TEACHING PROCEDURES

“A teacher is one who makes herself progressively unnecessary.”
— THOMAS CARRUTHERS
Mrs. Meanswell knows that the bottom line for her success is how well her students learn content. So that’s where she puts her focus. She doesn’t realize the invaluable secret Mrs. Allgood has worked seamlessly into her system. Procedures, far from “busy work” or a distraction from content, are her best friends. Spending time on procedures in the classroom not only makes the environment run more smoothly, but it actually facilitates teaching content. Mrs. Allgood puts a tremendous emphasis on procedures, regardless of what grade level she teaches. Her procedures, ranging from how students enter the classroom, to how paper is distributed, to how pencils are sharpened, are taught, reinforced, practiced, and reviewed throughout the school year.

Here’s a challenge I like to give teachers: I dare them to try to over-teach procedures. I imagine it’s possible to do, but in the well
over one hundred teachers I have observed and coached, I have never seen it. By trying to teach procedures too much, teachers begin to appreciate the amount of emphasis procedures need.

Procedures Are the Railroad Tracks — Content Is the Train

I used to try to drag my “trainful” of brilliant lessons along bumpy terrain, uphill both ways. Once I clearly laid down the “railroad tracks” of procedure, the “train” of content ran much more smoothly in the direction I wanted. Consequently, I learned to start the process of teaching procedures on the first day of school; consistent maintenance and “polishing” were essential throughout the year.

When Mrs. Meanswell assumes that her kids are supposed to already know most of the class procedures and routines, or if she is so overwhelmed by the amount of content she is supposed to cover, she may fall into the trap of giving only a quick, cursory overview of procedures. Bad move. The clarity of the “tracks” of procedure will determine the direction — and the speed! — of the “train” of content.

Because of this, procedures come before content. And in that sense, they need to be given more priority than content. Additionally, timing is paramount. Mrs. Allgood tends to address procedures before disruptions occur, trying to “head problems off at the pass.” Mrs. Meanswell tends to address procedures in response to disruptions, once the chaos has ensued.

Each procedure needs to be learned, so each needs to be taught. Though it may seem overwhelming to have to teach all of these, most of them are simple and don’t take long to establish. Others don’t need to be emphasized in the first few days. We should put our attention first on the key procedures that will establish order and focus, and follow up later with the rest. Generally speaking,
What Procedures Do We Need?

Below is a partial list of areas where procedures are typically used in K-12 classrooms.

Beginning class
- Students entering the classroom
- Using cubbies
- Tardies
- Absent excused
- Absent unexcused
- Absent students making up work
- Starting the lesson
- Turning in homework

During class
- Getting student attention
- Listening to P.A. announcements
- Passing out papers
- Headings on papers
- Getting student attention
- Using the bathroom
- Using the water fountain
- Going to lockers
- Checking out books to students
- Passing out classroom supplies
- Using classroom supplies
- Collecting classroom supplies
- Turning in class work
- How students ask for help
- Checking for understanding
- Sending students to the office
CONSCIOUS CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

- Sending students to another teacher
- Hall passes
- Sharpening pencils
- Sharing pencils
- Class discussions – raising hands
- Group work
- Watching videos
- Sustained silent reading
- Taking tests
- Taking quizzes
- Organizing notebooks
- Using computers
- Sharing computers
- Student movement in the room
- Oral reports
- Incentives for positive behavior
- Consequences for inappropriate behavior
- Addressing put downs
- Addressing student conflicts with each other
- Addressing student conflicts with the teacher
- Attentive listening
- Classroom community circles

Special situations
- Fire drills
- Field trips
- Sitting in the auditorium
- Taking students to the library or computer lab
- Guest speakers
- Parent/guardian volunteers in the classroom
students’ entering and leaving the classroom, starting class, and getting student attention are the primary procedures to start with. We can add the others systematically in the first few weeks. Check Chapter 10, “Getting Ready,” for a “Before-School-Checklist” that can help with organization before school starts.

**How Do I Teach Procedures?**

Procedures, like behavior, are taught in the same ways that content is taught. Teaching is teaching and learning is learning, no matter whether we are teaching calculus, singing, foul shooting, lining up for recess, or appropriate behavior during an assembly. The components are still the same. Addressing students’ learning styles — visual, auditory, and kinesthetic — can make a big difference. Teachers need to break things into parts, teach the parts and connect them. For example, most students are exposed to the quadratic equation in math class in the 8th or 9th grade. In actuality, they start learning it in kindergarten. Their learning begins with the number line, and moves through addition, subtraction, mul-

---

**Ending class**

- Assigning homework
- Dismissing class during the day
- Dismissing class at the end of the day
- Students putting their materials away
- Students cleaning up the room
- Lining up for recess, lunch, or an assembly
- Using cubbies
- Putting notebooks in backpacks and backpacks on backs

---

Mrs. Allgood addresses procedures before disruptions; Mrs. Meanwell addresses them afterward.
tiplification, and division, until eventually they can wrestle with the quadratic equation. It is a complex lesson, taking about nine or ten years to implement. In a similar way, in teaching procedures, we need to find a first step that is small enough to allow our students to “get on the escalator.” Once that step is established, we can continue to add steps that are appropriately challenging for our students’ abilities.

To summarize, there are several steps to teaching procedures effectively:

- Determine what procedures are needed
- Break them into simple steps
- Teach them visually, orally, and/or kinesthetically
- Check for understanding
- Practice them
- Reinforce them
- Periodically review them

This process is helped if we assume that students want to succeed, and that procedures are the road map for that success.

Below are four examples for teaching or re-establishing procedures that illustrate different ways to do it.

1. Practicing procedures: group work

If Mrs. Meanswell were to ask her students on the first day of school to “get into groups of four and discuss the story that I just read,” she’d more likely than not have total chaos. Group work is a complex task and needs to be taught. In fact, group work is so multi-faceted, most adults in the workplace are still learning it, even though they’ve been doing it for years. Human Resources Departments of major corporations have reported that many of their employees have a hard time working in teams.

They should watch Mrs. Allgood. By the time her students are ready to practice group work — “working in groups of four” — she has already completed several steps.
First, she determined what the students needed to be taught about the procedure of group work. Her partial list included how to:

- Move their belongings
- Move their desks
- Move their bodies
- Know where to sit, and with whom
- Interact with the other moving bodies in the room
- Listen to the teacher once they are in groups
- Take turns discussing and staying on task
- Record responses
- Encourage each other to participate
- Elicit full and sincere responses
- Respect each other’s opinion
- Report out results
- Listen to others report out
- Take notes on others reporting out
- Thank and appreciate their group members
- Move their belongings back
- Move their bodies back
- Move their desks back
- Refocus their attention once they are moved back

Before tackling “working in groups of four,” she drilled her class on working in pairs. She focused on how she wants students to talk with each other, both in terms of describing and practicing the procedure, and in building student accountability for participation in groups. Now, the well-oiled “working in pairs” class is ready.

Mrs. Allgood breaks the new procedure into parts. The first part is getting students into groups. On the overhead projector is depicted an aerial view of the classroom, showing all the desks labeled with students’ names and gathered into groups of four with the corners touching. She tells the students to get into their groups according to the “map.” She times them. Once they are in groups, she debriefs students on the “lesson” by noting how long it took and giving any commendations and recommendations. “Excellent work,
class. It took you forty-five seconds, which is good for a first try. There were two students bumping elbows too much, and one group didn’t have their desks touching…”

Then the room is rearranged into its original configuration, and Mrs. Allgood asks the students to try the grouping procedure again. This time she offers them an incentive as a class. “I know you all want extra time today to work on your projects. We’ll be practicing getting into groups several times. Each time you can get into groups in fifteen seconds or less without pushing and shoving and with the corners of your desks touching, I’ll give you an extra minute and a half at the end of class to work on your projects.”

They practice getting in and out of groups several times. Once she feels that the students are getting the procedure, she will “lightly season” the lesson with content. But the procedure is still paramount. Whenever she debriefs the students’ group lessons, she always talks about the procedure of group work first, before discussing whatever topic the students talked about.

This policy that “procedure precedes content” is one element of invisible management, something Mrs. Allgood does consistently. During a discussion, she’ll say, “Yes Sally. Thank you for raising your hand (procedure). What is your comment (content)?” Or, “Thank you, class, for being so quiet while José was speaking (procedure). Let’s look at his idea… (content).” As Mrs. Allgood focuses on procedures first, she is “polishing the railroad tracks” to allow for the content to flow smoothly.

2. Reviewing procedures regularly

Mrs. Allgood and Mrs. Meanswell each have the same ten-day lesson that involves daily group work toward completion of a project. Each class goes smoothly for the first six days. Then on the seventh day, for no obvious reason, Mrs. Allgood takes three minutes at the start of the lesson to review the procedure for