

# Troubleshooting

Now you have general classroom management down, but every day is something new. This section offers succinct summaries to those most common challenges we as teachers face in the classroom, challenges which may not have been specifically addressed in the previous sections of the book. It identifies the primary areas of the problem and lists actions you can use to prevent or resolve problems in that area. Think of it as a quick reference guide to turn to before troubles arises; in the event that a crisis is unfolding, turn here for immediate guidance. It is always a good idea, however, to seek out more experienced colleagues, counselors, and administrators to help you if anything occurs that could possibly endanger your students, the school, or your own standing as a respected professional.

## 1. Assignments

**Problems to Watch For:** Students who

- Do not do the assigned work at all
- Turn in work that is incomplete or not their own
- Submit work that is of poor quality
- Fail to turn in work that they actually do

If students consistently have trouble turning in, completing, or doing assignments:

1. Pose the most obvious question to them: *Why are you not doing the work?*
2. Evaluate who is actually doing the work at the level you expect.



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3. Ask yourself: *Do students have a reason to do this work besides avoiding a zero? Is the work engaging and does it have inherent value—or is it “busywork?”*
4. Provide opportunities for collaboration on assignments as a way of providing help and getting the work done by everyone, especially those who need the assistance that collaboration provides.

5. Assess the time needed to do the assignment; keep in mind that students may not have help or resources at home and may have homework for several other classes.
6. Give them time to begin the work in class so they can confer with you for help; or designate time outside of class when they can come for extra help or a space in which to do the work.
7. Provide them with models of how to do the work so they go home knowing what a successful performance on this assignment looks like.
8. Explain the directions for the homework clearly, leaving time for questions about the parts of the assignment they do not understand.
9. Try giving less work (e.g., five instead of ten math problems, ten instead of twenty vocabulary words) to see if more students will actually complete it.
10. Be consistent: Students quickly develop expectations about what classes demand, so they learn that math has homework every night but that another class gives it every once in a while. In such a case, students often do not do the homework for the other class as it is not a part of their evening ritual the way the math homework is.

## 2. Attendance

### Problems to Watch For:

- Excused absences for one or two days
- Excused absences for a prolonged period of time due to a family trip, college visits, serious illness, performances, or competitions
- Excused tardies due to school events, meetings with school officials, or staying after to finish a test or talk with a teacher
- Unexcused absences, sporadic but persistent
- Unexcused tardies that show a pattern of disregard for your class

When students consistently miss or come late to class:

1. Find out why they are coming late or missing school as the reasons are often, though not always, connected to larger issues of family difficulties, poverty, or health problems.
2. Prevent the problem of absenteeism or tardiness by establishing clear expectations regarding attendance through your syllabus and your *actions* in the opening weeks.
3. Set the standard yourself: be in class on time and ready to go at the bell yourself.
4. Begin with an activity that makes the start of class important and imposes a consequence if missed: a quiz or a writing or reading assignment for the first five or ten minutes, which students cannot make up if they are not present.
5. Keep accurate attendance records—for *all* students—so you can make them aware of the pattern and have the evidence for subsequent administrative follow-up.
6. Meet with the student at the first sign of any pattern of absence or tardiness to develop both an understanding of the problem and a plan to avoid the problem in the future.

7. Communicate to students the consequences for their reputation and their grade if they persist in coming late or missing class.
8. Avoid humiliating students who enter late or are frequently absent; instead, talk to them later to find out the reason and clarify for them the cost of their actions.
9. Contact parents if your efforts prove futile. Convey to them in an objective, professional tone your concern, what you have tried so far, the cost of their child's actions, and the scale of the problem.
10. Follow all school policies regarding attendance as they relate to making up quizzes, tests, and assignments.

## 3. Record Keeping

Record keeping serves many legal, instructional, and administrative purposes. Keep, organize, and store for easy access the following:

- **Health Information:** procedures and problems for specific students
- **Special Education Information:** accommodations and other procedures
- **Procedural Information:** maps, codes, routes, drills, calendars, and essential contact information in case of an emergency
- **Attendance:** roll sheets, attendance rosters, attendance reports
- **Assessment Data:** passwords, access codes, or user names for all online data access; reading and other testing data about students' performance in academic areas; grades and performance data on such assessments as Advanced Placement exams and state exit exams
- **Documentation:** any data you keep on participation, behavior, or infractions
- **Handouts and Lesson Plans:** extra copies for those who were absent when you passed them out

To avoid legal, administrative, or instructional problems related to information:

1. Keep a binder or clipboard (preferably with a storage space) at hand with essential emergency medical information, special education accommodations, and reading scores. This information should be secure but easily referenced.
2. Have emergency escape routes, procedures, and contact information readily available in the event of a crisis.
3. Maintain accurate, up-to-date records of attendance, as well as any summary reports for attendance or progress reports.
4. Store any information relating to grades, attendance, or students in a secure place where students cannot access it; if it is stored online or on a computer in your room, be sure it is password protected.
5. Organize all vital data, especially your class rosters, in one place—e.g., the clipboard or binder you use for other information—for quick retrieval in the event of an evacuation. It is vital that you bring that information to account for and protect those students who may have medical or psychiatric conditions.
6. Make copies of seating charts to use for record keeping purposes such as participation in discussions, group assignments, and accommodations to consider in placement.
7. Back up all essential student information, such as grades and rosters, and keep in a separate place to prevent loss.
8. Create a “Student Information Form” to help you gather essential, current information about your students’ needs, contact information, interests, and suggestions about how you can help them learn and succeed in your class.

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9. Consider requiring students to keep track of their own grades for the class as a backup and opportunity to teach them to monitor their own academic standing.
10. Designate a place to keep extra copies of handouts, announcements, and your lesson plans from previous days for easy reference when students return from being absent.

## 4. Abuse

**Abuse within the classroom takes several forms, not all of which are easily witnessed in a larger class:**

- **Sexual:** Touching, speaking, or otherwise acting in any inappropriate way with sexual intent.
- **Physical:** touching another with intent to harm or intimidate.
- **Verbal:** speaking words to another with intent to offend, injure, or coerce.
- **Emotional:** using any combination of means including gestures, actions, or words intended to upset or harm.

Prevent or respond to any form of abuse in one or more of these ways:

1. Emphasize from the first day of class that this is a safe environment where no abuse of any form will be tolerated.
2. Clarify for students, if necessary, what behavior is inappropriate and the consequences of such behavior; be consistent in your enforcement of these standards.
3. Monitor mounting tensions between students and intervene before they act upon them. Clarify the source of the tension and move to resolve it immediately. If it becomes necessary to send students out of the room, request an administrative escort. Do *not* send the students together or separately, as one may await the other and then assault them in the hall, as no one is likely to be around.

4. Meet with students you suspect or know are being abused, are abusing others, or may be injuring themselves to discuss the best way to handle the problem. Emphasize that the behavior cannot be allowed to continue, that you are concerned about them and wish to help. Listen to what they have to say, then tell them that you intend to talk to their counselor or, in more severe cases, the administration, because your job is to ensure that all students in your class are safe.
5. Confront students who engage in bullying behavior immediately but privately. What you see in class may only be part of a larger pattern of abuse outside the class.
6. Document any incidents of abuse—date, time, people involved, what was said or done—and include these in any communication with counselors, administration, or others involved.
7. Consult the administration regarding any students in your class who have a history of violence; most states require schools to inform teachers if a student is on parole for violent behavior. Tragedies in recent years have taught us to take all threatening speech seriously; immediately report any threats to harm you or any students. Likewise, students who include violent themes in written work or art projects should be referred to the counselor, who should have the work sample.
8. Call students on offensive language; reiterate the class policies. If they say, “I was just kidding,” confront them about this, emphasizing that there is no such thing in your class. Teach them to accept responsibility for their words and actions.
9. Insist on a behavior contract, a meeting with the students, or both before allowing them to return to class after a violent incident in the class. Confirm with the administration that this contract is appropriate and to be sure they know about its terms in the event that you must enforce it.
10. Get help immediately if a serious fight breaks out that you are unable to stop right away. Send specific students to get help if necessary, as opposed to saying to the class in general, “Someone go get help!” Do *not* leave the classroom where the fight is taking place. The laws are very complicated about whether you should actively try to break up a fight, offering seemingly contradictory

messages that suggest you should intervene because you will be responsible for harm done, while also implying that if you do get involved and harm or are harmed by a student, you could be held liable. In short, protect those not involved and move decisively to get the help needed to break up the fight and thus protect those involved from serious injury.

## 5. Cheating

### Problems to Watch For:

- Homework, papers, or tests copied from classmates, friends, or siblings who took the same course
- Plagiarism from uncited sources, most notably the Internet
- Purchased papers from online sites that sell them
- Cheating on exams

Thanks to the Internet and other tech gadgets, cheating is a more common problem than ever. Consider the following ways to prevent or respond to cheating:

1. Define what constitutes cheating or plagiarism in your class.
2. Communicate and post your policies on cheating as well as those of the administration. If your policies differ from the administration, make sure you will have administrative support if you try to carry them through.
3. Create assignments that make cheating impossible. If you ask students to write a paper about the subject of nature in Robert Frost's poems, you can be sure some will find papers on the Internet and borrow heavily or merely copy the whole thing.
4. Confront a student you suspect of cheating, but be sure to have evidence for your allegation. If, for example, you find the material online, print out a copy and attach it to the student's paper discretely. Never let a student off without a consequence for such an offense. Also, seek to understand why the student

cheated; there may be something in his or her remarks that teaches you something of use for the future.

5. Clarify the difference between collaborating and cheating in general or on a specific assignment. Some students come from cultures where it is not only considered appropriate to share answers but encouraged.
6. Request that students clear their desk of any materials but those appropriate for the exam they will take.
7. Monitor the room during any testing, asking students to store books, bags, or binders as needed if they appear to be a possible source of cheating.
8. Provide different versions of multiple choice tests and alternate them accordingly so students are not surrounded by copies of the same exam and thus enticed to cheat.
9. Be clear about expected behavior during a test: no talking, no moving around, approaching only you if they have questions.
10. Avoid humiliating students in front of others if you determine they have cheated. Follow up any such discovery by informing the student's counselor, the administration, and the student's parents.