

# Back to School Starter Pack: Elementary (K-5)

## Classroom Setup Checklist

- Purge and clean**  
Which areas need the most attention?
- Room layout**  
How will you design your classroom?
- Desk arrangement**  
How can your seating arrangement reflect how you want students to act?
- Organize library**  
How can you arrange books for easy access and readability?
- Organize materials**  
How to make materials easy to find and use?
- Think about systems**  
How can systems help you stay organized?
- Set up your work area**  
How can you make the most of work time?
- Decorate**  
How can you make your classroom inviting?

## Class Culture Checklist

- Reflect and envision**  
How do you see your classroom?
- Pick a focus**  
Is there an area you want to explore more deeply?
- Think about norms**  
What practices and routines do you imagine for your classroom?
- Think about family communication**  
How will you share class culture with your families?
- Plan the first two weeks of school**  
How will you use the first two weeks of school to build culture?

## Lesson/Unit Planning Checklist

- Come up with a system**  
How will you record your lessons?
- Decide routines**  
What daily and weekly routines will affect your plans?
- Align to standards**  
What standards do your lessons need to address?
- Think about how to share plans with students**  
How will students know what they're expected to learn?
- Plan for the first few weeks**  
How can you plan lessons to help create a positive class culture?
- Long-term planning**  
How can you create a plan for the year?
- Share with families**  
How can you share your plans?
- Enrich planning with colleagues**  
How can you engage in collaborative planning?

## Self-Care Checklist

- Prep your teacher survival stash**  
What items do you need to make it through the day?
- Make a schedule**  
What will you do each day before and after school?
- Find some buddies**  
How can colleagues get you through the day?
- Decide what's important**  
What will you prioritize this year?
- Plan for feeling overwhelmed**  
How will you cope with moments of stress?
- Plan for fun**  
How will you bring joy to your classroom and beyond every day?



# Classroom Setup

## 1. Purge and clean: Which areas most need attention?

It's time to get ready for the new school year. But where do you begin? Whether you're coming back to your old classroom or entering a new one, start by looking at the room with new eyes. Take a walk to notice the state of the environment and think about which areas need purging and cleaning. Before you can set up for this year, try to get rid of anything you don't need.

### RESOURCES

- Check out our [Pinterest board](#) to inspire you to clear the clutter out of your classroom.

## 2. Room layout: How will you design your classroom?

Now that your classroom is clean, it's time to envision how you'd like it to be. Think about how you'll set up student desks, your desk, student materials, books, teacher resources, etc. In addition, consider where the main walkways will be and how traffic will flow around your classroom. Consider drawing a sketch of your classroom or even using paper cutouts to see what it will look like to move around different components of your classroom.

### RESOURCES

- Pinterest is a great place to see how other teachers have set up their classrooms. Check out our [Creative Classroom Setups](#) board for some fun ideas.
- Watch our Facebook Live videos to see how these teachers set up their classrooms — a [regular classroom](#) and a [co-teaching space](#) — to best meet the needs of ELL students.

### 3. Desk arrangement: How can your seating arrangement reflect how you want students to act?

You've got a general idea of your classroom layout, so now it's time to turn your attention to desks. How will your students sit? Think about how your desk arrangements can encourage the type of learning you're hoping to see. If you'd like students to learn to work in small groups, for example, consider seating them in groups of four.

#### RESOURCES

- Look at [these ideas](#) for setting up desks.
- Watch [this video](#) to see how one high school teacher set up desks to encourage collaboration.

### 4. Organize your library: How can you arrange books for easy access and readability?

We all want our students to become enthusiastic readers, so it's worthwhile spending time organizing your classroom library. How can you make books look appealing *and* create a system where they're easy to find? How will you address and invite different reading levels? Consider how you'll help students find "just right" books that they can read independently.

#### RESOURCES

- Browse these [classroom library ideas](#) to see how other teachers have set up their libraries for success.

### 5. Organize materials: How can you make materials easy to find and use?

You need so much stuff to make a classroom run smoothly: markers, scissors, paper, activity books, etc. Where do you put them all? It can seem overwhelming. But thinking through where materials will go can save you future headaches.

#### RESOURCES

- Look at these [organization hacks](#) that will help you make the most of your classroom space.

### 6. Think about systems: How can systems help you stay organized?

Now that you know where the materials in your classroom will go, it's time to think about how students will interact with them. Think about how you'll hand out materials, how you'll collect homework, and how students will move around the classroom. What routines can you put into place to help your classroom stay organized?

**RESOURCES**

- See how one teacher made [seating arrangements with work stations](#) so that students could have materials right next to them.
- Learn how to [choreograph your classroom](#) to help students move quickly and efficiently.

**7. Set up your work area: How can you make the most of work time?**

Once you've made a plan for student materials, it's time to attack all the materials that you'll need. What kind of file system will you use? How will you keep track of student work? Think about arranging your work area to make your work time be as productive as possible.

**RESOURCES**

- Don't just think about your physical work area, but consider how technology can help you stay organized as well. Check out [these three tech tools](#) to try.
- [Read](#) how Tch Laureate Josh Parker cleans up his desktop and other teacher spaces.

**8. Decorate: How can you make your classroom inviting?**

Here comes the fun part: decorating! Think about how to make your classroom a welcoming space. You're going to be spending a lot of time there, so you want to make your room as comfortable as it can be. Think about how to use the walls: will you keep them empty to fill with student work or will you post pictures or posters?

**RESOURCES**

- See how one teacher [uses her classroom walls as a teaching tool](#).
- As the year goes on, consider using student art work to [make your school a living museum](#) (or use art from previous students!).

For more resources, be sure to explore our [Setting Up Your Classroom](#) Deep Dive.



# Lesson/Unit Planning

## 1. Come up with a system: How will you record your lessons?

Before you start lesson planning, think about *how* you'll plan. What kind of format will you use? Will you keep a physical plan book or keep track of your plans virtually? Consider whether your school requires you to submit your lesson plans or use a particular structure. Consult any pacing guides and find a place to keep all the materials you'll need when lesson planning.

### RESOURCES

- Check out [this list](#) of ten lesson planning templates and resources.
- Think about [planning as a learning opportunity](#) by considering the power of writing down your lessons.
- [Read](#) about how you can save time and energy while planning purposeful lessons.

## 2. Decide on routines: What daily and weekly routines will affect your plans?

Now that you've considered how you'll plan, think about the daily and weekly routines that you'll need to plan around. In your plan book, note when you'll have prep periods and other school events (assemblies, buddy reading, etc.). Now think about your classroom routines. Will you hold a morning meeting every morning? Will all your lessons end with an exit slip? Think about the structures that you'll need to include in your daily plans.

### RESOURCES

- See how one teacher [holds morning meetings](#) to set the tone for each day.
- [Watch how exit slips](#) can be used as an end-of-class routine.
- [Read](#) why it's important to consider yourself the lead learner of your classroom.

### 3. Align to standards: What standards do your lessons need to address?

Whether state or national, chances are there are some standards you're held accountable for addressing. When planning your lessons, make sure you're addressing applicable standards. Consult pacing guides for your curricula and see how you can weave connections to the standards into the lessons you plan.

#### RESOURCES

- Sarah Brown Wessling shares how to ["skinny" the standards](#) to make them easier to use and understand.
- Looking to learn more about the Common Core? Check out [this video](#) about learning to read the standards.
- Watch [this video](#) to learn more about the Next Generation Science Standards.

### 4. Think about how to share plans with students: How will students know what they're expected to learn?

After figuring out what you'll need to teach, think about how you'll share your plans with students. Consider posting understanding goals, essential questions, or objectives in your classroom. Make sure to introduce and discuss the goals with your students so they have a clear understanding of what's expected of them.

#### RESOURCES

- Watch how to [communicate learning goals](#) with your students by sharing the objectives of your lessons.
- Participate in [this interactive video](#) about leading with learning objectives.

### 5. Plan for the first few weeks: How can you plan lessons to help create a positive class culture?

As you think about what your students will do in the first few weeks of school, try to focus more on culture than content. You'll have the whole year to teach content and a strong class culture will make everything easier.

#### RESOURCES

- This [Star Student of the Day](#) routine helps students get to know and appreciate each other.
- Think about the [unique classroom culture](#) you'd like to create.

### 6. Long-term planning: How can you create a plan for the year?

Planning for the day-to-day is hard enough; planning for the long-term can make it easier. When you have solid long-term plans, daily lessons are easier to create and execute. Again, refer back to your curricula and pacing guides. Think about your school's calendar and any

other important events to plan around. Then work to create a yearly plan. This will be invaluable to return back to as the year progresses!

#### RESOURCES

- Check out these resources for [completed lesson and unit plans](#) to use as inspiration.

### 7. Share with families: How can you share your plans?

You have your plans figured out, but how do you share them with your students' families? Think about creating a newsletter or blog to keep your classroom community informed. Back-to-School Night can be a great place to introduce your pacing plan/yearly calendar.

#### RESOURCES

- [Read about](#) how engaging families can strengthen communities.

### 8. Enrich your planning with colleagues: How can you engage in collaborative planning?

Sure, we can plan on our own. But what fun is that? Collaborating with colleagues makes planning more fun *and* more effective. Try to find colleagues that you can brainstorm with and bounce ideas off of. Consider dividing up planning tasks to make your loads a little lighter.

#### RESOURCES

- [Watch two teachers](#) reflect on their lessons and work together to plan future instruction.
- Collaboration doesn't have to happen just at your school site. [Watch](#) how cross-school teams come together to support teacher inquiry.



# Class Culture

## 1. Reflect and envision: How do you see your classroom?

We all want to develop positive classroom cultures. And sometimes we want it *right away!* But building a strong classroom culture can be hard because it takes time. Before you can even think about how you'll build your class culture, take a deep breath and imagine it. If you're a new teacher, think about everything you've seen and read so far. Whose classrooms would you like to emulate? If you're a veteran teacher, think about last year. What did you like about the culture you built with your students? What would you change? Once you have them down, think about how your culture goals fit into your classroom setup plan.

### RESOURCES

- Watch a few [videos](#) on class culture for ideas.
- Listen to Sarah Brown Wessling discuss how she thinks about [class culture at the start of school](#).

## 2. Pick a focus: Is there an area you want to explore more deeply?

Now that you have a vision of your class culture in mind, think about an area you'd like to explore more deeply this year. Is there something specific about class culture you'd like to get better at? Or is there a focus you feel your students might really need? Maybe you want your students to be kinder to each other, or maybe you want to encourage appreciation. Explore some areas of focus, pick one, and start to plan out how you'll work on related goals.

### RESOURCES

- Interested in helping kids be more appreciative? Check out how one teacher [encouraged appreciation](#).



- Watch how another teacher focused on teaching her students to [use respectful talk](#).

### 3. Think about norms: What agreements can you make with your students?

With your class culture vision and focus area in mind, start to think of what you'd like your class norms to be. What practices and routines do you hope your students will follow? Think big, like helping students be respectful, to the small but important things, like bathroom procedures. Give students ownership of these norms by co-creating classroom agreements together. But even though you'll be writing the agreements together, it's a good idea to have your own ideas solidified first. Then you can use students' ideas to help you build your class culture vision.

#### RESOURCES

- Think about classroom culture as part of your [class management strategy](#).
- See how one teacher [establishes classroom norms](#) that help to build an inclusive classroom community.
- Watch how [expectations are communicated](#) in a Pre-K classroom.

### 4. Think about family communication: How will you share your class culture with families?

It's important to make sure your students' families understand the culture you're trying to build in your classroom so that they can continue the work at home. Most likely, your students will not report back on the great class culture you'll be working to build, so it's nice to have a communication plan. How will you present class culture at Back-to-School Night? How will you continue to communicate throughout the year? Will you use a class website, newsletter, or an app?

#### RESOURCES

- Read Common Sense Media's [post](#) about tech tools that boost teacher-parent communication and see if one of these options might work for you.
- Start planning how you'll communicate class culture by reading [these tips](#) for structuring your Back-to-School event.
- Check out this [Pinterest board](#) with lots of family letter examples and templates to explore.

### 5. Plan the first two weeks of school: How will you use the first two weeks of school to build culture?

Time spent building classroom culture at the start of the year will save you time in the long run. Although you may feel eager to begin teaching content, give yourself permission to slow down and devote time towards building culture. A strong class culture makes deep learning

possible! So make sure to infuse a lot of class culture activities into your first two weeks of school.

**RESOURCES**

[The First Six Weeks of School](#) from [Responsive Classroom](#) provides excellent advice on building a positive class culture. It even gives you a sample first-two-weeks lesson plan for grades five and six that can easily be adapted to all elementary grades.

[Connect your class culture goals](#) with first month of school activities, as well as the rest of the year.

For more resources, be sure to explore our [Class Culture Deep Dive](#).



## Self-Care

### 1. Prep your teacher survival stash: What items do you need to make it through the day?

Real talk: chocolate can help you survive teaching. Before the school year begins and life gets hectic, prep a stash of items that you can reach for on a daily basis or when times get tough. Make sure to keep it in a secure place, such as a locked cabinet or drawer. This spot can hold your purse or wallet, but it should also hold essentials: breath mints or mouthwash, any medicine you may need, lip balm, hand lotion, extra deodorant, etc. Also, think of items that can get you through a hard day, like your favorite snack or anything that will bring a smile to your face. And remember to keep the stash stocked throughout the year!

#### RESOURCES

- Check out this [Pinterest board](#) for fun ideas for your teacher survival kit.

### 2. Make a schedule: What will you do each day before and after school?

While your teaching schedule is usually set for you, how you use the rest of each day is not. Making a schedule for that time helps you stay sane! Are there days you need to stay late for meetings? Are there days you can leave earlier? Can you exercise after school, or do something else for the mind and body? Is there a day you want to stay late for planning or reviewing student work? If you set this schedule ahead of time, you'll thank yourself later. Just as your students appreciate routines and norms, so will you!

#### RESOURCES

- [Protect Your Personal Time!](#) Read Tch Laureate Crystal Morey's advice for protecting and scheduling your time.
- [Read this post](#) about improving your work-life balance.

### 3. Find some buddies: How can colleagues get you through the day?

If you've been teaching for a while, you probably have colleagues you can turn to for advice, snacks, or tissues! You may even have collaboration partners for planning and curriculum. But maybe you've changed schools, or you're a brand new teacher. Maybe there's a new teacher next door to you. Take some time before the school year begins to get to know your colleagues and make a plan to support each other, whether that simply means eating lunch together daily or collaborating on curriculum. Although teaching can feel like independent work once you close the classroom door, collaborating can make the year so much better!

#### RESOURCES

- [See the power of collaboration](#) by sitting in as two teachers plan a lesson for their ELL students.
- [Watch this video](#) to learn more about the benefits of collaboration from the perspective of middle school teachers.
- [This video](#) is about coaching relationships, but there's great advice in it for all professional relationships.

### 4. Decide what's important: What will you prioritize this year?

As a teacher, there is a never-ending list of what you could be doing, but the fact is, you can't do it all. Ever. Once you embrace the fact that your job is never done, it will be easier to make room to recharge. At the start of the school year, set some priorities. What are the most important things for you to focus on in your teaching this year? Then, make a plan. A plan might be for hacking new ways of doing things to save time for other items, or it might be to take a deep dive into one area this year so you get better at it.

#### RESOURCES

- Check out Tch Laureate Sean McComb's [Hacking Feedback](#) series to learn how he made giving feedback easier and more effective at the same time.
- Discover how to set and [work towards effective instructional priorities](#).

### 5. Plan for feeling overwhelmed: How will you cope with moments of stress?

In step four, you made a plan to limit your areas of focus so you don't burn out. That's great! But that doesn't mean you can avoid stress entirely. Acknowledge the fact that there will be overwhelming days and have a plan ready to put into action. It's better to be prepared than caught off guard.

#### RESOURCES

- Have Sarah Brown Wessling's [5-Day Reboot](#) in your pocket and ready to go when needed.
- [Read this post](#) to remind yourself that you can't do it all, and that's okay!

- Read Sarah Brown Wessling’s heartfelt [letter to her children](#) to remind yourself just how important and beautiful the work of teaching can be.

## 6. Plan for fun: How will you bring joy to your classroom and beyond every day?

Finally, before the school year begins, think about how you can bring joy to your life (and thus to those around you) on a daily basis. How can you have fun with your students each day? How can you do something fun for yourself each day? How can you infuse joy into teaching and learning? A simple sticky note with “have fun” written on it might be all it takes to remind yourself to take time to laugh and smile each day.

### RESOURCES

- Incorporate Play! [Read](#) Tch Laureate Crystal Morey’s advice on remembering to have fun.
- [Watch this video](#) to see how simple games can make transitions more fun.
- Focusing can be fun, too. Watch this video to [see how mindfulness](#) can be used by you and your students.