

# Back to School Starter Pack: High (9-12)

## 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, get rid of anything you don't need. And remember to save some of your cleaning supplies for when your students arrive. You often need to clean up a spill or freshen up your space!

### RESOURCES:

- Check out our [Pinterest board](#) to inspire you to clear the clutter out of your classroom.
- Having trouble letting go? Keeping resources “just in case?” Read [this post](#) by Eat.Write.Teach. to learn how to use the KonMari method in your classroom.
- If you struggle with organization in your classroom, check out [this post](#) on four steps to organizing teacher resources — starting with a purge!

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

Now that your classroom is clean, it's time to become a designer. Start with a vision. 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 or even using paper cutouts to see what it will look like to move around different components of your classroom. Browse images of other teachers' classrooms, and even tour your own school building to see what your colleagues are up to.

### RESOURCES:

- 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.

- Think about what you want your classroom to communicate. Align the energy of the room with the culture you want to create. Read [Reimagine Your Learning Space: Starbucks Your Classroom](#) for a creative DIY twist on classroom design.
- Check out [Classroom Eye Candy](#) from Cult of Pedagogy for a few funky and fresh ideas on classroom design.

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

You've got a general idea of what your classroom layout will be, so now it's time to turn your attention to desks or tables. 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:

- The way we set up our classrooms sends a message about diversity, communication, relationships, and the roles of teachers and students. Gain some insight from Teaching Tolerance's [Thoughtful Classroom Setup and Structure](#).
- Watch [this video](#) to see how one high school teacher set up desks to encourage collaboration.
- [Write-On Tables: Tools for Communication](#) shows how one teacher turned his desks into conversation pieces.

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

Reading happens across all subject areas, so whether you teach history, science, or math, your classroom most likely has some sort of 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? Do you have a reference collection? Will you have an area where students can sit and read? Even high school students love reading nooks!

#### RESOURCES:

- Browse these [classroom library ideas](#) to see how other teachers have set up their libraries for success.
- Don't have a classroom library? Read Pernille Ripp's [blog post](#) about building one and why they are important.
- Looking to add literary and informational texts to your lessons, but lacking resources or space? Check out [CommonLit](#) for a free, online alternative.

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

There's so much stuff that you need to make a classroom run smoothly. Most classrooms need art supplies like markers, scissors, and paper. Depending on the subject you teach, you may need simple calculators or extensive laboratory supplies. And what about tech

supplies, like laptops or ipads? 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.
- Check out this [Pinterest board](#) for tech storage ideas.

## 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.
- Google Docs can be a great way to organize materials, even physical ones. Read [this blog](#) to see how one educator uses Google Sheets.

## 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? Or will you be paperless? How will you keep track of student work? Think about arranging your work area to help your work time be as productive as possible.

**RESOURCES:**

- Create less clutter at your desk by going digital. [Watch](#) how one teacher does just that.
- Want to really cut the clutter? Read [this post](#) for ideas on ditching your desk all together.
- Read this post to learn just how a [digital calendar](#) can help you create more space in your teacher life.

## 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 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!).

- Watch our Facebook Live Classroom Tours to see how teachers of newcomers use the walls as language learning tools in [math](#) and [social studies](#) classrooms.

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.

## 2. Decide 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 each class, prep periods, and any school-wide activities. Now think about your classroom routines. Will you start each class with a warmup or Do Now? Will all your lessons end with an exit slip? What tools and routines will you use throughout your lessons? Think about the structures that you'll need to include in your daily plans.

### RESOURCES

- Read [Five Ways to Start Your Lessons](#) and [Five Ways to Close a Lesson](#) for examples of starting and closing routines.
- Think about what's on the menu in your classroom as you read [How to Approach Your Teaching Like a Master Chef](#) from Cult of Pedagogy.

### 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. And leave a little room for flexibility because once you get to know your students, you'll want to think about their interests and be responsive to their needs as well!

#### 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 or NGSS? Check out [this video](#) about learning to read the Core or [this video](#) to learn more about the Next Generation Science Standards.
- Watch how teachers [plan together](#) around a particular standard.

### 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 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. Think about ways you'll keep students on track with assignments, projects, and due dates.

#### RESOURCES

- Most high school teachers are expected to develop and post a course syllabus. This [post](#) from Cult of Pedagogy will help you write a well-designed syllabus that gives students a clear understanding of your expectations. Bonus: There's a link to a template inside!
- Watch how one teacher helps her students [understand the goals](#) for each lesson.
- Use tech tools like [hyperdocs](#) and [playlists](#) to communicate, differentiate, and transform your teaching.

### 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

- Think about the [unique classroom culture](#) you'd like to create.

- See how one middle school teacher starts off her school year with [important routines](#) built into her lessons.
- Remember that [planning engaging lessons](#) is a key element of culture.

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

Planning for the day-to-day is hard, but a little proactive planning for the long-term can make your daily flow much less stressful. When you have solid, long-term plans, daily lessons are easier to create and execute. Again, refer to your curricula and pacing guides. Think about your school's calendar, district-wide assessments, and other important events to plan around. Then work to create a yearly plan. This will be invaluable as the year progresses. And leave a little room for flexibility -- once you get to know your students, you'll want to think about their interests and be responsive to their needs!

### RESOURCES

- Planning to make learning more personalized this year? Take a look at how Sean McComb put his students at the center of instruction with [personalized and customized learning](#).
- Visit Literacy Design Collaborative's [Core Tools](#) or [Teaching Tolerance](#) for excellent planning resources you can use as is, or use as a springboard to generate ideas.

## 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? Back-to-School Night can be a great place to introduce your pacing plan and yearly calendar, but it shouldn't be the only time you communicate with parents and families. Think about creating a regular newsletter or blog to keep your classroom community informed.

### RESOURCES

- Check out these [four tips for communicating with families](#) throughout the year.
- [Read about](#) how engaging families can strengthen community.
- Email can be both a blessing and a curse. Use the insight in [this post](#) to help you confidently navigate all types of parent communication with finesse.
- This [blog post](#) has a great tutorial on creating personalized newsletters. If you'd rather design something more general, check out tools like [Smore](#), [Tackk](#), or [Adobe's Spark Page](#).

## 9. Enrich 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

- Get ideas from this [video playlist](#) that highlights the way two teachers closely align their curriculum so that students are working on similar topics and skills in both English and Social Studies at the same time.
- Collaboration doesn't just have to happen at your school site. Watch how [cross-school teams come together](#) to support teacher inquiry.
- Take a look at how one school makes [collaborative planning](#) the norm.



# Class Culture

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

Building classroom culture can be complex for high school teachers. You're looking out at a sea of young adults and trying to find the right balance between friendly rapport and professionalism, but you likely won't see each group of students for more than one class period each day. Imagine your ideal classroom culture. 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?

### RESOURCES

- Watch a few [videos](#) on class culture for ideas.
- Get a window into Sarah Brown Wessling's vision for the "[ideal classroom](#)."
- In [Start with the End in Mind](#), listen to Sarah discuss how she thinks about class culture at the start of school.
- [Read](#) about ways you can create a more democratic classroom this year.

## 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? Explore a few areas of focus, pick one, and start to plan out how you'll work on related goals.

### RESOURCES

- Learn a little more about [inquiry-based teaching](#) and what it takes to achieve success with this approach.

- Check out our blog series on [Social Justice and Equity](#) in the classroom and [Teaching for Civic Engagement](#) for more class culture focus ideas.

### 3. Think about norms: What practices and routines do you imagine for your classroom?

With your class culture vision and focus area in mind, start to think about 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 and accountable. But also think about the small but important things, like bathroom procedures or turning in work. How can you allow your students to play a role in creating the norms and expectations for the classroom so they're more likely to buy in, and still come to the table with your own norms designed to achieve your vision?

#### RESOURCES

- Watch how one teacher models clear and consistent expectations from day one in [Setting and Achieving High Expectations](#).
- Learn about using contracts for better participation during projects in [Group Contracts for Collaborative Work](#).
- [Read](#) about smart classroom management strategies you can try this year.
- There is a relationship between authenticity and purpose, between engagement and culture. In [Building Culture: Strategies for Starting](#), find out how Sarah Brown Wessling models her expectations for her students, creating a class culture that supports learning.

### 4. Think about family communication: How will you share class culture with your 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 high school students won't report back on the great class culture you're working to build in your class, so it's important 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?

#### RESOURCES

- Keep in mind that in every interaction you have with parents and families, you are [communicating something about your classroom culture](#).
- Start planning how you'll communicate class culture by reading about ideas on [structuring your Back-to-School event](#).
- Many teachers blog to communicate about their practice and the culture of their classroom. This [blog series](#) from [National Blogging Collaborative](#) will give some insight on how you can break down barriers and tell the story of your classroom.

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

High school teachers never have enough time to teach their content as deeply as they'd like. While you may feel an urgency to get to your content curriculum right away, give yourself permission to slow down. A focus on building class culture during the first two weeks will give you more time to dig into content in the long term. So make sure to infuse a lot of class culture activities from the start, because a strong class culture makes deep learning possible!

### RESOURCES

- Read this [blog post](#) from Edutopia for ideas or inspiration, and think about some innovative tweaks you can make or some new ways you can infuse class culture building into your lessons.
- Spend some time setting up [ground rules for discussion](#), teaching students how to engage in [Respectful Talk](#), and modeling how students can [give respectful feedback](#) to one another.

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?

It's OK to hope for the best... but be prepared for the worst! 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. Don't forget to include 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

- Take a peek at one teacher's list for her personal [Teacher Survival Kit](#).
- Check out this [Pinterest board](#) for fun ideas for your teacher survival kit.
- Consider using a social media platform like [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or [Instagram](#) to reach out to your teacher network and crowdsource a list for a personalized 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 maintain your sanity! 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 assessing? Do you want to set a day for conferring with students after school? If you create this schedule ahead of time, you'll thank yourself later. Just as your students appreciate routines and norms, so will you!

**RESOURCES**

- Read [Why is it So Hard for Teachers to Take Care of Themselves \(and 4 Ways to Start\)](#) to find out what qualifies as self-care and how you can get into the habit.
- Tch Laureate Crystal Morey gives important advice for [protecting and scheduling your time](#).
- Check out these [ten tips](#) on how teachers can improve work-life balance.
- The start of school can sometimes feel chaotic. Read [this post](#) for tips on surviving the madness.

### 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 is 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**

- Tch Laureate Crystal Morey came to appreciate [trusting others](#) after reading author Nan Russell.
- [Building Coaching Relationships](#) is a video about coaching relationships, but there's great advice within for all professional relationships.
- The benefits of teacher collaboration are many, but some of the most important are the gains in teacher growth as [shown in this video](#).
- Always remember that [working in teacher teams and PLCs](#) can be a very personal and human endeavor.

### 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 without burning out. At the start of the school year, it's a good idea to set some priorities. What are the most important things for you to focus on in your teaching this year? Then, make a plan. One plan might be for hacking new ways of doing things to save time for other tasks. Another plan might be to take a deep dive into one area this year so that you can focus and work on becoming an expert.

**RESOURCES**

- Discover how to set and [work towards effective instructional priorities](#).
- 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. Then watch [Making Feedback Meaningful](#) and [Getting Better through Authentic Feedback](#) to see how his plan played out.

## 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 it doesn't mean moments of stress can be completely avoided. 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

- Is there an upside to stress? Watch Kelly McGonigal's Ted Talk, [How to Make Stress Your Friend](#).
- Check out these [three tips for staying energized](#) during the school year.
- Have Sarah Brown Wessling's [5-Day Reboot](#) in your pocket and ready to go when needed.
- 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

- We're never too old to play! [Read](#) Tch Laureate Crystal Morey's advice on remembering to have fun.
- Keep in mind that play and learning are not mutually exclusive. Watch [Fun & Funny Improv Activities](#) to discover how improv can help you and your students practice important life skills while having fun.
- Sarah Brown Wessling has a gift for designing rigorous lessons that are also engaging and fun. Watch [Life-Size Graphic Organizers](#) and [Comic Book Templates: An Entry Point into Nonfiction](#) for examples.
- Interested in critical creativity and [#rigorouswhimsy](#)? Check out this [Tch Talks podcast](#) filled with fabulous and fun ideas for deeper learning.