

# Schedules and Routines



**A**n important job of first grade teachers is to create schedules and routines that help first graders pace themselves, organize their energetic and active ideas, and reach the end of the day tired but happy. The first graders I've taught have found the set routines of our day reassuring.

- Our morning gathering, doing daily equations, singing or reciting poetry together, and all the other predictable routines throughout the day help them maintain both their energy and enthusiasm for school. One year there was a bathroom in our classroom, and I often heard children singing in there as we worked. I always knew the pace and rhythm of our day was just right when I heard as much singing at the end of the day as at the beginning!

33

In this chapter, I'll give you practical ideas for helping first graders make the most of the industriousness they bring to school.

## Scheduling

Creating an effective daily schedule for first graders means capitalizing on their energy without letting them wear themselves out—and balancing those considerations with your school's scheduling requirements.

### *Consider How First Graders Learn Best*

First graders are very curious and love the opportunity to explore topics of interest to them, but they also crave the security of having routine, structure, and plenty of time to do their best work.

Consider these needs as you plan your schedule and lessons:

- **An up-and-down pace to the day.** First graders tend to be active, energetic people, but too many active periods in a row can exhaust them and leave them little energy to last the day. They should have some periods of



sustained, quiet work interspersed with more active periods.

- **Active, hands-on learning.** Although first graders benefit from some direct teaching and seatwork, make most lessons as active as possible—for instance, choose strategies such as shared read-

ing or interactive writing, use manipulatives for math, and make science and social studies hands-on whenever you can.

- **Interactive learning.** First graders commonly like to talk, so intersperse lessons and independent work times with opportunities for talking. For instance, if writing time needs to be relatively quiet, allow students to do some talking (possibly through partner chats) during the writing mini-lesson beforehand and the reflection afterward. Even when doing “independent” reading, first graders may need to read aloud quietly to themselves. You might also follow quiet times with a quick song or game that allows for talking and interacting.

- **Freedom within limits.** First graders often have a lot of creativity and innovation, so try to find ways for them to use these qualities in their work. For example, you could have students create or solve story problems in math through writing, drawing, or using manipulatives. However, some first graders also have a tendency to bite off more than they can chew, so be sure to provide some parameters for more open assignments. For instance, in my classrooms, when

### What about Pacing Guides?

Many schools require teachers to follow pacing or time guides. Of course, you’ll need to adhere to these, but try not to lose sight of the children’s needs in the process. If your district requires ninety minutes of language arts instruction, for example, find out if these have to occur in one block. If not, consider putting math or science in the middle of the block. If the ninety minutes must occur in one block, work in some quick movement activities, talking, hands-on work, or reflection breaks.

For lively movement breaks that take just one to three minutes, see *Energizers! 88 Quick Movement Activities That Refresh and Refocus* by Susan Lattanzi Roser (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2009) available at [www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org). Other resources are listed in Chapter 4, “Classroom Games, Special Projects, and Field Trips,” starting on page 81.

first graders made new versions of children's books we had read, I limited them to two pages a day to make sure they didn't try to rush through and write a "whole book" in half an hour.

- **Changes of pace and place.** Make sure first graders have ample opportunities to move, change places within the room, and interact with many classmates. For instance, start lessons in the circle, move students to their desks for independent work, and have them return to the circle for reflection. Also keep the pace of lessons fairly quick so that first graders, who sometimes struggle with attentiveness, can stay focused.
- **Food and water.** First graders need to eat—frequently. When I first started teaching first grade, we had lunch at 10:30 in the morning. I was worried that the children wouldn't be hungry so early and would miss their opportunity to fuel up for the rest of the day. But I discovered that they were very hungry by 10:30 and then again at about 12:30. Try to have periodic snack breaks or a grazing table for those who are frequently hungry. Also, be sure first graders have frequent water breaks.

### Do You Need to Do Calendar Time?

Calendar time is a fixture in many first grade classrooms. However, this concept of time, as it's typically used, may not fit most first graders' needs. Children tend to grasp temporal concepts slowly and through experience rather than through rote exercises. They may also be thrown by the use of place value manipulatives to mark the number of days of school and the placing of patterns unrelated to time onto the calendar. Finally, whole-group instruction may not be the best way to teach calendar concepts given the wide range of understanding in most first grade classrooms.

Nonetheless, if you're required or want to do some calendar activities, here are tips for making them purposeful:

- **Treat calendar time like any other learning block.** Have clear objectives, tie calendar activities to those objectives, and have some way to assess whether children have met the objectives.
- **Assess children's knowledge.** Make decisions about what to teach at calendar time on the basis of students' knowledge of calendar terminology (days of week, months of year, and so on) and understanding of temporal concepts.
- **Tie activities to real-life events.** For instance, you could use words or photos to mark events that occurred or are coming up in the classroom. You could then discuss those events in temporal terms such as "last week," "yesterday," or "in two weeks."
- **Avoid adding too many concepts.** For instance, although first graders do need practice with pattern concepts, try to find ways to practice other than by adding patterns to the calendar.



36

## *List the Day's Components*

Think about both the academic and social skills learning you want to include in each day. Here are some components I typically list when making a first grade schedule:

Morning meeting  
Shared reading  
Reading workshop  
Chapter book read-aloud  
Writing workshop  
Word study and spelling  
Math

Science  
Social studies  
Desk organization time  
Recess and lunch  
Quiet time  
Closing routines

### **Give Movement Breaks Often!**

Regardless of what schedule you come up with, insert movement breaks throughout the day as the children need them.

## *Order the Day*

Once you have the parts you'll need to schedule, balance them with your constraints—the class's required lunch time, when their specials are, and so forth. Here are two ideal schedules you could use as a basis for your own:

## Two Ideal Schedules

7:45–8:00	Arrival routine
8:00–8:30	Morning meeting
8:30–8:50	Shared reading and reading mini-lesson
8:50–9:50	Reading workshop, including picture book read-aloud or guided reading
9:50–10:00	Snack* (can be combined with quiet reading, listening to jokes/poems, catch-up time)
10:00–10:45	Math
10:45–11:00	Read-aloud
11:00–11:30	Special
11:30–12:00	Recess
12:00–12:30	Lunch
12:30–12:50	Quiet time or desk organization
12:50–1:40	Writing time
1:40–2:00	Word work with snack
2:00–2:45	Science and social studies
2:45–2:50	Desk organization, cleanup, and packup
2:50–3:00	Closing circle
3:00	Dismissal

7:45–8:00	Arrival routine
8:00–8:30	Morning meeting
8:30–9:15	Writing workshop
9:15–9:30	Read-aloud
9:30–9:50	Word work
9:50–10:00	Snack
10:00–10:50	Reading workshop, including picture book read-aloud or guided reading
10:50–11:50	Math
11:50–12:20	Recess
12:20–12:50	Lunch
12:50–1:10	Quiet time or desk organization
1:10–1:50	Science and social studies
1:50–2:00	Snack
2:00–2:30	Special
2:30–2:50	Shared reading and reading mini-lesson
2:50–2:55	Desk organization, cleanup, and packup
2:55–3:00	Closing circle
3:00	Dismissal

37

\*Snack consideration: In some first grades, it works best to have a “grazing station” that students can visit at several designated times of the day. If you choose this option, you won’t need a separate snack time.

### Do Students Know What Your Catchphrases Mean?

With the best of intentions, many first grade teachers (and teachers of young children generally) use catchy phrases to share expectations with students. “Criss-cross, applesauce,” “stay in your personal space,” or “use an inside voice” are just a few examples.

No matter how clear these phrases are to us, they often have little meaning to students. So try to avoid these phrases. If you do use them, be sure to explicitly teach students what you expect. Or teach routines first and let students come up with their own phrases.

## Teaching Classroom Routines

For teachers, phrases such as “line up,” “come to the circle,” and “clean out your desk” immediately conjure up specific mental images. But first graders, who often have only a year’s worth of school experience, don’t always have the same images. One of the key lessons I’ve learned as a teacher is that I cannot assume students know anything about how classroom routines should look and sound, so I need to deliberately teach them.

### Use Interactive Modeling to Teach Routines

Interactive modeling is a simple but powerful way to help students picture and practice our expectations for certain times and routines of the day. There are seven steps to interactive modeling, illustrated by the example on the next page of teaching first graders how to clean up and come to the circle quickly and quietly.



## Interactive Modeling: Cleaning Up and Coming to Circle

Steps to Follow	Might Sound/Look Like
1 Describe a positive behavior you will model.	"When I give you directions to clean up and come to the meeting circle, we need to do that quickly and safely. Watch while I show you how to do that."
2 Model the behavior.	Ask a student to play the role of the teacher. Go to a student's desk and clean up materials in a safe manner, push in the chair, walk safely but briskly to the meeting circle, and sit calmly while looking at the "teacher." Remain quiet. You do not need to narrate as you model.
3 Ask students what they noticed.	"What did you notice about how I came to the circle?" (If necessary, follow up with questions such as "What did you notice my hands doing?" or "How did I get to the circle?" to prompt children to list the important elements: cleaning up quickly, walking safely, remaining quiet, and so on.)
4 Ask student volunteers to model the same behavior.	"Who can show us how to come to the meeting circle the same way I did?"
5 Ask students what they noticed.	"What did you notice about the way Kiana came to the circle?" The children name Kiana's specific safe and focused behaviors.
6 Have the class practice.	"Now we're all going to practice coming to the circle quickly and safely. I'll be watching and seeing you do all the things we just noticed."
7 Provide feedback.	"You did it! You all cleaned up neatly and quickly, you walked directly to the circle, not too slow and not too fast, and you sat down quickly and quietly. We are now ready for a great book."

## Keys to Successful Interactive Modeling

### BE CLEAR ABOUT HOW YOU WANT THINGS DONE

For example, if you want students to give you a signal to go to the bathroom and wait for your nodding reply, show them exactly what that looks like. Be sure to stick to whatever signal you choose—first graders will be quick to point out if you don't follow your own methods!

### More Benefits of Interactive Modeling

Students . . .

- Have opportunities to talk and participate during the lesson—crucial for first graders!
- Become better observers (a skill that transfers into their academic work)
- Begin to value each other as models, which helps build a sense of community and trust
- Become more engaged in monitoring their own behavior

### USE A SCRIPT

Having a basic script handy will help you be exact in your modeling—and refrain from talking too much. Using fewer words helps students concentrate on essentials and also allows more time for them to practice and observe.

### PRACTICE BEFOREHAND IF NECESSARY

If you need to model lining up, greeting another person, or some other routine that requires student assistants, take a few minutes in the morning (or during other free time) to quickly practice with those students what you expect them to do during the modeling. With a flair for drama, first graders may not always demonstrate behaviors during modeling in the way you would like if they don't have some time to practice first.

### KEEP EXPECTATIONS HIGH

Students may need some time during the first weeks of school to practice certain behaviors—we can't expect perfection right away. But once they have a procedure down, be sure to hold them to it. For instance, if you model lining up in an L-shape to accommodate your room set-up, be sure that is how students line up every time. Otherwise, students will be confused or tempted to test limits, or they'll complain to you about how "So and so is not doing it like you said!"

## Making Adjustments for Particular Students

Having high expectations is important, but so is recognizing individual needs. Occasionally, you may need to modify expectations for certain students. You may model how to make eye contact when greeting another person, but some children (especially those with diagnoses of autism) are not ready to do this. Some students also may have been taught that making eye contact is not appropriate in their culture. Modify the expectation as needed (for instance, by teaching them to look toward the person or at her forehead). Be sure to discuss with the class why you might occasionally modify rules for particular students. First graders are capable of great empathy when they understand the reasons for changed expectations. Let students know that each of us needs different things to do our best work and that it's the teacher's job to help figure out what each student needs.

### KEEP EXPECTATIONS APPROPRIATE

If you're going to expect students to live up to your expectations, it's important to be sure those expectations are appropriate and to take into account the common characteristics of first graders. Knowing that first graders often need to spread out or stand up as they work, be sure to model independent work in several ways, not just sitting at a desk with materials neatly arranged. Because first graders are generally quite talkative and love to move, don't expect silence or even quiet voices when students are eating in the cafeteria. Inappropriate expectations set first graders up for failure, and they can be quite hard on themselves if they "mess up." Think about how to establish routines and model behaviors so that most first graders can and will succeed most of the time.

### GIVE STUDENTS PLENTY OF PRACTICE

Students need to practice how to show they're paying attention, how to roll the glue stick down, and how to stop talking when you give them a signal, just as they need to practice reading, counting, and other academic tasks. Set your first



### When to Reteach Routines

Here are a few times when students will benefit from extra attention to routines:

- Monday morning
- Friday afternoon
- Right after vacation
- Before and after a substitute teacher
- Around the holidays
- When a new student joins the class
- Before assemblies and field trips

graders up to succeed by giving them practice sessions where they can try out new behaviors and quickly correct any mistakes.

First graders will respond best if the practice is fun, fast-paced, and positive. For example, when practicing how to clean up, push in chairs, and come quickly and safely to the circle, pretend to be the students' "coach." (Wear coach props if you're up for it!) Use a stopwatch and cheer them

on as they conclude each step of the process—"Desks are looking clear," "All chairs are in," "People are walking safely—look at our team!" If someone makes a mistake (for instance, forgetting to push in a chair), go over and in your best coach voice, say "\_\_\_\_\_, I know you can do it—get that chair pushed in!" When all students arrive at the circle, let them know how much time they took. Have a great book waiting for everyone. Practice shouldn't feel like drudgery but like an important and engaging step in becoming a successful classroom community.

### SCAFFOLD

If interactive modeling seems problematic or students just don't seem to "get it," it may be because you've given too many instructions at one time. So, before using interactive modeling, analyze each step involved in the task and look for ways to scaffold by modeling each step separately and then giving appropriate directions. For instance, if students struggle with the transition from working at desks to sitting in the circle, direct them first to clean up. Then, direct them to push in chairs. Then, invite them to the circle.

### REINFORCE SUCCESS OFTEN

When things in our classrooms are going well and students are doing routines as we taught them, we sometimes just breathe a sigh of relief and move on to the next thing on our long to-do list. But all students, first graders especially, need us to keep paying attention to what they're doing well. Use specific, direct language that reinforces what you taught in the first

place: “I noticed that everyone lined up quickly today and left enough space between themselves and the next person.” “While you were in music class, I did a quick check of your desks, and they all look like our picture!” “You all got quiet in about two seconds; I think that may be our fastest time yet.” First graders love this positive feedback, and giving it often will keep the lessons of interactive modeling alive.

Learn More about Positive Teacher Language at [www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)

*The Power of Our Words: Teacher Language That Helps Children Learn* by Paula Denton, EdD (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2007).

If you have a class that generally struggles with routines but a few students consistently do what is expected, be sure privately to recognize their accomplishments. On the other hand, if a few students are struggling, pay particular attention to these students. Think about what they need to succeed (extra practice, modified expectations, closer proximity to you?) and provide it. Look for growth rather than perfection in struggling students. If a student often calls out or interrupts but is slowly beginning to raise his hand or wait to be recognized in some other way, be sure to note that success.

43

## Key Routines to Teach

### RESPONDING TO SIGNALS FOR ATTENTION

Very little learning can happen in first grade unless you can quickly and efficiently get students to stop what they’re doing and pay attention to you, so you’ll need to teach effective signals for quiet and attention.



The signal can take many forms—auditory or visual—but students respond best to calming signals like the peaceful sound of a gentle chime or the silent signal of a teacher holding up her

### Pitfalls When Using Signals

- **Speaking before everyone is quiet.** Sends the message that not everyone has to respond to the signal.
- **Inconsistency in using established signals.** If you say you're going to use a signal but then fail to do so consistently, children may become confused: Is the signal important or not? Do you really mean what you say and say what you mean?
- **Repeating or using more than one signal.** Teaches students that they don't have to comply right away—they can wait for the second (or third) signal.
- **Demanding immediate silence.** Can feel disrespectful and may be unrealistic: Students have a natural need to get to a stopping point in their conversation or work (ten to fifteen seconds should do it).
- **Saying "I'll wait until . . ."** Telling students that "I'll just wait until everyone is ready" gives them the message that they don't have to respond in a timely way and can take as long as they like.
- **Modeling the "wrong way."** Creates a competing mental picture that will confuse students.

hand. Such signals will be much more likely to gain students' attention than the alternatives. Yelling or trying to speak over children's voices often riles them up and can feel quite disrespectful. Starting to speak before everyone is listening implies that only those who are silent have to pay attention. Using a signal effectively provides a clear message that in the classroom, everyone is expected to pay attention, listen to whatever is being said, and learn.

In general, I use two kinds of signals: visual and auditory.

- **Visual signal.** When they're sitting in a circle or are close to you, students respond quickly and well to a physical gesture. I usually raise one hand high and put the fingers of my other hand over my lips. Children who see this gesture stop what they're doing, become quiet, and copy the signal. Having something to do with both hands helps first graders get needed control over their active bodies, and covering their lips is a helpful reminder to refrain from talking.
- **Auditory signal.** You'll need an auditory signal to gain students' attention when they are not close to you or are unlikely

to see your raised hand. You can use any means of making a calming sound—a chime, a rain stick, or any other instrument with a pleasing tone. Use interactive modeling to show students what to do when they hear the sound: stop what they're doing, put all materials down, stop talking, and look at you. Because first graders might be in a variety of places or doing different activities when you use the auditory signal, be sure to practice several of these situations.

## STUDENT SIGNALS

Students will also need to gain your attention. Teaching them some simple, nonverbal cues is an effective way to keep the classroom running smoothly and can prevent loud and expressive first graders from interrupting the flow of group lessons.

- **Taking a turn to speak in a whole group.** When students need your attention in a whole-group situation, they could raise their hand or make a question mark signal. Be clear with students that they should not do this while someone else is talking but should instead wait for a lull or pause in the conversation. This ensures that speakers have everyone's undivided attention and encourages children to listen fully.
- **"I need to go to the bathroom."** First graders need to go the bathroom frequently. Teach them a signal for letting you know that they need to go and show them what your response will look like.
- **"I feel fidgety."** When it comes to paying attention, first graders arrive in our classrooms with a wide range of abilities. Some may need an occasional stretch much earlier than others, and you'll want to provide for this without interrupting your lesson or having a student disrupt it. Teach students a signal for "I feel fidgety" or

## Having a Substitute Teacher? Keep the Schedule and Key Routines in Place!

**Schedules.** It may be tempting to plan something different to make the day with the substitute, or "guest teacher," feel more special. But first graders will already feel energized and excited by having a substitute—adding changes to the schedule may push that energy level too high.

**Routines.** Be specific in your lesson plans about any special routines or traditions the class has. For instance, if you typically begin math with a warm-up activity, choose an easy one for the guest teacher, but do not have her skip it.

### Other ways to help the day go smoothly:

- Choose several students whom the guest teacher can ask about the schedule and routines (rotate among students over the course of the year).
- Discuss with the class ways they can care for one another and the guest teacher while you're out (do what the guest teacher says even if it's different from what you would do, remember that you'll be back tomorrow, and so on). Leave these ideas for the guest teacher to review with the class.
- Use interactive modeling to teach how to be with a guest teacher. For example, have a colleague, pretending to be the guest teacher, act out doing spelling activities in the wrong order. Model and then let students practice how to do the activities in that order or how to respectfully let her know the correct order.

“I need to stretch,” such as raising their hand and wiggling their fingers. On your nod, they can get up, stand back from the circle or their desk, stretch, and then return to sitting. Of course, be careful not to let students overuse these signals.

- **SOS for emergencies.** Teach students a separate signal to use if they or someone near them has an emergency. Be sure to define what an emergency is—a bloody nose, feeling sick, bathroom accident, and so forth—as this is not a natural concept for first graders. An SOS signal—hand shut, hand open, hand shut—works well.

#### BATHROOM ROUTINES

Be sure to model and practice toilet paper usage, washing hands afterwards, wiping around the sinks, and returning straight to the classroom. Because first graders need to go to the bathroom so frequently, bathroom routines should be among the very first ones you teach.



46

Given the wide range of bladder control first graders will have, it’s unrealistic to think that all of them will be able to hold it until the appointed times of day. If bathrooms are located close to or within your classroom, teach students to use the signal, wait for your okay, and go quickly and quietly on their own. If bathrooms are farther away, teach children to use the signal, wait for your okay, and get a bathroom buddy to go with them. You may want to partner up same-gender students as regular bathroom buddies and use interactive modeling to show buddies how to walk with their classmates to the bathroom, wait for them quietly outside, and then walk back to the classroom. Be sure to switch buddies occasionally.

Make a system for students to indicate who’s in the bathroom so you won’t have to keep track mentally. You could use a pocket chart of all students’ name cards and a separate pocket chart with boys’ and girls’ bathroom slots.

When they need to go to the bathroom, students move their cards to the appropriate bathroom slot and move their cards back when they return. Or, upon receiving your okay signal, students could just get a designated bathroom pass and place it on their desk. When they come back, they return the pass to its storage spot.

Even with the best systems, teaching, and practice, bathroom accidents still occasionally happen in first grade. It will help to have some extra pairs of clean underwear and multi-purpose pants (sweat or knit pants work well) in a variety of sizes available. Accidents happen for a variety of reasons—but if a child has multiple incidents, contact the family to discuss what might be going on.

Also take the time to teach, model, and practice what to do if someone has an accident. Begin by asking students to quietly think about whether they have ever experienced having an accident and how that feels. Ask them to brainstorm how they can take care of classmates should it happen at school (for example, just keep working, go get a teacher, and use kind words). Model and practice what a few of their suggestions would look and sound like. Be ready to take the whole class to the bathroom after this discussion, as it will prompt a need to go!

#### MORNING ROUTINES

Most first graders enter the day with a great deal of excitement, energy, and enthusiasm, and having a consistent, smooth morning routine will help them channel that energy in positive ways. Some things to consider in planning your morning routine:

- **Check-in.** First graders are often excited to tell you what they've done since they last saw you. If your students enter a few at a time, you can simply greet them and ask them for one piece of news. If many of your students arrive at once, set up a check-in system. For instance, you can announce that you'll be coming around at a certain time to check with each person and hear one thing she or he wants to tell you.



## How to Teach Line and Hallway Routines

- **Decide where the line should be.** Where should children line up in the classroom before they leave? Choose a spot with few distractions where all the students can comfortably stand in a line.
- **Teach exactly how to line up.** Model and have students practice walking quickly to the line without stopping to touch or look at anything on the way, facing front, keeping arms at their sides, and leaving space between people (I show students a distance of elbow to fingertips when I model lining up, and they come up with their own way of describing this distance).
- **Teach expected hallway behavior.** If you have a choice, allow children to talk quietly as they walk, as this is more appropriate for first graders. But be sure to model and have students practice exactly what volume is okay. Otherwise, you may end up spending too much time turning down the volume. I also model and have students practice walking at a steady pace and staying together (by maintaining that elbow-to-fingertip distance).
- **Walk with your class.** First graders are not ready for the responsibility of walking as a class without their teacher. They will feel unsafe doing so.

- **Individual activities.** If you have a staggered arrival time, give students something to do (for example, browsing through books, practicing handwriting, using math manipulatives at their desks, drawing, and writing on dry erase boards) while they're waiting for everyone to arrive or for the official morning routine to start.
- **Handing in items.** Show students where and how to hand in notes from home, homework, or needed paperwork.

## SITTING IN THE CIRCLE FOR WHOLE-GROUP LESSONS

Be explicit with students about what it looks and sounds like to pay attention while in a whole-group circle and why this matters. Show them how to sit up straight and what to do with their legs—having the options of sitting cross-legged, with legs out, or on their knees generally addresses most first graders' needs. Show students where to put their hands—in laps or on legs—and how to direct their eyes and bodies toward the person speaking.

As the year goes on, you may also want to show them other accepted forms of showing listening, such as smiling or nodding at a speaker or demonstrating a personal connection to what someone else is saying by holding a thumb up.

## TRANSITIONS

Although at first, getting a group of first graders to make transitions within and outside of the classroom might seem impossibly chaotic, careful teaching of transitions can make this task simpler. Think through transitions so that you

can make them as simple and obstacle-free as possible. Then, break down what students need to do into parts, practice those parts, coach students through them, and focus on quick, efficient uses of time. Fast-paced transitions work well with first graders' enthusiasm and energy.

Transitions into and outside of the classroom:

- **Bringing classroom work to a peaceful close.** Before lining up and leaving the room, give students enough time to clean up their spaces quickly and become calm and quiet wherever they are. You can set a visible timer for this, play a short piece of calming music, or sing a little song together. When the timer goes off or the song ends, all students should be quiet and looking at you, ready to line up.
- **Line tasks.** In line, have students take a deep breath and then give them something to think about as they get ready to leave. ("Start counting by fives—you can whisper in my ear how high you've gotten as you walk out the door.")
- **Returning to the classroom.** Always have the same expectation of what students should do when they re-enter the room—for instance, you could always have them go straight to the circle and direct their attention to a certain spot where you have a preview of your lesson. Another thing that helps first graders is stopping the line outside the door to make sure they are calm and quiet and to reinforce a positive behavior you observed: "Everyone was safe, stayed together, and walked quickly to get here. You are ready for the great math lesson I have planned for this afternoon! Direct your attention to the stand, and I'll see you in the circle."

### **First, Last, Best? It Matters to First Graders!**

With their zest for life and competitive natures, first graders often care a great deal about things such as who gets to be first and last in line, who gets to hand out the papers, or who gets to take some papers to the office. Have a system in place for assigning these responsibilities in a fair way and explain the system to first graders. Some systems you might use include:

- **A job chart.** Assign each student a job for the day or week. Jobs might include line leader, door holder, plant waterer, and so forth. You could make a pocket chart with one pocket representing each job and just move students' cards from one job to the next as needed.
- **Drawing names.** Draw names out of a box or bag to see who does a particular job at a given time.
- **Groupings.** Call students to line up by table groups or categories.



Transitions within the classroom:

■ **Moving from the circle to independent work spots.**

First graders need to have a clear picture of how to move quickly and quietly to wherever they're going to work. Model and practice how it looks and sounds for children to leave the circle, get the

materials they need, choose a spot to work, and quickly get started. Be ready to stop the group and start over as soon as things go awry in a practice session. Even when students have gotten the transition down, avoid jumping immediately into your own work with small groups or individuals. Instead, stand back and watch transitions to make sure students are doing what they need to quickly and calmly.

- **Moving back to the circle.** Make sure students know how to clean up and return to the circle just as quickly as they left it. Some things students will need to know: where to put materials, what they should do with both finished and unfinished work, what path to take to return to the circle, and how long cleanup should be. Consider playing or singing a song or using a visible timer to help guide this transition.

#### INDEPENDENT WORK-TIME ROUTINES

No matter what reading or math approach you use, you'll need to model and practice with students how to work independently. Doing work independently may be very difficult for many first graders, but this task is worth modeling and reinforcing. Once students master these expectations, you'll be able to meet with individuals and small groups with few interruptions during independent work time. Some key points:

- **Talking and noise level.** First graders have a hard time working in complete silence and even do better with some socializing. On the other hand, if they're too loud or too talkative, they won't be able to

concentrate and you won't be able to work with an individual or group. Model and practice what an acceptable noise level sounds like. After modeling "some quiet talking," have a small group practice while the rest of the class watches and names the helpful behaviors they saw.



- **Staying in one place.** Although first graders may need a variety of different spots in which to work, they also need to be productive. Model and practice what it looks like to get all the materials needed and then stay in one spot to complete the task at hand. At the beginning of first grade, expect students to be able to sustain attention for five to ten minutes. Gradually, increase the expectation up to twenty-five minutes.
- **What to do if they're "stuck."** Model and practice ways for children to get help without interrupting your individual or small group work. For instance, teach them how to seek help from classmates and how to give help when asked. Also have some alternate assignments ready for first graders to work on if friends cannot help (for example, read from a book bin, do an activity with spelling words, or write in a journal). Let students know that in between small group or individual work, you'll come around to see if anyone needs individual help.
- **Scaffolded independent work-time practice.** After you've modeled independent work time, let students practice with you close at hand—don't immediately begin working with small groups. Once most students seem to have the independent work routine down, remove yourself from close proximity by working with a small group, but give this group fairly easy work to accomplish so that you can really keep your eyes on and give feedback to the "independent" workers. Scaffolding the teaching of independent work in this way will help students find success with it.

## READ-ALoud ROUTINES

It is a joy to read books to first graders! They often take an active and loud interest in what they hear and seem suspended in that magical place where they're still not quite sure what is real and what is fantasy.



Read-alouds with first graders should be as interactive as possible—choose books with lines they can repeat or say along with you such as Mem Fox's *Hattie and the Fox*, Karen Beaumont's *I Ain't Gonna Paint No More!*, or Doreen Cronin's *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type*. First graders also love books with a little suspense, clever plot twists, or surprise endings—first graders I've taught have loved Janet Stevens' *Tops & Bottoms* and Remy Charlip's *Fortunately*.

52

Follow these guidelines when reading aloud to your first graders:

- **Tell students what kind of book you're about to read.** Be sure to let them know if the book has some lines they can say with you or questions they can call out the answer to, or if the book calls for other responses. If you're reading a less interactive selection, such as a chapter from a chapter book, and want more quiet participation, let students know this as well.
- **Schedule effectively.** Read aloud throughout the day. To ensure that students get the most out of read-aloud time, try to schedule read-alouds after students have had a chance to move or have just sat down—for instance, right after a transition, when they return to the classroom from PE, or after a quick energizer or movement break. You

### Remember to Teach Recess and Lunch Routines!

See Chapter 3, "Building Community," starting on page 57, to learn about these middle-of-the-day routines.

could read knock-knock jokes and silly riddles as students are arriving at the circle area or getting ready to leave the classroom. Keep your introduction to read-alouds quick and purposeful so that most of first graders' attention and energy can go into following the reading selection itself.

- **Scaffold for success.** Set students up for success with read-alouds by beginning the year with simpler, quicker-to-read books that call for more active participation. Gradually increase length and complexity and add longer chapter books—for these, look not only for plot twists and suspense, but also for humor and lovable characters. (Kate DiCamillo’s *Mercy Watson* series is a good place to start as a first chapter book read-aloud, and you can move to more complex books such as Dick King-Smith’s *A Mouse Called Wolf*.)

#### EMERGENCY ROUTINES

Students need to know how to take care of themselves and each other during classroom emergencies. Teach children what you expect them to do when “disasters” such as the following occur: someone has a temper tantrum, gets a bloody nose, or throws up. Signal verbally (“This is an emergency time”) or nonverbally (use your auditory signal and show the SOS sign) and make sure students take these steps:

- **Students keep working.** If they’re working independently, just keep working.
- **Students read at their seats.** If they’re meeting in the circle, they return to their desks, pull out a book, and start reading.

Making sure students have mastered this routine will give you the space to take care of the occasional emergency or manage a child’s extreme needs quickly and efficiently.

#### DISMISSAL ROUTINES

Think through exactly what students need to do so that the room is in reasonably good shape, all their belongings are packed up, and they’re ready to leave safely and calmly. Try to limit the tasks that need to be completed to as few as possible. For instance, students could complete a desk or cubby check. Then they could get their backpacks, coats, and hats and hang those on the back of their seats. After closing circle, they could go get things from their seat backs and line up for dismissal.

**Learn More about Schedules and Routines at [www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)**

*The First Six Weeks of School* by Paula Denton and Roxann Kriete (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2000).

If possible, choose a time earlier in the day to pack homework, papers, and other things that need to go home so that first graders don't need to do this task when they're tired at the end of the day. During the first few days of school, it may help to practice this routine early in the day when first graders' attention and energy are at their highest. Later in the first week of school, carve out a little time to make sure dismissal procedures are done well and effectively.

**Learn More about Closing Circles at**  
[www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)

"Closing Circles: A Simple, Joyful Way to End the Day," *Responsive Classroom Newsletter*, February 2011.

In addition to the nitty-gritty parts of dismissal, leave a short time for a quick closing circle. Sing a fun song together, do a silent energizer, or reflect on the day's positives ("What kind thing did you do today?" or "How did we follow our rules?").

#### OTHER ROUTINES

Some other routines and social skills you may want to model and practice:

- Indoor recess routines
- Taking care of and putting away class supplies
- Winning and losing a game graciously
- Fire, earthquake, or tornado drill routines
- Greeting former teachers, friends, and family when you see them around the school
- Completing class jobs
- Closing circle





## Closing Thoughts

55

First graders thrive when their day is well paced and takes into account their need for conversation and movement, their energy and excitement levels, and their need to eat and drink frequently. They also do best when they know exactly what their teachers expect, and they're delighted when their teachers notice that they've met these expectations. Establishing routines and expectations is worthwhile work, as first graders who know what to do and how to do it can be as busy and productive as they love to be.