# Planning brilliant lessons

Refresher tips and ideas to take the pain out of lesson planning

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Acknowledgments

About the author

Mike Gershon is a teacher, trainer, writer and educational consultant. His teaching resources on TES Resources include The Starter Generator, The Plenary Producer and The Assessment for Learning Toolkit. Together they have been viewed and downloaded more than 2 million times by teachers in over 180 countries. Mike teaches at King Edward VI School in Bury St Edmunds. He divides his time between Suffolk, London and Yorkshire.

He is the author of six books on teaching and learning, including three bestsellers.

How to use Assessment for Learning in the Classroom: The Complete Guide

How to use Differentiation in the Classroom: The Complete Guide

How to use Questioning in the Classroom: The Complete Guide

How to use Discussion in the Classroom: The Complete Guide

How to teach EAL Students in the Classroom: The Complete Guide

More Secondary Starters and Plenaries: Creative activities, ready-to-use in any subject

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# Section one – Lesson elements

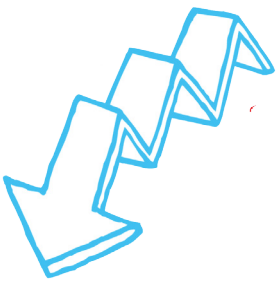
## 1. Think about the product

In my first few weeks of teacher training, I collected in a set of books for marking. I was pleased with how lessons were going and I felt that my students were making good progress, but, to my horror, the books did not reflect this. The quality of work varied considerably and the discussion activities I was using in lessons were not translating well into writing.

This caused me to think carefully about product: what did I want my students to produce in a lesson? High-quality talk was one thing, but I realised that if I also wanted to see high-quality work in student books, then I would need to reassess the activities I was using.

Before planning your lessons, ask yourself two questions: what sort of product do I want from my students in this lesson? What product would an outsider see in my students' books if they came in to take a look at random?

Thinking about the product of your lessons will help you to reflect on the expectations you are conveying to students.



## 2. Keep the focus on the students

Brilliant lesson planning is not about you. When observers come to watch you teach, what they really want to see is how you ensure that all students in the class can learn and make progress.

If you spend a lot of time talking at the front of the class, you are minimising the time available for students to think and to practise. Of course 'teacher talk' is necessary from time to time, but you should aim to talk briefly. Get across a key idea or set up an activity as succinctly as you can so that students have maximum opportunity to interact with the lesson content.

By remembering to keep the focus on your students, you give yourself the opportunity to observe, to gather information and to work with individuals or groups who need extra support – a great differentiation technique.

## 3. Plan how to show progress

Demonstrating progress at a specific moment in time is essentially a contrivance. It fails to take account of the uneven and incremental nature of learning. Despite this, teachers must find ways to show that progress is happening, for the benefit of students and observers.

Progress checks allow teachers to understand who needs more help and allow students to develop an awareness of how far they have come.

Here are five easy ways to show progress in your lessons:

1. Use a mini-plenary or brief review activity.
2. Use a whole-class feedback technique, such as holding up answers to a question on mini white-boards.
3. Set up a task that relies on students making use of the knowledge or skills they have acquired and observe how well they do.
4. Use an extended evaluation task with clear assessment criteria – such as a practice exam question – that is based on the theme of the lesson.
5. At the beginning of the lesson, present a question that students will struggle to answer. Return to this question later on, when students can use what they have learnt in the lesson to answer it.

## 4. Keep transitions to a minimum

Transitions are the moments that occur in between one classroom activity and the next. These moments disrupt the flow of the lesson and also provide opportunities for students to get distracted and go off task.

When planning your lessons, think about how many transitions will be involved. The more transitions there are, the more likely it is that you will encounter problems. While it is not possible to eliminate all transitions, you should think carefully about each one that you let into your lesson. If you get near double figures, then you are causing yourself unnecessary problems.

You can minimise transitions by using extended activities or tasks containing a number of separate elements, which students can work through without your intervention.

You should also think in advance about the logistics of the transitions that you decide to keep. What do you need to hand out or collect in? Do you need to appoint student monitors to help you with the materials? How will you make sure that all students have the instructions that they need to get working?

Planning for transitions will make you more confident and will help you to take all students from one activity to the next as quickly and painlessly as possible.

## 5. Tie it together

Tying the differing elements of your lesson together makes your teaching more coherent; it will help students to understand what is going on and impress observers, who will note the sense of logical progression.

To achieve this, it is important to maintain a firm grip on the content of the lesson. Ask yourself what you want to cover and how much consistency the material will retain if you are to divide it up. Consider whether this will be enough for a single lesson or if it makes more sense to split the content into several.

One trick is to draw a "map" of where students will go during your lesson: ask yourself if each activity is fully contributing to the overall journey. If an activity does not fit on the map, consider removing it from the lesson.

## 6. Open activities and choices

Open activities provide a structure within which students can freely express their thoughts and ideas about conceptually-demanding topics.

The great benefit of using open activities is that they allow learners to become active, independent and critically engaged, while still ensuring that the teacher maintains control over where the lesson is going.

Here are some examples of open activities:

- Ask students to respond to a statement or question, giving a choice of formats that the response can take, eg, essay, poem, prose story or comic strip.
- Give students a design brief and ask them to work in groups to fulfil it in whatever way they feel is best.
- Ask students to produce a piece of independent extended writing from a limited starting point, such as a title or a first sentence.

You can also encourage independent learning through providing choice in a more structured way. For example, you might present students with a question followed by three possible routes to develop an answer. The routes can be divided according to the type of work they involve, the style of learning they require or the materials that they ask students to work with.

Alternatively, you can provide a list of tasks that must be done to complete a particular piece of work, but leave it up to students to decide the order in which they will complete the tasks.

A final option is to offer a range of questions connected to the lesson topic. Ask students to select two or three questions to investigate further. Facilitate these investigations and then ask students to share their findings with each other.

# Section two – Planning practicalities

## 1. Titles and objectives

Before devising a learning objective, try coming up with a title for your lesson. This will force you to consider what your lesson is really about and help you to pinpoint which content is relevant. A title will provide a sense of focus and prevent you from drifting in disparate directions when selecting activities and content.

Once you have your title, you can decide on the learning objective that will underpin the lesson. In selecting a title followed by an objective, you are guiding yourself down an ever more-specific path.

A good learning objective should encompass a combination of skills and content.

For example:

To critically evaluate the use of persuasive devices used in a charity appeal.

By fixing a learning objective, you identify the content that needs to be included in your lesson and give an indication of the type of activities that will be most suited to engaging with it.

## 2. Starters and plenaries

Since these activities begin and end your lesson, in planning them you will be creating a framework for the main body of the lesson.

When choosing a starter, look for ways to get students immediately working and engaged. Having already specified the lesson title and the learning objective, this should be straightforward. All you will need to do is select an activity into which you can drop some relevant content. My resource The Starter Generator contains 120 starters that can be used in any lesson and with any age group. It is available for free at tes.com/member/mikegershon.

Plenaries need to ask students to do something with whatever they have been studying. This might mean revisiting, synthesising, evaluating or reflecting on their learning. If you know the topic and expected outcomes of your lesson, you can easily plan plenaries before planning the main activities. My two resources, The Plenary Producer and Plenaries on a Plate, offer 298 plenaries between them. You can use them all with any lesson and any age group. They are also available for free at the above address.

## 3. Activities

By this point you will have the shell of a lesson. You will know what information needs to be conveyed and what students should to be able to do with it by the end of the lesson. The starter will be the method of drawing students into the material; it will also help you to identify where it would be appropriate to go next.

When selecting activities, it is important to check that your choices will allow students to meet the learning objective you have set. This might seem a case of stating the obvious, but you would be surprised how many lessons fall down on exactly this point.

You can ensure that you are selecting appropriate activities by reminding yourself of your objective before planning each task and then looking back over the entire lesson and asking yourself how well the combination of activities meet that objective.

## 4. Make the students work

If you are spending hours planning lessons, this could be because you are doing work that students could be doing instead.

Instead of creating detailed, content-heavy slides or handouts, use an activity that asks students to research the topic themselves. You can supplement this with a short summary if necessary and students can even go on to share their knowledge through peer teaching.

Rather than having many short activities, each requiring planning and resources, try to include at least one extended task that will allow students to work independently.

By passing work onto students, you create challenges for the most able and free yourself up to support those who need your help.

## 5. Extension tasks

In any class, students will work at different speeds. Having extensions prepared ahead of time means that you will always have a task ready for those who work quickly. This ensures that no student is left unoccupied and free to distract other students who work more slowly.

If you are using a PowerPoint presentation, a good method is to include extension questions on all of your slides. This helps to communicate high expectations and gives all students the opportunity to challenge themselves.

Extensions do not need to be complicated or planning-heavy.

Here are three generic examples:

- Why might someone argue against the view that we have put forward?
- How might the world be different if what we have studied had never existed?
- Design an advertising campaign to sell what you have learnt so far.

The first extension asks students to think critically, the second and third ask them to think creatively.

While extension tasks can act as an incentive, it is also worth being aware that some students may try to rush their work in order to get onto them. It is important to check the work of those who think they have finished and offer verbal feedback if they need to do more to complete their initial task.

## 6. Don't overanalyse

Teachers are trained to analyse and evaluate things, be it our own work or the work of others. These processes are at the core of our job; they help us to succeed at what we do.

However, it is possible to take analysis too far. Spending hours analysing a single lesson or resource becomes problematic and self-defeating.

Overanalysing will cause you to get bogged down in minutiae and lose sight of the real purpose of what you are doing. It will sap your energy so that you have less to use when you need it most: the time when you are actually teaching.

It might be easier said than done, but try to avoid overanalysing. Spending an extra hour planning a single lesson won't necessarily make it better. As you become more experienced, learning when to leave a lesson plan alone will start to come more naturally. Instead of fretting, you can use the time to unwind and make sure that you are at your best for putting your plan into practise in the classroom.

# Section three – The student's perspective

## 1. Creating meaning and purpose

It is rare for students to turn up to a lesson intrinsically motivated and eager to learn. Part of the teacher's job is to create a sense of purpose and to communicate this to students so that they see the relevance of what you are teaching.

Here are three simple ways for you to create meaning and purpose when planning:

- Set students up for success by using a starter activity that everyone in the class will be able to access and complete. This creates positive associations and builds self-esteem from the outset.
- Build opportunities for independent learning into your lesson. Allowing students some independence will give them a sense of empowerment.
- Set students challenging but achievable targets and ask them to work on these during lessons. This creates a feeling of progress between lessons, giving your teaching a sense of direction.

## 2. Seeing a final product

What do your students see in your lessons? Do they see a work in progress or do they see a final product?

The key thing is presentation. Even if you know that your lesson is a work in progress, don't let students see this. Present them with what appears to be a finished product. This will create a better sense of pace, give you more authority and lead to higher levels of engagement.

One way to make a lesson seem like a finished product is to contextualise the learning right at the start.

Plan to explain what is to be studied, why it is to be studied and how it connects to what has gone before. You should also plan to give students an idea of how the lesson will progress and to share what they can hope to gain in terms of their knowledge and skills.

All this helps to create a sense of certainty as well as contributing to the development of meaning and purpose. Remember that a final product doesn't have to really be a final product; it just has to appear as such.

## 3. Engagement, excitement and enthusiasm

If you want your lessons to be brilliant, you should think about whether students are feeling three things during the course of them. Ask yourself whether there is engagement, excitement and enthusiasm in the room. If not, why not? How could you alter your planning in order to make it happen?

Create engagement by:

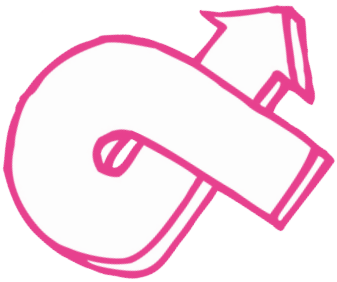
- Connecting the learning to students' own experiences.
- Using narrative to underpin tasks and contextualise abstract concepts.
- Highlighting how what you are studying is relevant to modern society.

Create excitement by:

- Using a range of activities, including ones with time limits.
- Using dramatic techniques and drama-based activities.
- Introducing unusual ideas or facts that are connected to the topic.

Create enthusiasm by:

- Being enthusiastic yourself.
- Communicating clearly where the learning is going and why.
- Maintaining variety over a series of lessons.



## 4. Is it clear?

Thinking about the language that you will use to communicate a task to your students can be a good way to keep your activities on target. Being clear in your language will not only help students to understand, it will also help you to become clearer about the intentions of the tasks you plan.

It is easy to slip into vagueness when giving instructions. Let's take this example: Work with a partner to answer the questions.

At first glance, this seems to be a clear command. Many of us will have said or displayed something similar in our own classrooms. However, this command does not specify what form the answers should take: are they to be written down or just discussed? Students could easily be confused.

Many lesson segments fall down or lose pace because of a lack of clarity. You should always specify exactly what you want from students, even if you want ambiguity. For example, you might say: "That's all I'm going to give you – the rest is up to you". This makes it clear that you are being deliberately ambiguous.

Go through each resource you have produced and ask yourself these questions:

- Is it clear?
- Will students understand it as I intend them to understand it?
- Is there any room for misinterpretation?

## 5. Who is doing what and when are they doing it?

During your planning, you should always consider who will be doing what and when.

This will help you to avoid three pitfalls that can cause serious damage:

- Situations where some or all students do not have anything to do. For example, during a transition between activities.
- Situations when it is not clear who is meant to be doing what.
- Situations where you are not free to help those who most need your support because you are distracted by others who could be working independently.

Rather than having to deal with these situations when they occur, you can prevent them from happening in the first place by preparing for them ahead of time and by always being precise in your instructions to students.

## 6. Train students in specific activities

Once a class is familiar with a particular type of task, they will no longer have to think about the practicalities of it and can instead focus their attention on the content.

For example, the first time that you lead a class through a structured debate, you will need to introduce the format to them and explain the rules. Students may be concentrating more on how to debate – on getting the activity format right – than they are on the issue being debated.

However, through practise and repetition, students will get better. The next time that you plan this activity, the class will already be familiar with how to debate and so will be free to devote more attention to the material you want them to explore.

While you do not want your teaching to become repetitive, it is worth taking the time to train your students in certain activity formats and reusing these in subsequent lessons. Used sparingly, familiar activity formats will make your planning simpler and can also help students to feel more confident.

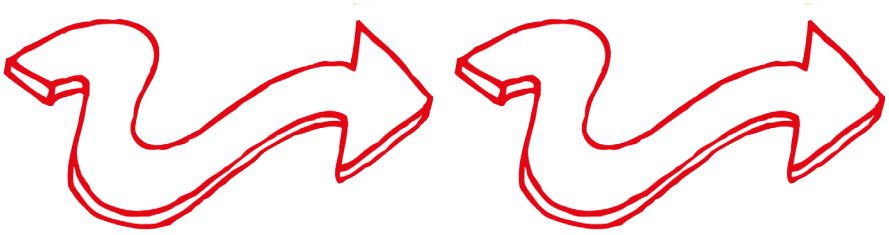
## 7. What is the point of the resources?

For many teachers, resources become a security blanket.

While good resources do facilitate learning, using too many of them can be overwhelming for students and will create more planning work for you.

If you find it difficult to pinpoint exactly how a particular resource is contributing to the learning, then you shouldn't waste your time preparing it.

Cut down on common unnecessary resources, such as table outlines or skeleton spider diagrams, by asking students to reproduce things in their books or by including material on presentation slides instead.



## 8. Pace

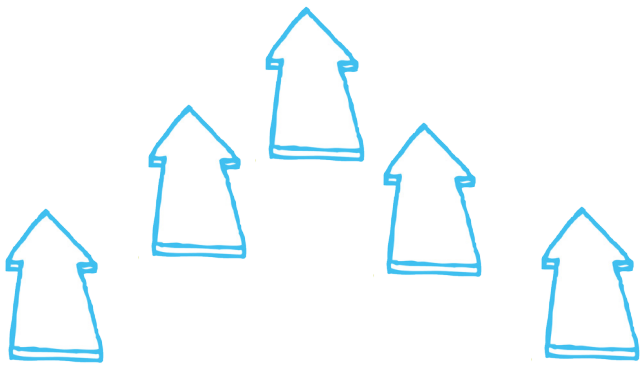
Pace is vital to good teaching but can vary considerably between lessons. When planning, it is important to consider external factors that may affect the pace of your lessons, such as the time of day or the temperature in the room. If you are teaching in the middle of a heatwave, there is no point trying to force students through a series of high-tempo activities.

Observation is a useful tool to help with pacing. This can mean observing another teacher with one of your classes, asking to be observed by a colleague or even filming yourself teaching and then watching it back.

Setting hard time limits for each segment of your lesson is a good way to maintain pace. You may want to use an egg-timer to make sure that you and your students stick to the timings you have set.

Try to plan a mixture of activities. You can create engagement by starting your lesson with a fast-paced task and then follow this with a slower task to calm students down before moving them onto an extended piece of work.

Getting to know your classes is key. One group may be particularly lethargic in the mornings, while another might be so excitable after lunch that they become difficult to manage. Knowing this will help you to pace your lessons to make sure that you are making the most of the time you have.



# Part Four – Hints, tricks and tips

## 1. Fail in order to learn

Failure is one of the best ways to learn. When we fail, we have an opportunity to evaluate what went wrong and to identify how we can avoid or build upon it in the future.

It is important to reflect on your teaching and hunt out the things that go wrong or do not meet your expectations. Don't shy away from this process, even though it might feel unpleasant. Welcome the opportunity to learn from mistakes.

If you can embed such an approach in your day-to-day work, it will soon become less intimidating.

## 2. Don't rest on your laurels

When we find something that works, we tend to stick to it. This is perfectly reasonable. We have already noted that reusing activities can be a great way to save time.

However, there are also risks to this approach. If students become bored or if they sense a lack of variety, then they are more likely to lose motivation and enthusiasm.

The more familiar you are with what you are teaching, the more likely it is that you will start going through the motions. Should this happen, there is no doubt that your pupils will make less progress than they would have done when the material was fresh and you were more excited about it.

Finding balance is important. By all means identify things that work and add them to your repertoire, but you should also be aware that continued innovation, refinement and variety will benefit both you and your students.

## 3. Be flexible

Flexibility is a vital part of planning brilliant lessons. You need to be prepared to adapt in response to the demands of your students and the information you elicit about their learning.

Here are five ways that you can plan to be flexible:

- Consider in advance what alternatives there are to the lesson you have planned. You don't need to go into these in depth, but it is helpful to have some idea of what you might do if a technical problem, fire drill or unexpected room change were to disrupt the work that you had prepared.

- Avoid planning lessons that are entirely dependent on rigid timings. Chances are good that some activities will require different timings in reality to those you anticipated.

- Identify the key point of the lesson. This means that you will have a clear sense of what you are trying to do. If you do need to adapt or change things, knowing this will help you to make decisions.

- Have a collection of fall-back activities ready in case something you have planned does not seem to be working with a particular class.

Be ready to edit mid-lesson. Taking a minute or two to check your lesson plan while students are engaged in their work and to reflect on what comes next will help you to determine whether you need to make any changes based on how the lesson is progressing.

## 4. Manage expectations

Here are three examples of how you can manage students' expectations in order to minimise the possibility of negative emotions developing:

- Only refer to specific timings if you plan to stick to them. A gap will develop between students' expectations and reality if you say that you will be moving on in ten minutes and then an activity drags on for twenty.
- Don't reveal more than you need to reveal. If you give away lots of information about the lesson, you risk not meeting students' expectations when something happens that causes you to drop an activity or change a task. Revealing too much will make it harder for you to be flexible in your teaching.
- Tell students when a task is hard. Don't try to minimise difficult activities. Knowing this will help students to meet a challenge head on and not get frustrated if at first they don't succeed.

## 5. Get student feedback

Your students have first-hand experience of what you do in the classroom. They are well-placed to give you an insight into whether your planning is successful or not.

Here are five ways to get feedback from them:

- Hand out evaluation forms or questionnaires at the end of a unit of work.
- Create an online survey using a free website such as www.surveymonkey.com
- Observe students in your lesson and note how they respond to different activities.
- Invite students to write comments in their books analysing and evaluating your lessons.
- Give students a Post-it note and ask them to write down one thing that they feel they do not understand about the topic or something you could do to help them learn better. As they leave the class, they can stick their Post-its to the wall or board. This can be done anonymously or with names.

This technique can fall down if students see the exercise as an opportunity to complain or to ask for more of the things they like doing. To avoid this happening, you can set specific criteria for students to use when making judgements and ask highly specific questions designed to elicit the information you are most concerned with.

## 6. Observe others

Never underestimate the power of observation.

Seek out the teachers who get the results that you aspire to and ask if you can watch them teach. After the observation, you can talk to them about how they plan their lessons and how they bridge the gap between planning and teaching.

Watching a wide variety of lessons will help you to develop a better sense of what makes lessons good. It will also expose you to different approaches and ideas. Talking to those you observe about how they plan will open up new ways of thinking and help you to critically reflect on your own practice.

## 7. Take risks

Planning a lesson that falls outside of your comfort zone is not an approach you can take all the time, but it is something that is worth doing now and then – maybe once or twice a term.

Going out on a limb and trying something completely different causes you to really question the assumptions and predispositions under which you usually work. The results can be liberating, confirmatory or surprising. You will only find out by taking the risk.

If, for example, you usually teach lessons where students remain in their seats, why not try pushing the desks aside and leading the class in a role play or drama activity? Something new could be just what you need for your class to reach a new level of understanding of the topic.

When you take a teaching risk, not only do you surprise your students, you might also surprise yourself.