

Classroom Setup



When you take students' common developmental characteristics into account while setting up a classroom, you'll find that they can be much more productive and comfortable throughout the school day. When designing a classroom for third graders, consider a couple of key characteristics: they have tons of energy but easily tire; and

- they are often gregarious, wanting and needing frequent social interaction.
- Their need for social interaction means that the traditional seating arrangement I remember from much of my own childhood (with separate desks facing the front of the classroom) would be really tough for third graders to handle. They need to interact with others, talk as they work, and feel like they're part of a group. This is just one way third grade characteristics can affect our classroom setup—read on to learn more.

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Arranging the Furniture

There is no one “right” way to organize a third grade classroom. In fact, each year that I taught (regardless of the grade) I created a slightly new room design at the beginning of the year and then usually rearranged everything at some point in the middle of the year. Class size, the academic themes of the room, and even the personalities of students can all be factors in determining how to set up the classroom. Some ideas to consider:

Whole-Group Meeting Area

You'll need to have a place where the whole class can come together in a circle each day for some whole-group work. I begin each day with a *Responsive Classroom*® Morning Meeting in this whole-group circle area. There are also other times to have the whole class gather together. Whether it's to teach



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a math lesson, think of solutions to a recess problem, plan a big class project, or simply enjoy a good read-aloud together, a whole-group gathering place will strengthen the class's sense of community and give third graders an opportunity to practice both social and academic skills. The whole-group meeting area is always the first area I set up in a classroom.

As you start to set up a whole-group meeting area, keep these points in mind:

- **A circle is important.** Whether students sit on the floor or in chairs, there should be at least one place in the classroom where they can sit in a circle so that everyone can see and be seen. If space is tight, consider teaching students how to move furniture so there's room to form a circle. (See "I Don't Have Room for a Circle!" on page 14 for more ideas.)
- **Make sure students can sit comfortably.** I find that an area about twelve feet across can comfortably accommodate about twenty third graders in chairs.

Desk Seating

Third graders' gregarious natures and proclivity for talking can be an advantage in some situations and a disadvantage in others, so flexibility is the key to a successful seating arrangement. For example, during group math projects or collaborative science work, it's great for the children to share ideas and

excitement—“Whoa! Jimmy! Check out this thing under the microscope!” At other times, however (such as independent reading or testing periods), third graders’ tendency to interact with each other can interfere with their learning. At times like these, it can be helpful to separate seating as much as possible. Here are some ideas about striking an appropriate balance:

■ **Spread out.** Having space around them and proximity to just a few classmates helps third graders relax and concentrate. So spread tables out around the room. If you use desks, cluster them in twos and threes. You can put clusters against the walls (if you’re pressed for space, try hinging desktops to the walls so you can fold them against the wall when not in use). You can even work a cluster into the classroom library area.

■ **Teach in the circle.** If you teach most of your whole-group lessons from the meeting circle, students don’t all need to be able to see a board or screen from their regular work seats. Since moving a lot helps third graders stay fresh and lively, you can teach a lesson in the circle where everyone can see the visuals, have them head back to their seats to work, and then come back to the circle to close the lesson.

■ **Name “regular” seat groups.** I recently visited a third grade classroom that had the name of a continent taped to each desk. Each table group

was made up of desks with the names of the same continent (all “Europe” desks together, all “Asia” desks together, and so forth). With this arrangement, regrouping into “regular” seating after furniture had been rearranged for whole-class work was much easier. It also made it easier to direct groups of

When Spreading Out Doesn’t Work

If you’re not able to create even a temporary circle area, put desks and tables in small clusters in the middle of the room so students will be able to comfortably see you and any visuals you’re using during lessons. Be sure to give students lots of movement breaks. For an occasional change of scenery, once you’ve finished your direct teaching, let students spread out to work on the floor or in any workable space they feel comfortable using.

Using Themes to Create Table Groups

Consider using the themes you’re studying to create table groups. When studying ancient cultures, the groups could be Incas, Mayas, Greeks, Egyptians, and Chinese. When studying geometry in math, table groups could be parallelograms, triangles, hexagons, pentagons, and octagons.

“I Don’t Have Room for a Circle!”

Unfortunately, this is not an unusual dilemma for teachers. Here are some possible solutions:

1 Create a temporary meeting area.

At meeting time, the children move desks and other furniture to open up a large space for a circle. After the meeting, the students return the furniture to its original place. With adequate teaching and practice, children will be able to do this setup and takedown in just a few minutes.

Three keys to creating a temporary meeting area:

- **Choose carefully.** Choose a spot with as little furniture as possible. Any furniture should be easy for students to move.
- **Use props to define the area.** An easel pad typically works well. Ideally, the easel pad would stay put and serve as the point from which the meeting circle grows.
- **Teach furniture moving.** Use interactive modeling to teach and practice how to move the furniture carefully, cooperatively, and quickly. Try turning the practice into a game, such as beating the clock.

Interactive Modeling

See Chapter 2, “Schedules and Routines,” pages 34–37, for a full explanation of interactive modeling.

2 Create it once, use it twice.

Have children move furniture to make room for a circle at the end of the day and gather the class for a “closing circle,” in which the children reflect on their day, share about their work, or plan together for the following day. After the meeting, leave the space open—don’t move any furniture back. The next morning, the space is ready for a meeting that welcomes the children, affirms the strength of the community, and

warms them up for the day ahead. Once the morning meeting is completed, the children move the furniture back. At the end of the day, they repeat the process.

3 Use a space outside the classroom.



Go to the cafeteria, library, gym, or other space in the school that's large enough to accommodate a circle. This solution, admittedly the most challenging, works best when you:

- **Use the same space every day.** The familiarity will help children succeed.
- **Limit distractions.** For example, if you use the cafeteria, meet when no other class is there.
- **Go at the same time every day.** Even if it's not the most ideal time, the predictability will help students feel secure and enable them to focus.
- **Teach the expected behaviors.** Be sure to teach and model transition routines and expectations for behavior outside the classroom.

The whole-group meeting circle is the heart of classroom life. Sitting in a circle, everyone can see and be seen by everyone else. And because the circle has no beginning and no end, it allows everyone an equal place in the group. By the very nature of its design, the meeting circle invites group participation and fosters inclusion. Its presence and prominence in the classroom or in the school day, even if only temporary, says, "In this classroom, we value working together, and we value each individual's contributions to the group."



children: “The ‘Asia’ table group may now line up for lunch.”

- **Allow changes in scenery.** Third graders will be more productive if they can sit in a variety of places. Bring some beanbag chairs and cushions into the classroom so students can enjoy a quick change

of scenery. I remember one third grade student who liked to sit at his desk for math work, in a beanbag chair during reading, and at the counter near the window for writing.

- **Mix genders whenever possible.** If left to their own devices, third graders will often segregate by gender, but when placed in mixed-gender groups they do quite well.

- **Mix up friendship groups.** I don’t mean that we should separate friends so they can’t talk. Far from it—we want to encourage strong friendships in our classrooms. But we can help foster new friendships by occasionally mixing up groups of students so they learn to interact with lots of classmates. Especially once the year is well under way, third graders can really enjoy the challenge and novelty of sitting with new classmates every now and then!

Support Shy or Anxious Students

Not all third graders are gregarious and outgoing, so take care of shy or anxious students. Some may find great comfort in consistency. Consider keeping a good friend nearby when mixing up seating groups. You may even keep a couple of students in the same place if that will be more comfortable for them.

Other Areas of the Classroom

Of course, there’s more to the classroom than seats and a whole-group meeting area. Many other areas need to be considered. Few classrooms have too much space, so see the chart on the next two pages for some ideas for designing multipurpose spaces.

However you arrange your classroom furniture in the end, remember that you can always change it later. Third graders tend to be pretty flexible, so they’ll be fine (and even excited) if you all spend a Friday afternoon in January moving the furniture around.

Designing Multipurpose Spaces

Area	Tips	Multiple Uses
Circle area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Make the area large enough for the whole class to gather in a circle comfortably ■ Include an easel with chart paper for teaching and for recording children's ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Holding class meetings ■ Teaching whole-class lessons ■ Doing independent work; students can lie on the floor or sit in chairs ■ Doing small-group instruction ■ Enjoying energizers and games
Classroom library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Arrange bookshelves with enough space so that several students can browse at once ■ Try a horseshoe shape so that the bookshelves create a cozy space big enough for a worktable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Displaying books and storing literacy supplies ■ Doing guided reading or other small-group work ■ Holding one-on-one or small-group conferences ■ Doing other classroom work ■ Doing small-group projects
Theme or content area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Have an area for books, displays, and ongoing work for science and social studies units ■ Have a bulletin board or wall display space for rotating charts, posters, and pictures of students working 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Displaying theme work ■ Working on theme projects or assignments ■ Doing other classroom work

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Designing Multipurpose Spaces CONTINUED

Area	Tips	Multiple Uses
Storage area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Have shelves and cupboards for student supplies and materials ■ Keep teacher-only supplies out of sight and out of reach ■ Periodically clean out damaged and worn supplies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Storing supplies ■ Hanging coats (place coat hooks on the backs of supply cabinets) ■ Displaying student work (on cabinet doors)
Computer area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Keep equipment safely stored when not in use ■ Arrange desktop computers so keyboards can be easily moved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Doing research or other computer work ■ Doing regular work when computers aren't in use

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Classroom Supplies

Sometimes the difference between good student work and great student work is as simple as the supplies available to students. Having an ample supply of good quality math manipulatives, art supplies, books, and writing equipment can help students more fully engage in their learning. Third graders especially need materials that allow them to do hands-on learning in all subject areas. But third graders can become easily overwhelmed by too many supplies at once. If given the task of making a poster, for example, they're likely to try to use all of the art materials at their disposal.

I remember a third grader who once made a poster for her research project on fish that included buttons, feathers, beads, paints, charcoal pencils, and yarn. It was beautiful and intricate, but she became so set on using every possible art supply that she didn't accurately represent the fish she was trying to describe. Limiting the supplies you provide can be a good way to prevent the frustration that can result from third graders' tendency to bite off more than they can chew.

Three Keys to Keeping Your Classroom Well Supplied

- **Reasonable variety.** Provide a mix of craft supplies, math manipulatives, and art materials so that third graders can find materials to suit their grandiose plans. But rotate supplies throughout the year to keep them feeling fresh while also limiting choices to a manageable number. For example, bring in craft sticks, but remove toothpicks. Bring in watercolor paints while taking away the oil pastels. You can always bring out previously removed supplies later in the year—they'll seem new again!
- **Quality.** As third graders' imaginations explode, they need high-quality supplies that can keep up with their ideas. Scissors that really cut, glue sticks that are clean, and markers that work will all help third graders stay excited and motivated about their work. Consider having students periodically go through supply bins to weed out supplies that are no longer useable. (It's a great indoor recess activity—third graders' developing interest in categorizing and classifying makes tasks like this really fun.)
- **Quantity.** Students need enough of these high-quality supplies to share easily. Some teachers place bins of art supplies in containers at each table group. Others prefer to have larger supply bins for the whole class to share. Either way, make sure you have enough high-quality supplies to go around.



Great Third Grade Supplies

The following chart shows some examples of supplies to have in a third grade classroom, along with quantities for selected supplies. This is meant to be a starting point rather than an exhaustive list. Although the supplies are grouped by category, clearly many materials could fit in multiple categories. Remember that with third grade, not all “early year” supplies should be introduced at once. Some variety is good, but too much at once will overwhelm.

Good Supplies for a Third Grade Classroom

Category	Early in the Year	Later in the Year	Sample Quantities
Art, social studies, projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Crayons ■ Colored pencils ■ Markers (thin and thick) ■ Drawing paper ■ Construction paper ■ Magazines for cutting ■ Yarn ■ Glitter ■ Toothpicks ■ Glue ■ Felt ■ Cotton balls ■ Tape ■ Scissors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Hole punch ■ Charcoal pencils ■ Oil pastels ■ Paints ■ Stencils ■ Modeling clay ■ Popsicle sticks ■ Feathers ■ Buttons ■ Seashells ■ Colored tissue paper ■ Wire ■ Wikki sticks ■ Fabric scraps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Scissors—one pair for every two students ■ Glue—one bottle or stick for every two students ■ Markers, crayons, colored pencils—an ample supply for each table or desk cluster ■ Feathers, buttons, seashells, etc.—enough for everyone to share; consider allowing students only a limited number of each
Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Books, both fiction and nonfiction, multiple genres, both boy and girl main characters ■ Sticky notes ■ Paper for rough and final drafts ■ Pens, pencils ■ Staplers ■ Writing notebooks or journals ■ Clipboards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Books (new genres; keep cycling in new books throughout the year) ■ Highlighters ■ Note cards ■ Binders ■ Clear plastic portfolio sleeves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Books—a wide range of levels is important to accommodate widely varied reading skills ■ Pens, pencils, etc.—several dozen of each ■ Staplers—two good ones for the class to share

Good Supplies for a Third Grade Classroom

Category	Early in the Year	Later in the Year	Sample Quantities
Math	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Rulers ■ Base ten blocks ■ Pattern blocks ■ Variety of math games ■ Dice ■ Playing cards ■ Unifix cubes ■ Dominoes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Meter sticks ■ Tape measures ■ Calculators ■ Cuisenaire rods ■ New math games ■ Fraction puzzles ■ Graph paper ■ Flash cards and fact triangles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Rulers, protractors, calculators, etc.—one for every child ■ Pattern blocks, base ten blocks, Cuisenaire rods, Unifix cubes—a large container for each small group
Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Science journals ■ Bug jars ■ Magnets ■ Plant pots, seeds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Magnifying glasses ■ Connex, Legos ■ Scales, balances ■ Critter tanks ■ Other hands-on materials that match your curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Enough for partnerships or small groups
Recess (outdoor and indoor)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Math/logic games ■ Literacy games—anything that involves word play ■ Joke books (also good for those few minutes when the class is lined up waiting to go to lunch or an assembly) ■ Playground ball, football, basketball 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Jigsaw puzzles (1,000–2,500 pieces) ■ Mad Libs ■ Quick board games (Mad Gab, Boggle, etc.) ■ Tongue twister books ■ Computer games ■ Snow brick makers ■ Frisbees ■ Jump ropes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ When supplies are limited (as with playground balls and computers), consider a rotating sign-out system so all students have a chance to use them

See the appendix (pages 105–108) for favorite books, board games, and websites for third graders.



Community Supplies

Consider allowing only “community supplies” in third grade. As third graders become more concerned with fairness, conflicts can arise if some students have a great set of markers (brought from home) but others don’t. I’ve invited parents to do some school shopping for the class at the beginning of the year if they wanted to donate

supplies for everyone to share. If students had special materials just for them (or their best friends), I told them that those needed to stay home so that everyone had the same great materials to use at school.

Location of Supplies

When students store materials in their own desks or cubbies, supplies often get lost or broken. Having a system in place for storing supplies so that students all know where they are and how to get them can allow for a neater and cleaner classroom and can help supplies last longer. A few ideas to consider:

- **Table caddies.** Available at most office supplies stores, table caddies can help organize and store many commonly used supplies (pencils, pens, sticky notes, scissors, rulers, etc.) so that each group of four (or so) has a set of supplies within easy reach.
- **Shelf storage.** Keep materials such as glue, marker sets, staplers, paper clips, and other commonly used arts and crafts supplies in neatly labeled bins on shelves. Make sure that the shelves are low enough for all students to reach comfortably, or spills and accidents are more likely.
- **Off-limits supplies.** Some materials such as buttons, feathers, clay, cotton balls, and fabric scraps may come out only for special projects. Some supplies (a digital video camera, for example) may come out only with adult supervision. These kinds of supplies should be behind closed doors or well out of reach. If all supplies are in the same place, third graders (who have a hard time remembering lots of little directions) may be confused about which supplies are okay to use and which aren’t.

Classroom Displays

I remember very clearly the first few days before my first year of teaching. I can't tell you how much time I spent trying to cover all of the walls. I had a huge poster of the steps in the writing process. I had a class welcome bulletin board. I had math and literacy reference charts. I had posters and maps. All of that must have been a bit overwhelming for the students as they first entered the room!



I have since shifted from using lots of store-bought and mass-produced posters and displays to primarily displaying work produced by the children themselves. Displaying student work sends an important message: In this classroom, we all share with and learn from one another. Furthermore, students will look at their own work more frequently than at commercial posters.

Tips for building displays:

- **Build displays slowly.** It's okay to begin the year with some blank walls and bulletin boards. As the class moves through its first units, let the displays track class learning. Children pay more attention to displays that are current and relevant to the work they're doing.



- **Build displays together.** Ask for student input as to what you should include in your new science bulletin board; have students create some of the words for the word wall; invite students to cut out pictures or make drawings that illustrate what they're learning in social studies. When students play a role in designing displays, they're more interested and invested in them, and the displays are more likely to enhance learning.

Displays of Student Work

Some basics about displaying student work:

- **Display in-process as well as polished pieces.** This point runs counter to what many of us may believe displayed work should be, but it's important to showcase rough drafts of writing to highlight the revision and editing process. Putting the rough and final drafts of a social studies poster side by side shows that we value the process of learning as much as the product.
- **Use wall spaces for two-dimensional work.** Display paintings, writing samples, book reviews, and other two-dimensional work on bulletin boards and other wall spaces. Clothespins on draped yarn or pushpins in cork strips are other ways of hanging 2D work on a wall.

Control Clutter!

- Walls cluttered with charts and papers can appear messy and add to stress levels in the room.
- Leave ample blank wall space around bulletin boards, anchor charts, and student display spaces. The blank spaces make it easier to focus on individual pieces of work.

- **Reserve bookshelf tops for three-dimensional work.** Keep the tops of bookshelves clear for dioramas, models, and other 3D pieces.

- **Consider adding simple shelving.** To create more display space, use simple wire shelving from a hardware store along portions of walls.

- **Keep displays fresh.** After displays have been up for a couple of weeks, students stop looking at them. When displays reflect current learning, students will find them more interesting.

Informational Displays

In addition to display spaces for student work, you'll need some spaces for reference charts and other information. Bulletin boards should change continually, right along with the content you're teaching and the time of the school year.

Some anchor charts (posters reminding students of lessons or key ideas and facts they should remember) may change often to reflect current learning. Other anchor charts will stay up all year as reminders. Ideally, the boards and charts will be centrally located for easy student reference.

Learn More about Classroom Setup at www.responsiveclassroom.org

Classroom Spaces That Work by Marlynn K. Clayton (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2001).

Some good third grade informational displays:

■ **Get-to-know-each-other board.** At the beginning of the year, most third graders will proudly share details about their hobbies, pets, families, and favorite school subjects. Create a fun bulletin board highlighting students' lives and they'll eagerly read and learn about each other, making connections that can lead to new friendships.

■ **Birthday chart.** Posting everyone's birthdays for easy reference boosts students' sense of belonging in the classroom.

■ **Word walls.** Post relevant content-specific vocabulary and commonly misspelled words.

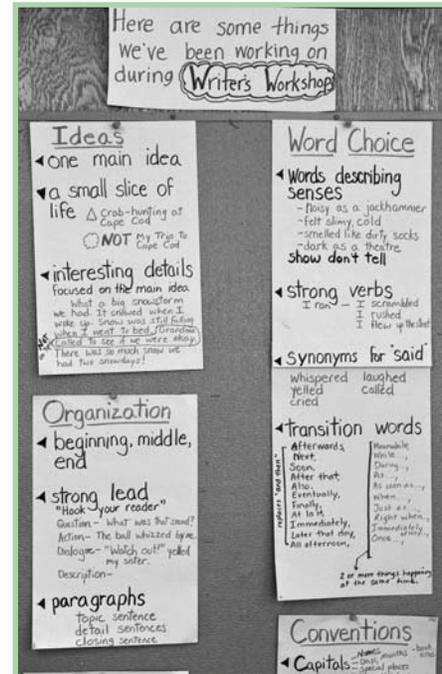
■ **Content boards.** Include interesting facts, maps, and pictures for each content area. Place new items on the board slowly (one or two per day) and make a big deal about each new item. Have students help you—many third graders love to organize, arrange, and create displays.

■ **Process or format reminders.** Should students sign and date their work in a certain way? Should they use a particular process for turning in homework? Do you have criteria for quality work that you expect all students to meet? If so, create some simple anchor charts and hang them where needed.

■ **Routines charts.** Have a sign-up chart for lunch and a sign-out system to use the bathroom. Post by the door an attendance chart that students fill out. Finding ways for children to be independent with these little routines can make for a much smoother day. Without these reminders, third graders—often busy talking to their friends—can lose track of everything they have to do.

■ **Writing and reading lesson charts.** Post a chart of key ideas from current lessons.

■ **Math lesson charts.** As students practice a new math skill, encourage them to keep checking their work against the chart to make sure they're on the right track.



Technology

Third graders can be quite independent with technology, but they also sometimes know just enough to get themselves in trouble. Left unsupervised, they will often attempt to solve problems on their own, relying on their increasing independence and confidence. I remember a colleague coming into my classroom with a confused look on her face and a handful



of Charlie's poetry. "Mr. Anderson, is Charlie having trouble with the printer?" she asked. I turned to see Charlie at the computer with a sheepish look on his face. "Sorry," he apologized. "I kept pressing print because it wasn't working." It turns out that he had reconfigured the printer settings and ended up printing about fifty copies of his poem to a printer at the other end of the school!

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While we teach third graders to use the technological tools at their disposal, we must structure and guide their work. A few ideas as you set up technology in your third grade classroom:

- **Monitor students' work.** At times, third graders can be overconfident and unrealistic about their abilities. Just because students say they can work the digital camera doesn't mean they really can. Make sure to directly teach the skills that students need and then monitor closely as they learn to use new technology. Also know your school's policy on what is considered appropriate use of the Internet, teach it to your students, and stay vigilant.
- **Ask for help.** If you're uncomfortable using technological resources, ask for help from a colleague or parent.
- **Use technology purposefully.** Just because a technology is available or in vogue doesn't mean you have to use it. As with any resource, make sure the technology you use will enhance your efforts to strengthen the classroom community and make learning interactive and child-centered.



Closing Thoughts

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Third graders have incredible enthusiasm and energy for learning. Our classroom setup can take advantage of this enthusiasm and transfer it toward deep and meaningful learning, or it can squelch the enthusiasm, leading to frustrated—and frustrating—behaviors and low academic and social engagement. When we pay attention to the common characteristics and needs of third graders as we arrange furniture, design classroom displays, choose materials, and manage other elements of the classroom, we can set up a space that will foster joyful and productive work.