things from your mentor's point of view as well. A few years down the line and you too are going to be more rushed and stressed than you would believe possible, without the luxurious surplus of free periods you have as a trainee. Maybe this insight into a mentor's mind will give you a clearer perspective of how frustrating it can be to want to do this teaching lark properly but equating that with being human too . . . A while back a new batch of students arrived at school, veering between waggy-tailed enthusiasm and wide-eyed horror. They kept appearing at my door when I least expected them, in order to observe me having a nervous breakdown when they really should have been taking notes on how long I spent talking, organizing kids into groups, encouraging and summarizing. After each lesson they would hang around to ask me questions I couldn't answer, like why had I deviated from the scheme of work or how would I usually motivate the kids that had been muttering 'bollocks' under their breath. They seemed to enjoy pointing out to me in the nicest way possible that so-and-so at the back had spent the lesson constructing a rubber-band ball rather than completing the work I'd set, which I had been well aware of all along, of course, and had just been happy that so-and-so had found something constructive to do rather than hit his classmates, which was his normal approach to my subject. Whenever they tried to show me up like this I attempted to smile sweetly and give them a textbook answer, but was usually so frazzled that instead I pointed to the spelling mistakes they'd made in their observation notes and sashayed away with what I'd like to think

was some dignity left intact. You see, one half of me was entirely brimming with empathy, remembering my own shell-shock when I myself was training to be a teacher. And the other half would think: Don't mess with me, college boy. I'm trying my hardest to show you what a good lesson should look like and you want to tell me about rubber-band boy at the back? Don't mess with what you don't understand . . .

Finding your true calling

There are those amongst the teaching profession who are the true nobles, who have known for a long while that teaching was the only vocation that would satisfy them, and have worked towards that vocation since their own school days. There are others who may not have given it much thought until several years in industry made them look around for something more fulfilling, and perhaps at just the right time they saw one of those advertising campaigns designed to recruit more teachers to the profession. Then there are those who just drift into teaching, perhaps lured by golden handshakes or golden handcuffs or other glittering offers to repay student loans, and find themselves sticking it out through the bumpy first few years and then thinking that it's not so bad after all.

But at some moments, or perhaps frequently each day, elements of doubt can creep in. Maybe during your first few weeks of training when you begin to wonder why you gave up your company car and soundproofed office, or at 3 a.m. one morning when you can't sleep because lesson plans are swimming around before your eyes, maybe then

you will question your decision to become a teacher. You may be twenty years into your career, wondering where and how all that time has gone and why Battersby Junior is as much of a pain as his father was. It's at times like these that you need to have formulated your own true calling, the best reason you can think of for being a teacher.

For me, one of the great things about teaching is that you really can astound children with your knowledge of meaningless trivia, because most of them are too young to have heard it before. It makes a change from trying to outsmart the contestants on TV quiz shows in a vain effort to feel superior. With children you can feel superior pretty much all of the time, at least with the younger years. Sometimes it's easy to forget that they don't know stuff that you've assumed is common knowledge for the past twenty or so years. And feeling superior is no comparison to seeing a class of genuinely fascinated faces taking on board something for the first time. You can almost see the penny drop. You can imagine the intricate brain processes as they store away the shred of information for tests, exams, pub quizzes, and to tell their mums later. Best of all, you don't need to be a genius yourself to feel this satisfaction. Even the ability to read the textbook at a faster pace than your charges will keep you at least one step ahead.



Top Tips!

If you don't have your own firm reason for being a teacher, then you will find one along the way. Just don't admit that in your first job interview, though! Teaching really is an ideal job for a know-it-all. If you enjoy being right most of the time, what better feeling than to stand in front of

a captive audience of those who don't already know the fascinating facts you're about to divulge about your specialist subject? Of course, there's always the risk that some smart alec has already read copiously on the topic and will try to 'out-fact' you or contradict you, but they are fortunately few and far between.

Sometimes it's tempting to throw in something outrageously wrong just to check they're paying attention, but this can backfire: I for one will never forget the biology teacher who had me believing that oncology was the study of seashells well into my adult life; then there are the scornful looks at parents' evening when a grown-up smart alec of a parent gleefully informs you that a marmoset isn't actually a type of orange jam, because they just don't realize that you were only having a laugh at their child's expense.

However, being the omniscient one can sometimes go to your head. Being contradicted in front of a class full of children by some swotty oik who watches the Discovery Channel for fun means your credibility becomes slightly chipped, even if you know that a superficial half-hour TV programme is no substitute for your three years of degree-level study on the topic. The temptation is to stamp out the inquisitive questioner in front of everyone to ensure they all leave the lesson knowing that you're the one armed with all the facts and answers.

But this overlooks the truth that children need to question and challenge in order to learn and progress. Deep down I know it's good for them to win a debate and feel they are able to question what they are being told. Teaching is full of contradictions like

this: I want the kids to be free-thinkers and to see the benefits of questioning the status quo, but I don't want them doing it while I'm the one who's supposed to be in charge!

Knowing this doesn't help my reaction when I see a hand shoot up out of the corner of my eye, and start waving frantically the more I ignore it. Maybe my nostrils flare slightly with indignation as I slowly turn to face the owner of the hand and drawl, 'Yes?' in a voice that is really saying, 'You dare to challenge me, young person? You think you are going to be more correct than I already am? Fool, well go and try, but don't think you will succeed.'

It's great being the omniscient one, but it doesn't feel so good when you go out of your way to use your wit and all known powers of rhetoric to win a verbal battle with a 12 year old who is determined to pick holes in your statement. In fact, afterwards it feels a bit mean and grubby to have argued them back into their place when they've presented you with a series of 'buts'. Again, I did try to anticipate this reaction when introducing a textbook topic to a smart class for the first time. I only did it the once, though. I started off following the simplistic textbook and then just as several twitchy hands were about to spring into action I said, 'BUT . . . and there's a very BIG BUT . . .' and then lost my thread of explanation as half the class started sniggering over the size of my bottom.

Remember that in teaching it doesn't hurt to let the pupils think they've got one over on you, because it is all part of their education too. If you keep focusing on what really matters, then this can help to get you through the hard times.

Things you lose when you are a teacher

To ensure you are fully prepared for the realities of becoming a teacher, there are certain things you should know in advance, so that when they happen to you throughout your career, it comes as no big shock. One thing you start to lose is a little bit of your own identity as it starts to become subsumed by your job.

I resisted turning into a fully grown teacher for so long. Society's respect for the teaching profession may be eroding, but there are certainly a number of people out there who will formulate an instant opinion about you as soon as you tell them how you earn your wages. I really disliked the way the job starts to define who you are. Tell anyone you're a teacher and they immediately assume you're interested in kids, the education system, their kids, philosophies of teaching, current media stories of a generation out of control, TV programmes featuring unteachable kids or kids from posh schools being taught by faded rock stars, standards of literacy, and their other teacher friends. Well, sometimes I am interested in these things, but I am normal too, you know. It's bad enough that I seem to get teacher-related junk through my letter box at least twice a week: dated-looking union magazines, ballot papers to elect union members to positions of highly inflated self-importance, loan companies and insurance companies racing to offer me preferential rates because I'm that boring old fart with leather patches on my jacket elbows – dependable, reliable, sensible. It's hard when your job intrudes on the rest of your life. You do start to forget what it was like to be a mere wage slave who had every excuse to go out and have hobbies and pastimes and a social life that defined who you were, rather than being the upstanding member of society who is supposed to have more than a passing interest in their job.



Top Tips!

You can do something about your job taking over your life and identity if you are aware that it's a sad reality for many members of the profession. Keep up your outside interests, and don't make it widely known to mere acquaintances that this is what you do. You should also be aware that there are many more things that you will lose during your teaching career; forewarned is forearmed! Be prepared to lose the following things:

- ◆ Every pen, pencil, stick of chalk or paperclip you don't nail down. If you do nail them down, the buggers will have the nail too.
- ◆ Your voice, more often than can be good for you.
- ◆ Any shred of dignity you may have had before you joined a profession that requires you to swat bees out of a room while glaring menacingly at an overexcited child and trying to unstick your foot from the floor where it has been glued with discarded chewing gum.
- ◆ Most weekends. Saturday is for chores, cleaning, shopping and recovering. Sunday brings with it the dreaded feeling that it's back to school tomorrow and you have three sets of books to mark, thereby missing the chance to watch the big match/go for a leisurely Sunday lunch at a country pub/chat with visiting relatives/have a normal restful Sunday.
- ◆ The ability to spell properly. Looking at the hundreds of spelling mistakes that pass through

books every week has a negative effect. You suddenly start to see a sort of logic in the way words are spelt incorrectly, and begin to doubt the validity of our own very strange spelling rules and exceptions.

- ◆ The art of speaking eloquently using a rich and varied vocabulary. All the clear and simple explanations you are able to turn out at every opportunity come back to haunt you when you try to have a grown-up conversation with somebody (usually a very clever parent or governor who will stare at your simpleton stuttering as you grasp for words of more than two syllables).
- ◆ Friends who get fed up with your term-time hibernation.
- ◆ The opportunity to go on a bargain holiday – ever again. Coupled with this is the chance of going on holiday somewhere children-free.
- ◆ The freedom to fall over in pubs within a fifty-mile radius of your school. Although even if you respect a self-imposed boundary, don't be surprised to feel a tap on your back and the words 'Hello Miss/Sir' as you belch loudly in a post-pint kind of way.
- ◆ Your sense of perspective. You may spend the weekend worrying about how sad one of your pupils was feeling on Friday, only to return on Monday to find the sad pupil full of beans with Friday's problem forgotten. You may fear for your own sanity once you start a serious man-hunt after pins go missing from your precious wall displays. Catching the bugger who keeps writing rude words on your desks becomes your

raison d'être. A piece of substandard coursework from your star pupil has you in a sweat, and you consider phoning in sick, rather than face the class from hell once more last thing on a Friday. Just step back one cotton-picking minute: it's only a job. You're not even saving lives or rescuing people from burning buildings or diagnosing serious illnesses. The world won't stop turning because the child can't spell or punctuate. Hope that the child with the pocketful of stolen drawing pins stabs their own thumb as they rummage around for a lost sweet. Add your own swear words to the desk to really shock the culprit. Find some way to deal with those little things that become obsessions, then remember that you have a life too.

2

Get set: Theory into practice

Firm but fair

Efficient behaviour management is the holy grail of teaching theory. It's what makes teaching so frustrating at times, and as the social issues affecting children become more complex, so the number of strategies to deal with behaviour expands, and new possibilities are created.

It's often necessary to take a look inwards at your own teaching style and assess what it is you're doing right, what could be improved, and how you can remind yourself of strategies for dealing with disruptive behaviour that have long become buried under the automated reflex to hand out detentions.

Personally, in its simplest form, I see my teaching style as a balance between the characteristics of the two prison warders from the BBC comedy *Porridge*. Now bear with me here, and I'll explain. In the series there are two main prison warders, Mr Mackay and Mr Barrowclough.

Mackay is the strict disciplinarian, who barks orders at the prisoners and never ever gives them the benefit of the doubt. He is always on the prowl, suspects that the men would be up to no good if he weren't so vigilant, and the men relish making him look foolish.

Mackay's opposite number is Barrowclough, who pussy-foots around the men, trying not to trouble the trouble-makers with his orders. He takes personal advice from the

prisoners, and his home life is an open book to them. He believes that a sympathetic approach will be far more useful for their rehabilitation, and of course they mostly take absolute liberties with his good nature. However, one or two episodes show that he can still command respect, and he is liked far more than Mackay, the man who barks his orders and is wound up in return.

The secret of classroom management, I believe, is to get the balance between the Mackay side and the Barrowclough side of the personality exactly right. This stasis is rarely achieved for long, in my experience. Each day I start out probably a bit too much like Barrowclough. I might tell some of them (selectively) about my weekend when they ask during registration. I might allow myself to be diverted from my lesson plan to bring in a personal experience if it illustrates a point. I'm sympathetic, squatting down to reason quietly with the child who has just thrown all their books on the floor. I even let them go to the toilet if they look really desperate.

But as the day wears on, and the nagging continues, and my quiet reinforcement of rules and instructions starts to fall on deaf ears, I feel the Mackay side of my teacher self start to emerge. Requests for the toilet are scrutinized with suspicion. I squint at the child who claims their bladder is full, wondering if they just want to wander around the school, or perhaps flood a few sinks. I whirl round from writing on the board, hands on hips, at the slightest hint of giggling. I stop offering the choices suggested on training days, such as, 'You can choose to get on quietly with your work, or you can choose to continue throwing your pencil around, in which case there will be a consequence'. Instead, I raise my voice, dole out those consequences to various corners of the classroom, and probably lose respect in doing so. But my patience is completely eroded by the time I'm asked

yet again what they should do, because they weren't listening the first, second and third times.

So that's my theory, using an old and well-loved TV comedy series. Achieve the right balance between Barrowclough and Mackay, and the whole classroom discipline problem will be solved. I don't know if there are any more similarities between Slade Prison and any classroom I happen to be in, but I shall definitely be watching future re-runs of *Porridge* closely to see what other tips I can pick up for classroom management. Cheaper and more readily available than a day's in-service training, anyway.



Top Tip!

You don't just have to watch episodes of 1970s comedies to gain insight into classroom management. Your school should have in place some kind of system where you can observe your colleagues teaching. If this is carried out on a regular basis, rather than being a horrific, once-a-year process filled with paranoia, it's an excellent opportunity to see how your colleagues deal with behavioural issues. It's even better if this is carried out between departments, because if you have trouble with one or two pupils in particular, you could request that you watch another teacher take that class.

You may not agree with all the tactics used by your colleagues, but something positive can come out of that too: it helps you to reflect upon your own strategies, and sharpen up some of the techniques that you use in light of what you have observed.

Preventing misbehaviour

One way to prevent misbehaviour is to anticipate it. Think of all the outside factors affecting your pupils. One of these is the weather. The following scenario might sound familiar.

It seems like a normal day, but even the best of classes are hyperactive and fussy. And the last lesson, perhaps a mid-dling group, is the kind of fuss-fest that makes you wonder where it all went wrong. Kids are turning up late, and they all seem to be either in a strop or feeling too ill/hot/cold to do any thinking. The lesson suffers several interruptions from messengers who are probably just sent on trivial errands by teachers desperate to be rid of them from their own lessons.

Before doing anything else, check an almanac. Chances are you will have just experienced a lesson under the influence of a full moon. No, don't lock me in the funny farm yet, bear with me. Schools do seem to be affected by the weather, as well as the lunar cycle. That's not just some new-age excuse, or medieval reasoning from the days when lunacy was blamed solely on the moon. Every teacher has experienced the tension that a rainy day brings, and it's not just down to the kids being cooped up at break times.

Younger kids go mad in the playground when it's windy, charging around in circles like the autumn leaves. On a sunny summer's day the school is half empty, with an amazing bug sweeping the kids most desperate for a tan. Some teachers even break the rules and take their classes outside to sit under a shady tree, without completing the necessary risk assessment paperwork first. They instead weigh up the risks of a leaf falling on a child's head against the number of migraines brought on by the sun beating through the classroom window.

Other cycles affect how the children are going to behave too. How far you are into the term will affect how the

children perform. Energy levels become rapidly depleted towards the end of term for teachers, and so too for children. Add to this any exciting forthcoming events or festivities, such as Christmas, and the pupils will seem to veer dramatically between nervous energy and complete exhaustion.

You can almost tell what week you're in by analysing the behaviour in your classroom. In week one the kids need easing back into work as their minds have seized up thanks to a diet of television, texting and video games. Books have been lost. Homework is forgotten. The most important thing is catching up with their mates, making new alliances and enemies, and woe betide the teacher that tries to encourage any independent thinking if it isn't to do with how to beat that wretched monster on level 8 of 'Violent Shoot-'em-up in Space'.

Week two is the best week of the term. The kids are more settled. They are even willing to learn in some extreme cases. They have not yet got back into their disruptive little ways, well, not much, anyway. When you first start teaching, and are given your own classes for the first time, and you're sizing each other up, this is known as the honeymoon period. The false sense of security and competence almost gets you through to pay day. But not quite. Because it's generally in the third week of term that everything kicks off.

What happens in week three? It must be a combination of things. I'm sure there are PhDs on the topic. Or there should be, anyway. The more restless kids start remembering their favourite tricks. They get bored with actually doing homework, and instead hone their skills of excuse-making. They see if they can push it just a little further than they have ever done before. Detentions become part of the daily routine for some of them. Unless there are any important events in the school or year calendar, the rest of the weeks in any given term may well slide downhill from this point.



Top Tips!

When you plan your lessons, it's useful to bear in mind the cycles that affect the pupils. Don't assume they will have the same concentration skills in week five as they had three weeks before. Opportunities for misbehaviour diminish if you plan well-structured lessons with a range of activities to keep them on their toes.

The other side to this is that you must keep some flexibility in your lesson plans too. Consider that even a single snowflake fluttering down outside can bring chaos to your classroom as they try to rush to the window and start chattering about being snowed in. Imagine, then, how a storm or particularly rainy day will affect the moods of the children, and adjust your lesson as necessary to take into account the diversions and distractions that can be anticipated. For example, don't rely on technology if there's a storm forecast, because you may experience power cuts. If it's exceptionally sunny, find a shady spot outside where you can take them to at least pretend to work: a nature trail or drama activity might suit here.

Most importantly, ignore outside influences at your own peril. Incorporate them or allow for them, but be flexible too. If you anticipate that external factors may cause a problem with the behaviour of individuals or a class, you can minimize, or perhaps even prevent, opportunities for misbehaviour.

Mixed abilities

In secondary school, classes are generally taught either as mixed ability, or as ability sets. Both methods have their supporters, and are backed up by philosophies detailing why they are the best thing for the pupils.

What these generalizations often overlook, though, is the fact that within any group that is set, there are still a whole range of mixed abilities. Maybe the children all learn by different methods. Maybe they understand some things but cannot grasp others. Or maybe they just couldn't be bothered on the day they had the tests that sorted them into sets: their attainment might not be a reflection of their true ability.

All children have their own special needs, but some are categorized as such and given a little code to identify them. Special educational needs (SEN or SN) pupils broadly fall into two categories – those with emotional or behavioural difficulties, and those with learning difficulties. Some schools have a special group for the SEN pupils, while others mix them up amongst the teaching groups. The general trend has been towards inclusion, although there are schools admitting defeat and moving away from that policy.

Learning difficulties can be specific, such as dyslexia, or general, where a child struggles with basic literacy, for example. What can be annoying is the assumption by many staff that because a pupil has poor literacy skills, they are not capable of following a full curriculum. Many subjects are set according to exam results, but special needs kids may be in a set of their own. Fair enough, you might think, but schemes of work dictate that we should be delivering a very basic scheme to the SEN classes, assuming that because they can't write very well, they won't be able to grasp anything else that is thrown at them.

Time and time again I have found that the SEN classes I teach are lively, inquisitive and enthusiastic kids. They are

being marked down because of their inability to construct grammatically correct sentences, but their subject knowledge can be absolutely amazing. In fact, it can outstrip the knowledge and understanding of lower and middle sets. Should a pupil be denied access to develop a full range of skills because they can't write without an assistant to help them?

With lower sets, the pupils are generally there because either their behaviour is so bad that they never bother trying to achieve good marks, or they do try hard but their brain power is limited. Of course, I realize that bad behaviour often arises when a pupil is disaffected because they don't understand what's going on, but the wily ones are those with a spark of intelligence, because they work out the ways to really wind up their teachers.

Lessons with bottom sets often follow familiar patterns. Trying to encourage the pupils to draw conclusions about anything, or remember a few key facts from lesson to lesson, is excruciating. You can see the pain of concentration in their scrunched-up faces, and you start to wish that there was an easy access starter motor for their brains. Their thought processes are all over the place. They can't concentrate. But my point is, if I put the kids from the SEN class head to head in a panel quiz with a lower set group, the SEN class would whip their butts. And yet which group gets the wordsearches and colouring-in projects? You guessed it, that's a SEN speciality.



Top Tips!

If you teach lower sets, try out some of the SEN resources with them. Very often the game playing and colouring-in of pictures will engage them more than sticking rigidly

to the department's scheme of work. Surely it's better that they learn a few facts and skills than none at all, because the normal curriculum may well be beyond them.

Mixed ability teaching can be a challenge for the teacher, and a lot more work. But it's also useful practice to get into the habit of differentiating work, because you often need to do this in groups that are set anyway. Theories on the best way to teach mixed abilities abound. You could split them into groups or teams of approximately the same ability. Or you could ensure that each group has a stronger member and a weaker member, a loud pupil and one of the quieter kids, and so on. Make sure that in group work each member of the group has a job to do, such as reporting back to the class or taking notes. Make sure everyone has a go at all of these jobs. Variety is the best way to keep pupils engaged and on task. Changing activities every 10 to 15 minutes keeps the pupils interested, and it also motivates those who find one particular activity a struggle.

With mixed ability groups, there will be pupils who finish before all the rest. This could be because they have rushed their work, and it's not of a sufficient standard. If they are this impatient, they will require a further activity that reinforces what they have just done, rather than being told to check their work or redraft it.

Other pupils finish quickly and proudly show you the thorough work they have completed; these pupils require extension work to stretch them and help them access higher skills and grades. If the same pupil continually finishes the work well

ahead of schedule, you may consider setting them some project work that they can get on with while the rest of the class catch up. The nature of the project work will depend on the subject you teach, but there are many resources out there in government documents and on websites for gifted and talented pupils, so somebody in your department should know about these already.

Even if your school sets pupils for lessons, you should be constantly aware that there are still a wide range of abilities in that room at any one time. Children with poor literacy skills may still have the cognitive powers to excel at activities that don't involve writing, whereas others may cruise along in an attempt to get away with doing the minimum work possible. Your responsibility as a teacher is to the individuals in that class, and as such you must ensure that your lesson stretches all of them in some way.

The Workload Agreement

To give this its full title, it's the 'National Agreement: Raising Standards and Tackling Workload', which was signed in January 2003 and fully implemented for September 2006 in England and Wales. At first sight, it looks like another excuse to create more working parties with instantly forgettable alphabetisms like the NRT (National Remodelling Team), but if you delve deeper into its implications then it appears to be one of those reforms that has its heart in the right place, especially as one of its aims is to reduce the burden of teachers' workloads.

As it has been given the name Workload Agreement, it sort of implies that we all agreed to something, and I must confess I must have missed the voting day for that one. Or did we have one of those 'consultation periods' followed by 'union negotiations', including my subscription money being spent on full page adverts in the national press telling me why it's rubbish or why it's fantastic? And yet still I feel that I didn't really have a say that was worth more than a whistle in the wind, let alone a box for me to tick that said once and for all 'I agree'.

Now I'm not being overly cantankerous, am I? As far as I'm concerned, the Workload Agreement, which promises to reduce the administrative tasks that teachers have to carry out so that they have more time to get on with actual teaching, is an issue that should never have arisen in the first place. I'm sure my romantic notions of teachers from the works of classic novels were never tainted by their heroines sitting up by the flickering candlelight filling in forms with targets and levels. Surely the hard-nosed teachers in films usually starring Michelle Pfeiffer or Robin Williams didn't show the actors waiting for the photocopier or scrambling on chairs to dislodge a poster about to fall from its precarious hanging place? The only scrambling on chairs in Robin Williams' classes were to waffle some lines from a poem, if my memory serves me correctly.

So how has this reform affected me so far? First up is the bane of many teachers' lives: the photocopier. Now my school has always had a reprographics department: two women whose lives are dedicated to stopping teachers sneaking in at break time to run off a few copies of a worksheet they only made the night before, and jamming up the machine with their lack of technical knowledge. But now the Workload Agreement is officially in place, we teachers must not waste our precious time doing our own photocopying. Now for most people this is no problem at all. Just

fill in the reprographics department's forms, leave the work in a tray, and then go and pick it up four days later. No need to worry about finding coloured paper, getting it stapled, folded or enlarged.

Herein lies my first problem, though. Or problems, rather. On the one hand, I am organized and efficient. I like everything to be done properly, some might even say to control-freakish levels. So to leave the photocopying to somebody else is a bit of a wrench. I've had my share of bad experiences before. The wrong pages copied, the wrong order, the wrong size paper. The pictures that are reproduced so darkly they look like the toner was sick on the paper. The copies with edges chopped off so that we have to guess the first word of every line. So excuse me if I'd rather do the job myself. Yes, it is time-consuming. But so is dealing with the consequences of a bad photocopying job.

Another concern with photocopying is the foresight it involves. Sometimes I am not so organized. Sometimes I am spontaneous. Sometimes I have a lesson where the kids don't understand straight away, and I have to change my plans for the following lesson to reinforce a point. Or the opposite of this: some of the kids whizz through the work and I need to produce some differentiated worksheets for the next lesson. Which is tomorrow. And not four days later, which would be the first opportunity I could pick up anything I left for photocopying if I did it the proper way. So thank you for the Workload Agreement, for trying to reduce my problems, but now I just have to get up half an hour earlier to get into school before the reprographics ladies block my way to the photocopier.

The second point can be dealt with more briefly: wall displays. Apparently we teachers should not be wasting our time sorting out work to stick on walls, producing informative posters, or sticking in drawing pins to replace those that have been stolen. This is now the jurisdiction of learning

support assistants (LSAs) or teaching assistants (TAs). But from what I've heard they are going to have a battle on their hands wresting away the Blu-Tack from those teachers who enjoy making planets out of tin foil and displaying the vocabulary that they know their classes need to see. The chance to be creative in teaching is slipping down the plug-hole, and this is one of the last ways for teachers to shape their environment and insert some individuality into a job that otherwise stifles opportunities to be creative by demanding adherence to an uninspiring curriculum.

The last point that has affected me personally is much more positive. My free periods generally now stay that way. I can be taken for cover only once a fortnight! No more vindictiveness from the cover-generating computer, who sees my days off on a course as shirking and strikes back with five cover sessions in a row! Haha, take that you bitter computer! Now if I'm sick I don't have to worry about battling in when I feel like death warmed up slightly, paranoid that otherwise my colleagues will hate me for leaving them with my messy desk and classes from hell; chances are that a supply teacher will get an extra day's work instead. Of course, how the school can afford to employ more supply teachers is something I don't want to think about right now. I'll notice soon enough when my teaching classes number over 40 pupils instead of the 30-plus pupils that currently squeeze in.



Top Tips!

Most schools have been working very hard, juggling budgets and personnel, to ensure that the new Workload Agreement is in place and running like clockwork. But

there will always be a few that seem to think they can get away with continuing to ask their staff to do endless cover and not ensuring they have their guaranteed planning and preparation time (protected free periods). This is not the only area that the Agreement covers, so make sure you know your rights and what you are expected to do as part of your duties. Government and teaching union websites explain in more detail than is possible here what is expected of you.

Even if you do not work in an area covered by this Agreement, it is worth regularly checking up on what your contract, local education authority or government has decided are your conditions of employment. This particular reform has been well publicized, but sometimes it only takes a gentle snooze through a staff meeting to miss something that could affect your working life for the worse or better.

3

Go: The art of teaching

The lesson introduction

The lesson introduction really consists of two parts: getting the pupils into the classroom in the first place, and then getting them settled enough and focused on the subject matter of the day.

Advice on the topic normally states that you should conduct this process in a firm business-like manner, but one which lets the pupils feel welcomed into the room. Ideally, the pupils should line up neatly and quietly outside the classroom, and when they are ready the teacher should lead them in, perhaps standing at the door with a welcoming smile, and remind them of what they need to do: take coats off, get books out, sit quietly, and so on.

After this perfect start, the pupils are then ready to start the lesson with all the correct equipment out in front of them, and the teacher firmly in charge. There are a number of ways you can start a lesson, such as a quick-fire question and answer session about the previous lesson, explaining how this lesson will fit into what they have been studying, or a warm-up activity.

I think we would all love to be able to start our lessons like this. I have been in schools where this does indeed happen, and while the pupils are the normal rabble in the playground at break time, once they are in a lesson they know what is expected of them. Sadly, though, however optimistic your

expectations are, the start of your lesson may sound more like a typical example from my day.

It's first lesson of the day. There are 22 pupils present when they have all finally drifted in from assembly or form registration, or whatever Year 8 have been up to for the first half hour of school. For two of them it would seem to be smoking, because they come in reeking of fags. The ideal scenario of the class lining up outside until they are settled, and then being led into the room by me, is not a policy the architecture of the school building would support, as the corridors would start to resemble an M25 gridlock if pupils had to line up outside with streams of kids bashing past them with their huge bags and dangerous elbows.

There would have been one more pupil present but he broke his behaviour contract two seconds after entering the room. His long-suffering LSA shepherded him out of the room as I tried to ignore the tipping over of chairs and punches thrown everywhere. It's a great distraction for the rest of the group so I try to carry on normally. There are a few kids in the school on behaviour contracts. It's what happens when the kid should really be excluded for a culmination of major incidents, but the governing body or the local authority or the law disagrees, and forces the headteacher and staff to carry on with the kid in the school.

So far, the first five minutes of my lesson have consisted of a handful of children turning up on time, sitting there quietly with their things in front of them while waiting for everybody else to arrive. Others have drifted in, fussing over bags and being reminded several times to get out their pens. Several children have dozily wandered into the wrong classroom or cheekily stuck their heads round the door to yell a greeting to one of their friends, before legging it down the corridor. And of course that one pupil has already been taken out by his LSA, just as all the kids were starting to settle.

So that's the first part of my lesson introduction: I have managed to get the correct pupils into the classroom, sat in the right seats, with their bags under the table and their coats and baseball caps removed. But I haven't quite finished: there are still some sitting there without the right equipment in front of them. It then takes another five minutes of fussing to locate books for those who haven't left them at home, dish out scrap paper for those who forgot or lost their books, and find pens for everyone. I shouldn't be amazed that kids still come to school with no pens, but I can't believe it happens so often.

It's ten minutes into the lesson by now. One way to remind the class of what we did last lesson, and how this will lead into today's lesson, is to go over any homework they have been set. Homework is usually set to reinforce what has been covered in the lesson, or to provide extension work to stretch the pupils. To be honest, I rarely set this group homework. It never gets done, so I can't rely on work being completed for following lessons. If they can't bring in their own pens and books, they sure aren't going to get homework organized. Still, it's an experiment I try out every now and again to see if there's any improvement. In addition, the school insists I set homework according to a timetable, and sometimes even audits the type of homework I set over a term, along with completion rates.

The homework experiment from last week failed, because none of them completed the simple task of illustrating the cover of their new project booklets. If anyone asks, the learning objective of this homework is to select suitable illustrations, therefore demonstrating their ability to identify the key points of the project. I thought they would enjoy the colouring-in aspect the most.

But, in fact, only four of them have even brought in their booklets. Three others were absent when the homework was set, which means that I must have a homework

completion rate of . . . ooh, it must be just 85 per cent for this group. I note the figure down on my register and hear the headteacher's words ringing in my ears: 'Let's all aim for a 100 per cent homework completion rate! I won't settle for less than 90 per cent!' I'd settle for one of the group doing something, but I know it's not to be.

As three pupils were absent last lesson, I have to rapidly think of a way to summarize an hour's lesson from a week ago to bring them up to speed. It turns out to be a beneficial exercise because a sea of gormless faces stare blankly back when I ask some simple questions based on last week's lesson. We look back at the textbooks and I desperately search for any flickers of recognition as we scan the pictures in the book. Finally, one pupil manages to answer a simple question and I feel we are able to move on to the topic of today's lesson.



Top Tips!

There's the theory of efficient teaching, and then there's the practice, and at times there is a huge gulf between the two. However, even when you feel the forces are conspiring against you, with children let out of previous lessons early or late, sent on errands when they should be in your lesson, given every opportunity to drift in the corridors rather than line up outside your room, don't give up. There are still some principles and routines you can keep in place, and hopefully drill into pupils arriving at your lessons. It may take some time, especially when other teachers don't insist on such standards, but eventually the penny will drop and you should see a more efficient start to your lessons in time.

Pupils should all know where their seats are in the room. If you teach the class across several different rooms with different seating plans, this is more difficult, but don't allow the pupils to swap seats. At the beginning of the year you may have asked them to sit in alphabetical order, or a boy-girl combination, or provided them with a seating plan they should stick to.

With younger groups, having some kind of team incentive will encourage groups of pupils to settle. You could divide the class into five or six groups depending on where they sit, and allocate points on how well the groups enter the classroom, to the first group sitting there ready with all their equipment out, and even for their performance in team quizzes. Keep score of how well they do, and make sure there is some incentive at the end of the half term or whole term, using your school's reward system or small prizes for the winning team. Pupils will soon realize if one member of their team is continually letting them down, and some pupils respond better to the cajoling of their peers than to what sounds like the teacher's constant nagging.

Have an introductory activity that can be started by those pupils who do arrive on time, something which will keep them occupied while you deal with the latecomers and the inevitable fussing they bring. The type of activity will depend on the subject, but it could be a quick quiz they can work through at their own pace, or thinking of five key points from the previous lesson. Once everybody is present, feedback from this type of task should provide a reminder to the class, and a summary for any pupils who were absent last lesson. Writing the instructions on the

board will save you from feeling like a parrot if the pupils drift into the lesson at different times.

Even if your lessons aren't allowed the chances you think they deserve, there are still ways to salvage the routine and stop the chaos at the first possible opportunity.

The lesson in progress

No matter how long your lesson lasts, from a forty-minute session to a two-hour double lesson, you have to visualize your time in segments. There's the lesson introduction, usually taking the first five or ten minutes. At the end, there's the lesson plenary, which must be juggled with the separate activity of packing away: again, usually allow five or ten minutes.

The rest of your lesson will ideally consist of a balance of well-paced activities, incorporating individual, pair and group work. It will be a mixture of whole-class teaching and smaller group activities, giving the teacher a chance to make their way around the classroom and speak to each child at least once during the lesson, ensuring that the child has understood and is following the learning objectives. What? What's that? Are you sniggering at the back? This comes highly recommended, you know. It's what we expect of every lesson from every teacher, isn't it?

Every now and again I like to stop and do some basic arithmetic with my classes. Not because I'm consciously incorporating numeracy across the curriculum (although now it's been mentioned, that's not a bad way of doing it), but because I like to show them how much time is wasted by the class as a whole, and by certain members of the class.

If I give them ten minutes to complete an activity, I remind them of when half their time has gone. I'll warn them when there's a minute left. Then I'll ask them to be quiet so we can have some feedback. And I'll wait. Sometimes I'll repeat the instruction. Sometimes I'll make over-exaggerated glances at my watch, cross my arms and sigh loudly. If things don't improve, I turn around, write on the board 'Time wasted' and then make a big deal of looking at my watch, hovering by the board to write down a figure showing the number of minutes elapsed. Eventually, they shut up. By this time, two or three minutes could have passed since my first request for quiet.

This is when I like to do my mental arithmetic. 'If we have three ten-minute activities and I have to wait for three minutes at the end of each one, how long have I waited for? Now subtract your total from the length, in minutes, that break time lasts . . .' They soon get the message.

But there are individuals, too, who repeatedly waste lesson time and distract the majority of the pupils. It's all very well to punish them by keeping them behind or following the school's discipline procedure, but nothing is going to regain those lost minutes for the rest of the class. The amount of fussing that goes on is incredible. Here is an example of a typical exchange that follows even the simplest of instructions, a fuss created by four or five children:

Me: Right, copy the title from the board into your exercise book.

Pupils: What? I don't get it.

Me: What do you mean, you don't get it? All you're doing is copying the title from the board.

Pupils: What's the title?

What are we doing?

He's taken my pen.

Can I have some paper?

Me: Where's your book?

Pupils: You've lost it.

Me: *I've* lost it? How could that be?

Pupils: What's the title?

Can I borrow a pen?

Me: Okay, when you've copied down the title, put down your pen so I can see you're ready.

Pupils: I haven't got a pen.

Me: Well, use a pencil.

Pupils: I haven't got a pencil.

Miss, he's taken my book.

Me: Right, stop talking, please.

I'm still waiting for you to stop talking.

Michael, sit down. Tina, turn around.

Pupils: What are we doing?

Me: I'm waiting for you to stop talking so I can explain to everyone what we're going to do.

[Silence for a millisecond]

Me: Last lesson we found out what a glacier is. Who can remind us?

Pupils: What does glacier mean?

Me: That's what I'm asking you! Look it up in your glossary, you wrote the meaning down last lesson.

Pupils: Where? I can't remember.

Get off my book!

It's a lump of ice!

Me: Okay . . . So who can remember how glaciers are formed?

Pupils: In the fridge.

Me: No, and please don't shout out.

Pupils: Erm . . .

Me: Right then, let's remind ourselves by looking in the books to the last thing you wrote.

Pupils: What, the title?
 Miss, he's got my pen.
 Shut up, David.
 Why are we studying glaciers? It's booooring.

Me: [*spontaneously combusts*]

And all this is without the irritating interruptions that I comment upon elsewhere.



Top Tips!

Pace and timing are vitally important during your lesson. Spend too long on one activity and the class will begin to drift off, go off task, doodle on the desks and possibly each other. Each chunk of the lesson should be building towards the main learning objective, whatever that may be and however you get there: by role play, comprehension questions, filling in diagrams, and so on.

During the lesson, there are advantages to be gained by circulating the room. Behaviour management experts will often tell you to scan the class, circulate the room, and make eye contact, so you may think of yourself as a lion on the prowl rather than a teacher. This is something an inspector would expect to see you carrying out, and it has definite uses as well. During group work you will often realize that pupils are like animatronics, those robotic puppets that only jump into action when stimulated by an approaching audience. It's only when you patrol your classroom that you realize that half of each group

will be asleep on the desk, and the other half will be discussing completely irrelevant gossip. The first pupil to spot the teacher's approach will usually announce something relevant in a loud voice, so that the rest of the group spring into action too.

You should have extension work for those who finish early. Some pupils will rush through their work and not complete it to a very high standard. These require extension work that consolidates their skills. Other pupils finish the original work to a very high standard well within the time given, and for those you should provide work which allows them to develop their skills further and which moves them on to the next level.

With extension work, pupils don't like to feel they're being punished by being given extra work just for finishing early. To combat this, you might like to try a variation of the 'traffic light system' of work. With any piece of work, let all the children see all the possible work to be completed. Grade the absolute minimum amount you would expect with the colour red. Tell them that everybody must finish the red work in the allotted time, or they will be expected to finish it at break or lunchtime. The next lot of work can be graded as amber. This is the section that you expect almost everybody to have finished in the time, although there may be two or three weaker pupils who don't manage it. The final section is the extension work, which you grade as green.

Planning the timing of your lesson is all very well, but another key word here is flexibility. Most of the time you will have to make allowances during the lesson to deal with unacceptable behaviour, an inability to listen, and interruptions from outside. It's far better to ensure that all the pupils have understood

one or two topics thoroughly than to race through three of them so quickly that nobody is quite sure what they are supposed to have learned.

The lesson plenary

The lesson plenary is a fancy way of saying the end or completion of the lesson, and contrary to popular belief and practice, it should not be the manic five minutes at the end where you suddenly remember to set the homework, collect in the equipment, and pack away.

Even if your classroom has no clock, the pupils will take their cues from the shuffling noises and scraping chairs in neighbouring classrooms as a sign to pack away, and it's not such a surprising sight to turn round from writing the summarizing sentence on the board to see the pupils sitting there with bare desks, and wearing coats, baseball caps, and the occasional MP3 player. If this is the case, you have some serious training to do with your classes. Once again, they are revealing an insight into how your colleagues treat the plenary of their lessons, and you have to show the pupils that your expectations are different to this.

There are certain things that need to be done during any one lesson: collecting in equipment, setting homework, breathing a sigh of relief. But most importantly, you need to make sure that your pupils are well aware of what they should have learned in that lesson, by reinforcing the key learning objectives. In other words, summarize what you've covered. This is especially important if you have been subjected to several irritating interruptions, and found yourself stopping and starting to deal with an unruly pupil or two.



Top Tips!

Packing away can be a struggle on its own. Sometimes, convincing the more light-fingered members of the class to relinquish their bounty of glue and colouring pencils that you distributed earlier will take some time. You have more of a negotiating angle if your lesson is just before a break, because you can keep the class back until these things are returned. Put one of the most popular pupils in charge of collecting in the right amount of equipment if you suspect it could disappear, and you could get a better result than standing there with hands on hips a minute after the bell, the next class waiting to come in, and no real leg to stand on. Make sure you don't need superfluous stationery during your lesson plenary, and get it collected in before you start to summarize the lesson.

As for homework, it shouldn't be an afterthought or add-on to the lesson. Set the homework at the beginning of the lesson. Make sure each pupil writes down the instructions and the date it is due in. Tell them to write it down even if they don't understand what it's about at that stage, and assure them that they will know what to do by the end of the lesson. Towards the end of the lesson, review the homework task again to ensure that everybody understands it, and leave yourself time for further explanation if necessary.

I have experimented with setting the homework in the second half of the lesson, but many pupils are so used to having homework set right at the end, that they take this ritual as their cue to pack away, until you point out that there are still 20 minutes left of the lesson.

Timing is one of the most important aspects to any lesson. It's easy for time to slip away if you have to deal with behavioural issues, and you try to race through the second topic you wanted to cover that period. But you may as well consider it a waste of a lesson if you do not summarize or reinforce what the pupils should have learned by the end. This gives you a chance to check that they have understood the key points. At the beginning, you introduced the topic and explained what would be expected of the pupils during the lesson. The plenary may take many forms, depending on the nature of the subject that you teach.

It could be that you have introduced several new key terms and want to ensure that the pupils understand what these mean. In this case your plenary could consist of asking pairs to produce a one-sentence summary of each key term, then choosing a good example of each to write up on the board, and for the pupils to copy into their exercise books. You could briefly state what you're going to do next lesson, so that the pupils see how the topics all fit together. If the lesson has been heavily factual, your plenary could be a question and answer session. This can be light-hearted in form, for example a team quiz with the winning team being allowed to leave for break first.

Irritating interruptions during your lessons

In any one lesson, you may have achieved what you thought was hardly possible at the start: the class are settled, they all have something to write with and to write on (excluding the desk), most of the textbooks are turned to the right pages,

and they are focused on the task, and even engaged in the lesson. It's one of those sparkly magic moments in teaching when you can barely believe that this was the same rabble that sauntered in 20 minutes ago, and you gaze around the classroom with a mixture of awe, amazement, and the feeling that you're walking on eggshells.

Then it happens. Your peace is shattered. Above the murmuring of the busy bees hard at work can be heard a sharp knock at the door. You pause for a moment, wondering if there is genuinely somebody there or if it's just corridor wanderers having a laugh, but before you can scoot over to the door to open it, in barge two girls, who announce loudly that the music teacher would like to see all choir members at lunchtime. Too late. The magical working atmosphere has been destroyed, and before you have time to admonish the girls, they have started up a conversation with one of their friends across the room, before disappearing to interrupt the next class.

The next set of interruptions may come from the PE department, who have taken advantage of the three boys without their kit and sent them on a message to collect names for all those attending athletics trials at the weekend. Or to remind the football players of the practice at lunchtime. Or to borrow trainers from their friends who just happen to be in your class.

But that's not all! Expect to be interrupted by pupils asking to borrow your stapler, enquiring if you have any spare exercise books, collecting left-over dinner money for charity, brandishing sponsor forms, wanting to use your computer to print off their homework, looking for spare chairs or board rubbers or plain paper. They might want to search the room because they are sure they left their pencil case here last lesson. Further pupils may bring you notes from other teachers, forms to fill in right there and then, telephone messages, requests from the deputy head to see a certain

pupil right at that moment, or report cards left behind by a pupil during their previous lesson.

Pupils on messages don't seem to notice if your class are straining to hear a class member reading slowly from the textbook, or if the group at the front are giving their presentation to the class. Unless you are quick enough to catch the messenger's gaze and perform an exaggerated 'shhhh' sign, they will start to read aloud their note as quickly as possible, probably with the nerves associated with barging into a different year group's lesson.

Then there are the movements in and out of the room by pupils with sports matches to attend, instrument lessons, appointments with the headteacher following an incident at lunchtime, report cards left with the previous teacher, dentist appointments, nose-bleeds and desperate toilet visits, and so on.

Colleagues may disturb you in full flow to retrieve something they left in your room when they were teaching there earlier, or to get something from the stock cupboard, or to ask your opinion about a pupil whose parents they are meeting after school.

It's bad enough that your own class members can provide plenty of their own irritating interruptions, but these ones seem beyond your control. Is there any solution beyond keeping sentry by your classroom door for the entire lesson, blocking any messenger from barging in, or glowering with disapproval?



Top Tips!

Very often it's tempting to blame the pupil for interrupting your lesson, and their manner can often leave a lot to be desired. But most times that pupil is only there because a colleague

has told them to deliver a message, or given them permission to leave their lesson. Sometimes it's very tempting to get rid of your most annoying pupil by sending them on an errand. Here's a tip I was given for doing just that: keep a brown envelope containing a blank piece of paper inside it ready at all times. With the permission of several of your colleagues, write their names on the front of the envelope. When you have reached the end of your tether, give the envelope to the irritating kid and tell them to take it to each of the teachers named on the front and ask them to tick their name when they've read it.

When your colleagues receive the envelope they will understand the need to delay this child for as long as possible, so will usually say, 'Wait there a minute. I haven't time to read it just yet'. After at least five minutes have passed the teacher pretends to read the contents of the envelope, ticks their name, and the kid goes on to the next member of staff.

It's not something I've practised, as there seem to be enough children milling around the school corridors when they should be in lessons, and I'm afraid that one day they might just all gang together and start plotting the ultimate in lesson interruptions. We already have enough rogue fire alarms and flooded toilets, and I shudder to think what's next.

This is a whole-school issue that needs to be enforced from the top downwards. If that isn't happening, there are certain things you can do in the way of damage limitation. If the class are working happily, intercept each messenger before they get the chance to disturb the positive working atmosphere. Make a note of what they want, then send them on their way. You can deliver the message to the class

in your own time, or single out the child that is needed with minimum fuss and embarrassment to the pupil concerned. If the pupil messengers are selling raffle tickets or collecting for charity, send them away and tell them to come back five minutes before the bell. Chances are that they will forget or by that time be too concerned with dashing back to their original classrooms to grab their own bags.

Handling irritating interruptions to your lesson is another example of how it is possible to maintain your own standards when all around you are losing theirs. Just remember that it works both ways. Only let pupils out of your classroom when absolutely necessary, and if you stop disturbing your colleagues with requests for stationery when they are trying to deliver a lesson or keep a lid on an unruly class, they might just stop disturbing you too.

Irritating interruptions during your day

Just when you think you've almost got everything under control . . . sure, it's a fine balancing act as we all juggle lesson plans and homework submissions and exercise books that need marking. But let's face it, teaching is the easy bit! There's all this other stuff that people keep bothering you for that gets annoying. Statistics, targets, reports, plans, mark books (copies thereof), and development plans . . . the list of annoyances goes on. When exactly we're supposed to conjure all this stuff up, I don't know.

Let's take a typical lunchtime as an example. I had precisely ten minutes to shovel down my lunch before a bunch of kids turned up at my classroom door to catch up

with some coursework I was supposed to be helping them with. Why in the lunch hour? Because the lazy little gits couldn't be bothered to do it last year when the work was actually set. Now I had to give up my precious time to help the selfish buggers, as they all claimed neither to remember nor understand it, which is hardly surprising when you consider that (a) this was work we covered a year ago, and (b) they were all really thick.

So there I was, having ushered the stragglers out of the room so I could scoff my lunch, picking up litter and abandoned worksheets as I went. I was just shuffling papers on my desk and about to cram my mouth full of cheese and crackers when in sauntered a very boring member of staff. He sat down, and I took this act of making himself at home to mean he was here for something complicated. And sure enough, he talked for the next ten minutes about absolutely nothing that made any sense to me, until I felt like I was floating in vagueness, albeit with cracker crumbs all down my front and over the desk. As my next appointments slumped into the room, he said, 'So I'll leave that with you, then?' and I tried to affect a cross between a nod and a shake of my head so that I could claim in any future dealings that I didn't really commit. To what, I have no idea. But whatever it was, I wasn't really committed. I hope.

Anyway, with such an action-packed lunch hour (if your idea of action is sitting listening to somebody and trying to look interested but really just fighting the fear of offending) I had no time to leave my classroom before the afternoon's lessons. Then it was straight to an after-school meeting which was unfortunately a small group of people, so I could neither doze quietly nor sneak off to the toilet, which is what I'd really wanted to do since lunchtime. By the time the meeting finished, or rather finished me off, the caretaker had locked up the staff corridor where the toilets are located, and I had the whole car journey home to worry

about reams of statistics I was supposed to generate before Friday plus the added worry of my bladder exploding.



Top Tips!

It's not just a non-stop carousel of dashing around all day when you're a teacher. If there's one place where the grass looks greener, it's over the other side of the pay scale where the Senior Management Team frolic away their days. Of course, they must sometimes look out of their plush offices and remember the glory days of being a classroom teacher, but that's hard to imagine when you're classroom fodder yourself.

Members of senior management seem to forget that most of our time is taken up with the teaching of children. Sometimes issues arising in lessons spill over into break times and lunchtimes: keeping children back for bad behaviour, sorting out work for those who have been away, going to duplicate booklets when dozy kids have lost their originals, etc. During the school day and beyond, most teachers are busy with the day-to-day stuff, and it's enough of an effort to keep on top of the basics: preparing resources; hunting down missing textbooks; marking homework and coursework and chasing up the inevitable missing pieces; running extra-curricular clubs; preparing for open evenings and parents' evenings; sorting out bullying and lost property amongst form group members; learning how to use something new on the computers in five minutes in order to stay one step ahead in the following lesson; the list could go on and on.

So when a senior member of staff swans into my room, making full use of their 50 per cent (at most)

teaching timetable, and starts making demands, I like nothing more than to consult the enlarged photocopy of my timetable stuck to my wall, squinting in a slightly exaggerated and dramatic way as I seek out a free period amongst the mass of lessons, and then tell them I could probably manage to do whatever it is they're asking of me by the end of the week, provided I'm not taken for cover during my solitary remaining free period. Very often these demands from senior management are made when I'm in full flow of a lesson, so I have to stop to listen to them or talk with them outside or hunt out whatever it is they want, and meanwhile the class descends into slight chaos, and the pace of the lesson is lost and the enthusiasm has subsided when I try to pick up where I left off.

Oh, they probably see me as an awkward bugger at times like this, but sometimes you have to look out for yourself. How can you do your job properly when you're bursting for the toilet, have indigestion from scoffing your lunch down too quickly, or haven't had time to sort out books for the next lesson?

The advice here, then, is not how to stop the constant intrusions and demands, but how to deal with them. If you are professional in most aspects of your job, then what does it matter to get the occasional reputation as a bit of an unwilling 'volunteer' when it comes to demands above and beyond what you can physically cope with? If you come across as too keen, you will be asked to do extra jobs and favours time and time again. Similarly, if senior management know you are always in your room at breaks and lunchtimes, it is easy for them to hunt you down, so vary your routine. However disgusting you find your

school canteen (the food or the manners), make an effort to go and eat there on random days each week and hide behind the burly Year 11s. If you can avoid the smokers lurking outside the gates, then go for a short walk every so often at lunchtime. And start compiling a list of ways to say 'No' without causing too much offence!

Learning support assistants

Picture the scene. The pupils are sitting attentively for once and awaiting the fantastic lesson you are about to deliver. But hang on! There's some talking going on at the back! You're just about to open your mouth and chastise the talker when you notice that it's not one of the pupils at all, but the learning support assistant (LSA) who is with one of the pupils this lesson. Do you ask them to please stop talking? Do you announce a general warning to the class to be quiet? Or do you try to ignore it, hoping that they're really explaining some work when deep down you know that they're gossiping in a completely irrelevant way?

LSAs are a tricky addition to your classroom. There are many completely professional LSAs, who take their job very seriously and are an asset to the classroom. They may be in the class to support one or more children with learning difficulties, or they may have been assigned to assist the class in general if there are a number of weak members. They may accompany a particular pupil to all subjects, or the LSAs may concentrate on particular subjects, becoming experts in one or two subjects and gaining an enviable insight into a range of teaching styles. You might also know them as teaching assistants (TAs).

LSAs are not there to gossip with the children. I also believe that it's not in their job remit to encourage the kids to ignore the teacher, to shout at the class when they believe it's too noisy, to colour in their planners, to ignore explanations of activities that they are supposed to be helping the pupils with, to check their mobiles for text messages, or to type up worksheets on the class computer while their charge struggles or gives up altogether and starts flicking ink around the room. But this does, unfortunately, happen.

Understandably, it's not easy for the LSAs. The money and conditions are rubbish, for a start. Many of them are paid by the hour, the hourly rate is low, and the work is during term time only. Each teacher will vary in their expectations of the LSA, and it can be difficult to listen to instructions while trying to prevent the pupil doing whatever naughty deed they are desperately attempting.

There are some schools whose army of LSAs work with complete efficiency. They have regular meetings, are given time to collect schemes of work in advance and read worksheets and handouts prior to the lesson. If you speak with them during the lesson to tell them what you will be doing next time, they take it all on board, and may even have suggestions for particular resources that their charges may require. They listen, they give enough help to let their charge complete the work, but they don't do the work for them in exchange for an easy life. These LSAs are also few and far between.

If the organization and training of LSAs in your school is not sufficient, then you can only expect a group of LSAs who are not quite sure what their specific roles are, and they quickly settle into being a passive member of the class, especially if they are never told what they should be doing. Just like a bored pupil, many LSAs can become a disruption in their own way.



Top Tips!

Okay, so unfortunately at your school the LSAs don't receive enough training or instruction in their duties, and they think that getting on with kids means chatting away during your lesson. You have to become proactive here, not just for your own peace of mind, but also because if the LSA is not doing the job properly, there's at least one child in that class who will suffer as a result.

Find out who the LSA is supporting, and sit them by that pupil. Just like the rest of the class, make sure they always have a specific spot to sit in. Near the front of the room is best, because it's easier to get their attention. Some pupils are teased about having an LSA, but you don't have to be explicit about whom they are there to help. There are teachers who like to have the LSA sat at the back of the classroom, to pick up on any naughtiness going on, but this can be distracting for them.

If you have a couple of minutes at the beginning of the lesson, show the LSA any materials you'll be giving out that lesson, and explain briefly what the main tasks will be. Although they are usually the best raiders of the locked stationery cupboard that I have ever come across, make sure they have all the equipment they will need for the lesson.

The frown of non-comprehension on an LSA's face when you are explaining something to the class is a good indicator of how clear your instructions are. Once the pupils are working on their own, make sure that the LSA, as well as the children, is on the right track. Again, if there is time at the end of the lesson,

as the pupils are packing away, give the LSA copies of the work you'll be doing next lesson. Sometimes they pretend to look interested, and sometimes they even take the handouts with them, but as long as you remember to thank them after each lesson, you'll know you've done your best to help the LSA to help the pupils.

Incorporating ICT

The great ICT revolution finally rolled into town. I got half a dozen computers to squeeze into my classroom with the unspoken message that I should be grateful that I wasn't forgotten this time round. Admittedly, I was excited. There are lots of possibilities for my lovely new PCs. But there are also the downsides, as I'm learning rather too quickly:

- ◆ The incessant whirring.
- ◆ The slacker contingent of Year 11, who haven't completed coursework, and whose bloodshot eyes plead to be let on to the computers while I'm trying to calm down Year 8.
- ◆ The printer running out of ink very frequently. Or just not printing. Or churning out pages of rubbish from the previous lesson that will never be collected.
- ◆ Missing mouse balls. It's just the thing to steal them, so it seems, rendering pretty much the whole PC out of use.
- ◆ The gradually increasing litter pile stuffed behind monitors: a collage of sweet wrappers and lolly sticks.
- ◆ The beeping every time some kid decides to lean back on a keyboard with his monster rucksack, or fiddle with the keyboard by squashing his hand or face on to it (and yes, it's inevitably a he).

- ◆ Dyslexic keyboards, the result of some crafty key swapping behind my back or when I'm not in the room. Usually this is only discovered when a pupil presses something drastic like delete or escape, when the key says something innocent like 'page down'.
- ◆ Software not installed properly so that the only available clip-art is circa 1991.
- ◆ An overzealous firewall that refuses us access to any websites of any use, and won't let me download programs to make things work, like RealPlayer.
- ◆ An ICT technician who is so snowed under that he hasn't yet realized term has started, let alone been able to look at my seemingly optimistic list of things that need doing.

So yes, the great ICT invasion has revolutionized my classroom, but not in the rosy-visioned way I'd anticipated. In fact, dare I say it, these PCs seem more trouble than they're worth. Not only because of the list above, but also because now I'm expected to do great things with them, which I don't have time to plan right now. If I want permission to use a website, I have to provide a review for some committee at least five days in advance. My computer corner is like a drop-in centre for undesirables, and I'm already witnessing things that an innocent teacher shouldn't know about, such as how easy it is to hack into the online reporting system.

Besides, I thought these things were supposed to make our lives easier. Now at times I feel a massive burden of extra work, and it's another variable to consider in the lesson. As far as I can see, so far these computers have cost a fortune in set-up fees, wasted ink and paper, and odd bits and pieces that have needed replacing already because of vandals. I had great plans for classroom PCs, but in practice it's not working out as I'd imagined. It's with a slightly more understanding frame of mind that I now peruse those articles saying that ICT in the classroom is overrated . . .

Quite recently it was reported that all this hi-tech wizardry that has cost schools squillions of book-buying pounds may not be so great after all. Apparently, wireless networks may give out harmful death rays or something like that, which could mean anything from headaches to complete nervous breakdowns, although as I suffer from these on a weekly basis I don't think I could solely blame the wireless networking.



Top Tips!

We're all supposed to be at it now. ICT is a key skill that should be incorporated into every scheme of work, and put into action by every teacher, congenital Luddite or not. Of course, one of the big problems with this is access to the necessary equipment, and its tendency to go on strike when you need it the most! I know there are many teachers who breathe a sigh of relief when the ICT budget doesn't stretch as far as their corner of the school, but even though I've ranted about it, I can see that ICT is a truly wonderful thing which can be used in so many ways. Even if you don't know how to get on to the internet, if a colleague recommends a website that can be used for research, just supply the pupils with the address and they will be away. It may well be the same content that is contained in those dusty old textbooks, but it will probably be presented in an alternative way, with games, quizzes, interactive diagrams and animation that will reinforce their learning. Just ensure you can actually access the site beforehand!

The pupils will probably know how to word process and use spreadsheets and the internet from ICT lessons, and even if this is at a basic level there

are ways of incorporating this into your lessons. Drafting and redrafting work is a much easier task on a PC, particularly for those who struggle with their handwriting and despise all the mistakes they seem to constantly make.

Some teachers are worried by computers because they don't have much expertise themselves. Let me reassure you: whenever I can get near the computer suite I usually learn something new from the pupils. With ICT, your role as a teacher changes. You are no longer there to deliver information, but rather to enable them to learn. And by showing you how to do something, the pupils are demonstrating their competence in a key skill. With ICT the teacher doesn't have to appear omniscient, and even though it helps to have some know-how of the software packages you are using, there will usually be some techno-whizz in the class who is more than willing to show off their abilities.

Now all you need is access to the ICT equipment in the first place and a good working relationship with the school's ICT technician! The important thing to remember is not to use ICT just for the sake of it. There are many things that can be taught equally well, if not better, without computers and whiteboards and other hi-tech wizardry. And if you use it all the time, it no longer becomes something different for the pupils to focus on. I'm a fan of ICT, but even so I can see that it's not quite the instant solution to pupils' disengagement and multiple learning styles that it was perhaps once fêted as being. It's another tool for the classroom, and it just happens to be a noisy, expensive and not altogether reliable tool!

Incorporating communication skills

There seem to be enough demands in the curriculum already, but every subject has to consider the key skill of literacy, also known in a slightly different way as communication. And rightly so, too. It's what teachers have been doing for years anyway: correcting spellings, adding missing punctuation, groaning in despair at the incomprehensible mess that they are wasting a perfectly good Sunday afternoon trying to decipher.

Pupils should know about Standard English, and when they are expected to use it. Text message abbreviations are not, as far as I'm aware, yet considered to be Standard English, but this doesn't stop even the more able pupil from using it in their GCSE coursework.

Skills such as letter writing can seem antiquated to children, who are growing up with email and text messaging. Need to write a letter of complaint? Email the company. Want to send a postcard from holiday? Text messaging is quicker than working out the local phrase for 'Two stamps, please'. Pen pal? What's that? There's nothing exotic any longer about communicating with somebody from a different culture; some kids do it every night in chat rooms on the internet. Thank you letters? They just use their mobiles to call or text. Email seems a better way to say thank you, especially when it takes no time at all to attach a digital photograph of yourself wearing that lovely new knitted jumper.

Even though many companies are moving towards online recruitment, there are still many who prefer correspondence by post. Granny may not know how to operate email or a mobile. Isn't there still something special about receiving a brightly coloured postcard through the letterbox and admiring the glamorous stamp? There are many reasons why traditional writing skills are still important, and schools may just be the last bastions in which to teach and instil these

skills. Literacy should include knowing when and how to use different forms of communication. Different subjects may favour specific forms, such as report writing and the use of the passive phrase in science, or essay writing in history, but the school as a whole should ensure that no form is neglected.



Top Tips!

Holding up a united front is what can win the battle, and this applies to tackling literacy as a whole-school issue. One way of doing this is by concentrating on one particular aspect of writing across the whole school in any one week of term. So, for example, for the first week back pupils are told to concentrate on using capital letters in the right places, whether they are in English or science, maths or geography. For the second week of term, the emphasis is on writing in paragraphs, and the third week could be making sure commas are used correctly. Laminated notices could be distributed to each classroom on a Friday afternoon to be displayed for the following week, as a constant reminder of what that week's focus is. When teachers are marking work produced that week, they should look out for how well the pupil has used that week's literacy focus.

Another technique to improve literacy is a focus on spellings by each department. A list of key spellings for each year group is drawn up, and then given to the pupils to stick into their exercise books so that they have it there as a constant reference. They should also attempt to learn the spellings, and this is where form teachers can help too. If each form teacher has the appropriate sets of spellings from every subject

for their year group, they can run spelling tests once a week, or whenever there's a spare ten minutes.

Literacy and communication are not just about spellings and sentence structure; many of the other aspects are already incorporated into each department's schemes of work. Pupils should be given opportunities to present findings to the class and to take part in discussions, so that they are confident in their speaking and listening skills too. It's the listening part that many of them have exceptional difficulty with. During oral work, be forceful about penalizing pupils who don't listen to what others have to say, which you can do by deducting marks from their work. By reinforcing crucial skills, such as how to sit still and show you are listening to somebody else, across the subject spectrum, the majority of pupils can learn by habit and repetition what is expected of them.

The unanimous groan of homework

Homework: it's not just the pupils who groan upon hearing the word. It's no fun for teachers either, is it! Every year I manage to convince myself that this will be the year that I will have it nailed, that my new methods of keeping track of the many variables in the children-homework submission palaver will be a resounding success and I will have finally cracked the secret that other teachers seem to know already.

And then, with the academic year almost over, and memories of homework battles being dredged up for report writing, I concede defeat, wonder why I put so much effort

into something so fruitless, and go back to the drawing board to create a new system that will hopefully pin down the movements of every single pupil in every single class I teach from September.

So what is the problem? Once a week or once a fortnight, homework is scheduled to be set for each class, timetabled by the powers that be. Homework is an opportunity to test the pupils on what they should have learned and understood during the lesson. It's a chance for them to do some extra research or project work. Sometimes it's the main outcome from a series of lessons that all build towards the pupils producing a piece of work that they assemble and write up in their homework time: a chance to shine and show their true potential. At other times they are asked to prepare something to bring to a future lesson.

Now I'm not perfect, that's plain for all to see. I admit that sometimes I've been so busy I've forgotten to plan for a specific task to be completed. Homework tasks are occasionally invented on the spot to make sure the kids have their thirty or so minutes of extra work that evening. At other times I've taken in their books to mark that weekend and then realized they won't be able to complete their work in their books and they won't have their notes with them.

Sometimes other factors get in the way of planned homework: the lessons move at a slower pace than I've planned for; perhaps the pupils need longer to grasp or practise a concept, or maybe the lesson is cancelled or interrupted. The homework task I had planned no longer fits in with their timetabled homework slot. Mixed ability classes can be all over the place, with some of the kids struggling over questions that others have long finished, and with the high-fliers devouring extension work that was actually meant to be homework. Different kids in one class end up with different homeworks: some merely to finish the questions that

they should have managed in the lesson, while others are into the realms of research projects or essay writing.

So in theory, homework tasks in my planning folder should be a neat sequence of instructions: Thursday – set homework. Monday – collect in homework. Monday and Tuesday – mark and return homework. But let's just look at how this supposedly simple system becomes a big old mess in less time than it takes to say, 'I left my homework on the kitchen table'.

1. I aim to set homework in the middle of the lesson or sometimes even at the beginning. Sometimes this doesn't go to plan and 'plenary' is replaced by 'write down this homework before the bell goes'. Consequence: not every child will have written down the homework. This is just about the only point that I take full responsibility for.
2. Even if I set homework in the middle of the lesson, write it clearly on the board, pace the classroom watching them write it in their planners, I can guarantee that one child at least will slip through the net and have no record of homework being set. Consequence: a good few minutes wasted the following lesson explaining, cajoling or berating.
3. On the day the homework is due in, the child will show me a note from a parent saying that so-and-so lost the worksheet or didn't understand the homework. Consequence: I ask them why they didn't come to see me before the deadline, spend several minutes of lesson time finding new worksheets or explaining what they have to do, and write a quick response to the parent when I should be teaching the class.
4. On submission day, certain pupils claim to have been away when the homework was set. Now our school has a 'catching-up' policy, where if a child is absent, it's their responsibility to catch up. If it were really that easy, would there be a need for teachers? Children could

just spend their lives copying notes. Besides, very often homework is not freestanding, but rather an integral part of the lesson. If the child was away, it's difficult for them to complete the homework without my spending lots of time explaining what it was all about. Consequence: I have to go back and check my register and planning sheets to check if they actually were absent, which is time-consuming when the kids are looking for any chance to start their own conversations. I did try to get round this one year by designing a sheet that had spaces for me to write in the homework details, day I set it, and absentees. It worked for about five minutes until children leaving the lesson for music lessons or appointments, and so on, messed up my little system.

5. On submission day, between 5 and 90 per cent of pupils, depending on the class, will trot out the usual splattering of excuses for why they haven't got or done their homework. They are given until the next lesson. This means I have to keep track of who owes me what, and with some of the kids this list is ever growing.
6. On submission day I am handed some pieces of homework that are substandard, i.e. crap. These are returned and they are given until the next lesson to produce something that takes longer than two minutes on the bus on the way in. Consequence: another set of pupils to keep track of.
7. So there on submission day I have a mere handful of submitted homework which I'm secretly quite pleased about because this means I have to spend less time trawling through it before it has to be returned the next day, so that pupils can use their books in the following lesson. The following lesson some of the kids with outstanding homework show me they've done it, try to persuade me to take in their book to mark it, but it's too late! – another piece of homework has to be set, and they need to keep

their books to do it. Consequence: I don't get to mark their homework until at least a week later, so I don't realize that they've completely misunderstood the topic and it's too late because we've moved on. I make a note that we need to plan a revision lesson on that topic, and have to squeeze it into our overstuffed scheme of work.

8. Some children never do their homework. They have their reasons. They may be a carer at home to their parent and have no time to squeeze in something that seems so irrelevant. They might not have support at home or a quiet place to work. They may just be lazy or defiant. Yes, they have their reasons, and so the school supposedly has a solution of a study club. If homework isn't submitted, we are supposed to spend our break traipsing to the office with a list of names to write in the study club book. Study club is supervised by management. They register the kids, but nothing seems to happen if the kids don't turn up. It should, but it doesn't. The kids learn this simple truth pretty fast. There are no consequences if they can't be bothered to do their homework. My only 'revenge': mentioning it on their end of year report.

So there you have it. A supposedly simple system turns into a paper trail mess. I spend lesson time chasing after and checking up on kids, and my desk groans under piles of random books submitted at the wrong times, all to be marked as quickly as possible. I have to switch between year groups and topics and keep records of the chaos. I have to set more work, which creates more marking, which starts to make me alternate between panic, anger and defeatism. I waste evenings and weekends wading through rushed scribbles that make me despair or the 26-part volumes of project work that each member of a top set produces each time. This is on top of the work they get through in lessons. Yes, I see a reason for homework. But I'm still

searching for a method to control all the variables that mess up the process. I'd love for each pupil to have a homework book as well as an exercise book, but I can see many happy fictional dogs wagging their tails at the prospect of that savoury snack.



Top Tips!

How can I possibly suggest advice for the sort of hassles I've outlined above? There are one or two ways around the weekly hassle of homework, although really it is an ongoing battle that needs a firm school policy to ensure that submission dates are adhered to, and that there are actual consequences for those not toeing the line. Some schools have abandoned the concept of homework, probably for very similar reasons to those I've experienced, and when it is such a battle and time-consuming exercise you really have to start to question its validity. But when you don't hold such decision-making powers, and are still accountable to your line manager by means of your planning folder, then you have to fall back on other tactics.

Perhaps continue to set homeworks each week, but ensure that these are all contributing to one grand half-termly piece of work, which could be an exam, essay or project. One week it may be a piece of research for the pupils to carry out, the next it may be a series of facts they have to learn for a quick test that can be peer-marked. This way not every piece of homework they do is something that has to be marked by you. When you mark the piece of work that is the culmination of all these homeworks, make yourself a

grid of the different homeworks set that you can tick for each pupil and return with their marked work, only ticking a box if you can see evidence in their piece of work that they did the research or learned the facts. Then you can hand out consequences if you can see no evidence of homework being completed. This also means that if a pupil misses a lesson or a week of school, they have plenty of opportunity to catch up with completing the homework they missed, if this is what your school policy dictates.

Setting homework like this doesn't mean that your own hassles or battles are eliminated, but it does mean that they are reduced to once every six weeks or so instead of once a week.

4

Children can be the most irritating things

Playing truant

Some schools have community police constables to sweep the local shopping centres, bus shelters, parks and other hangouts to find errant children who should really be knuckling down to double maths instead of kicking tin cans around and defacing public buildings with badly spelt graffiti. Other schools employ an administrative officer to ring or even text message the parents of absent kids. Some local authorities have successfully prosecuted parents who allow their children to play hookie from school.

But let's look at this from another perspective. Let's leave aside the fact that the missing kids could be exposed to as much danger hanging around parks/shopping centres/abandoned buildings during school hours as they are at weekends and evenings. Let's just imagine the relief on the teacher's face when they are told by the class that so-and-so is absent today, and therefore won't be there to call out, disrupt the lesson, annoy the other children, throw their book on the floor, swear, refuse to do any work, claim to have no writing implements, and carry out the familiar rituals of the child who doesn't want to be in school. And then ask yourself: who is really losing out if this child chooses to be absent?

It would be great if it were as simple as that. However, we all know that truanting children only add to the chaos. First, there may well be the five minutes of tale-telling from other

class members, particularly if it's only your lesson that the pupil is skipping. Then you are obliged to follow school procedures, whether that be a note to reception or the head of year, or a phone call to a specified member of staff.

If the pupil is dragged back into your lesson halfway through from behind the bike sheds, this causes disruption. Whether the pupil misses half a lesson or a week's worth, once they are seated back in your room they will demand more attention simply because they don't know what they've missed and will need help to catch up. This is karma payback for the serene feeling of being secretly glad that your most disruptive pupil was playing hookie.



Top Tips!

Make the most of the lessons where certain children are missing, but remember that, theoretically, they will have to catch up when they do attend the lesson, which can be a disruption in itself. Whatever their reasons are for missing the lessons, assume that it is because there is something stressful going on in their lives elsewhere.

At the end of the lesson, borrow the exercise book of a conscientious pupil so that you can photocopy the work they have done. When the truant does return, they can be given the photocopy at the beginning of the lesson to read through as you begin your recap from last lesson. Or, for the more dedicated teacher, tap into the motivational powers of information technology, and add your lesson notes to the school intranet so that all absentees can have access to key notes or the work they have missed. Scanning a kid's work takes about the same time and effort as

photocopying it, and can have a positive effect on the pupil who donated their work to this good cause. You could even use this as a motivational technique for those pupils who are in the lesson, encouraging them to produce neat, tidy and, most importantly, legible work.

Language matters

Let me get this clear from the start: I'm not averse to a bit of strong language. Everyone has their own opinions on swearing. Some find it disrespectful and offensive. Others regard it as a sign that the user has a limited vocabulary. I don't know quite how this argument would go. Just have the thesaurus handy next time you bang your elbow on a door handle or drop a pile of neatly stacked and sorted worksheets. Others are eager to reclaim the words from our Anglo-Saxon heritage, and can quote every example of Chaucer's fruity choice of words, most of which would be worth a 50p contribution to any office's swear box.

Personally, I find that there are some situations where nothing says it quite like a swear word. Go on, choose one and say it now. Listen to the way it bursts from the mouth and rolls off the tongue. It's a little explosion of a sound that stops internal combustion in times of stress. But let me get this straight . . . I would *never* swear in the classroom, which, at times, takes all the self-restraint I possess. In fact, being a frequent swearer, one of the most difficult obstacles I had to overcome when I first started teaching was to eliminate such words from my conversations, which meant that I mostly spoke very slowly at first, sieving the words as they tried to tumble off my tongue.

I soon learned some substitution techniques. 'For goodness' sake' was my watered down version of something far stronger, 'Oh dear' replaced another curse, and so on. But something that I'm still perplexed about is where to draw the line. TV companies and radio stations have their own lists of prohibited and restricted words, which include words that can be used in rationed amounts. But it seems that in schools there are no hard and fast rules.

There are so many different situations where swearing is a potential or actual problem. Kids who grow up in families that swear all the time are immune to its power to shock, and use swear words in their conversations too. Other kids are well aware of the power of the four-letter word, and try it out with their mates in the corridors and playground. Where should a teacher draw the line? Many will remind children in their class about choosing suitable language for a situation, unless the swear word is directed at the teacher as an insult. Others, often weary and battle-worn, have learned the art of 'see no evil, hear no evil' and close their ears and eyes to anything happening in corridors and the back corner of the classroom that is not affecting them personally.

One teacher I worked with would scream in a child's face about 'the language of the gutter' if she heard them utter anything she found offensive. In my own classroom, I chastised a member of my class who said that something was 'crap'. I asked them to choose another word instead, and when they questioned why, I told them that they should answer without swearing. The pupil was genuinely confused by this. 'But crap isn't a swear word,' was the reply. 'Mr S [the PE teacher] calls us crap all the time.'

So here lies the problem. Which words should be on the banned list for classrooms, and even corridors? There are some obvious candidates, but also more and more words, like 'crap', are slipping into a murky grey area. Time and

time again, teachers are reminded that rule setting has to be a fair process. Most classrooms have a set of rules displayed on the wall so that the pupils know what is expected of them. After all, you can't win the game if you don't know the rules. But would a sign saying 'Use suitable language' be too vague?

Meanwhile, after a day of minding my own language, the expletives jostle for space as soon as I leave the school grounds, particularly during my drive home, should some git try to cut me up. And when I arrive home and finally switch on the TV, I get the opportunity to guess which of the current crop of comedy catchphrases will be bandied around the corridors the next day. Comedy shows on TV come and go, as do the associated catchphrases, which spread like wildfire around the school before fizzling out when the next big thing arrives.

There are two ways to approach this. One is never to watch TV and therefore remain oblivious to the irritating repetitions of gormless phrases and the associated sniggering. The second method is to enjoy the shows, bandy the catchphrases around the staffroom, and then tread with utmost care in lessons, anticipating trouble before it arises.

Of course, I would do well to heed my own advice, so sage in retrospect. But we all learn by our mistakes. Recent catchphrases of choice came from the sketch show *Little Britain*, which has graduated from the lesser BBC channels to prime time TV. Some hail it as a work of comic genius, while others prefer to let the fact that it appeals to your average 13 year old speak for itself. Some of it is indeed hilarious, particularly the clueless teenager Vicky Pollard, whose response to everything is a rapid stream of verbal diarrhoea that inevitably includes 'Yeah but no but it weren't me right'. A favourite catchphrase of teachers confronted with such nonsense every day, I can tell you, especially as it silences a kid about to launch into a 'it weren't me' monologue. One

of the favourites for imitations is the mental hospital patient, and don't even get me started on Dafydd, the only gay in the village.

Some of the sketches are cringeworthy and just downright sick. One of these is the grown man who is engaged to be married. Each week we see him and his lovely fiancée to be planning their wedding. But he has a particular quirk, in that he is still breastfed by his mother, who thinks nothing of yanking up her twinset in public to do the deed. He can be in a restaurant, at home, or even standing at the altar, when he suddenly regresses, insists on 'bitty', and goes to suckle on his mother.

So when I stood at the front of the class, leafing through a textbook and apologizing for jumping about from page to page, perhaps I should have chosen my words more carefully. But no, I had to explain that the task was very 'bitty'. I knew what I meant, but it was the word to spark a series of nudges, smirks and sniggers. Pupils twisted round in their seats to repeat what I'd just said. Giggles were very badly suppressed. And I tried to move swiftly on, except that now I too had an image dancing before my eyes that I tried to shake off as quickly as I could. Sometimes, the bliss of ignorance is preferable to being in the know, however cool it makes you feel in the staffroom.



Top Tips!

Ensure that you have your own rules about using suitable language in the classroom.

Very often the pupils will try to shock you, or try things out to see how much they can get away with. If your school has no clear or defined policy on this matter, it's even more important that you have your own.

Carry on being consistent in the corridors, playground and canteen. There's no point in laying down the law in your classroom if you allow pupils to swear within your earshot elsewhere in the school.

Don't overreact to swearing, though. Some pupils grow up surrounded by this kind of language, and don't realize that it can cause offence. They soon will if you make a huge fuss, though. Help them to expand their vocabulary by displaying lists of suitable adjectives on the wall that they could use instead of saying that something's 'crap'. Use a thesaurus to investigate alternative words. This is an activity you could do together with your class, depending on the age group and subject you teach.

Pupils who swear in anger, especially if accompanied by the slamming the desk, knocking over the chair and storming out of the room routine, should be dealt with in the usual manner that your school discipline policy has set out.

It's important to remember, though, that not all swearing is done as a form of aggression, so incidents should only be punished if the intention was to cause offence. Otherwise, it's time to do your job as educator – and re-educate those foul mouths!

Well versed in the art of lying

Are kids really so lazy at home? Or so naïvely stupid? Do they think that hiding the scrap paper or rubbish on their chair rather than walking the four steps to the bin to throw it away won't be found out? That even though they sit in the same seat every lesson, I won't know who is responsible?

Ditto for the wall display vandalism, and the thickest crime of all, writing on the desk where they sit, especially when accompanied by their own name or initials. I remember being far more cunning about these things at school. Have kids lost the initiative, or just the intelligence?

Similarly, there are the cases of leaving their own, named exercise book on the desk because they couldn't be bothered to hand it to the collector-in, and then subsequently couldn't be bothered to put it in the pile in the cupboard.

Parents, if your child claims they have looked everywhere for their book, they are most probably lying. If they say the teacher has got it, they are most probably lying. The truth is, either the teacher has had to tidy it away for them, in the general skivvy session that is necessary between classes, or the teacher has thrown it in the bin to serve the lazy git right. Besides, then there's less marking.

Talking of lying, kids do it a lot. Of course, teachers do it sometimes too, but only when it's for the best, for example in response to the questions 'Have you marked our books yet?' and 'Why are the computers still broken?', and it's almost compulsory in job interviews, especially to the question 'Why do you want this promotion, with its associated pay rise?'

But one of the most annoying things about working with kids is the barefaced blatant lies they tell you all day long, and even worse is that they think they have pulled the wool over your eyes. Fact is, kids, we know you are lying to us. Yes, you were chewing gum; no, you haven't swallowed it; no, you haven't done your homework; no, your dog didn't eat it; yes, you did write on the desk; yes, you were hitting each other; no, you haven't lost your tie/shoes/book; yes, you did swear; no, you don't have an excuse for being late, et bloody cetera. Lies, lies and damned lies.

There's just nothing we can do about it. Really. Our hands are tied. And sometimes it's just not worth the

challenge. Your word against ours. But it all gets stored up, and one day, revenge will be very sweet . . . if I ever work out how exactly I can get my own back and prove that you never actually did get one over on your teacher.



Top Tips!

Kids are going to lie to you. There's no getting around that fact. The best way to cope is not to take it personally. Lying is an automated defence mechanism, clicking into place when they realize they are wrong and can see no way of wriggling out of it. What you as the teacher should ask yourself is, what do you want the result of this situation to be? To avoid being wound up, make sure your instructions are clear, and reiterate them frequently.

If it's the old chestnut of failing to hand in homework for whatever fanciful reason the pupil comes up with, you need to ensure that you follow your school's policy on homework submission. Insist that any failure to submit homework by the deadline must be accompanied by a note from the parent. This won't always work with every child. Sometimes they don't see their parent in time because they are a shift-worker, for example. Give the pupil a second deadline, usually next lesson, and ensure they make a note of this. If you establish a routine, the pupil knows where they stand, and what the consequences of failure are. Some pupils simply don't have a quiet space at home to do their homework, or have a mass of obligations, from caring for a sick parent or large family, to a constant round of music practices and swimming lessons. If you establish a routine of setting

homework on a certain day and expecting it in after a reasonable period, not just the day after, most pupils will get to grips with this.

Make sure the homework task is interesting. Set something that will appeal to their creativity or curiosity. Writing up notes or finishing questions started in class are not the most scintillating of tasks. Remember why homework is set in the first place: it's not a punishment (although you may feel differently when marking it!). A primary aim of homework is to check the pupil's knowledge and understanding of what they have learned in lessons. You could ask them to present the key points of what they have learned in a different format, such as an explanation for a younger pupil or a poster. You could make it into a challenge or quest, and focus on the work of pupils who do submit their work on time by showing it in lessons, displaying it on the walls, and rewarding those pupils who hand in decent work on time if your school has a reward system in place. Try to eliminate the reasons why a pupil is disinclined to produce good quality homework for you. For older pupils, the nature of coursework should be an incentive in itself, but again there may be a multitude of reasons why the pupil cannot work to a deadline. The answer may be as simple as offering them a quiet place to work on it during lunchtimes, or breaking tasks down into smaller, more manageable, chunks.

These tips are not foolproof, but could reduce the number of times you hear the phrase 'Our printer's out of ink' in any one day. You can also try to have an answer for each excuse. Their printer may well be out of ink, so lend the pupil a cheap CD and let them print the work out in school.

Lies often come as an answer to questions. Don't give the child an opportunity to lie by resisting asking them questions when you know what the answer will be. For example, don't ask, 'Are you chewing?' Give the pupil an immediate choice: they must come and put their gum in the bin or they will lose their break time. Don't ask them what they are up to; tell them you know what they are up to (some bluff may be required here) and that if they don't cease that behaviour then they will face the consequence of their actions.

Consistency is the key here. Make sure the class knows that writing on the desk will result in a shift of desk cleaning at lunchtime. Point out to them that you know who sits where, and what lessons you have had that day. Sometimes the pupils genuinely don't realize how easy it is to solve their crime, and you need to make it clear that they won't get away with it. If you try to limit their opportunities to lie to you, this could well have a knock-on effect in your ability to manage their behaviour too.

Classroom banter

Eavesdropping on kids' conversations can be one of the perks of the job. Granted, most of the kids talk about pretty mindless stuff most of the time, but at times it's hard to suppress a giggle, smirk or sigh at some of their claptrap.

It also reminds you that although drugs and sex references litter their conversations, they still have much to learn, and sometimes it's easy to assume that they know more than they actually do. While a class of 12 year olds will happily

discuss the merits of bongos and skunk, only one will be able to explain to the rest what a joyrider or jaywalker is.

Meanwhile, the street insults rebound around the room with wild abandon, so I'm cheerfully informed of which pupils have a 'ho' for a mother, and who is 'so gay' – the general term of abuse, referring to anything that's bad or wrong. For example, 'Homework? That's so gay'.

Another form of eavesdropping is the ancient practice of note interception. It's an invaluable way of finding out who smokes, who's a bitch, who's going out with who, who likes who, and, more seriously, who's being bullied.

I haven't had any good notes recently, either to read out to the class, or to threaten to show parents at parents' evening. I blame new technology. One of my pupils recently let slip that many of them have their mobiles switched on to 'silent' in lessons so they can text friends in other classes. How am I supposed to find out their gossip now? Confiscating mobile phones is a grey area and it's easier to turn a blind eye than risk having something so expensive stolen from my desk. Although the one time I did confiscate a phone I was quite disappointed. I asked the pupil to show me what she had been texting in class, but she had obviously got to the delete button in time to save herself. Most of the messages were from the girl's mother, sent the previous evening, telling her to come downstairs because her dinner was ready.

When the banter is aimed in your direction it can become more irritating. This is usually the job of the pests in your class. Kids love to nag, but some are far more adept at it than others. Some children don't seem to understand when you tell them 'No'. Or they see the rebuttal as a challenge. Others seem to mishear 'No' or translate the word into 'I'll ask again in three minutes when it's been forgotten that I asked already'. This is what sorts the pests from any other normal kid. No wonder some parents look worn down and worn out.

But this is one of the occasions when I can sincerely say that I blame the parents. Otherwise, how is it that some children quietly accept 'No' as just that, while others refuse to acknowledge an adult response and decide to pester until they get what they want? I'll tell you the reason why; it's because they haven't learned the important lesson that no means no. And the reason they haven't learned it? Because weak-willed gullible parents give in at an early stage and therefore miss the opportunity of nipping pestering in the bud when the child is very young.

I'll give you an example. The kids rush in after break. We've just settled down to some work and then one will ask, 'Can I go to the toilet?' My response is no, we have just had break, and they must wait until the lesson is over. I try not to get into a debate about it; after all, they should accept an authoritative 'No' and I gave them a reason. Many try to debate as a method of pestering. I can guarantee that in 50 per cent of cases, three minutes later the same child will ask again. Again, I will say 'No' and give my reason. It's not just me being mean: one of the lesser school rules is no children out of classrooms during lesson times. I say it's a lesser rule because many other teachers ignore it and send their troublesome pupils on long errands to get them out of their hair.

By now the kids will be doing individual or pair work and I'll be moving around the room, trying to avoid tripping over bags as I check on everyone's work. Then I'll feel a tap on my shoulder, or as high as the child can reach, and a slightly whiny, 'I really need to go to the toilet . . .' At this point I will probably explode, having had enough of the pestering for one lesson, and spout a well-worn speech about no meaning no, and the probability of my changing my mind not being in direct relation to how many times they ask, and I'll throw in a few appropriate footnotes about when they should use the toilet facilities and how

teachers have to wait until breaks and so should they, unless they have a doctor's note.

This pestering scenario doesn't always involve the toilet. It may involve using the computer, borrowing something, leaving the classroom for five minutes to go and take some homework to another teacher, and so on.

One pest in a class is just about manageable. Doing something different in a lesson increases the amount of pestering that goes on, and the amount of pupils doing it. Take, for example, a trip to the computer suite one lesson, and the pestering that goes on reaches critical level. No matter how clear and slo-o-o-w my initial instructions, no matter how long we spend clarifying points with whole-class questions and answers before the activity, hell, it doesn't even matter that everything is reiterated on handouts or on a board that everyone can see, still the pestering comes.

Can I print on coloured paper?

Can we work as a four not a pair?

Can I go onto this really cool website?

Can I go to the toilet?

Okay, some of this pestering is because of the change from the norm, and many of the pests are pacified with my first response. But a hardcore of pests will continue, nagging and repeating themselves and whinging and whining and pulling on my sleeve to get my attention, five or six of them on and on and on . . . It's hard to remain calm. I want to swat them all away like flies. I want to swear at them or shout to shut them up. It's difficult to remain in control. I don't always manage it. Sometimes I'll explode.

'Oh, for goodness' sake, what's the matter?! You know what to do, go back to your seats!' I might yell. ('Goodness' sake' is my own private code. It's a substitute phrase for something far, far worse.) I might even tell them at that

point that if we continue to have so much fussing we won't come and use the computers again.

But why haven't these children learned by the age of 11, 12 or 13 that no means no? That when an adult tells them no they should understand that's the end of the matter and that repetitive nagging doesn't get them what they want?



Top Tips!

As with swearing, make it clear what language is acceptable in your classroom.

Whatever the current vogue for language is, if the language could be offensive to another person, it shouldn't be used. It's a fine line to tread, though: tiptoeing around certain words and phrases only makes it all the more delicious to your pupils. Sometimes the pupils use the latest slang with no real understanding of the word, so demystify it for them. A dull three minutes on its etymology will take the shine off a phrase you don't want to hear.

Mobile phones are a tricky area. They shouldn't be: in an ideal school, there would be a strict policy regarding their use. Some schools don't allow them, but if this is the rule then they must make some provision for pupils who carry them at their parents' insistence. In other schools the rules are more hazy: pupils may have phones, but they must be switched off in lessons. There will always be something distracting for pupils to fiddle about with under the desk, from passing notes and swapping football stickers, to things that don't bear thinking about. Mobile phones are just the latest distraction. If you pace about your classroom as the lesson takes place, popping up behind pupils with unnerving frequency, you will

have a better chance of their keeping distractions stuffed in their bags than if you teach from the front of your classroom like a preacher on the pulpit.

Some teachers insist on silence during their lessons in a bid to stop the classroom banter and pestering, but that's an unobtainable aspiration in most subjects, particularly those that require frequent group work, or even the sharing of textbooks. Banter can help you to get to know your pupils better, but make sure you let your pupils know that you have the power of super hearing, and can pounce on any conversation at any time.

As for the pests, they are much more likely to understand that no means no once you dish out consequences for every subsequent time they pester you for the same thing. Time penalties to be kept in at break often do the trick, especially if it's the toilet that they are pestering you for.

What we sometimes forget

It's easy to be flippant when you have a class seemingly full of liars and whiners and pests and cheats. It's very difficult, in the space of an hour's time slot, to deliver your lesson, enable learning to take place, deal with whatever else gets thrown your way (sometimes literally), and still remember that those 30 or so faces gurning or snoozing or chewing in front of you are all individuals with their own problems and concerns.

There's so much more going on in your average teenager's life than you really want to know, and I wish they would leave their angst and arguments at the classroom door and

come in and get on with the things detailed on my lesson plan, but of course that's impossible. Instead, teachers and other adults in the vicinity are often the buffers and observers of the little dramas played out in teenage lives every day. Often these take the form of arguments. Boys will argue, have a punch up and usually resolve the matter in minutes. Sometimes the more sophisticated ones use arguments to test their powers of sarcasm for the next month, digging at each other across the room, giving sly punches on the way in or out, but nothing compares to the way girls treat each other.

With girls, friendships are constantly tested and under pressure. The closest of friends will turn into the worst of enemies in the blink of a heavily made-up eye. Even the best of friends will constantly dig at each other, pass notes to other girls about each other, and stir up rumours, and that's just the stuff we teachers see. Plenty more goes on in the realms of text messaging, emailing and instant messaging. Some girls believe the best form of defence is attack, while others crumble under the pressure.

I had a row full of girls crumble recently. Three were in tears and one stormed out of the room, meaning I had to get a message to reception and involve the deputy heads in a hunt for the girl around the school site. I could make no sense of the situation either, when I had three or four girls telling me what had caused these events in a manner that the writers of Vicky Pollard from *Little Britain* would be hard pressed to capture in any form of dialogue.

On the flip-side there are the rare moments that make you see a different, more favourable side to a pupil that you teach. Before my GCSE class left for study leave, and before the boy I'm about to tell you about was suspended for rearranging the features on another boy's face, I confiscated a note that this boy and another were passing between them. It ran to two sides of A4 paper, far more than either of them had produced in the whole of Year 11, and when I tried to

read it I found it was a coded message, written in a language only teens understand, that of text messaging. That just made me all the more determined to decipher it, and I spent a lunch hour pondering the contents of this note. When I eventually deciphered it, it did make me see these two little thugs in a different light. So for your elucidation, I have transcribed its contents into a more palatable form of English below:

Boy A: How are relations between you and your fair lady these days?

Boy B: Not so good, I'm afraid. I think she favours another.

Boy A: Who is this other suitor? We should take him to one side and have words.

Boy B: That won't do much good. The fault lies with me.

Boy A: Why, for goodness' sake, would you say that?

Boy B: I really don't appreciate her as much as I should. I really am very upset. She is so special to me. She really is the one.

Boy A: But why does she no longer worship the ground you walk on?

Boy B: I neglected her for football practice.

Boy A: That was silly. I know how it feels to have loved and lost. It's difficult to find a good woman who doesn't have loose morals.

Boy B: I know, I know! I'm such a fool. I'll do whatever it takes to win back her affections. I'm so miserable without her.

Boy A: When I split up with my lady friend I was extremely miserable too. However, the good thing is that we're talking again.

Boy B: Do you think your love can be rekindled?

Boy A: I'm restraining myself. I don't wish to press the lady in case she considers me too serious. Our

conversations are limited to electronic media right now.

Boy B: I'm glad I have your confidence. I wouldn't be able to discuss this matter with any of the other members of the football team. They would consider such talk to be in the realm of the homosexual.

Boy A: Worry not, my good friend, we are men of the world and understand how it is to have loved. They are the homosexuals.

Boy B: I'm laughing out loud at your insights into our fellow team members.

Boy A: I am laughing out loud too.

Then there are the awful home lives that some children endure. The appalling and awkward home lives that many children now accept as their normality is well documented and well known: the bullying, abusive and rowing parents; the broken homes and complicated step-families; the unsettling shunting between relatives; the parents who can barely look after themselves and drag their children up in the manner to which they themselves were accustomed. There are kids in care and kids who are carers for their own parents. It usually goes without saying that the unsettled and abusive kids in school are those with home lives that have shaped them this way.



Top Tips!

It is difficult to try to take into account children's backgrounds when you see the class for one or two hours each week.

Some schools are very keen to fill all staff in on

changes in certain pupils' home lives and circumstances, whereas others operate on a need-to-know basis where you never get to hear why a certain child is so sullen or miserable. Sometimes this is for the best, though. For many children, school and the friends they have there is an escape from their less than desirable home lives, although this also brings its own problems of having so many hormones flying around one enclosed space. But bullies soon pick up on any differences meted out by teachers in their treatment of pupils within a class, and if you start to make public allowances for lack of homework based on what you know about a child's background, that child can soon become a target for the others, many of whom are glad to detract attention from their own sorry lives. So, for example, if you want to excuse a child from their homework because you know something terrible happened at home, then do so in private and certainly not in front of ear-wiggling classmates. Or anticipate pupils' possible difficulties by giving everybody sufficient time to complete the homework and highlighting their access to the library or study rooms at lunchtimes.

However, some pupils, despite their unruliness, relish coming to school, although they'd never admit it. This is why many kids who are suspended usually end up hanging around outside the school gates: they have nowhere else to go. Plus, the structure of school is good for them when they have no structure elsewhere. It's just a pain that they rally against it so vehemently!

5

In addition to teaching

Form time

Part of the duties of most teachers will be to have a form group. The extent of the responsibilities that this entails varies enormously from school to school, as do expectations of how far your responsibility to these children stretches.

Some schools adopt the system that you start off with a bunch of fresh-faced Year 7 pupils and stay with them through the teenage traumas and tantrums until you end up with the same group in Year 11, the fresh-faced part being replaced by acne and thick layers of make-up.

Other schools randomly allocate their teachers with different form groups each year, while others expect teachers to stay with the same year group or key stage.

Each year group has its particular challenges, from helping new pupils find their way around a dauntingly large school building when they first start, to encouraging GCSE revision and career choices. Along the way there are a multitude of issues to deal with, from bullying and discipline to changes in family circumstances, friendships and hormones.

Having consistency as a form group is beneficial to the children, especially as they struggle to adapt to the new regime in secondary school of moving from lesson to lesson with different teachers. As a teacher, you get to see the group of children change and develop over the year, or even over five years. It's also often the only way you ever get to hear

about what's really going on in the school, either from the kids telling you about the really massive fight that occurred at lunchtime, or by the newsletters that appear in the register. No registration duty means you don't get to see what's been stuffed into the register that day, and so could end up oblivious to the fact that the following day is sports day, or that the whole of Year 9 are out on a trip.

At the beginning of each morning and afternoon session, form groups usually return to their form rooms to be registered. Often, the morning session is the longer of the two. Some days you might have assembly. Other days might have specific duties for the form teacher to perform, for example checking the pupils' planners or running a pastoral session. Pastoral in this case is nothing to do with scenes of rolling fields, gambolling lambs and tranquillity. It's more often than not a session the children are hardly awake for, and the teacher half stumbles through, having been handed the appropriate scheme of work by the head of year just the afternoon before. This can also be known as PSHE, or a variation thereof, which stands for Personal, Social and Health Education.

As such, the pastoral session will often involve the teacher making excuses about their personal smoking and drinking habits if the subject is the dangers of smoking or alcohol. You might well be cringing as you carry out the session on personal hygiene, knowing that the infamous Year 9 pupil, 'Smelly Harris', is sitting a little too close for comfort. The names of sexually transmitted diseases are seen as an opportunity to provide an anagram quiz, rather than dwell on questions you really don't know the answers to, and can't seem to find in the book. Of course, you could always revert to the internet if you have a networked computer in your classroom, but you shudder when you think of the computer technician having a laugh about your latest web

search, and then not wishing to use the same toilet as you at break time.

The extent to which you get involved in the children's welfare will depend upon your school's policy. Some schools see your role as form tutor being to take the register and keep the kids quiet if they don't have assembly that day. Others expect your role to involve contacting parents, dealing with the latest misdemeanours of the pupils on report, chasing up homework that a colleague has mentioned to you in the staffroom, and helping to sort out the personal problems of form members.

Sometimes, though, it's just you and your form for half an hour. You've taken the register. You've told them to get out their reading books or planners, or learn some spellings, while you have to distribute letters, read and reply to several letters from parents, chase up absences notes and outstanding library books, inform them of room changes and timetable changes, ensure the special needs children have written everything down correctly, collect in reply slips and money for their next trip, hunt down spare copies of letters home for children who have lost theirs – and suddenly the bell goes, and they're off, leaving you standing there waving the register as the register monitor disappears into the sea of pupils in the corridor outside.

It is better to be busy, though. Having the form group for half an hour when the register took two minutes to get through can be a pain. With one ear you listen sympathetically to the pupil in tears because the dog ate their homework or their best friend called them fat, and with the other ear you hear the ever-growing crescendo in volume of pupils relishing this half hour of freedom to gossip, bang the tables, cram sweets into their mouths when they think you're not looking, and copy their best friend's homework.



Top Tips!

Sometimes a form group and its associated responsibilities can seem overwhelming. As with any job that seems too large, delegate. Even Year 11 pupils can be persuaded to take on 'monitor' jobs if you tell them it will go on their personal statement and impress future employers – even if none of us actually know an employer who took on a school leaver for their ability to carry a register over to reception. Appoint monitors to tidy textbooks, make sure the computers are switched on, ensure there is enough paper in the printer, check desks for new graffiti, close or open windows, order your lunch from the canteen – whatever you think is appropriate and makes life a little easier for you.

Getting to know the kids well over a number of years is all well and good, but they will see you as being on their side and some will begin to take liberties with regards to wearing trainers, jewellery, make-up and piercings. So much so that it's quite normal to think of yourself as a perpetual nag, one who struggles to find answers to the injustices of being a teenager, such as to why one girl isn't allowed to have so many piercings, even though we can't see them, and being told to pick on her instead of badgering another about his hair dye.

Keeping the pupils occupied during form periods is a critical role. They will become more resistant to this as they grow older, because they will want to spend the time discussing amongst themselves how drunk they got at the weekend, or why their band is going to make it big, or what a slag so-and-so is, but if you get them into a routine early on, they will know what to expect, and what your expectations are.

On days that are not assigned to assembly or PSHE sessions, plan activities that every pupil can participate in. During their first couple of years in the school, you can give them mental arithmetic tests on one day of the week, and spelling tests on another. Ask your colleagues in different departments for their lists of key spellings they expect the children to learn, and this way you can vary the spellings each week. You could have general knowledge quizzes, or quizzes on current affairs.

Another thing you could do with your form, if your head of year agrees, is to encourage them to write in personal diaries. Tell them that you are the only one who will be reading it, so if there's anything worrying them they can write it in their diary. It will help you to sort out any potential bullying issues or problems that are affecting their school work. Otherwise, the diaries can be used to write about what they did at the weekend, and this way you get to know your form members a little better.

A final idea is project work with your form. This will keep them focused, while working in groups is a tick in the citizenship box, and it even has learning objectives. A project could be something like the desert island project. Each session, the groups have to come up with part of a story depending on the information you give them. For example, in the first session you could tell them that they wake to find themselves on the beach of a desert island. They have to construct the scenario of how they got there, perhaps by a shipwreck. In the next session they have to describe day one on the island, and you can give them criteria such as describing how they make a shelter, what items they find in their pockets, where they locate food and water. This project can run and

run, because you can extend it to cover as many days on the island as you choose before they are rescued, with something different to think about each day, such as drawing a map of their island, designing a raft out of certain materials, dealing with wild animals, deciding how to signal for help. Their project work could take the form of diary entries, messages in bottles, plans, designs and maps.

Being a form tutor can be a challenging position because of the multitude of responsibilities to perform each week. Sometimes the most challenging thing can be keeping the form occupied with something constructive while you deal with pupils on an individual basis. Project work is an ideal way to do this.

The school production

Whether the school production is an annual music and dance extravaganza or a nativity play of a familiar format, its existence takes priority over everything else. It is usually referred to as a 'production' rather than a play or musical, perhaps because the latter terms promise something so specific, which a 'production' doesn't necessarily have to deliver.

The school production becomes a black hole into which the children get sucked, swiftly followed by lesson plans, lunch breaks and sanity. The theory goes that the more children there are taking part, the more relatives there will be to fill up the school hall when the production is finally staged. The flip-side of this is that the more children are involved, the more disruptive it is for everyone else.

As a rule, teachers take one of two sides. There are those that sign up to help, relishing the opportunity to be a part of something that lets them see a different side to the children, to do something as a team, and to create something of which the school can be proud.

The other side is those that abstain. Abstention may seem like the lazy option, but it is in fact the martyr's role. Sometimes there is simply no role for you, as a teacher, to fulfil. This is particularly true when you join a new school. It matters not if you have previously single-handedly designed costumes for a whole stable of nativity animals or coordinated the lighting and special effects for *Oliver!*, because there will usually be some old codger of a teacher who has done that job since time began and sticks to it tenaciously, growling slightly at anyone who threatens the existing hierarchy.

Even worse, teachers not involved in the production end up babysitting all the children too naughty or disaffected to take part, and this is the reason why so many teachers sign up to help in the first place.

Of those volunteering their assistance, a good many just want to be in charge. It's not just the children who have stars in their eyes, but also the drama teacher. The art department's contribution to scenery painting is not a selfless act of philanthropy, but probably their greatest chance for a wide audience for their work. It's also penance for the lack of marking that comes with that particular job.

If, as a parent, your kids are in a school production this year, and you're nodding off between the scenes in which they feature, here's a little game for you. Count how many teachers you can see spaced around the hall and at the edge of the stage, and then rank them in order of starry-eyed desperation. You can award them points if they are mouthing the words to the songs, distracting the performers on stage by pointing out directions, or just generally

trying to look important. Then try to spot your child's teacher(s). If they are absent, it will be because they have had a rough time containing the excluded kids, or are at that moment calming down the overexcited lambs backstage, and will never see the production themselves. So give them a sympathetic smile at the next parents' evening, and say no more about it . . .



Top Tips!

Find yourself a niche when it comes to helping with the school production.

Drama, art and music teachers have particular roles to play, and if you teach design and technology you should be able to contribute in some important way. If you don't want to be assigned to 'crowd control' or any of the other less desirable jobs, you have to be quick off the mark to sign up for something more fulfilling. In addition, by getting more involved you could earn brownie points from the senior management, plus you can understand why the kids are hyperactive or haven't done their homework by the time they get to your lesson.

If you're flexible, you could incorporate aspects of the production into your lessons to motivate the pupils in between rehearsals. Science teachers could take the opportunity to explain how the lighting works. In maths, ask the children to find out the optimal ticket price to offset overheads and make a small profit. Geographers could find out something about the place where the play is supposed to be set, or complete a project on entertainment facilities in the locality. Historians may be able to investigate the

period in which the play was set or written, whether focusing on the politics of the time or even the fashions, which could then inform the art department and those designing the costumes. In English, pupils could study advertising materials for shows and plays, and then create their own. Or they could try turning some of the script into prose, perhaps trying to change the genre.

There are many possibilities for incorporating the production into lessons, and by doing so you will hopefully keep the pupils interested in learning even when there's chaos in other parts of the school day. If you know that various members of your classes will be missing lessons, you could set project work so that the children can pick up what they were doing even if they miss a lesson or two. Or you could make sure that each lesson, while following the same theme, is a self-contained lesson that doesn't require any knowledge from the last in order for the pupils to participate.

Training courses

Training courses are an essential part of teachers' working lives. Also known as Inset (in-service training), you will spend a few days each year in school without the pupils there, so that you can be brought up to date on new school initiatives, or participate in first aid training, or doodle on your notepad as a speaker enlightens you about something that you apparently need to know. A day in school without the kids sounds great until you suddenly begin to sympathize with their daily plight of having to sit still for hours on end and listen carefully in case something really important

is being said. Some Inset sessions take place in 'twilight' time, which is after-school hours. It is aptly named, as after a hard day's teaching, this part of the day can be particularly tiring, and can be akin to the twilight zone. You may or may not turn into a zombie.

Then there are courses that mean you get a day off school with the promise of coffee breaks and buffet lunches. As a teacher, you will be sent on a course for one of a few reasons. Maybe the government has introduced a new strategy that you must learn about, digest and implement by Monday week, and so off you go to learn about it in some third-rate hotel in the back of beyond for the day.

Or it could be that your school throws a load of brochures your way and tells you to take your pick from the courses, as they've discovered you haven't been on a course for over three years, and are worried that this must be affecting the way you teach – perhaps manifesting itself in that grimace every time you have to cover for colleagues who are on yet another course.

For paranoid teachers, being told you are to attend a course on behaviour management, for example, is a huge blow to the ego, and will lead to many accusing stares at fellow members of staff as you think about why you're the only one who needs help with their behaviour management. You may also silently accuse colleagues of grassing you up to the Inset coordinator because your classes are always so noisy.

Training courses themselves take on such variety, but here I want to demonstrate what training courses aim to do, and how this affects the mind of an average teacher.

The last training course I was sent on was on behaviour management (see my paranoid points above), which accounts for at least half of all training courses, I reckon, being the issue that will never be resolved in teaching, however many government initiatives are issued, and however

many psychologists spend their careers trying to find new solutions to ancient problems. I could sum up all those training courses in one sentence: Kids have been, and will always be, kids, so accept it.

These courses on behaviour management, of which I have experienced a fair few in my time, are not really designed to give you any new and all-encompassing strategies that really work in the classroom, because if it were that simple, I'm sure the inventor or discoverer would sell the secret to a publishing company for multi-millions, rather than trekking round the guest lecturer circuit in beige slacks and an ill-matching tie-and-jacket combo. (Training courses leave plenty of time to analyse the clothing choices of the speakers.)

Instead, many training courses trot out the Child Psychology 101 course, in the hope that it will change the way that you, the teacher, feel about children – understanding why they swear at you, ignore you, lie to you, and so on – so that you don't become angry with them, but instead reach a state of pure enlightenment with the class from hell.

This brainwashing effect will work to varying degrees for a limited period after the training course only, depending on how desperate you are to believe it. For example, a couple of the key messages I took with me from my last course were as follows.

First, don't tell children what to do. They won't do it. Instead, give them choices, for example: 'Either you choose to put that away, or you choose to continue waving it around the room, in which case there will be a consequence. It's your choice'. I must admit, my mind boggles once I get onto the next stage in this imaginary scenario, for example: 'You can choose to remove your hands from my neck, or you can choose to (cough) carry on and face the (choke) consequence'.

Second, bad behaviour that follows such a statement should be ignored as much as possible. No child wishes to

lose face in front of their friends, so they will swear, raise their eyes to the heavens, badmouth you, etc. You, the teacher, should remain focused on the outcome you want, rather than the route the child takes in achieving it. On no account swear back, or tell them that they won't be at school for ever, and you know where they live.

But let me put this into context for you, and show you how training courses can allow your brain to accept that you are entirely helpless and unable to administer the punishment the child deserves, while neutralizing all urges to show the child how much they have wound you up.

The other day I was pulling out of the school gates when I saw a bad-ass 12-year-old pupil messing about in the road. He was pushing one of the other kids into the road, and then kicking the tyres of parked cars, spitting at wind-screens, and ignoring the fact that the road is always a vehicular minefield of double-parked parents, and teachers with their feet on the accelerator. I checked my mirrors, and there was no other teacher around to deal with it, or not, as the case may be. As I saw a bus coming down that side of the road, I acted instinctively. Well, that's not strictly true. I'm afraid if I dig deep enough, my instinct is a dark one indeed – I would have been quite happy for that little git to reap the consequences of his actions, whatever they may be when he was stood in the middle of the road with a bus approaching.

Instead, my civil response was to beep my horn, wind down my window and call over to him to get out of the road. As I wound up my window, I heard him turn to his friends and say something along the lines of, 'No, I will not f***** get out of the f***** road', and I'm sure I would have seen the appropriate hand gestures had I glanced back.

So what would your response be? With me, at first, pre-training course teacher emerged. This involved much muttering under my breath, listing ways I could get the

sod back the next day, and fervent wishes that he experienced first-hand the consequences of his bloody actions.

Then I checked my rear-view mirror. He was no longer in the middle of the road, but was hopping down the side, one leg on the pavement and one in the gutter. And then the effects of the training course began to kick in. I felt a calmness wash over me, with all thoughts of revenge being washed away and replaced by a feeling of peace, and probably some glib phrase like 'kids will be kids'.

You see, he *had* followed my instructions – almost – and got out of the road. The secondary bad behaviour was merely his way of not losing face in front of the others. It can't have been directed at me, his saviour and moral guardian. What he really wanted to say was, 'Thank you, I have been behaving foolishly, I will take your advice because I know you are right and that under your stern and nagging exterior you are doing these things because you really care'.

And so my evening wasn't ruined by thinking that a little idiot had got the better of me. The training course worked! I'm brainwashed! I then had to try to block out the thought that all those psychologists are far more successful with adult behaviour patterns than the behaviour of children . . .



Top Tips!

Training courses might seem to consist of teaching the proverbial grandmother how to suck eggs, but there's always something there you can take away with you. Whether that something is new strategies to try out in the classroom or the free biros and notepads given to delegates will depend on the quality of the course.

Courses can remind you of all those different tactics you used to try but have since forgotten. Attending a course with teachers from different schools gives you a chance to swap notes on everything from whole-school policies to how many lessons they spend on a particular part of the curriculum. Networking with other teachers is useful in so many ways, and not just so you have somebody to play 'keyword bingo' with at the next course you attend.

The school holidays

Sometimes, when I've had a bad day, I ask myself, or anyone vaguely in the vicinity, why I'm a teacher. One of the replies I hear most often is, 'Oh well, just think of the holidays'. It's true, of course, that the long breaks that teachers get make the job seem very attractive. Sometimes each half term presents itself not as a chunk of weeks or a scheme of work, but as days to be counted down to when I don't have to get up so early, and can stay up a bit later on a week night.

But as any teacher will quickly point out, we need the holidays. Not just to recover from an exhausting job, both physically and mentally, because there are many other professions whose hours exceed any European recommendations, and which have their own particular stresses. The holidays are, admittedly, a chance to catch up with everything for which there aren't enough hours in the week during term time. There is always something hanging over you as a teacher, whether it's marking or planning or even extra research into your own subject area.

I have now concluded, after many experiments, that the only way for me as a teacher to enjoy the school holidays is

to get away. I'm not talking about jetting off to foreign places as soon as the final bell rings, although of course that is one option that I would love to take. A few days in a different environment is enough to recharge the batteries, however exhausting it turns out to be.

That way, I'm not tempted to sit at my computer surfing the net under the guise of research or work, discovering that there are a thousand different ways to teach one particular lesson, which ultimately makes me feel inadequate and not at all refreshed. And then, of course, I end up trying to buy some work-related books online and get caught up in the online retailers' snares of special offers and free postage and packaging if I spend just a little bit more, and before I know it I'm checking out the top 100 paperbacks and wishing I had more time to read for pleasure . . . if only I didn't spend so long online . . .

Discussion boards for teachers are also quite compulsive, especially if I post a response, because I then feel compelled to check the site every hour just to see if somebody's responded to my post, and then I wander off on to threads that are completely irrelevant but sometimes entertaining, mainly comparing how many reports have been written and who has the worst deal when it comes to work that must be completed during the holidays.

Nope, get away from the computer and the teetering piles of unmarked books is my answer. Being in a different place means that time takes on a different meaning too. The twilight time of the end of the school day becomes time for a late lunch. I no longer feel compelled to get ready for bed before the *News at Ten*. I still wake up early, of course, but this is a bonus, because it means more time to spend doing different things.

It's the delight in the small things that makes a difference. Meandering along in the car, stopping wherever I fancy, not just doggedly driving from home to school and back again.

Going to see a film in the afternoon, in a cinema devoid of children because they are all queuing to see the latest hyped-up blockbuster. I can even visit a tourist attraction and enjoy it, without getting the urge to count heads or tell a child to remove their fingers from one of the exhibits, although I must confess the gift shop always makes a profit out of me when I spot anything vaguely educational.

But then it's back home, noticing afresh that the housework needs doing, reports need writing, and that there are only a couple of days left before the holiday is officially over. And, of course, I haven't checked my email or the discussion boards so there goes an afternoon (or two) sat in front of the computer, urging myself to clear the desk space to make room for the school work, but not being able to let go just yet . . .

One thing I never do, though, is go near the school building during the holidays. This is particularly true for the summer break. I know that there are tortured souls who spend the first week or two of the summer holidays faithfully going into school to clear out filing cabinets, plan for next term, and so on. They often then take a week or two off before starting up again with the unnecessary going-into-school thing, to prepare for the next term (AGAIN?!) and be there for exam results.

I tend to think of this as a boy scout attitude of do-gooding, but in all seriousness there is something immensely sad about the whole thing. I suspect that the teachers who inhabit the empty corridors and echoing classrooms in holiday time either have no lives of their own, or perhaps hate their families so much that they would rather be in a stuffy old building during the best time of the year.

I really am struggling to discover what takes up so much time, though. What takes up to four weeks to do that can't be crammed into the Inset day at the start of term? I imagine it to be a coffee-swilling dithering and gossiping kind of

work. By the end of the summer term, books are all marked, the first week's lessons should consist of the introductory kind, there's no work yet to stick up on the walls . . . what are they doing? When you start a new job, you're normally sent your timetable over the summer and expected in school on the first day of term. There's not much you can do to prepare until school gets under way. That's not to say I don't have my own lists of things to do, but I wouldn't waste my precious time off worrying over them. The summer holidays are really the only holidays where teachers can feel a small sense of completion.

Let's face it, we were given a long holiday for a reason. We need to be refreshed, we need to bring something extra and fun back to the classroom when we finally have to drag ourselves back, and we're not going to get that by hanging around a grim old building all summer, seeing the same grey faces of our colleagues and whinging about work. So make the most of it, and my advice to teachers who find themselves chained to their blackboards is: go home! Leave it all behind!



Top Tips!

As a teacher, there are certain things you have to accept. One of them is that however long you spend changing fonts on your worksheets for Year 8 to make them more appealing, the pupils are still going to graffiti all over them and leave them on your floor at the end of the lesson. Sometimes the pressure and volume of work can seem overwhelming. There are always things that can be improved, cupboards to be tidied, and paperwork to sort out.

Accept that you will probably spend a good part of each half term break marking or report writing or preparing, but also understand that there are teachers who do jump on that plane straight after the final bell and return a week later looking bronzed and relaxed, ready to face anything that's thrown at them (sometimes literally). They may have to work a bit harder after school for a week or so to make up for not spending the week in despair, but the balance between work and life outside work means that taking full advantage of the holiday gives these teachers the energy and enthusiasm to tackle the new term with gusto. Otherwise, you return to school wondering where the week has gone and feeling like there has been no holiday at all; instead, you have just gone through some kind of purgatory before reaching the gates of hell – sorry, school – once more.

This is especially true for the summer break. The last week of the school year is usually a time to wind down anyway, so while the pupils are watching the 'educational' video you are showing as a treat, use the time to file your worksheets or pack away books. When the pupils race out of the building with the taste of freedom within reach, you should do the same too. At least, give it a try. I don't know how much evidence there is in the rumour that many teachers simply fade away after retiring because they are not used to unwinding, but better to hedge your bets and look at your summer break as a practice for a long and stress-free retirement.

Trying to get away from it all

Once upon a time, before I became a teacher, I had a friend who was already a teacher, and we decided to go on holiday together. We set off for a hot part of the world at possibly the hottest time of year, and for the most part our visions of pool-lounging and cocktail-slurping and swatting giant insects were realized. But something strange would happen whenever we talked to people and they asked us what we did. I was quite happy to divulge the dullness of my daily grind, but my friend would elbow me in the ribs as some fanciful or absurd job title spilled from sunburned lips, leaving me slightly puzzled. You see, I always thought that saying you were a teacher was a perfectly acceptable thing to do; after all, the teachers I knew were mostly friends from university who seemed to be living pretty much the lives they were living as students: sharing houses, going down the pub, playing on games consoles, and generally not taking life too seriously.

So you see, I never really understood my friend's reluctance to let people know there was a teacher in their midst. Until I became one myself. Now I see it all too clearly, and have been known to poke companions in the ribs myself or at least give them a steely glare as they are about to confess my profession to holiday companions. The reasons for this are not always straightforward, but can be generally summarized as follows:

1. People see teachers as bastions of society and morality, and those responsible professionals who look after their kids for five or more hours a day. They do not want to know that teachers have a life outside school, and frown upon seeing them baring pale flesh on exotic beaches or hogging the karaoke at a dodgy ex-pat bar.
2. People see teachers as those scary/boring/bossy people that made their own school days a misery, and don't

particularly want to share bar or beach space with that type of wacko, thank you very much. Besides, all that learning can't be good for you, can it? I'm probably mentally correcting their grammar as we converse over spaghetti and lager.

3. Those other people on holiday are actually teachers themselves. Now this category can actually be subdivided into teachers who don't want others to know they are teachers in case of reasons (1) or (2) – like me – or teachers who actively seek out their own kind when on holiday because they can't actually bear being apart from their work or their kind. Teachers who seek out other teachers are a group to be very much avoided, because they really are a scary lot. This is yet another reason to deny to everybody that you have anything to do with schools, and make up fanciful professions such as lifeguard or zoo-keeper to anyone who asks.

In fact, teachers who seek out other teachers maybe just can't help themselves. It takes a lot for me to be able to unwind from work – my insomnia is testimony to that – but a few thousand miles, a different climate, a few bottled beers and a lack of TV and newspapers is usually quite helpful. But once I'm in that state of bliss, it's only fragile, and is easily shattered by somebody peering over the top of their glasses in a certain way as they study a menu or crossword, or by a stern voice echoing across the pool. I try to ignore it, but then the niggling feeling is confirmed: as I surreptitiously glance around, the other holiday-makers come into clear focus – they are not just Les and Janet from Wigan, but actually Les and Mrs Johnson, SENCO at Wighall Middle School, and Mrs J has just cornered Shelley from Blackpool (also known as Miss Price) to discuss how many statemented kids they have at their respective schools.

Some people claim to have a gaydar – a radar that spots the only gays in the vicinity. Some teachers have a similar device for picking out members of their profession so that they can corner them at the bar and bore them senseless with talking shop. JUST LET IT GO! That's what I want to yell. And that's why I am so reluctant to confess what I really do for a living on holiday.

Unfortunately, with the entire teaching profession taking their holidays at the same time, the chances of bumping into other teachers on holiday is very high. And they permeate every type of holiday you can imagine. Cheapo packages on the Costas aren't just reserved for normal people, oh no, they're full of teachers who, just like you, waited until the last minute to get a late deal. Cultural tours? Right up a teacher's street. Backpacking in some remote corner of the earth, far from the madding crowd? That's just the type of thing that appeals to a teacher. Soaking up the rays in an exclusive child-free hotel? Look around, you're not alone.

I've been hungover, with bloodshot eyes and slicked back hair, cramming boiled eggs in my gob at a communal breakfast table, when a middle-aged woman has sat herself down and within 30 seconds has called over to me, 'You're a teacher, aren't you?' I've been sat on a plane, ready for a snooze, when the woman next to me has started talking – and talking and talking – about her school and how nice it is to get away from it all, and what's my school like, and so on for the entire four-hour flight. Do I have 'that look' about me, even on holiday? Is it the grey skin, the twitching eye, a haunted look when children come close, the desire to plan everything in timetable style? Does the DCSF number come with an indelible mark on your forehead, only visible to those in the know? So why haven't I seen it?



Top Tips!

It's all very strange to be singled out as a teacher on holiday when you're trying desperately to get away and forget it all, and very infuriating. I can think of only two solutions to avoid other teachers on holiday: first, a remote villa far from anyone else, particularly those who single you out to discuss Ofsted or outdo you on behavioural issues at their school, and second, staggered school holidays around the country to reduce the risk of running into a concentration of schoolteachers when that's exactly the thing you're trying to escape.

Other than that, surround yourself with non-teaching companions who aren't remotely interested in your life at the chalk-face, and insist they make you perform some forfeit every time you start to mention school or get 'that look' about you when you spot somebody's unruly children dive bombing into the pool. Ask them for their help in creating an alter-ego for yourself whose occupation is so dull that even other teachers aren't going to ask too much about it. And make sure they scrutinize your suitcase for any give-away items of clothing like sensible sandals and light cardigans.

The last boy scout

My own experience of school was not always a happy one. Although I started secondary school bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, by the time I'd been through the mill of teenage hormones I was definitely not prefect material. Strangely, it seemed like most of my fellow classmates clamoured to be

prefects or run the tuck shop or edit the school magazine, and I was gratified that my hunch about their ulterior motive was right: they just wanted good references on their university application forms. And possibly also the power to make younger pupils cower in terror for running down the corridors.

I believed that working to rule was a good principle. I was not quite sure what it meant exactly, but I knew there was no way an employer was going to get free labour out of me to fill their own pockets. With that attitude, imagine my surprise upon entering the school environment once more, only to find all those prefects had grown up and turned into teachers.

Here they were, volunteering to sit on committees that discussed everything from new uniform ideas to spending the ICT budget. Then they were running clubs at lunchtime and after school for no kind of overtime pay. Then came the even bigger commitments: staff to accompany overexcited sweet-scoffing kids for 48 hours on a coach that was part of the short break to France, somebody needed to design and make the costumes for the school production, someone else needed to give up their weekend to drive the minibus so that the debating team could attend a competition. I shook my head in disbelief at times, finding it hard to comprehend why you would want to give up your precious free time to do something that seemed above and beyond the call of duty.

Can you guess what happened next? Slowly, I got sucked in. First of all was a theatre trip which wouldn't return to school until midnight, but meant that I missed an afternoon of lessons that included the rudest boy I had ever met. Fair swap, I thought. Then came the annual residential that was organized by my department, and for which they really needed me to go, almost to the point of begging and bribery. It was exhausting. It was non-stop worry and head-counting

and checking details and organizing children who could barely dress themselves and got homesick, but we had a great time. By the following weekend I almost forgot I hadn't had a day off for twelve days, and that four of those days had consisted of only five hours off duty (for sleeping!).

Pouncing on a willing residential trip-goer, other teachers saw me as a pawn to be exchanged amongst departments, and I got to see new parts of the country, as well as many a motorway service station. I started to develop a new skill of not retching violently whenever a child was sick near me on the bus, and my supermarket loyalty card began to show the data miners a warped picture of myself, as I racked up the points for hundreds of pounds' worth of oven chips, bread rolls and bottles of squash.

But that wasn't all. I started two lunchtime clubs and got so carried away that I organized competitive leagues with neighbouring schools just for the satisfaction of watching our school see off the toffs from up the road. Having strong opinions about the way in which the school was being run, it was all I could do to stop myself becoming a nuisance and joining the school improvement committee. What had happened to me? I was turning into the last boy scout, into that cliché of a teacher at whom I had scoffed only a short while ago.

However, I do have my limits. While I don't mind volunteering for extra-curricular activities, and enjoy working with the children outside lesson time, I do retain my right to say no. Unfortunately, that's not always the way that everyone else sees it, especially the management team. There are certain expectations placed upon you as a teacher that you are not always willing or able to fulfil. Sometimes it's as simple as the choice between getting coursework marked on time and attending the school fête, or between finishing the reports for the deadline and helping with after-school play rehearsals. That's without confessing to have an outside life with its own obligations and appointments.

I may well be glowered at in the morning meeting when the staff are thanked for supporting the Christmas fête, but I know what would really hit the fan had I not finished writing my form group's reports.



Top Tips!

Contributing to the extra-curricular activities in your school will be expected. If your spare time for this type of thing is limited, find out which events are the highest profile, where your face really should be seen, and which you can avoid. If you don't want to be at the beck and call of your colleagues when they need a helping hand with their particular project, start up your own activity. This could be a lunchtime club that meets for half an hour each week, based either on the subject you teach, or on your own particular interests.

For extra brownie points enter a select group of pupils into a national competition, whether it's story writing or technology projects. This way, not only are you credited with raising the profile of the school, but you also stand the chance of a few days out of school attending regional finals if you all put in the effort.

It is easy to be taken for granted and if you give away your favours too freely, you will find yourself put upon. Although it's great to spend time with the children outside normal lessons, and you get to see sides of them that don't perhaps come across in your classes, stretching yourself across too many extra-curricular commitments is exhausting, and being forced to give up your precious spare time should not be part of the package.

Have a break before you have a breakdown

What exactly does break time mean, anyway? A break from the kids? A chance to tidy up the classroom before it all starts again? Not enough time to boil the kettle and drink your coffee? An opportunity to detain misbehaving pupils? Just enough time to get to the staff toilets, queue, and race back to the other end of the school where your classroom is? Playground duty?

It's no wonder teachers can feel stressed by the end of the day. Lunchtimes might consist of putting up displays (whatever the new Workload Agreement might advise), running clubs, attending rehearsals, phoning parents, raiding stock cupboards, photocopying, supervising detention, canteen duty, helping pupils who have been absent to catch up, marking, preparing, trying to find a printer that works to print out your worksheet for next lesson, chasing down the only set of textbooks you need for after lunch, or trying to find another member of staff you desperately need to talk to.

You might even have time to eat lunch. There are teachers who are stalwarts of the staffroom, who sink down into their favourite chairs each and every lunchtime; at least, they always seem to be there when you pop your head round for five minutes. Maybe they are the same teachers who waste their valuable holiday time haunting the corridors of the school building, preparing or clearing up because they didn't want to relinquish their lunch breaks.



Top Tips!

There is something to be said for spending some of your lunchtime in the staffroom.

It's a change of scene, and a change of conversation – this may well be your only chance all

day to participate in conversation with adults. Or at least to listen to some outrageous gossip about the headteacher. The staffroom gives you an opportunity to discuss unruly pupils, and it can be a great comfort to discover that you're not the only one who struggles to contain a particular class. If things can seem out of perspective in the classroom, having a laugh about them with other members of staff can make you realize that it's not just you that Year 9 wind up.

Make sure that some of your break time resembles just that: a break from the constant rushing around. At least, until one of your form members knocks on the staffroom door asking for you because of some emergency of epic proportions, such as forgetting their dinner money or getting a splinter.

Sometimes, though, the staffroom may seem to you to be a stressful place in its own intimidating way. Maybe it is a hive of gossip that you just don't want a part of. Workplace bullying is a topic that often comes up when teachers cite the specific stresses of their job. You might just dislike the company of the teachers who stake claim to their corner of the staffroom. It could be that you don't see eye to eye with the teacher who regularly allows members of one of your teaching groups to wander the school on errands when they should be catching up with their coursework with you, but don't feel qualified to question their authority.

In this case, show what an asset you are to the school by throwing yourself into extra-curricular activities. After all, a change can be as good as a rest. If I sit down for more than ten minutes at lunchtime, I'm tempted to snooze, and it's very difficult to drag myself back up again and get enthused for a long afternoon. You don't have to make work for yourself: if

you don't want to run your own club or society, find a colleague who already does something you could help out with.

Fresh air is a good stress buster, especially if you would otherwise never see the light of day between parking your car first thing, and staggering out again in the evening. In this case, you could offer to help out with a sports practice or nature club, and ensure you get your daily dose of daylight. Invest in a warm waterproof, because winter is the time that most of us crave to see the daylight, especially if it's not yet light when you arrive at school in the morning, and almost dark again when you leave. There are many ways to maximize your own chances of well-being while combining them with school activities. You don't have to think you must conform to the stereotype of the teacher swilling coffee in the staffroom every break time.

Tour of duty

Unfortunately, not every break time is sacred. Every teacher at some point gets drafted in for a duty of some sort, one of which may be dinner hall duty. Dinner hall duty is not a pleasant task. Plus it comes around far too often. It's a total bombardment of the senses which is dulled by poor acoustics and general fatigue. Scraping cutlery and chairs, screeching voices, slammed-down trays, burned toast at break time and chip fat at lunchtime, rubbish and leftovers blatantly dropped, and the quick strides needed to reach tables before they are abandoned and left covered in crumbs and unidentifiable (possibly regurgitated) remains of food.

For pupils, the dinner hall is the place to eye up older boys if you are a Year 9 girl, gossip with your mates, play fight if you are a boy, spend every last penny on provisions in an effort to last the two hours before the next feeding time, and of course the number one challenge of splatting the teachers on duty with custard or sticky gunk without their noticing. A close second-favourite activity is to time the teacher's pacing well enough to desert your table and avoid taking your tray to the scraping zone or having to wipe down your table.

Although dinner hall duty lasts only 15 minutes or half an hour, this is one of those times that Stephen Hawking needs to investigate, as time stretches painfully into unfathomable dimensions. It's never this long when you have a cup of tea to drink, and the scorched skin on my tongue is testament to that. And when you're in need of a desperate dash to the toilet/photocopier/stock cupboard, the time disappears in a flush of a chain or the flash of a photocopier light.

Another problem with dinner hall duty is the effect that it has on the rest of the day. It may be just 15 minutes but the knock-on effect can be felt over and over. Without the respite from the noisy argumentative kids, waves of tiredness begin to lap around during the following hours, and by the final bell of the day the extra strain has caught up. Some schools organize their duties by allocating staff members to days of the week, so you know that every Thursday is Duty Day. Other schools have rotas for the entire year, where your duties are scheduled for a week at a time. Those in the know consult the duties rota as soon as possible and arrange courses or hospital appointments to coincide with duty days or weeks. This is especially tough on colleagues if the duty is done in pairs, as supply teachers forget more often than not to cover duties, or more usually no replacement is scheduled.



Top Tips!

Ideally, teachers would be relieved of all duties and a crack team of security experts would be drafted in to patrol during breaks and lunchtimes, looking menacing in heavy-duty food-resilient uniforms and slapping batons into their palms as they marched around the dinner hall. The hall itself would be left sparkling, meaning that the kitchen staff could concentrate on proper cooking rather than sweeping up after hundreds of littering hooligans. And I'd have time to grab a cup of tea and not see or hear a child for a whole blissful ten minutes.

Unfortunately, until that day comes, duties are an extra burden to the teacher's life. There are ways to prepare yourself for the trials of duty time, though. If you know you are scheduled to patrol the dinner hall, then make sure you wear clothes that will stand up to a bit of mess that may well be flicked your way. Light colours show up ketchup and pizza crust more than dark colours, but dark colours do fall victim to macaroni cheese and mayonnaise. Maybe keep some wet wipes in your desk on those days. Check the soles of your shoes if positioned in the canteen, for you would not want to slip over in front of a baying crowd of children.

If you have playground duty or bus duty, remember your waterproof and umbrella, because even if the sun has been smiling down all day, the minute you step outside the storm clouds will gather. Remember too the games children love to play: 'Soak the teacher by stamping in a nearby puddle' is a perennial favourite, so watch where you position yourself.

If you need your cup of caffeine, then arrange for a colleague to make you one and do the same for them when it's their tour of duty. Some schools don't allow you to walk around with a mug full of boiling water (I can't imagine why) so think ahead on your beverage quaffing logistics to avoid disappointment later.

Bear in mind that many a new government initiative will have an effect on your tour of duty somehow. Recently we have had the whole 'Ban the turkey twizzler' controversy, and now we too have allegedly turned over to a regime of healthy eating in the school canteen. While this is something that I wholeheartedly support, so far there are two problems. The first is that many of the kids are refusing to eat the 'crap' now served up by the canteen, claiming they only like chips, and resisting the opportunity to try anything in healthy hues like green. Second, the black market in sweet selling has gone through the roof, with budding entrepreneurs fleecing kids of their dinner money in exchange for chewy sticky sweets bought wholesale. They have started to resemble Bash Street Kids, those cheeky chaps from some comic or other, with their booty bulging from their pockets, and this means an increase in sweet wrapper rubbish across the whole school. Plus you have to keep an eye out for the selling of contraband in addition to everything else.

Sports Day

There are certain occasions when horrific childhood memories come flooding back to you as a teacher. For some,

it may be the smell of fear in the exam hall on a sunny May morning. For me, it's Sports Day.

Now I'm not completely unsporty. I exercise regularly, and even enjoy it. But I have never seen the point of Sports Day. It's just a big exercise in showing off, as the same kids triumph in track and field, while the others shiver in their shorts and are forced to throw small yet wrist-bendingly heavy balls, or whack their ankles on hurdles, or trot around the track while under the scrutiny of the entire school.

Teachers either take immediate control of their chosen activity, or wait to be allocated a role, depending on whether the PE teacher picks you for their team or not. After picking up the high-jump pole for the five hundred and twelfth time with a fixed grin of encouragement plastered across your face as your back clicks once again, crowd control looks like a cushy job. This is until you arrange a swap and realize that the kids are not going to sit in lines, pick up their sweet wrappers, or stop booing, however much you try to make yourself heard.



Top Tips!

My tips for surviving Sports Day are as follows. Learn how to use the digital camera, and quickly make yourself indispensable as the official photographer. This is also a great excuse to disappear for a while every hour, to 'download the pictures'. However, if another teacher beats you to this ploy, the symptoms of hayfever can be easy to feign with the help of a well-concealed onion. Even better is the sprained ankle approach, which should afford you a seat in the sun far away from errant javelins. Or, if your school is desperate

for helpers, you will be given a stopwatch and be made a finishing line judge, which is virtually Sports Day royalty.

Marking madness

It's been bothering me that I'm one of the laziest teachers I know. It's not something I've wanted to own up to, but I feel it's time for a confessional tone.

It's not that I'm lazy in the classroom. I'm certainly not the type of teacher who sits at their desk during a lesson, letting the little scamps get on with it. How else would they feel threatened into working if I weren't towering over them, sneaking around in non-squeaky shoes, and sweeping down to pounce on note-passing and the furtive unwrapping of chewing gum?

I'm not lazy in my preparation either. I love making resources: worksheets and handouts and games. I am master of the clip-art and the internet image search, hunting down the perfect illustration for each topic's worksheet with only a small degree of obsession, even though I know my lovingly created resources will be graffitied upon, torn, screwed up, and destined for recycling before the hour is out.

To my colleagues, I am efficient. It's me they ask about the time and place of meetings, knowing I write them in my planner with anally retentive precision. They admire my filing system, improvised with cardboard boxes bearing the legends of past usage: 'Tomatoes' and 'Apples'. Reports written on time? No problem. Forms filled in by the deadlines? A day before, my friend. Instant recall ability of each lesson's relevance to the National Curriculum? Yep indeedy, with the confidence of the professional bluffer, of course.

But it has started to strike me that as I run up the stairs each morning, and straight back down again each afternoon, I am unburdened by the boxes and bags of exercise books that other teachers lug about. This was underlined by a recent conversation with a colleague, where we grumbled about our early starts, share of the housework, lost Sunday afternoons, and so on, compared to the easy and unburdened lives of our respective non-teaching partners.

It suddenly hit me that my colleague was talking about marking books every night of the week, whereas I was referring to the fact that my pottery class clashed with my daily dose of TV drama. I didn't admit it, of course, but carried on letting my colleague think that I too was referring to book marking, while hoping that my thoughts didn't leak out of my brain and start rearranging themselves in picture form around the top of my head.

Following further investigations, I've discovered that another colleague's breakdown and subsequent revision of contract to part-time status was brought on by reducing the number of free weekday evenings by one to zero, in order to keep on top of coursework marking. Yet another colleague takes full advantage of insomnia to mark books well into the wee small hours.

All of which makes me feel incredibly lazy. By the time I get home I've already had at least a twelve-hour day, so I'm usually extremely reluctant to do another six hours of work-related stuff. I don't mind hunting down resources or making a worksheet or two, but the thought of rising out of my armchair during peak viewing time to start trying to decipher some of the rubbish that passes for classwork makes my stomach lurch. I've been there, done that, and almost had the breakdown. Besides, how else am I going to 'keep it real' with 'da kids' if I can't communicate with them on the simplest level about what's going on in the charts and on The Street? (I'm referring to *Coronation Street* here; I'd rather not think about what goes on out on real streets

after dark.) Isn't it my duty to make the kids feel included and relevant?

So yes, I feel lazy compared to the slavish dedication of some of my colleagues. But I don't feel guilty now that I've thought it through. The books get marked, eventually. It's just a case of varying activities in the classroom so that not every lesson ends up with written work. And I feel like a more efficient teacher for my evenings of leisurely pursuits, like pottery and football and operatics. Okay, I'll admit it, we all know I'm talking about watching TV, don't we?



Top Tips!

If marking is getting on top of you, there are several things you can do to ease the burden. Not every task you set has to result in a written activity, whatever your subject is. You just have to be creative, and your pupils will enjoy the variety that your lessons offer. From group role-plays to individual presentations, having them concentrate on an oral activity means you can mark them as they make their presentation. You can also involve the rest of the class as an audience. Give them something to do as they listen, such as thinking of at least one question to ask the speaker, or allocating marks to each group based on the criteria you give them.

Similarly, homeworks don't have to result in a written task. You could ask pupils to research or prepare something to bring in for the lesson next week. They could learn spellings for a test, or work on ongoing project work. To prevent them thinking this is a homework they can wriggle out of doing because

you won't be marking it, make sure you test them or ask to see their research on the deadline.

Peer marking is a useful activity, especially if your subject encourages the drafting and redrafting of work. Ask pairs of pupils to swap work and look out for incorrect spellings, missing punctuation, and so on, which they can circle with a pencil. Ask them to think of three things their partner could add to their work, or three things they could improve. Hopefully, this kind of exercise will teach children to check their own work before handing it in, and they will also learn the techniques of careful proof-reading.

Another method for reducing the agony that marking can be is to tell the class what in particular you will be marking for a certain piece of work. This could be anything from paragraphing to how well they have answered the question, but it means that you don't have to get side-tracked by correcting spellings and presentation for every single piece of work.

Group project work can give you a breather from marking a particular class's work for a while, and is especially useful if you are trying to balance your marking schedule with your other classes who have just submitted large pieces of coursework. The project work can last several lessons without your having to mark anything, especially if you instruct each group to have one member responsible for proof-reading. If the groups produce something like a wall display, stick the finished projects up around the room, and let the groups circulate and mark each other's work based on criteria you give them. This type of exercise is beneficial not just for you: it enables the pupils to see how they could improve

their own work next time, and to draw conclusions as to what makes a successful project.

With marking, teachers very often find they reap what they sow. You may well decide that you want a quiet lesson with the pupils working hard on individual written work, but you will have to mark what they have produced. If you vary your learning activities, you will have to become an intrinsic and active part of each lesson, instead of having half an hour to sit at your desk, desperately trying to mark books for the next lesson. But this also means that you won't have to spend as much of your free time ploughing through a dog-eared pile of work.

Surviving a hangover

When I was on teaching practice, a sage piece of advice was handed down to me by a harassed member of my department: after the first time, you will never attempt teaching with a hangover again. But did I listen? Indeed, in those hazy days of teaching just two or three lessons a day, interspersed with easy access to the never-ending supply of cold KitKats from the vending machine, a hangover was an unwelcome yet inevitable part of the routine. The banging, the shouting, the screaming . . . was that me, the kids, or the voices in my head? The nausea and dizziness were not helped by the enforced standing up (or swaying, as it seemed).

But the vicious circle of life means that a bad day at school these days is followed by a couple of beers, some wine, perhaps a chug or two of whisky . . . it always seems like a good idea at the time. At least, it cheers up my spirits in the

evening, but come the morning it's a very different tale. And the sad part about getting older is that even a solitary glass of wine with dinner is enough to induce a headache some mornings.

If the hair dryer sounds too loud in the morning, then I know I'm in for a rough ride. Hungover teaching usually goes one of two ways. The first way is preferable, as the day shimmies past like an alternate reality. To minimize the noise damage and save a ravaged throat, lots of activities can be knocked together that require almost independent work from the kids. The favourite is aptly called 'Making a poster', which requires only coloured paper and a faint glimmer of an idea. Very limited educational content, in my opinion, but if pushed I could justify the lesson to anyone who cared or dared to ask – from curriculum-specific content to key skills to citizenship (that means things like sharing glue and working together without a punch-up). The kids love it, aside from the occasional squabble or slap over the stationery, and so noise levels are peacefully low.

Ah yes, making a poster. Make a poster to show what a certain character was like or how a combustion engine works. Make a poster explaining why beggars would be hanged in a Tudor village or showing the rules of multiplication. Make a poster of whatever you like because I can't be bothered arguing; just look busy. That's one of the most important lessons you need for life anyway.

The first hungover solution requires a minimal five minutes of shouting at the beginning of the lesson, probably followed by ten minutes of repetition to the usual idiots who weren't listening, before the luxury of sitting down at the desk with thumping head in hands.

The responsibly hungover teacher will also take a dizzy stagger around the room from time to time, ostensibly to check on progress, in reality to make sure that nobody at the back is texting on their mobile phone, and also to stay

awake, of course. There's also the delicate matter of wind, but good timing of the classroom wander means there are a plethora of small victims to blame.

This is also one of the times when those 'magic moments' of teaching take place. In a relaxed hungover state of blurry reality, the pressures of making sure that every child has negotiated the clearly defined learning objectives of the lesson go out the window, and allows the teacher to have a good laugh at their crappy attempts at drawing and writing, thanking the lord that they were never such a slow-wit. I guarantee, pass a classroom where a teacher is honestly laughing – and I don't mean in a manic or sarcastic way – and that teacher is probably enjoying the detached reality of a hangover. Double guaranteed if the kids are making posters.

The second type of hangover, though, is not the fun and games of the first. It is cruel, vicious, and probably some kind of karmic payback. It's usually raining and the room gets stuffy, with the steamed-up windows only adding to the oppressive and claustrophobic atmosphere. The kids are shouting, argumentative and uncooperative – not much change there, I know – but the noise is intensified when it rattles around in my vacuous skull while my booze-shrivelled brain cowers in the corner.

To make matters worse, the need to shout frequently arises, and the booze's laxative effect starts to be quite a pressing matter – fine for office workers who can saunter to the toilet at will, but not for the classbound teacher who can't desert their post for another two hours. It's a miserable situation, and one that, knowing the spite of Sod's Law, will probably be topped by a surprise lesson observation or the headteacher dropping in to discuss something you suddenly remember should have been prepared last night when you decided to push the books out of the way and start knocking back the beers.

At least you know that, like all things, this time will pass. Albeit slowly and excruciatingly. And perhaps with some new insight into the laughable stupidity of some of your pupils. And, of course, the stupidity of yourself, for drinking on a school night when you should know better.



Top Tips!

Well, there's the obvious point here: don't drink on a school night. But that's not my tip at all, because while I may veer between pessimism and optimism, I know for sure that I'm a realist too.

There's a serious point to be made here too. Sometimes you may struggle into work feeling genuinely ill. Your head may be banging, you may be starting to get a cold, or your tummy feels slightly dodgy, and you really don't know how you're going to get through the day.

Make sure you have a back-up plan. One sunny September day, at the beginning of the school year when you know what classes you've got but you still haven't taken any books in to mark, spend an hour or so preparing your 'first aid' lessons. These should be a ready-made lesson, at least one for each group you teach, that can be used as a stand-alone lesson requiring minimal fuss and individual quiet work.

Stash them away in your filing cabinet just in case you come in one day feeling wobbly and incapable, and your weak and perhaps hungover self will look back on bright and breezy self with an immense amount of gratitude.

6

Dealing with colleagues

Gossip

There are so many things to remember when you start a new job, but there's one invaluable lesson to be upheld if your job involves going anywhere near a staffroom. It's nothing to do with those old chestnuts of sitting in the wrong chair or using somebody else's coffee cup, milk or fridge space. The lesson that will stand you in good stead is to NEVER say anything to anybody beyond small talk about the weather until you know who hates who, who tells what to who else, who once pissed off somebody else six years ago and has never been forgiven, and so on. In other words, who's bitching for which team.

In fact, discussing the weather can be a useful test of where conversation trickles when your back is turned. You'll know how far your comments go when a kid comes up to tell you that 'Mrs X said you're always moaning about the weather'. All you have to do then is work out how Mrs X knows when you only told Mr A.

It all seems so innocent when you first start. There are so many names to learn that it really is best to say nothing of any significance about anyone else to anybody at all. Otherwise, it will be an awful stomach-dropping moment when you realize that Miss Mills is actually the mother of that wretch in your Year 9 group, and that she is married to Mr Smythe, who is not related to Mrs Smythe, despite what you saw going on in the science lab on your way to moan

about the Year 9 wretch to the head of year, who happens to be Miss Mills' best friend since teacher training college.

Confusing? Oh yes. Particularly if you fall victim of any of the following:

- ◆ knowing only the first names of some teachers and the surnames of others, and not being able to match up either of these with the sets of initials by which they are known on the edge of the pigeonholes or in the staff handbook;
- ◆ assuming that teachers who drink tea together like each other;
- ◆ assuming that teachers who stay huddled in their department's office can bear the sight of each other;
- ◆ underestimating the length and breadth of the headteacher's network of gossip, which can seem to permeate every social network within the school;
- ◆ believing that an after-school drink will endear you to your colleagues, instead of stigmatizing you as you choose to socialize with 'that lot', as 'that lot' try to fill your mind with the misdemeanours of absent colleagues.

Even when you've been in the school for a couple of years there can be surprises. And they are usually nasty, in the way that exposing yourself as a gossip when you only said one thing to the wrong person once will be. These days I like to think of myself as a sponge, soaking up the remains of the spilt guts that cross my path, but never squeezing them out in public. I do slip up occasionally, though, and it's a horrible feeling. You know you're heading down that stony path when you catch yourself saying something to a colleague that starts with, 'Well, I heard . . .' or 'Apparently . . .' This kind of thing makes me feel about 14 years of age all over again, but maybe working in a school brings you out in a rash of gossip, a result of being in close contact with teenage hormones for too long.

And perhaps there is a reason for all this juvenile behaviour. Ten-minute chats about the weather at break time aside, contact with colleagues in a school is fleeting. Most of the working day is spent in the company of children, and even if there are other adults in the classroom, perhaps to support children with learning difficulties, there's no time to chat and find out something about their lives.

On the other hand, there are long-standing teachers in my school who are extremely good friends. They car-share, babysat for each other once upon a time, meet up in pubs, have dinner at each other's houses, and even end up marrying each other. Maybe it's just a slower process in a school than elsewhere. Or maybe the gossip that divides some of the staff binds others, so that the only thing they have in common is a shared irrational hatred of somebody else, usually middle or senior management. At least, that's what I heard . . .



Top Tip!

I can only reiterate what I stated above: find out about the complex social relationships at work in your staffroom before wading in with your opinion. If you have been in one teaching post for a long time, you forget that once upon a time you knew nothing about the ancient grudges of failed internal promotions or clandestine affairs. When you move to a new post, however long you have been teaching, you have to start all over again, being the newest part of the complex social network that exists amongst the staff at any school. One remark out of place to the wrong person will be remembered for a long time, especially when you only meet up with these people during short tea breaks.

Being sporty

Sometimes it's hard to be a pupil, we're all aware of that. One of the worst trials is surely the test of picking the sports teams. It can be such a trauma for some children that it's almost a cliché: the skinny kids, the fat kids, the asthmatic kids, the shy kids, huddled together in their ill-fitting shorts and shirts, waiting to be chosen for a side by the lithe-of-limb and sporty-in-heart team captain.

By the time we're grown up such ordeals are, thankfully, only rarely encountered. That's not to say that even as teachers we never endure such trials. From the interview stages for jobs, when the existing team of teachers – and, at times, pupils – decide which of the shivering and shaking applicants should join their team, to the triumph of being chosen to go on the all-expenses-paid beano of the school ski trip or study exchange to somewhere exotic, the sports-team-picking process can prepare most children for the disappointments, struggles and successes of adult life.

This section, though, is about the endless gloating of PE teachers in staff meetings. Let me explain. Say you teach a subject other than PE. You work hard, you've got books to mark, steamy classrooms on wet days, smelly classrooms on hot days, magic to perform with a broken stick of chalk and a scratched blackboard. Sometimes you might glance out of the window and see hordes of children pounding the running track, with one track-suited figure loitering about with a stop-watch. Or, on your free lesson, you might pass the changing rooms and observe that even though lessons started 15 minutes ago, the PE lessons are still in the spraying deodorant and removing earrings stages.

Now I'm not saying that PE teachers have it easy. Having covered PE lessons before, I'm aware of how stressful it can be to deal with lost kit, forged notes, thefts from the changing rooms, smelly feet, shenanigans in the showers, and all

the other hassles before the kids are even out on the playing fields. I would hardly deny them the pleasures of next to no marking (in comparison – I know some PE teachers have lots of GCSE and AS work to plough through) because when I'm making the most of my lunch hour by putting up wall displays, planning, marking, etc., I know that the PE teacher is stoically coaching the football or hockey team, or setting up hurdles, or taking overexcited youngsters to play against another school team.

But come on, let's be honest here. It's not the hardest job in the world, is it? Whatever recruitment crises the profession is currently undergoing, PE is hardly a shortage subject. Time and time again, courses to train as PE teachers are oversubscribed, and I'm sure I've read reports that potential PE candidates always have shiny qualifications in a broad range of subjects and could have their pick of jobs, but choose to use their expertise to get kids fit.

Here is the crux of what really annoys me. It's staff meeting time. Or school assembly. Whatever you've done in the past week, and whatever subject you teach, there have been some successes. Maybe one of your pupils completed their coursework at long last. Maybe one class finally understood something just as you were beginning to despair. Maybe a particular child managed not to shout out for the whole lesson. But hang on, what's that the headteacher is saying? Well done to the rugby team, even though they lost their third match in a row? Let's have the netball team up here on the stage for a round of applause for thrashing the school in special measures down the road? And you – you in the fifth row – why aren't you applauding loudly?

Yep, this is what really gets my goat. Although I am actually a firm believer in phrases like 'a healthy mind in a healthy body', I hate feeling like a traitor to the 'school team' for not giving a stuff that our rounders team played in some semi-final somewhere. I certainly don't waste time laying

awake at night wondering how the gym team did in the local competition. Why should I applaud like a deranged sea-lion when the oafs in the football team, who constantly miss my lessons for matches or training, score a few more goals than the other team? And woe betide the next PE teacher who announces in our staff meeting that their team won this or that, and then looks round the gathered staff for their praise and admiration. I'm not even interested! Although I could demonstrate my own physical dexterity in a deft punch to their gloating chops.



Top Tips!

The issue that arises here is that anything which gives the school instant prestige is going to have priority over the run-of-the-mill actual teaching and learning that goes on every day. This can make life difficult if the under-16 county javelin thrower is in your GCSE set, and has yet to produce a piece of coursework because he is too busy annihilating the competitors from neighbouring schools, in what is essentially a hunter-gatherer skill of not much use in the world of work (unless he plans to be a big game hunter or something).

Often the frustration on the teacher's side comes from only finding out that half the class is leaving for a hockey match once the lesson has started. It is extremely annoying to have planned to introduce a new and tricky topic, prepared the work and drawn up the diagrams on the board, only to discover that most of the boys have to leave in ten minutes to go and roll around in mud.

Find out at the beginning of the school year if any of your pupils are in sports teams. Fixtures are usually

drawn up well in advance, so ask either the pupils concerned, or better still the PE department, for a list of match dates. This can be amusing in itself, watching the PE teacher try to grapple with paperwork.

If you know that several members of your class will be absent, it will help you to plan something that they won't struggle to catch up with on their return. With the sporty type of child, it's far too optimistic to believe they will catch up with the missed work in their own time, because they will probably be too busy with lunchtime or after-school practices.

You may have to grin and bear the bragging of the PE department, but you can minimize the disruption to your own lessons with a little foresight, and by efficient communication with your colleagues.

When your classroom is used and abused

Unfortunately, there comes a moment of realization when you're a teacher that not everybody is as competent as you. If you are a generally incompetent person anyway, you may be shocked to find out that this still applies.

For those of us lucky enough to have our own classroom, and not destined to haul around books and equipment between different floors or buildings, we can get quite possessive of our room. It might need several good coats of paint, it might be too hot when the sun beams through in the mornings, and maybe the desks constantly need propping up with wads of paper under a wonky leg, but a lot of time and effort goes into creating the best working environment possible. Wall displays are scrutinized regularly for missing drawing pins, desks are checked for new graffiti,

and a small hoard of chalk or pens are kept handy from the latest raid on the stock cupboard.

So imagine the feeling of dismay when it seems that every time I return to my room after a lesson elsewhere, I seem to experience a hell dimension consisting of a floor carpeted with sweet wrappers, shelves adorned with bits of used tissue, wall displays hanging by one remaining drawing pin, and desks that tell playground tales of who is 4 who, and who else is a slag. I will spare you the more gruesome details of nasal contents.

I frequently glare at the departing teacher's back with scorn, incredulous at the sudden departure. First, how dare they pretend to be so blind that they don't see the rubbish they are wading through to reach the door? Second, how dare they leave the rubbish for me to pick up, as I know that otherwise it's a clear message to my next class to help themselves to their sweets and then drop their rubbish too, or merely throw the existing rubbish around? Third, what the hell went on in that lesson that could leave such a trail of destruction? Maybe the messy teacher has already had their punishment in the preceding hour, but as I dislodge those manky tissues yet again, it's hard to feel much sympathy.



Top Tips!

This can be a tricky subject to broach with your colleague. They have a responsibility to leave the room in a fit state for the next teacher, but if they are continually failing in this duty there are several things you can do.

Try to find out why they have allowed such a mess to be created. Were they called out of the room to take a phone call or deal with something else? Ask

the kids. They will soon tell you how chaotic the teacher's lessons are, but remember to take what you hear with at least a slight pinch of salt. If the teacher is failing to control their classes, you could have a quiet word along the lines of how terrible 10B are, and then suggest some tactics that may have worked for you, whether you are basing your examples on that class or another. Or you could start with small requests: just ask them to keep an eye on the pupils sitting by the wall displays, saying that you are determined to track down the culprit who keeps pinching your drawing pins, and you have your suspects narrowed down to lessons on a Wednesday morning (or whenever it is). The last thing you want to do is tip over the edge somebody who is already on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

It could be that the teacher is just incompetent, or doesn't care, or is counting down the days to retirement and has given up trying to control the class. If they are leaving the school, the best thing to do is grit your teeth and count down the days with them. And then hope they don't come back to do supply work.

If the direct approach scares you, perhaps because this teacher is senior to you in the school hierarchy, there are some other tactics you could employ. Huge signs on the wall, by the bin, and by the door, ostensibly for the pupils, should remind colleagues to keep your room tidy. Change around the positioning of the signs every week so they are eye-catching. Make sure the bin is in an obvious place. If you know any of the pupils in that teaching group, ask them if they could make sure the room is tidy when they leave. This might result in no more than their blurting out at the end of their chaotic lesson that Mr/Ms so-and-so

wants the room tidy, but it might stir the untidy teacher into action.

If there's no improvement, raise the issue at a staff meeting, even if it's just within your department. The senior member should then report back or write down in the minutes what your request is. This doesn't have to be specific. Allow the issue to remain hanging rather than directing the blame at any member of staff. Say something like you've noticed that the kids are becoming messier, and maybe you suspect that some of them have been sneaking in at break times, because the classrooms you teach in are becoming more untidy. Ask that a message be passed on to staff to ensure that rooms are tidy at the end of lessons, and that children are not allowed in unsupervised.

Hopefully, you will find that one of these ways will improve the situation. There's no point in bitching about the incompetence of your colleague to other staff members, because that won't resolve your problem, although it might make you feel better!

Ships that pass in the night – leaving work for supply teachers

Since the Workload Agreement in England and Wales, schools have had to juggle their accounts to budget for more supply teachers, and in some instances have even created posts of 'cover supervisors', a controversial role amongst the teaching community as no qualifications are needed, the money is poor, and regular supply teachers see this as an erosion of the work available to them.

Generally, though, if you are off on a course, you will leave work for your classes as usual, and then a supply

teacher will be drafted in to cover for you. If your school has permanent cover supervisors, then you will probably know in advance who is going to take your classes, but if your school hires supply teachers then you may never meet the poor soul who has to come in and face your jubilant classes, where even the most sloth-like pupils will be spurred into hyperactive overdrive when they realize their regular teacher is absent.

A while back I was ordered on a course at the last moment as the teacher who was supposed to attend had 'something come up' (a premonition of its dullness, I suspect) and the school didn't want to lose its money. Now a few days off from the routine of any job should be an excuse to celebrate, but instead I found myself in a state of panic, and headless chicken syndrome kicked in. Should I start by clearing my desk, shoving the stacks of folders into the cupboard, finding each class's register, sorting out work for the supply teachers, marking all the work that had been lingering around for too long, or locking away all my important papers? I was on a time limit here, just a few hours to sort and prepare before the caretaker appeared menacingly, swinging his big bunch of keys and flicking his eyes to the watch on his fat wrist every few seconds.

Dashing around the room, and between the photocopier and stock cupboard, I felt like I was trapped in an episode of *Changing Rooms*, only this was *Changing Teachers*, and the only MDF in sight was Messy Desk Face-lift. But just like the show, I managed to have everything sorted by zero hour, except in place of a vase of flowers and creative pebble arrangement, I left a selection of chalk sticks that I knew I'd never see again, board rubber (ditto), and neat piles of papers bundled up in elastic bands and labelled with clear instructions.

A colleague came to admire my desk. We both gazed at it, me with pride gleaming in my eyes, and him with what

I hoped was slight envy and admiration. And then he burst my bubble, saying, 'You do realize that you'll be lucky if anyone follows your instructions, don't you?' I felt my teeth start to gnash slightly, and my fists began to curl into a clench. I'd just spent hours planning the next few days lesson by lesson, rewriting my own plans in favour of lessons that could be taken by anyone used to dealing with kids rather than a subject specialist, and had leaned towards lessons where the kids could just get on with the work rather than needing explanations and prompting over the normal range of activities we're expected to include. But I knew he was right.

How often had I left plans for a day's lessons, only to return and ask the kids how they got on and heard the same reply: 'We had a free lesson. Mr/Ms So-and-so didn't tell us to do any work'? And then, inevitably, one child would hold up a battered photocopy with graffiti all over the back, and say, 'He/She gave us some paper to draw on', and only then would I begin to notice the paper aeroplanes wedged on top of light fittings and littering the bookshelves and tops of cupboards. The very same self-sufficient worksheets I'd dashed off specifically for the cover lesson, whose only purpose had ended up being expensive scrap paper.

In this instance, on my return the following week, I learned that there is some gratification to be had from the experience, which was just enough to sustain me as I tried to work my way through the confetti on my desk, and tried to ascertain what, if any, work my classes had managed to do when I was away. Because children, even if they spend half their time rallying against you, cursing you, bitching about you, slagging you off to their parents and friends, refusing to work for you, etc., do actually like the familiarity of the routine. Even if that routine is turning up late to your lessons, chatting for ten minutes after their arrival, not bothering to do any work or listen or join in. They seem to be comforted

by the fact that they know it's you there, at the front of the class, and when they are actually forced to do something productive, you're not going to be that hard on them when they produce a pile of twaddle, and so they can get on with the more important things like passing notes or texting under the table. Or if they do end up in detention, well, that's a fair cop, and they know they deserved it, and although they may shout for a bit or act up in front of their friends, they know their time has come for retribution.

So when they swan up to your room late and find out that it's not you there, but some sergeant major type, or a flaky woman past retirement age, or a nervous NQT, several emotions must swim through their minds, ranging from 'Shit! I'm going to get in trouble for being late now' to 'Great! A free lesson 'cos teacher's away' and including 'Right, so what's this duffer's Achilles heel, then?' (although I suspect the last one is only for public school types and those who understood *Troy*). But strangely enough, the most common reaction to having a stranger in the classroom seems to be a slightly unsettling feeling. The kids don't like feeling unsettled. It's bad enough being a kid anyway, without further unsettling things happening.

And although I have no control over who covers my lessons, I always hope it will be a competent, clever disciplinarian and subject specialist who can't stop tidying as they go and feel compelled to mark bits of work completed in the lesson. But when I returned to the classroom that week I found out there is another type of teacher I should now wish for when I have time off, and that's the competent disciplinarian who's an absolute bore. You see, there's nothing like inflating your own sense of self-worth, and children are very quick to massage your ego when they've been kept on task for an hour by somebody very boring who follows the lesson plans you left without an ounce of flair or excitement. My return was greeted with shocking enthusiasm by one

class in particular, who ordered me never again to leave them to the clutches of The Most Boring Teacher In The World, who made them do this and do that and wouldn't let them do this or that, and who shouted at them.

Now I'm not one to fall for these tricks; I know they were just gutted that they had to do some proper work for a change, and full marks to the Boring Teacher for actually managing to extract writing from them and keep them on task for such a long time. I know these children are fickle and will flatter you endlessly if they think it will get them out of doing something. But isn't it nice to think that in some small way you are actually less boring than somebody else, and the kids would rather have you as their teacher than the other guy?

Of course, I did try to stick up for The Most Boring Teacher In The World, even though we've never met. 'It's not easy coming in and taking a new class,' I said in the teacher's defence. 'Especially you lot.' At this they continued their cries of injustice and tried to convey to me exactly how boring this teacher had been. And I had to cream it just a little bit more. 'It sounds as though you had a great time. Look at all the work you managed to do.' And as the protests got too much, I tried to suppress my smug grin, while my ego resisted the voice of reason within for just a little longer . . . It was small compensation for the lunchtime tidying I had to carry out!



Top Tips!

If you're absent for just half a day, it could well be that one of your colleagues covers your lessons. If it's a longer absence, then there will probably be a supply teacher drafted in to cover all your classes. Either way, assume that the

cover teacher will have a different subject specialism to you, and that they won't know the classes very well.

Make sure that what you set is work that the pupils can progress through individually, without the need to hunt round the room for equipment they don't have, like colouring pencils or rulers. Leave plenty of paper, and ensure that your instructions ask for the work to be collected in at the end of the lesson. Your instructions should also be extremely clear, and indicate where books and paper can be found. Make sure you set enough work, with an enjoyable extension activity that comes as a reward to the children that complete it, not as a punishment of more repetitive work.

Don't use this as an opportunity to introduce a new topic, and don't expect to follow straight on from the lesson when you next see the class. Allow for absences, idleness, and a cover teacher who might prefer to ignore the work altogether while the pupils set about demolishing the wall displays.

Clear your desk, lock away your valuables, and Sellotape your instructions to the desk so they don't get lost. Leave a class register so that the teacher knows who is supposed to be there without their having to send round a piece of paper for the children to sign, or you will always find your class gained several 'Mickey Mouse's or worse. You could also indicate which pupils are the ones to watch, and leave a seating plan.

You may never meet the teacher who has covered your lessons, but they will certainly remember you from how easy or difficult you make their life!

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7

Dealing with parents

Meeting the parents at parents' evening

Like the football season, parents' evening season seems to grow longer every year. Parents' evenings do vary from school to school. Some allow the children to be present along with their parents. There are of course advantages and disadvantages to this. If the child sits down with the parent, the teacher is expected to know the name of that child, I suppose, but there are always a few that slip through the net. If the child isn't there, at least the parents can tell you who it is you are supposed to be talking about. If you don't know the child's name, there's not usually much to say about them anyway, which makes for an excruciating five minutes.

Some schools have a system of appointments to see each teacher, whereas others opt directly for the free-for-all that any type of system tends to disintegrate into anyway. At some schools, the timing of the parents' evening will coincide with prime-time TV viewing, which does affect the type of parents that turn up. Others are run for a few hours directly after school, meaning that commuting parents never receive any face-to-face feedback, but instead the school hall is filled with parents dragging around the broods of children they've just gathered from crèche or neighbouring schools.

Parents' evenings are great from an anthropological point of view, though. All those people in one claustrophobic

school hall, suppressing their own school day memories and trying to look like they understand what they are being told. That's the teachers and parents alike! Like them or loathe them, the parents' evening can become an easier process once you know what to expect.



Top Tips!

You can ease the burden of parents' evening in advance. For weeks before, inform various children who slightly or grossly misbehave that you can't wait to see their parents. Perhaps even pocket some of the more daring notes they pass around class and tell them that their parents would love to see the work they produce in lessons. Come the evening itself, watch smugly as your charges guide their parents away from your table, then nip home early.

However, for the more determined parent, you should know what you're dealing with. Here are some of the more common categories of parents.

Aggressive parents

You usually know what to expect from the parents because you have, after all, got to know the child. It's at the moment when the burly red-faced father sits down that you realize that the child's cries of 'I'm going to get my dad up here', because you dared to hand out a detention, were no idle threat at all. Aggressive parents refuse to accept that anything, from low exam marks and incomplete homework to the CCTV footage of the canteen being trashed, is their child's fault.

Sometimes this aggression is well hidden at first. This is the most dangerous situation, as you can be lulled into a false sense of security. After showing their child's exercise book and reeling off some targets, you may well feel that these parents could help you and support your efforts in school by ensuring that their little treasure does not bring in her mobile phone/Gameboy/pet rat again. This is when the aggression bubbles to the surface and splatters you all over the face.

Aggressive parents are not class-specific. There is some overlap between this category and well-informed parents, as well as my next category . . .

Trailer trash parents

I'm sorry to have to even mention this category at all. They don't all live in trailers of course, but if you imagine the stereotypical *Jerry Springer Show* brawling dimwits, you'll get some idea of this group of parents. It's the best reminder to stop the doziest kids snogging in the corner of the library at lunchtimes, because here you have a portent of things to come.

Trailer trash parents are usually just mother, and occasionally just father. I award a ten-point bonus if a trailer trash couple attend together. Mother will turn up bedecked in her finest white tracksuit, hair scraped back into a greasy ponytail, and will spend most of the appointment trying to extract her chubby baby's fingers from the large array of gold chains she is wearing. She may stop to yell after her toddlers who have run off to play with the other teachers' legs, or to take a call on her flashy little mobile. She'll be extremely irritated that it's no smoking, and instead

chomp her way through a packet of chewing gum. Why she's actually there is a bit of a mystery, as she doesn't listen to a thing you say, and you're not even sure she would understand or care anyway. In some cases she may bring with her a sour-faced older woman who could well be her mother, so that they can gang up on you if you say anything 'out of order' about their beloved child.

Trailer trash father may well belong in the 'Aggressive parents' category. Or he may seize the opportunity to try his various charms on you to excuse his child's behaviour, flirting while skirting the issues at hand. You know he's really only here to trawl the masses of single mothers who are desperate to get home in time for *Neighbours*.

Nervous parents

Ah, bless, probably my favourite parents. They're not sure how to act around teachers, and still feel like they should be on their best behaviour. They've dressed smartly for the occasion and they listen really carefully to everything that you say, although there's not usually much to tell them because their child is often quiet and conscientious and, like them, wouldn't say boo to a goose. As long as you smile at them encouragingly, they leave your table thinking that they've passed the test, and everyone's happy.

Parents that you know too much about

There are a number of situations that can fall into this category. I'd worked in one school for over a year before I realized that I'd been teaching a fellow teacher's offspring, but it's not uncommon. More of a

surprise is when a familiar face from the pub plonks himself down in front of you, but this is a good reason to live a suitable distance away from the catchment area.

Nope, the worst-case scenario is when the pupil has told you way too much information about the parent, or you have overheard it when they should have been discussing something lesson-related. Could I ever be comfortable having a pleasant discussion with a man whose son recently revealed to everybody that his dad has a large porno stash at the back of his wardrobe? Or chatting with the mother who has dragged along her latest boyfriend, who I know tells the daughter to eff off down the park when she should be sat at home finishing her coursework? Do I really manage to keep a straight face when confronted with the smartly dressed mother who only last weekend had woken up her children by hammering loudly and drunkenly on their front door, crying to be let in, because she was too pissed to get her key in the lock?

Of course, the worrying thing is that if their child is such a blabber-mouth, what are they sitting there thinking about you . . . ?

Well-informed parents

These are another bunch of parents who are not always a pleasure to deal with. They come armed with statistics and an alarming awareness of acronyms and current teaching policies. It's usually only afterwards, when you've patiently explained National Curriculum levels and where their child fits into the scheme of things, that you discover that the father is

head of a neighbouring primary school and the mother is an educational psychologist. The worst, though, are those who feel it's their duty to challenge and test you, and hold you personally responsible for not spotting that their child has some rare learning disorder (that they have probably just invented) that you should have addressed in your schemes of work.

I'm all for parents taking an active role in their child's education, but well-informed parents would be all the better informed if they came to sit in their child's lessons for the day and saw for themselves how their teacher was not crushing their child's enthusiasm, but merely requesting that the little git remove his pen from his ear and sit down.

Dealing with situations at parents' evening

For every year that you teach there will be new peculiarities amongst the parent population, some new insults to be absorbed or deflected, and some more jaw-dropping moments in the chilly school hall. So here is a round-up of current contenders for title of Moments When You Realize That You're Not Really Cut Out For This Type Of Thing.

Number 5

Straight in at number 5 are the parents who both turn up, but because of a recent messy divorce come to see you separately, while performing a bizarre dance of avoidance around the tables, chairs and queues in the hall, which is something most amusing to watch when your queue has petered out for the time being. Parent One seems as nice

as pie, explaining how the sensitive son has been badly affected by what's been going on at home, and how he's learning to cope with living in two houses, and the fact that Parent Two has a new partner (at this stage you start to cringe, knowing this is just a bit too much information, and seeing Parent One on the verge of tears makes you start to panic slightly in case anyone nearby thinks it's your fault that the parent is upset).

After this emotional interlude, along comes Parent Two, who verbally lashes out at the lily-livered son's inadequacies and inability to organize himself properly, implying quite freely that it's clear which parent the inadequate child takes after. At which point the sympathetic smile begins to slide, the encouraging nods feel distinctly out of place, and you promise yourself never to berate the poor lad for not remembering his homework again.

Number 4

An old favourite crops up at number 4: the parent who just looks a bit odd. It may be a hair or two growing from an odd facial crevice, or eyes that stare in different directions, and you know that one of them is focused on you, but it's quite difficult to work out which one without looking too shifty. Maybe you spot a really rude tattoo which puts you off your stride, or something as simple as ill-fitting clothes, but for some reason all talk about targets and exam results flutter straight out of your mind. For the first time in the evening you become extremely conscious of what you are saying, realize it sounds like a load of old twaddle, quickly justify this in your own mind by telling yourself it's only because you've repeated it over and over, and then just want to laugh at the absurd situation you find yourself in, trying to pass yourself off as a professional when you just feel like a big fraud.

So, parents, if you don't want your children's teachers to experience an existential crisis as you sit there and blah-blah on about your child, then please dress appropriately, brush the dandruff off your collar, pluck errant hairs and don't overdo the make-up. Yes, Mr Smith, I'm talking about you.

Number 3

At number 3 are the parents who lay the blame for their child's failings squarely at your feet. For every incomplete piece of homework you mention, there's a snort from the dragon parents quickly followed up by a short précis of why this is your fault. You know this conversation could go two ways, depending on how you react: the sensible reaction would be to pass the parents on to a member of management where they can rant about your failings to someone well versed in the intricacies of dealing with awkward parents.

But there's that little piece of professional pride at stake here. And if you are in any way slightly stubborn, and you hate losing an argument, or even if you think these awkward customers deserve to hear the truth about their child rather than be buttered up by teachers who just want an easy life, then you start to defend your position. This can get very messy. Forget professional pride. Surely pride is something you should have left firmly behind before you entered the arena of public scrutiny. After all, everyone knows that having kids immediately bestows you with the gift of knowing what teachers are doing wrong, doesn't it? Are we fools for forgetting that every parent could obviously do your job with far more flair and competence than you? Don't fall into the arguing with parents trap. Be a jobsworth, pass it on to someone who's paid more money than you to take flak, and save yourself a week's worth of anger at allowing yourself to be bullied by a double-headed serpent.

Number 2

Narrowly missing out on the top position, at number 2 is the nightmare of the recurring parents. Maybe you teach several of their children across different year groups. Maybe their poor sprog has been stuck in your group by the misfortune of exam result lottery for three years now. It could be that the father has sown his seeds wildly amongst the local community, and boasts a number of offspring of various surnames scattered throughout the school. Recurring parents are not always a nightmare in themselves, of course, but the nightmare can be entirely of your own making.

Do you always say the same things about their children? Do you use the same sound bites, catchphrases, or formulaic approach to promising that by the end of the year their child would definitely have grasped the art of whatever it is you've been trying to teach for three years now? If there's no real progress to report, do you try to invent some, or just throw your hands up in defeat and accept that their offspring will never be a high achiever in the subject? Should you start enquiring after their health, their other children, and so on? Do three annual meetings constitute the beginnings of a relationship?

All these questions flutter around your head when you see the parents approach your table, making you extremely conscious of every word you speak. This may well be because your own parents enjoyed hooting with laughter after each one of your own parents' evenings, imitating teachers they'd had the opportunity to observe year after year, mimicking their catchphrases and tone of voice, and therefore destroying your future chances of believing that not all parents would do that. Thanks, Mum!

Number 1

But at number one in this particular chart of Moments When You Realize That You're Not Really Cut Out For This Type

Of Thing is when you start to tell the parents only what they want to hear, rather than the truth. This syndrome can start to kick in for a number of reasons. It could be in response to any of the other reasons in this top five. You may well just want an easy life, and your philosophy could be that where's the harm if everyone goes away happy?

It may come about in response to parents whose attention wanders after five seconds of staring too hard at your earnest face, and who start to gaze around the hall as you speak, answering their mobiles in mid-conversation, or even tapping passers-by to say hello and enquire after their families, or to ask them if they're going down the bingo straight after. The penny might drop only after you've listed the grades their child has so far achieved, outlined your personal targets for their precious offspring, shown how you've tackled that little problem they had, and told them that you're hoping their child will make a grade C at the end of the year, but only with a lot of hard work and determination. It's when they reply, 'So he's doing all right, then?' that you realize you lost them four and a half minutes ago, and hate to shatter their illusions that their child is an A grade student.

This is particularly so amongst parents who, if we're honest, are a bit thick themselves, and who wouldn't be able to comprehend what their child would need to do to pass the exam anyway. So you just give a barely visible shrug, a lop-sided smile, and start to shuffle your papers to signal that your conversation is finished and that it's only ten minutes until the bingo opens, so they'd better get going.

And so there you have it. Five good reasons why parents' evenings can shake your confidence as a teacher, make you wonder if you're a bit out of step with the rest of the human race, and fill you with the need to reach for a stiff drink as soon as the gruesome ordeal is over. My top tips here? Simply to anticipate what might arise, watch all those pop

psychology programmes about how to tell if someone is really listening to you, and pass the buck if it all starts to get a bit too scary.

Letters from parents

The view towards teachers has shifted. The last generation with wholesale respect for authority figures has grown up, while the children currently punching each other in any school's corridors tend to be the spawn of parents whose main hobbies seem to be watching *Jerry Springer* and expecting something for nothing. They don't support school policies but instead rankle against them, siding with their mega-brats every time. As detentions can now be disputed, the naughtiest kids wriggle out of their punishments by brandishing a note from somebody at home (Mum, Dad's latest girlfriend, Step-gran, etc.).

Having met some of these parents, I imagine they were frequent detention-attenders themselves. You know that some parents like to live out their unfulfilled ambitions through their kids? We tend to picture the pushy parents sending their little angels to ballet classes and tennis lessons, but there's also a flip-side to this – the nasty pieces of work who now exact revenge on the teaching profession in remembrance of canings past. It may be very tempting to write a curt reply to a rude note accusing you of picking on their precious offspring, but always keep in mind that your words may be used as evidence against you!

There is a positive side to receiving letters from home, though. Some of them are just so funny that you will never be short of dinner table anecdotes again. One girl I taught had a mother who believed she had a special relationship with me. I'd only met this woman once or twice and she was nice enough, but she was incredibly dopey. Unfortunately for the child, the dopiness was apparently hereditary,

or at least learned by example. But what brightened up my morning was if the child shuffled over to me with a note from the mother. For these missives were usually the most amusing things I read all week, and when you plough through as many 'schoolboy errors' in exercise books every week as I do, that's saying something.

Mrs Dopey couldn't just write me a note like the other parents, one which said her daughter was going to be absent for a dental appointment or that the kid was away because of a cold or stomach ache. No indeed. With Mrs Dopey I received an often highly entertaining and convoluted story that brought the scene at the Dopey household alive for me every time. In fact, I still have a collection of notes from Mrs Dopey that I use to entertain visitors, and I only wish I'd started to file them away a long time ago instead of leaving them to the mercy of my untidy desk drawer.

Take, for example, the time the kid was away with stomach ache. That fact alone was not enough for Mrs Dopey's note; instead, I had a whole sorry tale of why she hadn't been able to ring the school in the morning, because she was in the bath, and then the doorbell went, and she had to nip up the road to see to a neighbour, and by the time she got back she'd completely forgotten until it was too late. Then there are the woeful tales of the child having to miss an afternoon of school to go and visit the estranged Mr Dopey, who was painted as a bit of a cad and a worthless so-and-so by Mrs Dopey, who felt the need to share with me, via pen and paper, the disintegration of the relationship and her best efforts to keep the kid in touch with the father, for what that was worth. And so it went on: the unfortunately timed doctor's appointment, with the whole saga of in-depth negotiations with the doctor's receptionist to get an appointment at a reasonable time; the expositions on local public transport, which the Dopeys relied on and whose

bus and train scheduling meant that the child had to leave or arrive at certain times after visits to the orthodontist's. All of this would be minutely detailed for me, including the nitty-gritty of which teeth had to be removed or shuffled around at that day's visit. Bless. I'm not sure that the kid even knew what went into the letters, and I'm sure she would have been mortified to realize how much information the mother volunteered. Still, it makes a change from the scrawled and scribbled scraps of paper that other kids tossed in my general direction of a morning.



Top Tips!

Letters from parents require special attention. Especially when they are full of the types of howlers you normally see in the children's work. A letter from home can give you a good insight into the child's home life, from the type of paper used to the contents within. But be careful not to assume too much!

Keep all correspondence you receive. This will probably feature most of all in your role as a form teacher. There will be reasons for absences, notes of upcoming appointments, requests for permission to miss PE or wear trainers instead of proper shoes, explanations and clarifications.

Initial and date each letter. If you have the time, file the letter somewhere safe, unless it's one required by the office as proof of absence. Don't do what I recently did, though: I was finding it difficult to juggle and multi-task with my usual panache. One child had handed me their homework diary with a message in

it from their mother, which I looked at without seeing what was there, because my wavering concentration was on the two other children who were telling me things simultaneously. Imagine my horror, then, when I glanced down at the diary to find that I'd absent-mindedly corrected the spellings on the note from the mother instead of just initialling it! I then tried to fudge the corrections to look like I'd ticked the note, but it was too late: the damage was done and I shudder to think what I'm going to be known as from now on in that particular household.

If the letter requires a reply, remember that many schools prefer that you run your reply past a senior member of staff before sending it home to a parent. For anything more than a quick note, make a photocopy of the letter, whether that's for future reference, or for when the pupil comes to you sheepishly saying that they lost the letter. Keep the letter polite and to the point, whatever style the original is written in. Don't assume that a note scrawled on the back of a flyer is from somebody who doesn't know what writing paper looks like; assume instead it's from a parent governor who was in a terrible rush that morning. If this sounds snobby, then it's done its job of making you more aware of any preconceptions you may have.

Remember, you may not feel particularly professional when a child is waving a note in your face as you're halfway down calling the register and trying to prevent the next class from surging in, but if you keep things looking professional this will minimize any possible comeback on yourself.

The school run

Driving to work is usually, thankfully, a non-event. It's a necessity, because there's no way I could struggle home on the bus with three sets of exercise books begging to be marked; a fact I'd love to point out to every environmentalist who glares at my car of just one occupant. Not that I've ever noticed environmentalists glare, just rain-sodden hitchhikers who wouldn't understand my need for half an hour of solitude, loud music and bad singing to blot out the day's events.

Sometimes, though, something does happen on my drive in. Something that stirs the primeval anger known as road rage. It's those mornings that the first child I see bouncing a football in the corridor, running off with someone else's bag, or fiddling with light switches, will be the recipient of a vitriolic verbal blast. Yes, I do feel guilty afterwards. But they did know the risk when they broke the rules.

One morning, though, a road rage incident left me unusually subdued. With only two minutes before the morning meeting, I really didn't need any hold-ups. So picture my frustration when a father in his *de rigueur* 4 x 4 decided to pull across the road in front of me to illegally park on the yellow zig-zag lines outside the school. These lines have been painted there to prevent kids like his chauffeured little precious getting knocked over by monster trucks like his. It was this frustration at the moron that made me throw my hands up in incomprehension after I was forced to brake, and then I shouted something rude and most probably highly insulting, as you do when you're in your metal box and nobody else can hear you. Unfortunately, it seemed that moronic father had interpreted my intended message only too well, and now that his monster truck was blocking my escape, he decided he was going to get out and sort me out.

I felt like shouting, 'But I'm a teacher!' as a valid excuse, but in retrospect he would probably have hit me even harder then. However, it must have been my day for lucky endings, as for some reason he climbed back into the moron-mobile, like he realized that being out of his vehicle would involve something called walking, or that it was an experience akin to being wrenched from the womb. It could also have been the oncoming school bus hurtling straight for his moron-mobile now that the bus passengers had been forced off to stream through the school gates, but whatever it was, it saved me from (a) having a slanging match/fisticuffs in the street with a scary idiot in front of the last few stragglers dragging their heels to school, and (b) being late for the staff meeting, which is probably worse.



Top Tips!

This is one of those unfortunate times when unless the school policy is efficient enough to back you up, there's not a lot that you as an individual can do. Except perhaps badger the senior members of staff into cracking down on parents motoring up to the classroom door each morning to save their child waddling the final few steps. Of course, every parent wants to know their child has been safely delivered to school, but they don't seem to realize that zooming around the school grounds or parking illegally outside the school gates in their behemoths is exactly the thing causing the problem.

Avoid the gates and grounds in those crucial minutes before school and after school. Some schools insist that staff members leave at least a quarter of an

hour after the final bell. If you accept that your school day is now just 15 minutes longer, you can avoid the chaos of knotted traffic and swarming children, and therefore avoid contributing to a potentially dangerous situation. It also means that if there are angry parents around, you do not leave yourself in a vulnerable position, perhaps where they could confront you when you're alone.

If a parent wants to talk with you, make sure they go through the proper channels of arranging an interview at a time that suits you both. Do not see them alone. It is always better to have another member of staff with you, such as your head of year or a member of senior management. They can act as a peace-maker, provide another viewpoint on a situation, or just be there to back you up! Make sure you write down what is said at the interview. If it could be a contentious issue, ask the parent to sign the record of what happened at the meeting, meaning that they can't change their mind afterwards about what happened if it suits their purpose better.

Don't forget that you too have a responsibility. Make sure you are completely prepared for any meeting, even if the parent claims they just want a little chat. Have your mark book to hand, register of attendance, exercise books, statements from other teachers, box of confiscated toys – anything that will help you to illustrate how their child behaves and is coping.

Even if you know the parent you are meeting with, as it's to do with a school issue you should remain professional, and remember that they have come to see you as a member of staff, and not as the neighbour they see in the supermarket every week.

Dealing with parents doesn't have to be a battlefield, as long as you remember and practise the rules of engagement.

End of term reports

How did you used to treat your school report? Was it opened with bated breath, with the family gathered around to read the summary of your progress over the past year? Was it hidden at the bottom of your school bag, reluctantly dragged out as you awaited your punishment for the truths written within? Was it passed around family members and friends, who compared scores and grades? Maybe you had teachers who could be relied upon to trot out the same phrases every year. Sometimes you wondered if they even knew who you were, and other times you may have felt misunderstood: you weren't disruptive, it was just that the teacher didn't like you.

Reports of old were allowed to be much more honest. If you were crap at chemistry, the teacher would report that you 'struggled with the subject' or that it wasn't one of your strongest points. If you were a pain in the butt, your teacher would write that you were 'a nuisance' or that you 'distracted the class'. But something happened between my being on the receiving end of these comments, and my getting to dish them out.

Everything now has to be so darn positive, so we never get to tell the parents that their kid is a little bastard, but instead have to pick out their best qualities, whatever they might be. Instead of Fiona being rude, answering back, and spending the entire lesson chatting with her friends, we should be writing that she's popular amongst her peers,

questioning, and willing to assert herself. If Jimmy spends the lesson in a daze, not knowing his test tube from his Bunsen burner, he is reported as being a quiet boy whose target is to ask for help when he doesn't understand. Should Alex be noisy and disruptive then he is 'lively'. The whole procedure of report writing has become an exercise in covert codes, with only fellow teachers being able to read between the lines and build up a real picture of what the child is like.

Of course, there is a case for being positive, but why can't we tell it like it is? No wonder parents find it hard to understand when their little darling gets into trouble or is put in detention: there were no warning signs in the end of year report, and they've been receiving mixed messages. I've even found myself pussyfooting around like a professional politician at parents' evenings, not daring to give a direct answer because the truth is the kid is a proper bugger in the lesson. It's made me feel like I'm working in customer services, presenting a corporate image of the school, rather than trying to help the child be more successful and become a more likeable person.

But now there are shifts in the reporting practice once more. For several years now, schools have gradually taken on computerized reporting systems, where comments are stored in 'banks' and are chosen by clicking on them so that they fit into the spaces that used to be reserved for best handwriting and well-chosen phrases. Some may argue that teachers tended to write each report using their own stock of phrases anyway, and that's partially true. All those kids that got on with their work without a fuss were 'quiet and conscientious', and those that tried but didn't excel were often 'putting in an admirable effort'.

However, with computer-based reporting I can no longer remark on the individuality that children bring to their classes, or accomplishments that are particular to them.

Instead, I have stock phrases to choose from, depending on whether I have graded the child A, B or C. These phrases are so bland that they don't actually say anything if you stare at them hard enough. Sometimes none of the comments really apply to the pupil, but I have to make my choice of a certain number from one section and a certain number from another. The reports don't really seem to have much value any more. We called the old style 'cheque book reports'. Now we have a 'statement bank'. But for a procedure that seems surrounded by financial references, it seems that the reporting process is now bankrupt of any real meaning.



Top Tips!

With computerized comment banks, an A grade comment might read something like 'He has produced some excellent homework which has shown his depth of insight into the topic' but an E grade comment might be 'Lack of organization and commitment has meant that he has failed to hand in much of the homework this year'. Having the wording already figured out is meant to save us time, but it also means that there isn't much room for flexibility or individuality. Plus, the comments aren't really what I mean at all.

You can make the whole process less frustrating for yourself by knowing what you really mean when you're copying and pasting comments at the computer screen. Perhaps parents too should be aware of what that E grade really means to teachers. Here is what I have in mind when I grade the pupils I teach.

Behaviour

A = thank God he's in the class. At least there's someone willing to collect in books and answer questions.

B = nothing special, but be thankful he doesn't play up. Like a ghost child really. Not noticed much.

C = less than desirable behaviour. Plays up at times but nothing a good bollocking doesn't sort out.

D = disruptive little s***. Annoying, doesn't listen, disturbs others.

E = drives me to drink. Makes me question my vocation. Nobody can do anything with him and we're stuck with him until the day he goes too far. Please don't let him be in my class next year.

Class work

A = does the work and it's bloody good too. Will succeed in life no matter what.

B = tries hard, does the work and it's okay. It may lack sparkle but she'll pass her exams.

C = a bit average really. Either she's not working at full capacity, or she's trying really hard and average is the best she'll be.

D = in the olden days this could be called rubbish.

E = doesn't bother with working. Probably too busy being a little s***.

Homework

A = come on, parents, admit it, you've done it for him, haven't you? Either that or your poor

child is deprived of the conveniences of modern life, like TV and computer games, and spends his evenings chained to a desk with pots of glitter and craft glue.

B = acceptable work; questions are answered sufficiently with no particular depth and no sparkly glitter border.

C = this work is rushed and looks suspiciously like it was done on the bus on the way to school.

D = homework is rarely seen. I imagine he gets home, slings something in the microwave and settles down with his PlayStation while Mum's out at bingo. Any homework I do get looks like the dog got there first.

E = he has never ever done any homework. Do I look bothered, though? It saves me marking it and I expect it would be rubbish anyway.

Just adapt the above comments to suit your particular subject and classes, and there you go, much greater satisfaction from churning out report after report. Everyone's happy.

Conclusion

It was never the aim of this book to provide a comprehensive review of life as a teacher. There are too many facets to the job, and too many variables, depending on the subject and age group taught, the type of school, the ethos and efficiency of the school, the position on the pay scale, and the character and motivation of the teacher. In our educational system, not all things are equal, not by a long way. In addition, changes filter down through schools at different rates, even if it seems that governments are forever introducing new strategies and reforms.

You may have recognized characteristics of a school you know or a teacher you avoid in the staffroom. Some parts of the book may have raised a smile or made you angry. You may have thought much of the advice is obvious. In which case, I'm glad, because that means you could well be the type of teacher I admire, one who always tries to make the best of a less than perfect situation. I felt compelled to point out solutions and tips that can be forgotten over years of hard graft and in moments of stress.

The idea for this book came from my website, www.rantingteacher.co.uk, which I set up to save myself banging my head repeatedly against a brick wall. Instead of venting my frustrated spleen to an audience of friends with raised eyebrows and beers in hand, I could let it explode in hyperspace. Judging by the responses I regularly receive, mostly from teachers, of course, I'm not alone in feeling the

frustration that can be experienced when aspects of the job seem beyond our control. Indeed, since setting up my website in the spring of 2003, 'blogging' is now all the rage (quite literally in some cases) amongst teachers, and others who are frustrated with their lot. 'Blog' is short for web log, which in plain old English means a diary. You can sign up to a website that will provide you with a frame and some web space, so that all you need to do is type away your thoughts, feelings, actions and news, and then post it up for anyone and everyone to read.

My website is a bit like a blog, except I don't want you to know who I am or where I work, for obvious reasons: to protect myself, my job, my employers and everyone else at my school. It's not easy; I do find myself biting my tongue at times, both on the website and at work. I just hope the teachers who have set up blogs realize the full implications of what they're doing. Some of them are trainee teachers who haven't yet realized how nosey and technology-savvy some of the kids can be. Putting up your personal life on a website is one thing; there are so many websites out there that anyone's personal site can be quite hard to track down. Giving the address to your pupils, though, is a huge gamble. It's like giving them the keys to your personal life and telling them to help themselves to all the ammunition you've laid out for them. Kids are already way ahead of most of us when it comes to utilizing technology to forge on with their evil ways. How long after the invention of text messaging did the first child start to be bullied in this way, receiving threatening or abusive messages on their mobile phone? There are websites set up by 14 and 15 year olds where pupils can post rumours and abusive messages about their classmates, and the law still has to catch up with regulating this type of publishing.

My advice to teacher bloggers, then, is proceed with caution. But don't stop: I think people should know what

goes on in schools across the world, the best and the worst bits, and even the mundane.

What I have aimed to do in this book is highlight some of the experiences of a bog-standard classroom teacher, and then suggest ways to regain some control of your own professional life and personal well-being. My hope is that you have found something in here to take away with you and mull over, and that you have been reassured that positive solutions can come out of a good old rant. After all, these words of Charlotte Brontë sound familiar even two hundred years later:

I had been toiling for nearly an hour. I sat sinking from irritation and weariness into a kind of lethargy. The thought came over me: am I to spend all the best part of my life in this wretched bondage, forcibly suppressing my rage at the idleness, the apathy and the hyperbolic and most asinine stupidity of these fat headed oafs and on compulsion assuming an air of kindness, patience and assiduity? Must I from day to day sit chained to this chair prisoned within these four bare walls, while the glorious summer suns are burning in heaven and the year is revolving in its richest glow and declaring at the close of every summer day the time I am losing will never come again? Just then a dolt came up with a lesson. I thought I should have vomited.

Is it idealistic, then, for teachers to imagine that their profession could hold any surprising developments? Should we warn new recruits to the profession that this is as good as it mostly gets, so that they are well prepared for the daily grind, even the urge to 'vomit'? Or what can we do, with all the technology we now have at our disposal, to change the way we teach, to alter the legacy of 'irritation', 'weariness' and 'wretched bondage' that teaching can be?

Maybe there is no golden solution, other than to keep journals of both the happy and the unhappy moments, and to spill our guts in the form of the written word, and also to keep trying out new tricks, hopefully believing that a wonderful hi-tech solution is just around the corner, and if we keep working at it, then we will be the ones to crack it, to get it right, to teach children who don't want to learn, to love our jobs day in and day out . . . but above all, to keep a sense of humour when all around seem to be losing theirs.