

Introduction: Before You Begin . . .

I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging of the future but by the past.

—PATRICK HENRY

One of my favorite things about teaching is that my job is never the same. I teach high school English, and although the objectives rarely vary (to improve the reading, writing, and thinking skills of my students), I can choose from an ever-expanding list of books and topics to create my lessons. But in truth, the reason I am drawn to this profession is the students. Each year, I stand in front of a classroom full of new faces—some who smile and say “Hi” when they walk in, eager to please and be pleased, and some who slouch in at the last minute, slump in a seat in the back, and defy me to teach them anything. I find this exciting. In fact, as I scan their faces before I start “the show,” I get the same tingling of anticipation I feel when I walk into a well-stocked bookstore. Every kid is a story I cannot wait to read.

When I work with my students on reading comprehension, one of the skills I try to help them develop is the ability to draw on prior knowledge before tackling a text. I tell them that I approach a research article and a gothic novel with very different mind-sets. Because I have past experience with both types of writing, I am familiar with the genres and understand how to get what I’m looking for from each. I adjust my reading speed, my attention to detail, and even my surroundings based on what has worked in the past. I don’t believe that one form of writing is superior to

The Ten Students You'll Meet in Your Classroom

another just because one may require more effort than the other—it's my motivation that differs. For the research article, I need to sit in a not-too-comfortable chair with plenty of light early in the day. For the gothic novel, soft music and a cup of tea in the evening will work just fine.

Like books, no two students are the same. Each is a unique individual, but because I've had the privilege of getting to know so many over my 27 years of teaching, even a kid I'm meeting for the first time will seem vaguely familiar. Every year, I spend a few weeks studying mythology with my students, partly because the stories are entertaining, but mainly because they help us to understand human nature, offer explanations for the mysteries of life, and illustrate how certain choices can invite either tragedy or triumph. I have done what I can to disguise the identity of the students I describe in this book—all of the names have been changed, yet every story is based on an actual event. But because I've taught for such a long time, each student described in this book also represents hundreds of students I've known—they have become the archetypes I draw on to help my students get over the roadblocks that life has placed in their paths. I also tell these stories in workshops when I try to help teachers understand the often baffling behavior of some of their most challenging students.

When you glance at the titles of these chapters, it's important to remember that most students can cross over into several categories. As an adolescent, I could have been called a Rebel, a Misfit, or a "Good" Kid; and depending on the class, the teacher, or whichever phase of teenage angst I was currently wallowing in, they could all have been right. Students should never be reduced to stereotypes—they are far too dynamic and complex for that. However, I have noticed that recognizing and understanding general patterns of behavior can be useful as new and experienced teachers develop specific techniques to deal effectively with discipline problems in the classroom.

I begin this book with the "Good" Kids, and that's where I start when I face a new group of students each year—they're all good kids, but I cannot be so naïve as to think that they come to me without a past, a tabula rasa, if you will. A class is not a concrete unit but a room full of individuals who

may have to be reached in different ways. My experience has taught me that there are some specific, practical things I can do before school starts to eliminate 80% of the discipline problems I've encountered in my career. Tackling the other 20% requires more of a philosophical approach—a frame of mind that will help you keep your eye on the big picture, which is that we all have a basic need to be accepted and feel like we belong.

If you enter a classroom with a solid knowledge of the subject matter, a sense of humor, and some common sense, all of the rest is just details. This book contains affectionate descriptions of various kids I've taught, coupled with practical advice on how to create a classroom management plan that will allow you to spend more of your time on the job of teaching and less on dealing with discipline problems. At the end of each chapter, I have supplemented these real-life stories with a list of tips for putting these techniques into practice and samples of handouts and worksheets I use every year with my own students.

I have been a teacher for most of my life. In one of my favorite poems, Langston Hughes writes, "I've known rivers . . . My soul has grown deep like the rivers." Well, I have known students, and my life has been enriched by their stories. Let me tell you what I know.

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