

## Chapter 1

# What Have You Gotten Yourself Into?

---

### *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
- 

**M**ost 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 look like a dolt, you need to memorize their definitions." In this section, I show you how both worlds you'll be living in compare and contrast.

## 12 Part I: What They Didn't Teach You in College

### *The similarities*

Even 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.** Even though *tons* of books are 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 she makes 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.
- ✓ **You will 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 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. You and I both know that teaching is one of the few truly humanitarian professions left, but trust me when I say that the rest of the world would rather us not belabor the point.

## The differences

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 I sound like I'm starting to get a little bit too deep into academic speak here, let me dispel that perception with the first stark contrast I 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 (I'll try to put this politely) 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 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 my 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 police and security 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 Chapters 17 and 20 for more discussion of extracurricular activities.
- ✔ **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 spitting on other kids. 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 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!



## 14 Part I: What They Didn't Teach You in College

✓ **Your summers are “work free.”** This difference is no longer true universally, as it once was. I never experienced “year-round school,” and I’m 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.



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.



### Practical potty talk

If you’re someone of weak composure, bear with me for a moment or two. I’m almost willing to bet that most teaching books don’t address this issue, but it’s one that most rookie 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 (ahem) 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.

## *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 guys 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. "Is he going to make it? He may be in trouble, but let's just watch what happens. He may pull through after all, and if he doesn't, we'll drag him out and throw somebody else in instead."



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, and 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 across the Atlantic Ocean with nothing more than those little inflatable armbands. You'll stay afloat, but you'll swallow a *lot* of water along the way.

One of the new teachers I interviewed relayed this story to me. He was taking a class down to the media center for the first time. The class he was taking there was deemed a "behavior problem" (or more appropriately, a powder keg ready to explode), so the thought of simply walking the group as a whole to the library was a daunting exercise in itself. After they arrived with no calamity to speak of, he sat his students down at the available computers and had, what he deemed, a rather successful lesson explaining how to use the school's electronic and online resources. However, the librarian contacted him the next day, enraged. Evidently, his class was so quiet and focused because they were in the process of stealing pieces of the computer. Of the 30 computers in the lab, 23 were no longer functional, and the librarian held him flatly responsible for not keeping an eye on his kids.

# 16

## Part I: What They Didn't Teach You in College



That sort of thing is quite a wake-up call, and it's the result of a common practice among principals. (By the way, that teacher-principal relationship is a tricky one, so I discuss it more in Chapter 13.) You'd think that, as a new teacher with little experience and a lot of learning to do, your administration would remove as many obstacles as they possibly could to ensure that you'll be as successful as possible. Unfortunately, this probably isn't going to happen, and it all falls under that sink-or-swim mentality. In their view, putting you in a rough situation is the best thing that they can possibly do. That way, you have "ample opportunity to gain experience." How generous! Here are the most common adversities you'll face as a newbie:

- ✔ **You'll probably have the "bad kids."** If veteran teachers have any input in the scheduling process, they'll do everything they can to make sure that they get a good group of students or classes for the following year. Think about it — you'd probably do the same thing in their shoes. Before you get too bitter, just remember one thing: They were in your shoes once, and they had to go through the same thing you're going through. So they're more than content to let you experience the joy and fun of tough classes. Remember that even the bad classes can be transformed using effective discipline tactics, which I describe in Part II.
- ✔ **You won't have the greatest classroom if you have a classroom at all.** When it comes time to choosing classroom space, veteran teachers will leave you slim pickings. If there are more teachers than available rooms, the new teachers usually draw the short straw and become *floaters*, the stoic nomads armed with only an audiovisual cart (the one that's so hard to drive because it always swerves to the right when you push it) to hold their meager possessions and stacks of papers to grade.
- ✔ **You won't get to teach the cool classes.** Don't forget that you're not coming into a fresh ecosystem when you start teaching. Most likely, that school has been around for a while, and so have most of the teachers — and they've all carved out their little niches. The upper-level courses and electives already have teachers whose names are synonymous with them, so don't expect to march in and assume leadership of the classes and coursework that you've always dreamed of. Even if you have terrific qualifications in a given subject area and are actually more qualified than the current instructor, that doesn't amount to a hill of beans, so eat your humble pie and wait your turn. Something will eventually open up, even though you may have to wait a couple of years (or more).



Don't let any of this discourage you. Most of the negatives I've laid out here are true, in one form or another, in any job that you take. Having to pay your dues is simply the way of the world. Although all these things are frustrating and sometimes overwhelming, most people survive and even have great success in the face of such obstacles. In fact, it's through the struggle that you gain the respect of your co-workers and students alike. Only through the refining fire of the sink-or-swim trial do you gain professional stature and experience.

## Jack or Jill of all trades

Pretend for a second that you're an accountant ready to begin work in a prestigious office. On the morning of your first day, the CEO of the company comes into your office and greets you. "We're glad to have you on board," he says. "It's tough to find a good CPA these days, and we feel pretty lucky to have you on the team." You grin inwardly, knowing that you excelled in all your classes for just such a moment as this. You're wanted; you're *needed*, in fact. And then, he says something baffling. "I know you're an expert in foreign currencies, exchange rates, and that sort of thing, which is exactly the reason we hired you. No one else can chug those numbers with quite the proficiency you can." So far so good, but his look is somber. "Here's the problem. Between the hours of 12 and 2 p.m. each day, we really don't require your skills, so we'll need you to do some electrical wiring work around the office. We saw that you

took some physics in college, and we've got an electrician's hat for you and everything. Welcome to the office — and can you fix my lamp when you get a chance?"

As ridiculous as that scenario may sound, it happens all the time to teachers. For example, the choir teacher at my former school had to teach a few Spanish classes, even though she had just taken a few Spanish classes in college. Even if you have no formal training in a subject, you just may find yourself teaching it! This isn't such a big deal to elementary-school teachers, who teach just about every subject there is, but if you're a middle-school science teacher, don't be surprised if you're asked to teach a class or two of language arts! Most state certifications allow a teacher of one subject to teach "out of content area" for a couple of class periods each instructional day.

## *Facing adverse conditions*

Even though rookie teachers have it tough, they're not the only ones. You're bound to carry burdens that aren't unique to those green behind the ears. These common frustrations aren't only a little annoying — they are, in fact, extremely detrimental to learning. Among all the teachers I spoke to, two completely different complaints arose time and time again: the lack of supplies and resources available to teachers and the temperature in the school building.

You probably already know that you're going to have to buy most of the things you'll need in the classroom. I'm not talking about paper clips and staples or overhead projectors — those items are usually provided by the school system. Supplies for in-class experiments and projects, stickers or awards, and even the constant and pressing need for boxes of tissues will have you constantly reaching into your wallet or purse. Furthermore, your classroom is going to be as boring as a sensory-deprivation tank if you don't have some colorful, fun, and engaging decorations on the walls. Although your school may have some posters that you're required to display, the bulk of the decorating will fall to you.

## 18 Part I: What They Didn't Teach You in College



You can offset some of the costs you face. Many elementary schools publish a list of materials that students are required to bring with them on the first day of school. Anything the kids bring from home is one less thing you have to provide. One teacher I spoke to added “Bring a box of tissues with you” to the list, thereby creating a small stockpile of tissues in the classroom. By collecting all the boxes and only putting out one box at a time, she was able to keep her kids swaddled in tissues until the end of the year. Furthermore, the tissues in her room were much softer than the industrial 120-grit sandpaper tissues schools buy. Why am I focusing so much on facial tissue? You’ll understand in February when all the students in your class are oozing out of all their facial orifices, and the office is out of tissues for the rest of the year. High-school parents were much less keen on the idea of sending tissues, but I motivated my students to bring in boxes by offering small bits of extra credit. (High-school students would kill their cousins for extra credit.) You may want to try this tactic yourself if you have trouble getting people to pitch in to the tissue stash.

The second biggest complaint about school conditions is the temperature of the classrooms. Let me set the stage for you. It’s October, and temperatures are finally beginning to fall. As I enter my classroom, I feel my door stick a little bit in its frame. “Hmmm,” I think to myself. “That’s odd.” The little mystery is soon explained by an agonizingly hot gust of wind that hits me in the face as the door swings open. My room is so hot that my extensive duct taping has given up the ghost, and all my posters (about 75 of them) are lying on the floor, curled and bent beyond recognition.

I knew that learning would be difficult in such an atmosphere. In fact, staying awake would prove just as tricky. In essence, I was going to have to teach that day in a volcanic cave full of desks. I immediately reported the situation to the office, hoping that (at the worst) it would be rectified by the end of the school day. It was rectified — but not until April! I bought fans, opened the outside door, and did whatever I could, but it was truly a nightmare. Evidently, some part was on order and then this and that happened to delay the shipment. All I knew was that I spent most of the class period sweating through my shirts, and the kids were miserable.

In fact, I think that they had it worse. As they went to their next class, the temperature changed dramatically. Down the hall, my friend Tim McHugh taught in a room that was so incredibly cold that (and I am not exaggerating here) *it hurt to breathe*. He taught in a ski parka and gloves and confessed that he still shivered so badly that he ached. The situation gets even dicier if students have classes in a trailer outside the school building, the new necessary evil of overcrowded schools. My wife taught in a trailer whose air-conditioning couldn’t battle the heat during the late spring and, conversely, whose heat couldn’t battle the winter temperatures, either.



TIP

Whether they be from an oppressive classroom temperature or a debilitating lack of supplies, you'll have plenty of woes. Is there an upside to all this? Believe it or not, yes. These issues are undeniable, affecting everyone, and, therefore, offer you a chance to speak frankly and honestly to your students about something other than, for example, mitosis. Dealing with these issues and your feelings about them help you to form a bond between you and your students in the same way that you can walk up to anyone on the street and start a conversation about the weather. Allowing them to voice their opinions, to vent frustration, and to cope as a group is an invaluable experience, so don't miss an opportunity to bond with your students, even about so mundane a topic.



REMEMBER

If talking to toddlers and teens about your occupational frustrations doesn't appeal to you, don't worry — it's not the only relief you'll get from the doldrums of your working conditions. There are other adults in the school whom you may even see occasionally. However, there are very specific politics wrapped around the relationships you'll have with your colleagues and administrators. Knowing where to complain, how to voice your concerns, and whom to trust in the faculty lounge are just a few of the skills you'll need to develop. I focus on how to get along with everyone else in your building in Part IV.

## *You're the Adult Now!*

When you exit college (or graduate school) with all your training complete, to say that you're familiar with how the educational system works is an enormous understatement. If teaching is your first career, you've been hip-deep in the educational system for your entire cognizant life. If you're entering teaching as a second career, surely the coursework and training you had to undergo for certification purposes was enough to remind you of the joy of taking classes. There's one big difference now, however: You're in charge, and things look a lot different from this side of the big desk.

### *Performing six shows a day*

First and foremost, you need to understand your role as the grown-up. Your bosses think that you're there primarily to teach content and secondarily to provide a classroom atmosphere fertile for learning. Your students, however, know that you're really there to entertain them and (if you have to) teach them something. You're the Wayne Newton of Language Arts now.

The bell rings. Boom! You're on. Go out there and have a great show. Try the joke with the funny voice and manage to squeeze in how, exactly, to diagram a sentence while you're at it. A little while later, the bell rings again, and you

## 20 Part I: What They Didn't Teach You in College

have two or three minutes to compose yourself before the next show time. The only differences between you and a Vegas entertainer is that you have to perform more often, to a captive audience (instead of people who *pay* to be there), and you actually have to teach while you're at it.



The elementary-school teachers I interviewed accepted their role of entertainer far more easily than did the secondary teachers. Younger kids need constant pizzazz to keep them alert and on track. Things have to be quick, constantly shifting, vibrantly attention grabbing, and always exciting. But even as a secondary teacher, you're the center of the students' attention for the entire time they're in your classroom, and your mood and actions hold sway over everything that happens. Many teachers feel that they're not paid enough to entertain the kids — and that's unfortunate. These faculty always seem to be the exact same group that complains when in-service meetings are boring, or if they feel that they're being "talked at" rather than actively engaged when they're not the one in charge. Try to teach your class in a way that would keep you both interested and entertained if you, yourself, were a student.



Does this mean that you need to begin every lesson by jumping through fiery hoops while juggling on a unicycle? No, but I'd pay to see it, especially if you could teach the finer points of the French and Indian War while you did it. You can do all sorts of little things to spice up your lessons, which I discuss in Chapters 11 and 16, but you need to remember that holding your students' interest is just as much your job as making sure that they pass their quizzes and tests. In fact, you'll grow to see that entertained students and successful students are often one and the same.



Make no mistake about it. Whether you're a secondary teacher and you have a bunch of distinct shows every day, or you're an elementary teacher and all those shows blend into one long performance, it's exhausting and often thankless work. The more involved your lesson plans and the more interactive your activities, the more draining it is. But as your kids figure out that you design your classes first and foremost with them in mind, they'll grow to trust you, and your relationship will begin to turn from teacher-student into mentor-student, with the ultimate goal of becoming allies in the educational process. Although mentally, physically, and emotionally taxing, developing a strong trust relationship with your students provides benefits that far outweigh the inherent drawbacks.

### *Working in Neverland*

Remember Neverland, the home of Peter Pan and the Lost Boys? The land where no one grew up and everyone could fly? Well, school will be your own personal Neverland, where only you get older, but each generation of kids stays exactly the same age. (And you'll swear that they can fly based on their limitless well of energy and enthusiasm.) It's a land with rules unto itself that don't apply anywhere else in the world. For example, chewing gum is rarely

allowed in Neverland, and in Neverland you have to ask permission before you use the restroom.



One thing you must always keep in mind is that the rules of Neverland and the rules in the adult world are not at all the same. For instance, regardless of how old the students are, most of Neverland's residents suffer from a severe lack of perspective. Tears flow freely and often within the bounds of this magical land, no matter how old the resident. Each test is the *end of the world* and causes severe stress and panic. Every emotional or interpersonal crisis can actually make time stand still for those involved. I defy anyone to try to teach the quadratic equation to a girl who was dumped by her boyfriend of *six whole months* right before your algebra class began. You may as well try to train a dog to weave with a loom, because you'll have the same amount of success.



You need to remember one key rule during your visit to this exotic and strange country: You are only a visitor to Neverland and are not a resident yourself. You are, in fact, an ambassador from the adult world and are there to (in some fashion) help these children transition into a world where people get older, time gets faster, and trapping lightning bugs in jars slowly loses its allure. In plain and bold terms, always act your age because Neverland residents don't respect people who are constantly applying for citizenship after they're adults and, thus, far too old to qualify.



### The spotlight's on you!

If you piled up everything that you've discovered, accumulated, and experienced during your student-teaching term, the heap would be considerable. However, the one thing that student teaching doesn't offer you is a chance to do things from scratch. You were always working within your sponsor teacher's guidelines, in a room that was already prepared for you, with a plan of action that was already in place.

You'll feel overwhelmed when you walk into your new job, and everything depends on *you*. I talked to a teacher who arranges student-teaching placements and then follows up after those student teachers find jobs. She happened to walk in on one of her students who'd just been hired as he stood alone, in the dark, in his future classroom. He evidently didn't hear her enter the room because nothing broke his unblinking gaze as it swept back and forth

across the desks piled along the walls and the vast, open floor. As he turned, he looked at her with wide, unblinking eyes and said, "There's nothing here . . . *nothing*. Where do I start?" She had no response other than to comment to herself that perhaps she hadn't expressed to the teachers the enormity of the task before them.

When you arrive on your first day, there are no rules, lesson plans, seating arrangements, or decorations. The task of putting together a successful school year is truly daunting because it is made up of so many individual composite parts. You may get a feeling of abandonment as you pass from the nurturing embrace of student teaching to the full immersion of professional teaching. Therefore, your best bet is to find allies among your new colleagues as soon as possible, so that you feel you still have a support structure in place.

## 22 Part I: What They Didn't Teach You in College

### *Facing the Daily Grind*

Each and every day, you'll be faced with quite an impressive, if not intimidating, list of things that need to be accomplished. First and foremost, you have to provide competent, meaningful, and (if you have time and energy left) engaging lessons for each of the classes that you're teaching. On top of that, you have to grade the results of those lessons, tutor after school, make parent phone calls, hold administrative and parent conferences, and participate in whatever extracurricular events you're tied to. Throw in any detentions or punishment assignments that you have to supervise, your duty assignments, and the chin-high stack of paperwork that needs filling out nearly every period, and it's enough to make you want to quit your job and become a Domino's pizza delivery person (unless you already are one during the evening to help pay the bills, that is). Just making it through every school day is a chore in and of itself.

### *Managing the school day*

What one word would best describe the typical school day? How about *hectic*? No, that's as giant an understatement as describing the pain you experience when being impaled as “a brief, tingling sensation.” The best word I have ever heard used to describe the school day is *triage*. If you aren't familiar with that word, picture in your mind's eye a war-torn battlefield, cluttered with wounded soldiers. The injured fighters suffer from a variety of different wounds, and they are each in a unique state of emergency. Some require immediate care, and some can be stabilized and receive medical attention later.

The triage doctors attend to each of the wounded and decide, on the spot, the order in which everyone will be helped. The most seriously injured are taken first, but only if there's a good chance of saving them (some are too far gone to be worth the effort, as callous as that sounds). However, the triage doctors do more than just order the casualties. They also must tend to those waiting, to keep them alive until more specific attention can be given them. In other words, the triage doctors and nurses are jugglers of lives, keeping hundreds of balls in the air at the same time until each can be attended to.



I know, I know — leave it to a guy to come up with such a gory metaphor, but it describes exactly how I felt every day during instructional hours. You will be asked to do *numerous* things, and you probably won't be able to accomplish them all. You're going to have to prioritize, organize, and reorganize every moment of the school day. The hardest thing is deciding what has to go because your time is limited. Usually, your coolest and most innovative lesson plans are the victims of triage, and that's natural, so don't sweat it. Not all your lessons are going to be powerhouses.

## *Lesson plans and grading*

Week to week, all kinds of different paperwork is going to pop up that will need your attention. However, as unavoidable as death and taxes, lesson planning and grading are two kinds of paperwork that will become part of the daily routine. In fact, they're the bookend activities to your time in the classroom. You must plan before lessons to both ensure your understanding of the material to be covered and to consider the most effective method of presenting it. Grading is the by-product of assessment, to see just how effective that lesson was in retrospect. In order for your time in the classroom to be most productive, you must be fully immersed in both planning and grading.

One thing I don't talk much about in this book is how to write a lesson plan. If you've been through a teacher-training course, you know the important elements of a lesson plan and what your professor or cooperating teacher required. After you've taught for a year or so, you'll probably also discover that making up lesson plans like you did in college is absolutely ludicrous. They are way too time consuming, and you'll find a style that better suits your individual needs as you gain experience.



You do need to find out if your school requires you to turn in your lesson plans. Some schools absolutely require lesson plans on file, and some simply require you to file lesson plans on the days you're being observed by an administrator. Others, thankfully, are more relaxed, and only want you to have "evidence of planning" if a superior ever requests it (and you'd better hope it's not requested, because that usually means that somebody thinks you're slacking).

The style of lesson plan that you use doesn't really matter. I was a math teacher, so my lesson plans were usually lists of important topics to cover with illustrative examples of each. I felt that an unstructured plan gave me some working room and, at the same time, established my goals.

My good friend Rob wasn't comfortable with such a vague plan, and his plans were nearly word-for-word what he'd say in class. "Today we're going to define and talk about circles. First let's talk about what a circle is . . ." — that sort of thing. This helped him work out exactly how class would flow and made him feel more confident as soon as class began. Neither of these styles is better than the other; it's just a question of what you need to do in order to be prepared.



The further into your first school year you get, the more you're going to hate writing lesson plans, and the more tempted you'll be to fly by the seat of your pants. *This is a very bad idea*, no matter how comfortable you feel with the material. There's no feeling quite like the cold chill of panic running down your spine when you realize that you've been teaching the wrong thing for the entire class period, and that class period is about to end. Furthermore, anticipating and preparing for student questions makes you look a lot

## 24 Part I: What They Didn't Teach You in College

smarter in front of your class, which is a key element to gaining their respect. They need to know that you know exactly what you're talking about.

After you've set up your plan and delivered the lesson, you eventually have to assess the students' understanding. It's hard to quiz or test too much; in fact, most new teachers assess too little because they feel that it breaks up the flow they have going in class. One new teacher I knew looked back at the end of the nine-week marking period and realized that he'd only given one quiz, and he'd even forgotten to grade it!



Don't let assessment be an afterthought, because it's the one thing parents and administrators can see and use to judge your performance. If you end up fudging with the grades a little because you didn't have enough real numbers to base grades upon, you're heading for trouble. However, you have to keep one thing in mind, and that's the volume of papers you'll be grading. One assignment in each class each day translates into between 500 and 900 papers to grade by the weekend! Just like everything else that I've discussed in this chapter, the name of the game is anticipation, preparation, and finally, commitment, after you've formulated a plan of action.

### The school-day marathon

I don't think that many people remember just how tiring the school day is. During my tenure at the high school where I taught, the school district switched from an appointed to an elected school board. The result? A ton of "innovative" ideas to improve education. One older gentleman insisted that kids should be in schools longer. Even though, for example, my school dismissed at 2:20, he insisted that students should be held at school, kept active in one way or another, until 6:00 p.m., so that parents could get home from work before their kids. I understand the benevolent motivation — reducing the number of "latch-key" kids. However, I think he forgot how long school really is and how exhausting being a student can be.

He, with all the other candidates for the school board, was permitted to "shadow" a student for

one day. That is, they followed a student to all her classes and even had lunch with her in the cafeteria. The gentleman with the (in essence) day-care plan shadowed a student who attended my class at the end of the day. When he came in, he looked a little ruffled — I think the day had been rough — but I looked forward to speaking with him after I got the students started on their assignment.

Unfortunately, I never got my chance because he slept soundly (and loudly) for my entire class. I didn't have the heart to point out to him the irony of the situation, because a school day of regular length was even too much for him. However, I was pleased to see that he was defeated soundly during the election.