So you’re ready to begin your first teaching job—ready to make a difference, to leave an indelible mark on young lives. You’re wearing your brand-new pair of rose-colored glasses, and they look quite nice on you. You’ve got a promising career ahead of you. You’re both excited and scared out of your mind! Hopefully, you have signed on with a school district that will provide structured, ongoing induction training and support for you during your first years of teaching. As a new teacher, you cannot possibly know all there is to know about effective teaching, but the following 20 tips will serve as a springboard to a very positive start.

1. Don’t be afraid to ask questions for fear of appearing incompetent. One of the strengths of competent professionals is that they are continually questioning. When you don’t know—and you often won’t—ask!

2. Do not fall prey to negative influences. There’s a “Mrs. WarnYa” on every faculty. Be nice to her, but don’t engage in any negative conversations with her. Resist the temptation to gripe or gossip at all costs.

3. Have a classroom management plan. Be very clear on what you expect of your students, and ensure that the students know what is expected of them. Establish your rules (no more than five) and enforce them consistently. Establish your procedures (you will have many) and practice them continually. Being consistent is vital!

4. Remember that teaching is a popularity contest. If the students don’t like you, they likely won’t learn from you. So yes, you want your students to like you. Be cautious, as there is a definite line between being friendly and being their friend. Students have plenty of friends, many of whom are leading them astray. Rather, you are their teacher—an adult who will help to guide them and teach them and inspire them and reach them. You should always be friendly, however, acting as a positive role model for your students. Nice, professional, caring, and consistent are adjectives that describe the kinds of teachers students adore.

5. Dress professionally. Your appearance should say that you are a proud professional. Don’t make the mistake of attempting to dress in a way that makes you appear “cool.” Students might think you’re cool, but they won’t respect you. Look in the mirror each morning and ask, “If I stopped at the store on my way to school and a stranger saw me, could the stranger surmise that I am some type of professional on my way to work?” If the answer is yes, then you are dressed professionally.

6. Act like a professional. The students, the parents, the community, and your coworkers are watching you. Don’t say or do anything unbecoming of a professional. Teachers are held to a very high standard both at school and in the community.

7. Make learning meaningful by relating the content you teach to the real lives of your students. For instance, students might not be as interested in a lesson in which they simply study Newton’s laws of motion as they would be in a lesson in which they study and discuss how the laws of motion apply to the sport of football or to video games.

8. Know, in advance, three very important things: (1) you will not make a lot of money as a teacher, (2) all students will not always behave appropriately, and (3) you will have lots of paperwork. Teaching is not easy, but its rewards far outweigh its difficulties.

9. Stay on top of your workload. Set aside time each day to plan, grade, and complete other paperwork. Procrastination is not your friend!

10. Greet your students every day as they enter your classroom. Don’t underestimate the power of making your students feel wanted and welcomed. Walmart greets its customers for a reason! Customers who feel welcomed are more likely to buy what is being sold. Students who feel welcomed are much more likely to buy what you are selling—content, skills, and a thirst for learning.

11. Get to know your students. Students need to feel that you care about them as individuals. When they feel this way, they will work harder and behave better in your class.
12. Be the most positive person you know. “Don’t smile until Christmas” is bad advice. Students need happy adults in their lives. As teachers, we are hired to be actors and actresses. So fake it if you must, because even on your worst of days, you have to appear happy and enthusiastic if you’re going to be effective.

13. Be very careful about posting your life’s details online. When using social media, don’t post anything that you would not want your students or their parents to read.

14. Communicate with parents. Send notes to parents telling them about something good that their child has done. Send notes telling of exciting things happening in your classroom. Parents are much more likely to cooperate with teachers when they feel these teachers care about their children.

15. Don’t allow students to push your buttons. The biggest mistake that teachers make is letting students know that the students are offending or upsetting them personally. You must appear calm and in control, even and especially when dealing with students who have lost control.

16. Make all decisions on the basis of what’s best for students, not what’s easiest for you. When you’re tired and are contemplating giving the students busywork so that you can rest or grade papers, ask yourself, “Is this best for my students?” This one question will keep you on track!

17. Use clever psychology. For instance, when a student is behaving inappropriately, privately ask, “Is everything all right?” Display an attitude of caring and concern as opposed to one of frustration.

18. Make the classroom theirs! Post pictures of students, post their artwork, and post work of which they are proud. Ensure that your environment says, to anyone who enters, “We, the students, take ownership of this classroom, and we’re proud of it. Our teacher is proud of it (and us) too!”

19. Recognize the power of your influence and know that your influence on a student has nothing to do with the student’s good or bad behavior and everything to do with yours. Don’t take student behavior personally. If you’re ever offended or hurt by a student’s actions, never let the student know it. Remember that you are the adult and the professional. Act like one and you will be treated as one.

20. Never give up on any student, no matter what. Students deserve to be in the classrooms of teachers who refuse to give up on them, regardless of their behavior or ability.

If you follow these 20 tips, this year and every year, and if you continue to learn, to grow, and to give your students your all, you will be loved and remembered as a teacher who touched lives and truly made a difference. Welcome, new teacher, to the noblest profession on Earth!

I Teach
I light a spark in a darkened soul
I warm the heart of one grown cold
I look beyond and see within
Behind the face, beneath the skin
I quench a thirst, I soothe a pain
I provide the food that will sustain
I touch, I love, I laugh, I cry
Whatever is needed, I supply
Yet more than I give, I gain from each
I am most richly blessed—I teach.

—Annette Breaux

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