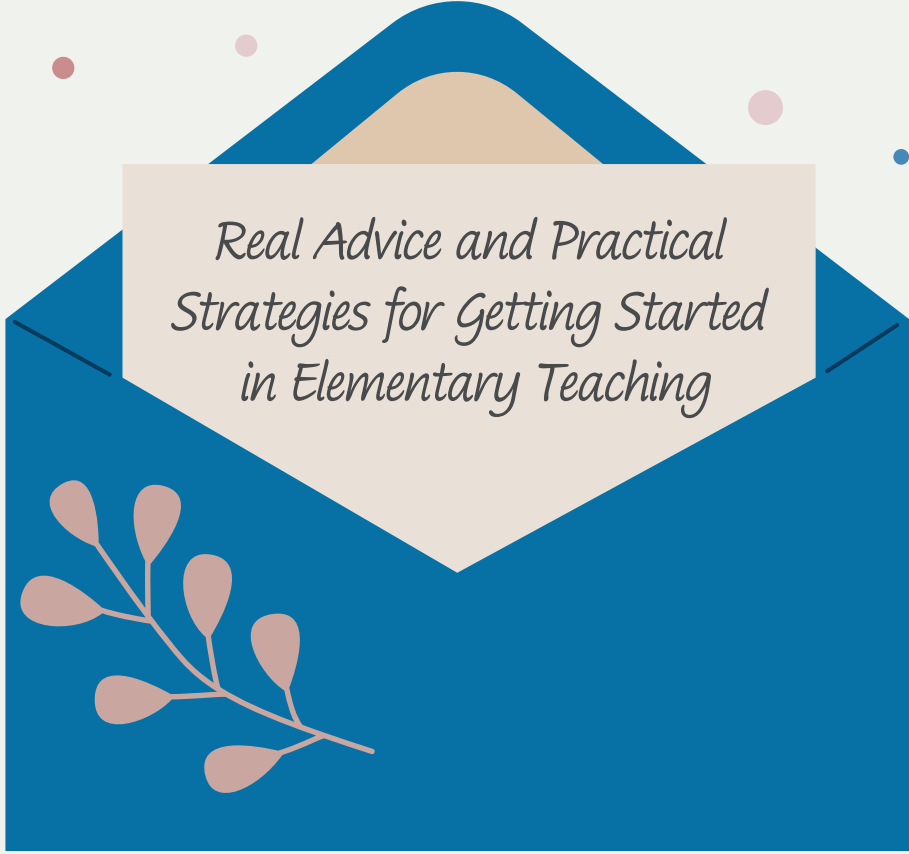


# Letters to a New Teacher



*Real Advice and Practical  
Strategies for Getting Started  
in Elementary Teaching*

**JENNIFER ORR**

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## Keeping Classroom Space Clean and Organized

**D**ear Jen,

This job is so much. I am exhausted at the end of every day because it is so nonstop. And then, after my students leave, I feel like there is still so much to do. Making sure I am ready with everything for lessons the next day and organizing everything from the day that just ended. The worst part, though, is that I look around the room once it's empty and want to cry. It's such a disaster. There's so much I need to do to just have our space ready for the next day. It feels overwhelming.

—Feeling Crushed

**D**ear Crushed,

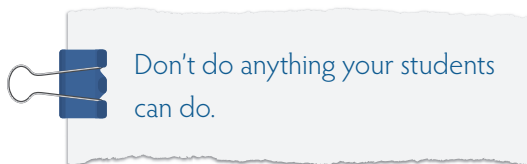
I feel this so strongly! There are so many parts to this job that most people, sometimes even others in education, don't see. One key to survival is to figure out what you really have to do and what you can let go of. Having your classroom space ready each day is clearly a crucial piece. The good news is that making that happen doesn't have to fall to you.

I got lucky in my third or fourth year of teaching. A close friend and former colleague had moved away and was teaching kindergartners, not her ideal grade choice. I visited her classroom one Friday in January and was amazed when we walked out the door as soon as her students were gone. The classroom looked perfect! I turned to her and said, "How did that happen? How

is your room all set for Monday?!" She gave me one of the best pieces of advice I'd ever heard: Don't do anything your students can do.

I went back to my classroom, full of fourth graders who were certainly more capable of caring for our classroom space than kindergartners would be, right? For the next week or so, as I spent my afternoons readying the classroom for the next day, I began to take note of the things I was doing. I was making sure all the chairs were stacked, erasing our board, watering our plants, straightening our classroom library, etc. Why was I doing all those things? Suddenly I had no idea.

I made a list of classroom jobs. (We already had some jobs, like line leader, that changed regularly.) I thought about how many students would be needed for each job. Some only needed

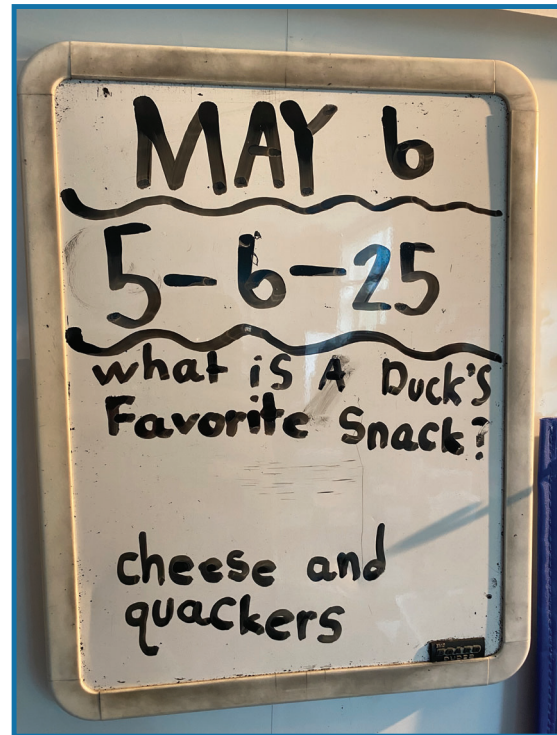


one student, others required two or three. My goal was to have a job for every student. Sometimes that might mean three students did a job that I thought could be done by two, but I wanted to be sure everyone had shared responsibility for our classroom space. At first, I assigned every student a job. They did that job regularly for one quarter of the year. One student erased our boards every afternoon, another student straightened our set of small whiteboards and made sure the markers were all closed tightly, two students stacked all of our chairs, and one student watered our plants every few days. I even had one student who wrote the date up for the next day, another who set our schedule for the next day, and one who turned off all of our lights (we have floor and table lamps around our classroom so it's a bit more complicated than the light switch).

As we moved forward, I added some jobs that happened at other times of the day. One new job was to have a student tell me who was absent each morning after our morning meeting (that way I remembered to submit attendance!), another student passed out papers when needed, and another collected papers when necessary. I just kept reminding myself, "Is this task something I have to do or can one of my students do it?" If they could do it, it became another classroom job.

Now, more than twenty years later, I have added a job application to the process, thanks to one of my own children's teachers doing so. Each quarter students apply for a job by filling out the application, which includes their name, address, phone number, and birthday. (I adapt the application depending on my students' grade level.) They list their top three job choices and explain why they would be good at their first choice (or all three, depending on how complex I want it to be).

One final tip comes from another colleague of mine. She was so frustrated by the mess on her floor each afternoon, she took a couple of minutes before dismissal to play Magic Trash. She told students (and these were third



**FIGURE 1** One of my classroom jobs is Date Writer. At the end of each day that student sets up our board with the next day's date. Some of my Date Writers have taken the job to a whole new level!

Job Application				
Full Name _____				
Birthday _____				
Address _____				
Phone Number _____				
<b>Possible Jobs:</b>				
Scheduler	Date Writer	Plant Waterer	Technician	Math Materials
Materials Distributer		Materials Collector	Check Out/In Manager	
Attendance Reporter	Materials Manager (2)	Librarian (3)	Substitute	
Chair Stacker (2)	Light Extinguisher	Thursday Folder Organizer (2)		
Board Manager	Rug & Trash Manager	Job Manager		
Whiteboards/Clipboards Manager				
My last job was _____.				
My first job choice is _____.				
I would be good at that job because _____				
_____				
_____				
My second job choice is _____.				
My third job choice is _____.				

**FIGURE 2** An example of a job application I have used with third and fourth graders.

graders!) that there was some magic trash on the carpet, and whoever picked it up would get a reward. Every day, after students scrambled around grabbing trash and throwing it away, she would identify two students and give them stickers or bookmarks or Jolly Ranchers. It was surprisingly (at least to me!) effective. She did try to identify different students each day to spread the fun around, but she often tried to pick students who had really had a fabulous day or, just as importantly, students who really needed a pick-me-up.

Having students take responsibility for the space and materials in a classroom not only takes some of the burden off of you (not all of the burden, because there are always things you have to do that they can't), but it also gives them more ownership. They are more invested in caring for the space and materials when they are more responsible for them. It's also great when you are out and have a substitute teacher because you're far more likely to return to an organized and ready room when the students are the ones who set it up each day!

## First Day(s) of School

**D**ear Jen,

I've set up my classroom and explored my curricular materials as I'm getting ready for the school year to start. My students' names are outside my room, ready for them to arrive on the first day of school, but I'm realizing I have no idea how to get started! My planning and pacing guides aren't as helpful as I'd hoped because I don't think I want to start in on our first units right when my students arrive for day one. But what do I do instead? What does that first day of school look like? How many days should there be before I start in on the first units for my district? I know that we need to start the year off right so that we are all set up for success, but I don't know how to do that.

—Striving to Start Strong

**D**ear Striving,

I don't know if it helps to hear this or not, but I go through this same thought process almost every year. I'm initially so focused on getting the space prepared and collaborating with my team to get ready for the year and I am often looking farther forward than the first day. I always plan as though my class is already up and rolling and then it hits me that we have to get to that point. Somehow we have to establish all the routines and expectations that will make for a strong classroom community.

One of the things to consider, as you plan for the first few days, is what you want your class to be after those days. How do you picture your class running? That picture will help you plan activities to teach your students what they need to know to function in that way. You can do this by mentally walking through your school day.

One of the things to consider, as you plan for the first few days, is what you want your class to be after those days.



- ◆ How do you want your students to arrive in the classroom? Will they all walk in at the same time or will they trickle in? What will they do as others are arriving? Will they be eating breakfast in your classroom? Where will they put their backpacks and jackets?
- ◆ How do you want to get your students' attention? Do you want just one routine for that or multiple options?

- ◆ How do you want students to raise their hands or let you know that they want to answer?  
How do you want students to let you know they need to go to the bathroom or get water or tend to other needs?
- ◆ How do you want your students to line up to leave the classroom for lunch or other activities?
- ◆ How do you want your students to walk through the hallways?
- ◆ How do you want your students to move to and from your whole-group meeting area (if you have one)?
- ◆ How do you want to pass out papers, books, or other materials? How do you want to collect them? Where will students keep such materials?
- ◆ How do you want students to prepare to go home in the afternoon? How will you dismiss them?
- ◆ What expectations do you have for lunchroom behavior that your students need to know? What about for recess?

That is an overwhelming list, I know! You can't possibly tackle all of that in one day. You and your students will lose track of things if you do. You may be hitting on all of those things briefly on day one, but it will take your students time to really learn how to follow the routines and expectations you are teaching them. For younger elementary students, it might take the first month of school for these routines to be strong. For upper elementary, it might only take a week or two. But everything you do in that time should take into consideration that students are still in the process of learning new routines and expectations. Whatever lessons and activities you are doing, you can reinforce how students gather materials, how they raise their hands (I have students put a thumb up in front of their chest instead of waving a hand in the air), how they move from one activity to the next, and more. Remind students of the routine as it is coming up, and notice and name when students are doing it well. For example, "I notice that Matilda is waiting patiently on the carpet for her paper." That doesn't call out students who forgot the routine, but it does remind them of what you expect.

Of course, in all of that, I haven't really answered your question! I've just listed things you need to do without really addressing *how* to do them. For those first few days, no matter how young or old my students are, I have a bunch of activities we can do. It is easy to look at the list above and end up with students sitting and listening to you for quite a while. That's not easy for

elementary students in general, but it's definitely tough in the first week of school when they are excited and out of practice. I plan for ten-to-fifteen-minute chunks for the day. If one chunk is practicing how to line up and walk respectfully in the hallway, then the next chunk will be an All About Me page or something else they can do independently and without so much structure. My goal is to make sure my students don't have to sit, mostly passively, for more than ten to fifteen minutes at any time.

If we have notebooks or folders we are going to use, we will take some time to decorate them. I do lots of read-alouds of fun picture books in the first days of school and students can write or draw responses to them as their first entries in these journals. There are plenty of fun All About Me pages online for free that offer another option for decompressing after working on some routines or expectations as a whole group. I've done some Would You Rather activities (would you rather have ice cream for dessert or get to stay up as late as you want?, for example) and have students move to a specific space in the room if they answer a specific way. That activity allows them to get up and move and to talk with their classmates and get to know each other. We might do five to seven different Would You Rather scenarios each day.

You might be feeling some pressure to be teaching content immediately. Hopefully your administration and your teammates value spending some time building a classroom community and establishing routines, but sometimes the focus on content takes over. There are some fun ways to include content while still working on routines and community. You can find a range of Color By activities (color by number, color by letter, color by word type, color by multiplication problem, etc.) to use between more structured times. You can have students do All About Me using numbers as a part of math (number of siblings, age, number of places lived, etc.). As long as you remember to focus on routines and expectations during any activity, you can use just about anything. If it also supports building classroom community, getting to know each other, making connections, even better.

On those first days of school, elementary students are usually super-excited to be there, back with friends and with a new teacher. They are pretty open to just about anything. Focus on them, connect with them individually and as a group, let them know you are excited too and that you care about them. That's the most crucial part of those early days of the year.

## Flexible Seating

**D**ear Jen,

I've seen a few teachers, both at school and on Instagram, who have flexible seating. I'm not really sure how doable it is, but I'm intrigued by it and curious to have more information. What are the benefits and drawbacks of flexible seating? How challenging is it to get furniture that will work for a flexible classroom? How can I make sure my students understand how to use the flexible options? I really like the idea, but I am overwhelmed by how to make it all happen.

—Wanting Flexibility

**D**ear Wanting,

These are great questions. Thinking about the benefits and drawbacks before jumping into something is so wise (and something I struggle with as I just want to *do!*). Having had flexible seating in my classroom now for nearly twenty years, with students from kindergarten through fifth grade, I have lots of thoughts. I'll start with the benefits, because they're the reason our classroom still has flexible options:

- ◆ **Students can find what is comfortable for them while they work.** Every year I have at least one student who prefers to work standing up. In the past, that meant their chair was pushed back and in the middle of the walkway. Sometimes I could get them to stand behind their chair, but they wouldn't always think about it. In a flexible classroom you can have a taller table available for students who want to stand while they work. If students prefer to stretch out on the floor, they can do so. You can have chairs or stools that roll or rock or bounce for students who need to move, just a bit, while they're working. As adults, we likely know the places that are most productive for us to be focused. For me that's my dining-room table or the easy chair in my bedroom. Our students can also have options so that they can find their most productive spot.
- ◆ **Students have ownership over the classroom space.** When students have one desk, with their name plate taped on it, that is their space. That can be important and helpful for some students to have a space in the classroom that is uniquely theirs. (And every once in a while I have a student who needs this and we choose a spot in the classroom that works for them and designate it their spot.) For many students, however, having a flexible classroom

means that all the space belongs to them. Students might make suggestions about how the space would work better for them or might request opportunities to sit and work in places that hadn't crossed your mind. In first grade one year, I knew I would have a student teacher in the spring so I put a desk in our room for her when I set things up in the fall. It was a favorite place for students to work until she arrived in January. We had a bit of a challenge convincing the first graders that it was now her space. In third grade for a few years, I had an electronic piano in my classroom. (When I'd been in kindergarten and first grade we did a lot of singing that supported literacy.) I rarely used it as a piano, unfortunately, so the cover was typically closed. Students sat on the piano bench and used the piano as another table. Every space in our classroom, unless I explicitly forbid it, is theirs.

- ◆ **Students also have ownership over their own personal space.** In a traditional classroom, students have an assigned seat and have to sit next to whoever is assigned to sit beside them. When my own children were in elementary school they would complain to me about having to sit next to disruptive classmates because they were fairly well-behaved (far from perfect, but mostly rule followers in the classroom). I realized that my own students didn't have this problem because I no longer forced them to sit beside anyone. If another student was disrupting their work or being unkind, they could just get up and move to another place in our classroom. When students complain to me now that someone is bothering them, I remind them they can move. I tell them they have the power to solve this problem and that they should not give up that power.

There are some drawbacks, of course:

- ◆ I struggle when it is time to give a standardized test and I need to spread students out. I can't simply move desks apart to meet the expectations of a testing environment. For many years at least a few of my students were pulled out for small-group testing, making our classroom set up work just fine. Some years all of my students stay in my room for testing and I have to get creative. I have been known to get a few extra desks and put them on our carpet area during a test to make sure students have the space that is required.
- ◆ Students frequently opt to sit with friends. That's not inherently a bad thing, of course. It can, however, lead to lots of chattiness and off-task behavior. There are ways to minimize this and to address it when it happens and I'll get to those when I answer your question about how to help students know how to use a flexible classroom.



**FIGURE 18** Examples of some flexible seating options include desks for one or two students, a taller table for standing students, a lower table for students to sit on the floor, and couches or comfortable chairs.

- ◆ Not all administrators are on board with flexible classrooms. It can be important to make sure your administrator is not going to come in and make you start all over if you set your classroom up flexibly. If others in your building already have flexible classrooms, then you are good to go. If you're the first, this is something to keep in mind.

Now to your practical question about furniture. There are a wide range of ways you can approach this. When I began, almost all of my furniture belonged to my school. Twenty years later, almost none of my furniture belongs to my school. It's been a gradual transition.

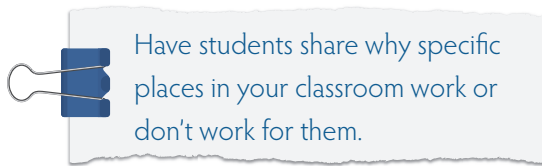
You can start by taking tables or desks in your building and raising them up taller or lowering them much shorter. I find that easiest to do with tables because then I only need to change four legs instead of changing legs on individual desks to create a group that serves as a table. Desks, however, work well to make different-sized groupings in your classroom. I have three or four desks each year that sit by themselves for students to work alone when they want to do so. I've used desks to make groups of two or three or more so that students can opt for a quieter or busier space, as they wish.

If your school has different seating options, those can also be a great addition. I've found regular school chairs, school chairs that rock, stools that are flat, and stools that wobble a bit. Your school might also have clipboards and/or whiteboards you can have available for students, if they want to find a spot on the floor to work. Starting a flexible classroom in this way, with furniture and materials from your school, allows you to try it out without investing money or a ton of time.

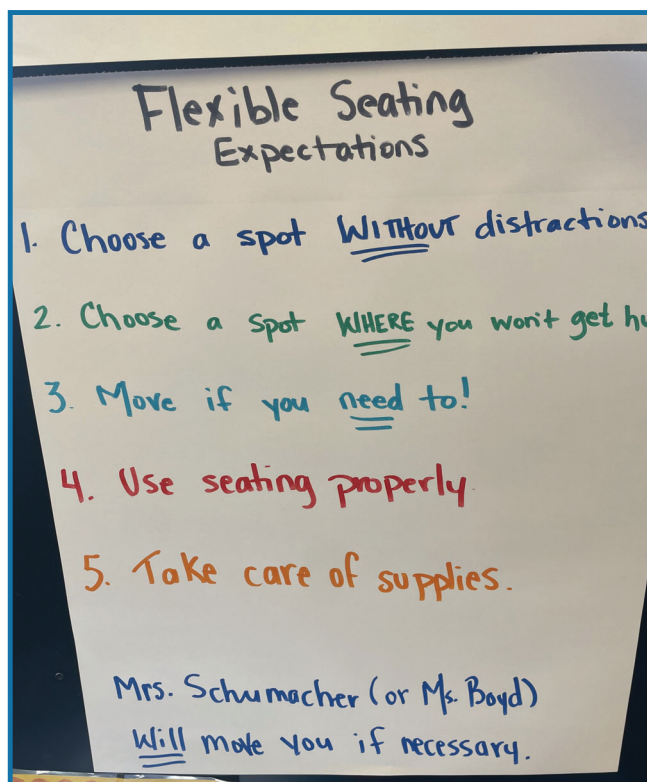
If and when you're ready, you can expand beyond those options. One of the first things I got in my classroom was a hand-me-down couch from my parents. My students, from kindergartners on up to fifth graders, love reading on the couch or perching on the arm while working at a table. I've gotten hand-me-down throw pillows and bean bags for students to use. (I store them in tubs or laundry baskets that sit under our tall table or in a corner.) With my youngest students I had small corner tables from Ikea that were a great height for them to work while sitting on the floor (and were pretty cheap). My older students have had hand-me-down dining-room tables and chairs, coffee tables, and a variety of stools. I'm always on the lookout for options for our classroom, because furniture that isn't designed for an elementary classroom doesn't always hold up as well as I'd like. My students can be pretty hard on our furniture and I've learned to accept that and to keep an eye out for new possibilities that might replace something that is nearing the end of its use.



**FIGURE 19** I typically try to store our clipboards, whiteboards, and pillows in multiple places in our classroom, if possible. If lots of students want to grab one, it is easier if they can go to different locations rather than all heading to one place.



have conversations with your class about what makes a space good for them for learning and working. Have students share why specific places in your classroom work or don't work for them. I typically make a chart about what makes a space a good choice, including things like comfort, feeling of safety, ability to focus on work, etc. I tell students that if they have chosen a place that isn't working for them, a place where they are distracted from what they should



**FIGURE 20** An anchor chart can be helpful in establishing expectations for flexible seating and as a reminder, when needed. This chart was created by Alyson Schumacher, a former colleague of mine.

Finally, about how to help your students use a flexible classroom. Like so many aspects of teaching, this requires some up-front investment to make things run smoothly. Early in the year (or early in the transition to a flexible classroom if you opt to do it mid-year),

be doing, I will ask them to move and find another place to work. I try to allow them to make another choice, but if a student is frequently having trouble finding a good place to work, I will choose a place for them. For a week or two we talk about where we want to work at the start of math or reading or science work. It cuts into content learning time, but it pays off when they are able to independently take responsibility for using the flexible space well. Throughout the year, I remind students that they need a good place to work and I tell students to move, as needed. Most students take the responsibility seriously and enjoy having the freedom to choose. That allows me to work with the handful that have trouble finding a spot where they can focus. I can talk with them one-on-one to discuss why they're having trouble (often because they want to talk with

friends or they like one specific spot and others distract them there) and we can brainstorm ways to solve the challenge they're having. If I absolutely have to assign a spot to a student, I will do so. I also use proximity as a reminder sometimes, standing near a specific table or group of students. My presence is often enough to get them refocused without having to say a word.

Transitioning to a flexible classroom is a fascinating process. It requires the kind of thought you're already putting into it, and it requires some classroom time and conversation. I think, however, that once people make the leap, they rarely regret it. People often walk into my classroom and remark on how cozy and warm it feels. I know that is how I feel when I walk in every morning and hope it's how my students feel as well.

## Collaborating with Families

**D**ear Jen,

A new school year is about to begin and I'm a bundle of nerves. That seems normal so I'm okay with it, but I'm trying to think about what things I can do to start the year off right. I have lots of ideas for the first day and week of school to get to know my students, help us all build community together, and make them feel safe and welcome. (I don't know if they're all good ideas, but I have lots of ideas!) Setting up my classroom is exciting to me, figuring out the space and the materials. The thing that feels important but unknown to me is building a relationship with my students' families. As my students are young, I know their parents (and other caregivers) are really important and I want to make sure we have a partnership to support the students. I'm just now sure how to go about doing so.

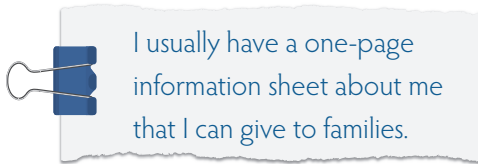
—No Flying Solo

**D**ear Solo,

I get butterflies every year at the beginning! It is so exciting and overwhelming, and at least mildly terrifying. You sound like you are in an unusually strong position for a newish teacher. That's fantastic! The fact that you have the brain space to consider how to build relationships with your students' families says a lot. And you are wise to be wanting to start off quickly and on the right foot.

Elementary students, even in the upper grades, are still very reliant on and close to their grownups. (I use the term grownups rather than parents because students have different family situations. Saying grownups allows me to be more inclusive.) And those grownups likely know your students better than anyone else can. Getting to know them and having them get to know you is super-helpful.

You can start off even before the school year begins, if your school does an Open House (it may have another name at your school; it is a time for families to visit the week before school begins). Of course you'll meet families there, but it can often be pretty chaotic and busy, if very many people come. While that's a wonderful thing, it does make it hard to really get to know anyone. I usually have a one-page information sheet about me that I can give to families. I include two or three photos of myself with my family or my dog or doing something I love. I write about where I'm from,



I usually have a one-page information sheet about me that I can give to families.

where I went to school, and reasons I feel connected to the school community where I teach. I try to make the page feel casual, and I don't share anything super-personal. It's one quick way for me to introduce myself a little more thoroughly to students' families.

My next suggestion is a little more time consuming so it may or may not work for you. During the first week of school (sometimes all on the first day, depending on how ambitious and energetic I am) I take photos of each student. I try to get unplanned photos of students working with classmates or playing at recess or whatever, so long as they look happy! Then I write a couple of sentences that I can copy and paste for every family. For example, "Our first week is going great! These third graders are getting to know each other and are already showing how kind and thoughtful they are. I am really looking forward to this year with them. I've attached a photo of [child's name] here so you can get a glimpse into their day." Then I email each individual family and attach at least one photo of their child. Again, this takes some time! I usually do it while I chill out in front of the TV in the evening. By doing so, the first time that families hear from me is in a positive way. Attaching the photo shows them that I see their child and am invested in them. It helps start the year off with some goodwill between me and my students' families.



Find a way to make sure your first communication with families is positive.

If the above idea just feels like too much, which is totally reasonable, you do want to find a way to make sure your first communication with families is positive. Unfortunately, you're likely to have times throughout the year that you have

to contact a student's grownups for difficult reasons. If your first contact was positive, that will ease the future challenges. Some teachers take 20 percent of their class each day for the first week and call those families. A quick phone call (which often ends up with you leaving a message) to just say how much you're enjoying working with their child can set you up for a more successful year. I don't think it's less time consuming than the idea of emailing though! I tend to use the phone-call plan when I get a new student during the year. At the end of their first or second day in our class, I call their grownups to say how well things went. It doesn't feel so daunting when I only need to make one phone call and it starts our relationship off on a good foot.

Individual contact with families in the first week or two is invaluable. It does take time and energy but think of it as an investment. Spending that time and energy early will support you through tougher times that might be ahead. If you need two or three weeks to reach out individually, whether through email or phone calls, take that long. It'll still be worth it.

I am so excited to meet you and to work with you this year! This is my fourth year at Fort Belvoir Elementary and I am thrilled to have joined this community. I have been a teacher in Fairfax County for 24 years, teaching kindergartners, first graders, third graders, fourth graders, and fifth graders at two other schools.

This is my family. My husband is a historian and college professor. Our oldest is a sophomore in college this year and our youngest is a sophomore in high school.



I have a great love of books and of reading and I take every opportunity to meet authors and hear them talk about their work. Hopefully your child will have lots of books to share with you this year!



Please don't hesitate to reach out anytime this year with any questions or concerns you have. You can email me at (work email) or call the school at (XXX) XXX-XXXX. I am really looking forward to all of the learning and growing we will do together this year.

Thank you!  
Jennifer Orr

**FIGURE 34** The one-page letter I sent home at the start of one school year, introducing myself to my students' families.

Just make sure you keep going and get to everyone. If you miss a family, it'll be just the luck that they're the one talking to another family who did get a call or email and they'll feel slighted! Also, you might want to start with the students who seem like they might be the most challenging for you. There are two reasons to start with them. First off, the longer you wait, it's possible the more challenging they'll become and you'll have more difficulty speaking only positively of them. They are also the students you're most likely going to really want strong relationships with their families so the sooner you can begin building that, the better.

You can build up a lot of goodwill with families in the first week or so of school with these kinds of communications. Believe it or not, they're probably nervous about the start of the school year too. The grownups have their own memories of school, which might not all be positive, and which impact their feelings about sending their children off. They, both grownups and your students, also have memories of the past several years of schooling for the children. You can't know what all of those memories might hold, but at least for some there will be negative things that exacerbate fear. Showing families how invested you are in their child and how you are paying attention to them from the beginning will ease their worries and your own.