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“Details create the big picture.”

— SANFORD I. WEILL

STARTING A CLASS OR LESSON

The Beginning of Class

MRS. MEANSWELL wants all her students seated, with their notebooks open and pencils ready, by the time the bell rings to start class. She tries politely asking her students to settle down and get out their belongings, but the students are slow to respond. She sometimes ends up raising her voice to the point of nagging and yelling, just to get the students ready to learn. She doesn't want to badger them, but is at a loss as to what to do.

How can we get class started on time and have our students ready with their materials, while maintaining a warm and welcoming classroom environment?



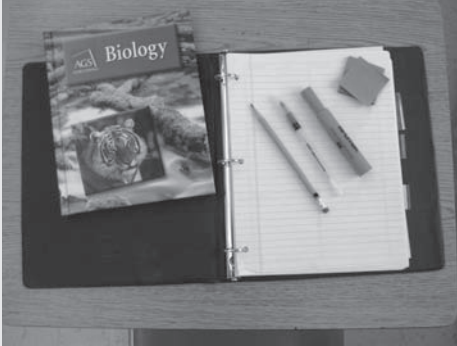
Mrs. Allgood says

Display a visual image of the surface of a student desk, with necessary materials out and ready (*see image 1 on opposite page*).

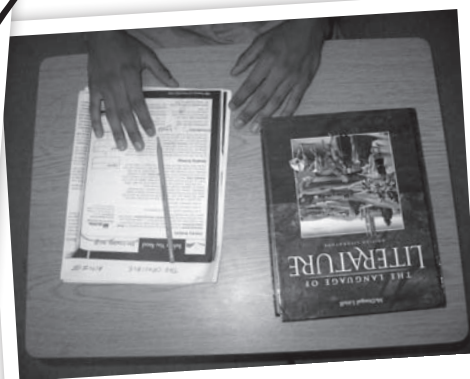
If you require students to have their books open to a certain page, you can create a reusable visual or picture of an open textbook on an overhead (or on a poster or in PowerPoint). Then write in the page number with an erasable pen, making it possible to use the same visual each time you need to convey this information. In PowerPoint, you simply type in the new page number, and on a wall poster you stick a Post-it® note or piece of paper to the image of the open book. If used routinely, the kids will come to rely on this gentle reminder of how to get ready and focused, making one fewer thing they need to worry about upon entering the room. Both your stress and your students' stress will be reduced (*images 2A–2D*).

Variation: If you start class with a specific activity, like sustained silent reading (SSR) or a problem of the day, use a visual to remind students of how their desks should look and what they should be doing at the beginning of class (*image 1*).

1. Ready to Begin



2A. Open Textbook



2B. Everyday Materials









2C. Open Textbook



2D. Everyday Materials

Morning Routine

1. Put your homework book and pencils on your table. 
2. Put your homework and file in the basket. 
3. Put your water bottle on the tray. 
4. Put your bag away. 
5. Put your apple in the basket. 
6. Go and play outside until the bell rings. 

Elementary Classroom
Morning Routine¹

¹ Trinity International School, Bangkok, Thailand.

“The rubrics allowed me to use consistent language and to eliminate unnecessary repetitions; I could merely refer to the rubric. My principal was so impressed with the change in my classroom that he gave me a principal’s award for creating a culture of calm.”

— BARBARA TRIGGS
8TH GRADE ENGLISH AND SOCIAL STUDIES
JOHN HAY ACADEMY, CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Headings on Papers

MRS. MEANSWELL requires her students to place a standard heading on all their papers. She uses these headings to help her label student work, so she can more easily grade it, record the grades, and pass the work back to her students. It also helps her students keep track of their assignments. However, her students often are inconsistent with their headings, and her verbal attempts to keep them on track tend to slow the class down, increase her sense of aggravation, and detract from the positive, organized, unified environment she is trying to establish.

How can we get students to consistently put the proper heading on their papers, without nagging them or repeating ourselves?



Mrs. Allgood says

1. Create a poster that illustrates the proper heading (*image 1*), and color-code each element of the heading. For example, if you want the heading to include the student name, date, and class period, then try writing the student name in black, the date in green, and the class period in orange.
2. When circulating through the classroom, if you see that Mark, for example, doesn't have the date on his paper, point to the poster and say "green" and move on. It will train Mark's brain to focus on the poster, as opposed to consistently relying on you to tell him what to do (*image 2*).

Bright Ideas

The reason for choosing a poster in this example, as opposed to PowerPoint or an overhead, is that some teachings require constant “road maps” that are always accessible, in plain view, on the wall. Creating proper headings on papers is likely to be an ongoing issue, and repeatedly stopping to flash the model on the screen simply takes too long. Some teachers use PowerPoint or an overhead initially to teach the expectation for headings on papers, and then later refer to the wall poster.



1. A Visual Poster



2. Color-coded

Materials Set-Up

MRS. MEANSWELL'S students love hands-on activities such as labs, projects, and simulations. However, the set-up of these activities can be a laborious and stressful process, where students take up unnecessary class time—not to mention Mrs. Meanswell's energy. Her students often end up missing materials, or with the wrong materials at their desks. She doesn't have the time to set things up in advance for her students, and she doesn't have the energy to play the role of "materials police," yet she knows that the hands-on activities are a great benefit for her students, both socially and academically.

How can we help our students collect what they need for an activity in an efficient and stress-free manner?



Mrs. Allgood says

Display a visual that shows exactly what items need to be on student desks or lab tables. The sample on the facing page shows a lab table with various items on it (*image 1*). You can number each item so that when a student is missing a particular item, you can reference the number while pointing to the screen. This will help train the student's brain to focus on the visual, rather than relying on your words. In addition, you can provide a checklist handout, correlating items by their number, so students can check off each item that they put in place on their desk or lab table.

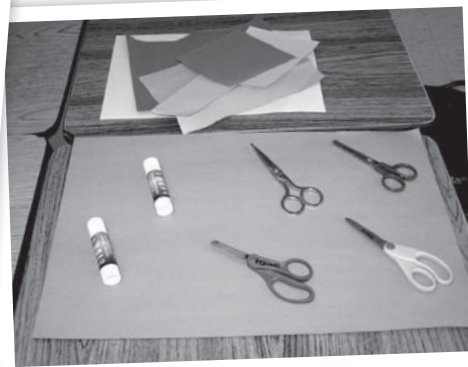
This can be used for anything that involves setting up—from science labs to art projects (*image 2*). Eventually, students will rely less and less on studying the visual, and will immediately begin gathering what they need when the image is displayed.

“I used visual cues in the form of pictures to help students complete the beginning of class procedures within a reasonable time limit ... Students who were taking 15–20 minutes are now able to do it in the time allotted It’s such a goofy elementary way of reinforcing the procedure but it’s working extremely well.”

— CHRISTOPHER DEAN
6TH GRADE, SPECIAL ED. MATH, NEW YORK CITY



1. Lab Station Set-up



2. Art Materials Set-up

Bright Idea



For efficiency, consider making this process more motivational for your students. Hand out the checklist to each table group of students in the class, project the visual, and then give the class a specific time limit within which all table groups must be set up, seated, and ready to go—in order to earn a class incentive.

Test Taking

WHEN MRS. MEANSWELL'S students take a quiz or a test, many might feel anxious. This reaction magnifies their tendency to lose focus on the task at hand. Thus, it's often harder to get them settled down and ready for a quiz or test than for other activities. She asks her students to clear their desks of everything except a piece of paper and a pencil, and immediately a flurry of questions ensues: "Do we need a blank paper?" and "Can we use our books?" and "What are we doing?"

How can we help all our kids get ready for testing without having to repeat ourselves, and without raising their anxiety?

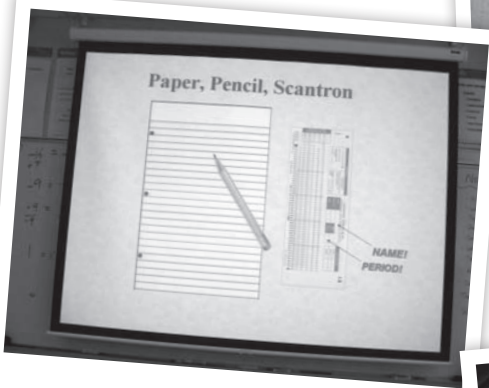


Mrs. Allgood says

1. Display a visual image that shows exactly how each student's desk should look to be ready for test taking. Make use of this visual only for tests, so that students associate the image only with this activity (*images 1, 2, and 3*). If you require a special seating arrangement for test taking, then create a visual of your seating arrangement and pair it with an aerial view of a student desk.



1. Open-book Test Materials



2. Scantron Test Materials



3. Pop Quiz Materials

Seating Charts and Arrangements

MRS. MEANSWELL occasionally rearranges the seating in her classroom. Sometimes she simply changes the arrangement of the desks in the room, and sometimes she shifts desk assignments by altering her seating chart. When she makes either change, her students often feel stressed and/or overly excited, resulting in complaints, fidgeting, and disruptions.

How can we efficiently assign our students new seats and seating arrangements, in a clear and relatively stress-free way?



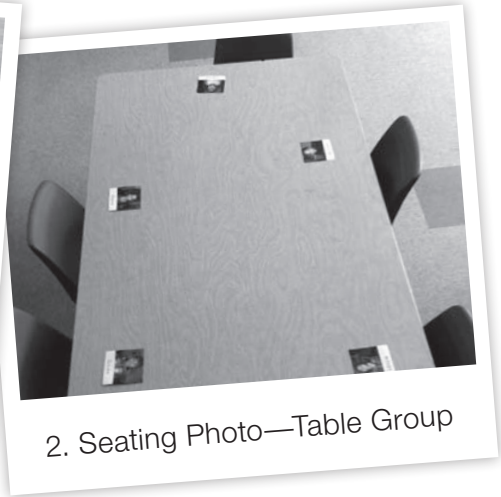
Mrs. Allgood says

To assign particular people to particular desks on a poster that illustrates (via photo or graphic) the whole room, you can simply write student names across their assigned desks. Reinforce the message by taping photographs that you've taken of students to their actual desks (*images 1 and 2*). Or, to use digital images, you can incorporate the photos of your students into your PowerPoint or overhead. In fact, there are several teacher grade book software programs that do just this (*images 3 and 4* show printouts from computer-generated seating charts). You drag the photos of your students into the program, and place each photo onto its proper desk. The result is an image of the classroom, with the desks in their proper places, and the student faces on the desks. This image can be projected onto a screen, printed onto a transparency, or handed out.

Another way is to print photos of your students, paste them into your seating chart, and write each student name next to his corresponding photo (this works great for substitute teachers—for more, see the section that follows). This also can be done with a wide-angle shot of your entire class, with everyone properly seated. If your camera doesn't have a wide enough angle to see the whole class in one photo, take two photos and tape them together.



1. Seating Photo—Student



2. Seating Photo—Table Group



3. Computer-generated Seating Chart



4. Computer-generated Seating Chart for Special Day Class



Mrs. Allgood says

A simple way for you to rearrange your students, either in rows or in groups, is to use sticky notes on a folder, with each note bearing the name of a student (*images 5, 6, and 7*). This makes it easy to move around the sticky notes until you come up with combinations of students that work to keep students focused and learning together. You can easily highlight individuals from each group to be facilitators or spokespeople. In addition, you can copy your chart onto an overhead and share with your students.

Some elementary teachers initially use photos of students from the previous school year. When a student walks into the classroom on the first day of school, his photo has been pre-placed onto his desk in the room.

Display an image of an aerial view of the classroom. Looking down, students can see exactly where the desks need to be in the room. The image can be a diagram, photo, or drawing, and can be created in PowerPoint, on an overhead, or on a poster (*images 8A–8G*). Included are images for various seating arrangements.

Bright Ideas



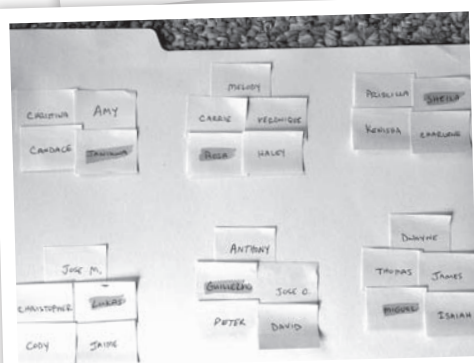
Number different seating configurations, and post the collection on the wall (*image 9*). Periodically have students practice rearranging their desks according to the numbers. Some teachers have “seating formation competitions” between classes, as a motivator for students to practice moving desks quickly and quietly. Once students are efficient at this task, you can seamlessly rearrange formations, depending on the activity you want to do. Think your high school students won’t buy into it? Check out the sample in the video section of our online library at www.consciousteaching.com/picturethis.html.



5. Seating Chart—Rows



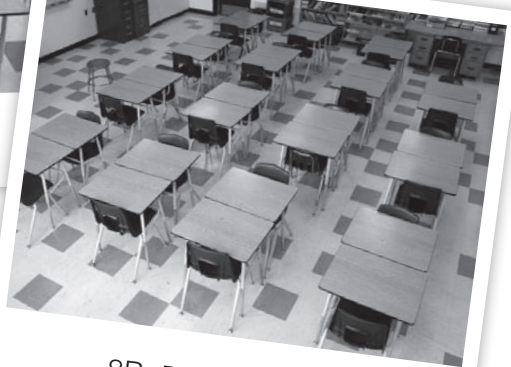
6. Seating Chart—Groups



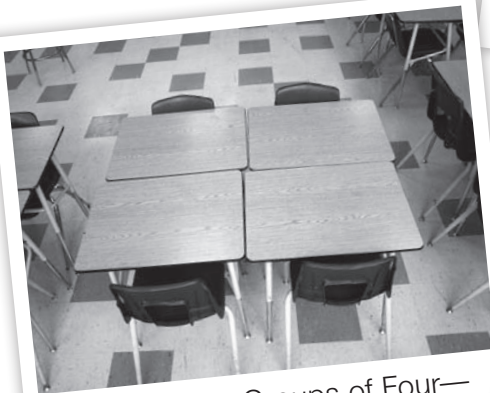
7. Seating Chart—Table Groups



8A. Desks in Rows



8B. Desks in Pairs



8C. Desks in Groups of Four—
Close-up



8D. Desks in Groups of Four—
Whole Room



8E. Fishbowl with Desks



8F. Fishbowl with Desks
and Chairs



8G. Desks in Horseshoe
Formation

9. Numbered Seating Arrangements

1. Rows



2. Pairs



3. Groups of four





“The brain as a structure is capable of absorbing 36,000 visual images in every hour ... research approximates that between 80 and 90 percent of the information received by the brain is through visual means.” David Hyerle (2000, p. 30)