

LEARNING MADE EASY



First-Year Teaching

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Navigate your
first week of school

Cultivate a welcome, safe, and
structured learning environment

Develop positive relationships
with students

Carol Flaherty
Flirtisha Harris
W. Michael Kelley

Former first-year teachers

First-Year Teaching

**for
dummies®**
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**by Carol Flaherty, Flirtisha Harris,
and W. Michael Kelley**

**for
dummies®**
A Wiley Brand

First-Year Teaching For Dummies®

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Introduction

Teaching is a profession adorned with platitudes, and when you're in training, you hear them all. They are well-intentioned, as are the people who are constantly posting them to your social media accounts, but they're not particularly helpful. Here are a few quotes that elicit a groan whenever we read them. Each is attributed to the people generally recognized as the original source:

- » "If you have to put someone on a pedestal, put teachers. They are society's heroes." – Guy Kawasaki
- » "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." – Henry Adams
- » "Better than a thousand days of diligent study is one day with a great teacher." – Japanese proverb
- » "I'm hot for teacher. I've got it bad, so bad. I'm hot for teacher. Whoa." – Van Halen

All these inspirational quotes are meant to tell you that teaching is an important job, that educating the next generation is a noble goal, but no one is arguing that fact. Everyone knows teachers are important and underappreciated. Here's something people may not know: Teaching is *hard*.

Legendary interviewer Terry Gross, host of National Public Radio's *Fresh Air*, explained it honestly and succinctly in a recent television appearance. She started her professional career as an eighth-grade teacher. "I got my BA in English, with a teaching certificate. I was literally fired in six weeks, for not being able to keep control of a class, or even keep them in a class." Her teacher training did not prepare her for the realities of a classroom.

Even if you don't struggle with classroom management, there are plenty of other challenges you'll face as a first-year teacher. Can you manage your time well? Can you communicate with parents and administrators effectively? Can you make your instructional content interesting enough to hold the attention of a class full of fifth-graders right after lunch?

Once you're actually in the classroom, the reality of teaching erodes the idealized version most of us have built up in our minds. Things you may have shrugged off at first — the low pay, the increasingly charged politicization of education, a massive at-home workload, and the expectation that you'll work all hours of the day and night — make you wonder why you chose the path you did. It's stressful. It's isolating. It's *hard*.

A 2022 study conducted by Merrimack College and EdWeek Research finds “a deep disillusionment of many teachers who feel overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated.” After surveying more than 1,000 teachers, they found that only 12 percent of respondents were very happy with their jobs, and almost half of those surveyed were planning to quit the teaching profession entirely within the next two years. Why is this happening? Why are people who were so eager to teach leaving in droves so quickly?

We believe that teacher preparation is failing our new teachers. You don't need platitudes. You don't need inspirational quotes. You don't need a 5 percent discount on school supplies purchased during the first week of August if you present a valid school ID (exclusions apply, see store for details). You need help. You need support. You need to know what you're getting into and what you should do when things go wrong. That's where this book comes in.

About This Book

Every first-year teacher needs an experienced teacher mentor — someone they can trust, someone who's made mistakes and learned from them, someone who can give them useful advice. Those people are hard to find. The three of us didn't have a mentor like that when we started teaching, so we learned the hard way. Over our many years in the profession, we slowly accumulated advice based on our own experiences, the cautionary tales of mistakes we (and others around us) made, and the occasional solid-gold nugget of advice panned from colleagues' hard-earned wisdom.

Over and over, we found ourselves saying, “If only I'd known that when I was new — it would have saved me so much trouble!” That's why we wrote this book. There's no reason that every new teacher should have to build their own bedrock of institutional knowledge and go it alone. We wanted to take all that advice and experience and distill it into one volume so that you are better prepared to succeed right away.

Although we, as a diverse team of three, have a broad knowledge base, we wanted more for this book. We wanted to present a comprehensive view of teaching from

many different perspectives and stakeholders in the educational process, so we talked to lots of different people, including

- » Prospective teaching candidates, to find out what they were the most nervous about
- » Student teachers, to identify pain points and skills they needed to develop
- » First-year teachers, who shared stories both inspirational and tragic
- » Experienced teachers, who have seen and dealt with it all
- » Principals, who explained what they expect from first-year teachers
- » District administrators, who provided insight about how they evaluate new teachers
- » School staff, who provided insight into the day-to-day operations of a school and how they interface with teachers
- » Former students, to figure out what teachers do to make their lives better or worse

We've tried to anticipate every important decision or situation you'll face during your first year teaching so that you're prepared to respond. You'll find tons of real-life examples and plenty of those "Here's what you shouldn't do" stories (some of them, unfortunately, starring us). This is our way of helping you measure how deep the water is before you dive in.

Foolish Assumptions

We don't assume much about you in this book, other than that you're probably involved in — or just finishing — a college or postgraduate educational program. You know all the theory, you can write a lesson plan, and you're filled to the gills with educational psychology. We aren't going to revisit any of this well-trod ground. Instead, we're going to focus on practical advice.

One assumption we *don't* make is the grade level you're teaching or planning to teach. When we were writing, a lot of people asked us, "Is this going to be a book for elementary teachers or secondary teachers?" The answer is: Both. Carol taught elementary school, Flirtisha taught middle and high school, and Mike taught high school and college classes. When we sat down to plan out the book, we discovered over and over again that the same advice applied, regardless of the age group you're teaching. In some rare cases, some tips are more applicable to students of a specific age, and we call that out when it occurs.

Icons Used in This Book

Here and there, sprinkled in the margins of the book, you'll find little pictures that point to important parts of the text. Here are the icons we use and what they mean:



TIP

These little nuggets of advice can save you valuable time or prevent headaches in the future. It's sage advice from teachers who have already suffered the slings and arrows of bad decisions.



WARNING

Think of these warnings as little flags that a minesweeper has placed in the field before you so that you know where you can safely step and where you definitely can't.



REMEMBER

File these things away in your mind because, somewhere down the road, you'll be glad you did.



CAROL
SAYS

We wrote this book as a team, so we generally speak as a consensus. Occasionally, one of us will share a personal anecdote or speak in the first person, so we include one of these icons to indicate which of us is talking.



FLIRTISHA
SAYS



MIKE SAYS

Beyond the Book

In addition to the pages you're reading right now, this book comes with a free, access-anywhere online Cheat Sheet that summarizes some of our key advice at a glance. To access this Cheat Sheet, go to www.dummies.com, and type **first-year teaching cheat sheet** in the search box.

Where to Go from Here

We think the first three chapters provide important context for the rest of the book — they help differentiate this book from most of the other teacher preparation books out there by presenting a realistic picture of what you're walking into. However, if you want to skip right to the practical advice, you may want to start with Chapter 4 and go from there. We recommend reading through as much of the book as you can before you start teaching, because you may not know what you may not know, you know?

As you read, you may find yourself disagreeing with us here and there, and that's fine. These strategies worked wonders for us, but our goal with this book isn't to make you into our disciple. We just want you to think through challenging situations before they actually arise. If that means you come to different conclusions than we do, so be it! You'll still be forming your own strategies and policies, and that's what's most important, after all.

This book is our love letter to you. It has been a joy to work together to distill our lives' work into something that we hope you find useful in your new journey as a first-year teacher. Feel free to e-mail us at those.teacher.dummies@gmail.com. We'd love to hear from you!

1

What They Didn't Teach You in College

IN THIS PART . . .

Learn what life is like as a first-year teacher.

Confront society's preconceived notions about teachers.

Discover what schools *really* think about all those educational theories you had to learn in college.

Explore how things have changed since you were your students' age.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Exploring how teaching compares to other occupations
- » Understanding the unique demands teachers face
- » Anticipating the challenges you'll face before your first day of work
- » Coping with the chaos of your day-to-day life

Chapter **1**

What Have You Gotten Yourself Into?

Most new teachers are shocked by how different their perception of the teaching profession and teaching itself tend to be. In order to reduce the transitional shock from perception to reality, this chapter focuses on some of the biggest unexpected adjustments that you'll need to make as you earn your stripes as a teacher. As you read this book, you may find that not every single thing applies to you directly, but you can still find underlying commonalities that affect all teachers. In addition, remember that even though teaching probably won't be exactly the way you pictured it, by no means should you fear those differences. The little unanticipated variations from the expected are often what make teaching the job that so enticed you in the first place.

Real World versus School World

The world inside the school walls is vastly different from the world outside those walls. However, a haunting, underlying similarity exists between the teaching profession and every other job that you could have taken. These differences make

people refer to the “real world” in class, as in the common apologies, “You’ll need to know how to divide decimals in the real world” and “In the real world, people use these spelling words, so unless you want to embarrass yourself, you need to know what they mean.” In this section, we show you how both worlds you’ll be living in compare and contrast.

How teaching is like other jobs

Though teaching has more dissimilarities than parallels with the so-called real world, you’ll find universal laws that hold true in both. Understanding how your new world stacks up to the one you’re used to is a necessary first step in preparing for the teacher’s life.

» **Your performance will be evaluated based largely on numbers.** There are many, many books written about the little emotional things that make an entire career “worth it” (*Chicken Soup for the Retiring Biology and Life Sciences Teacher’s Soul*-type books), suggesting that a teacher is a good one if they make a difference in *just one kid’s life*. The reality is that your proficiency in the classroom will be judged according to numbers, just like in most professions. Ultimately, test scores, grade distributions, and standardized assessment scores speak more loudly than anything else when it comes to administrators, especially early in your career. However, if your numbers aren’t quite up to the par they set for you, especially at first, never let that blind you to the good, albeit immeasurable, things that you’re accomplishing in the classroom. Just because you can’t quantify something doesn’t make it any less worthwhile of an objective.



I was blown away the first time my supervisor called my team together and then projected our test scores onto the smartboard. I never gave much thought to how I was stacking up to my colleagues because my school often assigned me students whom other teachers called the “bad kids.” I loved teaching them because they were a challenge, but it meant that my scores weren’t always at the top. I couldn’t have cared less. If my boss wanted to boil my life’s work down to a number with no context then so be it. That didn’t mean I would. The fact that my students were even *generating* data points meant that I was doing my job. You know in your heart that you’re making a difference — you don’t need a test score to tell you that.

» **You’ll get both praise and blame that you don’t deserve.** Take it all in stride. The good days and the bad days will eventually offset each other. So, if things look bleak, give it a week or so and the clouds will begin to clear. However, this works both ways. If you’re feeling on top of the world, don’t get too big for your britches. Even the most experienced teacher is bound to wind up in extremely sticky situations, and they always come out of the blue.

Always be on the lookout for problems and try to head them off before things get ugly.

» **Most people don't want to hear about what you do at work.** Even though everyone's been in school and can relate to your job, don't assume that people want to hear about your great lesson plan on teaching condensation to elementary school science students. As much as you may be changing the future and exciting kids about learning, realize that other people's apathy is nothing personal. In fact, keeping most educational opinions to yourself is usually to your benefit. If prodded, many people will launch into a diatribe about "what's wrong with education."

Teaching is an admirable career, full of sacrifice and too often bereft of the reward and recognition it deserves. But be sure that you don't slip into the mindset that you're doing society a favor by teaching, and that society should, in turn, pay you back in spades. We know that teaching is one of the few truly humanitarian professions left, but trust us when we say that the rest of the world would rather us not belabor the point.

How teaching is unique



My first job was a corporate job; I was a quality assurance analyst with a corner office. Business suits, elevator music, the whole thing. I can't possibly overstate the culture shock when I transitioned into teaching physical education. I thought, "How hard will this be? We'll just have fun and play all day!" And then I stepped foot into the classroom. It was so loud. There were 30 little bodies running around, all of them with their own needs, and they are all screaming. Susie's feelings got hurt. Johnny just barfed, and eight kids need to go to the bathroom right now. I had a moment where I questioned all of my life's decisions all at once. My dream of marching into a room of perfect angels eager to learn from me evaporated instantly.

Teaching is undeniably as unique a career as they come, and in many ways, it's completely, utterly, and shockingly different from other jobs. Most of these differences are practical rather than philosophical, and if we sound like we're starting to get a little bit too deep into academic speak here, let us dispel that perception with the first stark contrast we make between the real world and the school world:

» **You don't get to eat or go to the bathroom when you want.** You haven't lived until you're forced to eat lunch at 10:05 a.m. or until you've sweated out the last ten minutes of a class period, with a dire urge to (ahem) relieve yourself. Biological needs play a bizarre starring role as you get used to teaching. Veteran teachers are so used to this schedule and are so well



TIP

adapted to it that you can set your clock to the time that they use the restroom (not that you'd ever want to do that, but you get the point).

Do yourself a favor: If at all possible, find out what your schedule will be the summer before you start teaching and govern your life by it. Eat lunch at home when you'll eat it at school. Practice a little self-control in the bathroom department, and only go at the times allotted by your upcoming schedule. You may consider this preparation to be a little ridiculous, but if you're not used to such rigidity in your schedule, it may be an unwelcome surprise later.

» **You'll be expected to do a lot that has nothing to do with your training.**

Even though you've spent years preparing for a life of teaching, you're also going to have to serve as the police. Some schools have a safety advocate, security force, or police presence these days, but, in most cases, the system is miniscule at best. You'll be expected to police kids as they eat, play, walk in the halls, use the restroom, attend sporting events, attend school-wide assemblies, and so on. In addition, you'll most likely be asked to participate in a school-based activity, sponsor a club, or coach a sport *even if you have no experience in that club or sport whatsoever*. Flip to Chapter 16 for more discussion of extracurricular activities.



WARNING

» **Your free time is going to take a huge hit.** Most teachers use the term *9-to-5 job* very contemptuously. They curl their lips and produce spittle when they talk about people who can just leave work at 5 p.m. and not have to grade, plan, and wonder what to do about that weird kid in social studies who keeps licking the textbook. You should expect to give up lots of your own time (and spend lots of your own money), especially if you're going to make fun and engaging lesson plans. You can find tons of lesson plans in books and online, but you'll find that none are ever *quite* right for you. You'll spend a lot of time tweaking these plans so that they work better for your kids. Plus, don't forget that you have to master the material before you can hope to teach it — you're about to find out just how much you really forgot from your own schooling!

» **Your summers are "work free."** This difference is no longer true universally, as it once was. We never taught at a "year-round school," and we're thankful for it. All that time you spent at school and at home, grading and working yourself to the bone, is rewarded with a little more than two months of vacation. Don't be surprised, however, that your summers are rarely, if ever, actually vacations at all. Don't forget that you have to stay certified, and that takes a lot of classes and workshops. Furthermore, you're not earning a king's ransom, so most people take extra jobs during the summer.



TIP

You actually earn all your pay only during the academic year, so summer is technically an unpaid vacation. Many school systems will take your annual pay and divide it up so that you receive the same pay during the summertime as you did during the school year. However, some systems will offer you a choice. If money

management isn't exactly your strong suit, don't elect to take larger paychecks that end when the school year does. If you're given more money, you may end up spending it. On the other hand, if you know yourself well and you're confident you can set enough aside to make it through the summer without having to bum meals off your friends, you'd be wise to take the larger paychecks that end when the school year does. That way, you can be earning interest on your income that much sooner.



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PRACTICAL POTTY TALK

If you're someone of weak composure, bear with me for a moment. Most teaching books don't address this issue, but it's one that most first-year teachers wonder about and are hesitant to address. What if they *really* need to go to the bathroom, and they can't wait until the end of class? This topic is actually a very important legal issue. The key point is *supervision*. You can't leave your class unsupervised, even for a moment. Therefore, making friends with one of the teachers in a classroom adjacent to yours is essential. If you're a *floating teacher* (you change classrooms some or every period of the day), you have more work cut out for you; you'll have to find a buddy teacher for every classroom you're in.

If things get dire, give your class a good excuse for why you have to leave the room (the principal asked to meet with you quickly after the period got underway, or you have to deliver a note to another teacher), and ask your buddy teacher to keep an eye on your class while you're gone. (By the way, make sure that the excuse matches the length of time you expect to be gone.) This practice is applicable for all reasons that you may need to leave the room, even if you're just going into the hallway to speak with a student you've sent out for disciplinary reasons. Don't shut your door behind you as you leave! This cuts you off from the rest of your students, and anything can happen in your absence. Leave the door open and make it a point to keep looking in on them. Keep this question in mind: "If this were ever brought into a court of law, could I prove that the students were in some way supervised?" If so, you'll be fine. You're allowed to go the bathroom if you have to.

Except sometimes it's not so simple. I used to teach in a school that wouldn't let you leave students unattended, but neither would they do anything to help you in the face of a personal emergency. Plan A was "you can't leave your room ever," and there was no Plan B. Because I was teaching in the gym, a building detached from the main school building, it was impossible to communicate with, let alone get coverage from, another teacher. Even inside the building it was a challenge. The reality struck me when one of my colleagues actually urinated on herself during class because no one would come to her room and monitor her students for five minutes. She was humiliated.

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The administrators at the school did nothing to change their policies after The Event. Adults were still not allowed to use the bathroom if they needed to, and no one would respond to requests for coverage. It was up to me to protect myself, so I went to my doctor and asked her to write me a note that basically said, “Please let this grown woman pee when she needs to,” but to make that sound as medically professional as she could. The school had to make a medical accommodation for me at that point, only because the law required it.

Finally, and then I *promise* we’ll move on from this topic: Look out for your colleagues. When you have a planning period, pop into someone’s classroom and ask whether they need a break. One of my schools had a long (110-minute) instructional period because of lunch shifts, and I can tell you for a fact that there were days near the end of that nearly two-hour stretch that I wished someone had checked on me.

Bearing the Instructor’s Burden

Teaching is a unique profession in that you’re basically isolated from your colleagues from the first minute of the first school day and are expected to learn as you go with little or no help during the day. It’s a difficult chore and a heavy burden to carry, especially when things aren’t going well. You’d think that you could lean on your experience as a student teacher in these times, but you’d be surprised how different your actual teaching experience will be from your time as a student teacher.

Sink or swim!

Have you seen those TV shows where they demonstrate that babies can swim without instruction as soon as they’re born? They toss infants into a swimming pool, and the little ones just swim like tadpoles without a care in the world! That’s what it’s like to teach. You get tossed right into the water, and everybody stands back and watches. “Are they going to make it? They may be in trouble, but let’s just watch what happens. Maybe they’ll pull through after all, and if they don’t, we’ll drag them out and throw somebody else in instead.”



WARNING

Stop and think about that for a second — it’s actually pretty scary! School systems aren’t interested in making you a good teacher. They expect you to be good based on your college training, without a whole lot of experience under your belt. Even worse, you’re not going to swim very well when you first get tossed in. Teaching your first class based on what you learned in college is like being asked to swim