

# 5x5 STARTER KIT

25 deceptively simple high school teaching strategies to stress less, save time, be creative, and feel confident in your classroom.

If you know a teacher who could benefit from this free resource, feel free to send it to them. Just send them a link to this page:

[www.teachertactics.com/starterkit](http://www.teachertactics.com/starterkit)

TEACHER  
TACTICS  
High school teaching strategies

# We've got a quick question for you:

If you're a high school teacher, does any of the following sound familiar to you?

*"I need to spend so much time planning and marking that I don't have time for anything else in my life besides teaching. I'm not sure if it's worth it, and I feel like I'm going to burn out."*

*"I want to have creative lessons and activities that inspire and engage my students and get them excited to learn, but I don't know where to begin, and I don't know where to look for ideas. I feel like I'm letting my students down."*

*"I dread coming into school some days because just I don't know how to handle some of my classes. I've tried lots of things but nothing seems to work, and I feel like I'm losing control."*

**If any of the above sounds familiar, take a few minutes to read this Starter Kit.**

It's not your fault – and it doesn't have to be this way. Most teachers don't get enough support when they get into the classroom for the first time. Almost half of teachers leave the profession within the first 5 years. And spending a couple of months as a student teacher can be incredibly valuable, but it doesn't fully prepare you for the realities of having your own class.

(That's why you're here!)

## You want teaching strategies to stress less, save time, be creative, and feel confident.

That's where we come in. We're Colin Dodds and Michelle Davis, the founders of Teacher Tactics. We want to help you improve your teaching practice with tactics that let you stress less, save time, be creative, and feel confident in your classroom. We want you to re-connect with why you decided to become a teacher, and so you can be successful in your classroom without feeling overwhelmed or guilty.

We've spent hundreds of hours compiling real-world classroom strategies to find what works best. These tactics have been tested by real teachers in real classrooms. This Starter Kit contains our favorite strategies for the things that matter most: simple yet powerful ideas that you can try out in your classes starting tomorrow.

So let's get started:

# How to use this guide:

## 1 Slow and Steady

This Emergency Kit is short and simple to avoid overwhelming you with information. It's also yours to keep and refer back to forever – so you can start tomorrow, but you don't need to do everything all at once. Keep this as a reference and refer it in case of emergency – when you're struggling, or need inspiration to try something new with your teaching strategies.

## 2 Build Your Community

Go beyond this guide and join the teacher community at [www.teachertactics.com](http://www.teachertactics.com). If you have a specific question about your classroom, or you have your own teaching tactic you want to share, send us a note to [hello@teachertactics.com](mailto:hello@teachertactics.com). We'd love to feature your question on an upcoming podcast.

# What do you want help with first?

Click on a category to go straight to our top 5 tactics for:

1 [Classroom Management Techniques](#) Stress Less | Feel Confident

2 [Customizable Lesson Hooks](#) Get Creative | Stress Less

3 [Saving Time Marking](#) Save Time | Stress Less

4 [Kinaesthetic Brain Breaks](#) Get Creative | Feel Confident

5 [Self-Care Strategies](#) Stress Less | Save Time

# Top 5 Classroom Management Techniques

These 5 classroom management techniques will give you a simple toolkit to positively deal with individual or group behavior issues. They'll also make your job easier as the school year goes on.

## 1 Use proximity to manage your entire classroom (The Danger Zone)

The closer you are to students, the more likely they are to pay attention, and the less likely they are to misbehave. This has been studied and tested<sup>1</sup> many times over.

Let's repeat that for dramatic effect, because it's so important: the closer you are to students, the more likely they are to pay attention, and the less likely they are to misbehave. **Proximity is your most important classroom management strategy.**

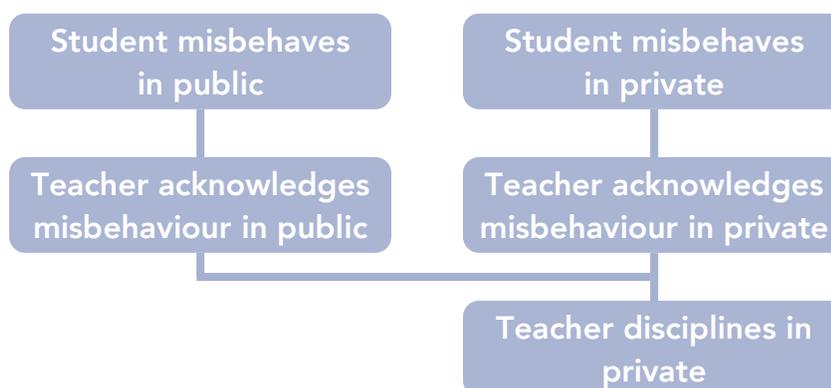
By far the **easiest** and **fastest** way to control your class is to change your seating plan so difficult students sit near you, and away from friends or distractions. We've seen behavior issues virtually disappear just from a simple seating plan change.

After all, *"when the cat's away, the mice will play!"* Beyond a strategic seating plan, use those cat-like reflexes to **circulate** constantly around the room to check in on your entire class. This is easiest to accomplish with desk placement that has lots of wide aisles for you to get from one corner of the room to the other as quickly as possible.

One more key point: if you want to change your seating plan, just tell the class you want to mix things up. If you frame it as a punishment or consequence, you'll end up with complaining, or worse, outright opposition.

## 2 Avoid defensiveness with private discipline (Public Arrest, Private Sentence)

Let's look at a quick flow-chart:



If a student misbehaves privately in class – maybe they said something disrespectful to you – there’s no need to get the rest of the class involved, as that brings more negative attention to the misbehavior. But if they misbehave publicly, you need to acknowledge to the class that you saw what happened, and that it’s inappropriate.

What’s so important here is all you have to do is acknowledge it, and nothing more. **Discipline should always happen in private.** Avoid giving the misbehaving students extra attention by calmly acknowledging the rule-breaking (in public) and following up later in the class (in private).

This minimizes attention-seeking behaviour while showing the class that you are in control of the situation. It also avoids the power struggle can come up if you discipline a student in front of the class, which often makes the student defensive and oppositional as they try to save face.

### 3 Use relationship-building to reduce behavior issues (Charmed)

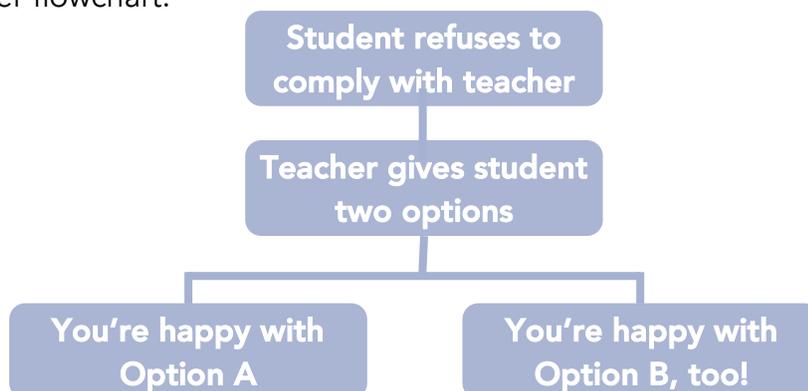
We’ve both seen countless students who behave very differently depending on who their teacher is. **Student behaviour often comes down to how much they trust and respect their teacher.** Students learn best and behave best with by teachers they respect.

How can you build these relationships and earn respect? Learn students’ names quickly. Be genuine with your enthusiasm and your interest in the class. Create assignments and activities that allow students to express themselves, their interests, and their personalities. Share information about yourself. Create opportunities like icebreakers for you to get to know your students, and for your students to get to know you.

Remember that teacher-student relationships should be based on respect, not admiration. It’s more important that a student respect you than like you. Therefore, having **high expectations** of you class is necessary along with relationship-building, as it shows your students that you care about them, but that you expect the best from them, too.

### 4 “Get to yes” by giving students options (The House Always Wins)

Let’s look at another flowchart:



One of the best ways to increase your chance of compliance is to give students a choice – the first is what you hope they'll do, the second is more severe – but **you're happy with both choices**. For example, *"you can talk to me outside, or you can talk to the principal"*, or *"you can give me your phone now, or if I see it out later, I'll keep it until the end of the week"*. This gives students flexibility and agency but still puts you firmly in control of the situation.

This is also a great strategy for **stand-offs** where a student repeatedly declines to comply with your request. Giving student a choice (even the illusion of a choice) gives them a sense of power over the situation, and allows them to save face, which can diffuse tense situations.

## 5 Use compassion to connect with difficult students (All You Need Is Love)

There are going to be days where it feels like it's you vs. your students. And this is partially true: students will naturally push back against boundaries, and they will test you to see what they can get away with in class. That's why it's important to balance being authoritative and caring when you're in front of the class.

But when it comes to privately disciplining students, approach it from a position of love and caring before resorting to being authoritative. Show students that you care about them. *Tell students* that you care about them. Some of them may not realize it otherwise.

Remember that teenagers go through a strange and difficult time in their lives, and many of them have significant struggles in their home lives.

When you sit down with a student to discipline them, **start by simply asking them if they're okay**. You could say *"you didn't seem like yourself today – is everything okay?"* Give them a minute to open up and explain themselves.

Showing that you care gives students the opportunity to open up to you, which lets you build a stronger relationship. It's also disarming – the student is expecting to be punished for their behavior, which has likely become a recurring pattern.

It's also hard for a student to be angry at you if you're showing care towards them.

# Top 5 Customizable Lesson Hooks

These 5 lesson hooks are a fantastic way to get students engaged in the lesson. You can re-use these hooks over the course of the year by customizing them with different lesson material. In fact, students will often get excited to see these lesson hooks in new contexts.

## 1 Opening Sentence (Question Mark)

Print out a question or sentence related to the day's lesson and **tape it to the floor** by the door of your classroom. Students will stop and wonder why it's there.

This is a fun way to transition students into your lesson. The **novelty** of the words on the floor (or on the wall, or on the door...) is a guaranteed way to get them thinking and talking about your class.

For example, in English class, you could ask *"Was MacBeth a good person?"*, in science you could ask *"Why is the sky blue?"*, or in history you could ask *"What is the most important invention of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?"* These sentences could be writing prompts, opinion-based questions, or content questions related to your unit.

For extra durability, laminate your printed out sentences to use them again.

## 2 Prediction (Guess and Test)

Get students to make a **prediction** – it could be what happens next in history, what they think will happen to a character in a novel, how to pronounce a word in a foreign language, how to solve a math problem that you haven't yet demonstrated in class, or which artist developed a piece of artwork you're displaying in the room.

Raise the stakes by taking a class vote to see which prediction is most popular, or get students to do a quick mini-debate on their position and why they've chosen it.

If you phrase the prediction question as a yes/no, true/false, or multiple choice, you could ask students to **separate themselves in the room** based on their prediction. For example, students who think the prediction will come true move to the left side of the class, and students who think it'll be false move to the right.

### 3 Envelope Questions (Audience Participation)

Write (or type) questions about the lesson and put them into envelopes labelled by number.

Then, hand them out to students and ask them to open them and **read them out to you**.

This hook is great because it adds a sense of **novelty** and **mystery** to the questions. It's also an interactive and low-risk activity. Even shy students can participate by reading out something from an envelope.

Your questions can also be used for assessment – put some review questions in the envelopes and see if the class can answer them.

You can make this really fun, too! Put in some surprising and fun questions. For example, you could break up a bunch of review questions with personal questions for you.

### 4 Class Challenge (Make it a Game)

Start the class by giving the entire class a **difficult challenge**. For example, put students in groups and give them a review problem and make it a race to see who can complete it first. Put students in pairs and have them come up with review questions to try to stump their friends, or ask them a question about an upcoming unit to see if they can brainstorm an answer. Have your students try to come up with the best version of: an impression of a character, a conversation in a foreign language, a drawing of a map from memory, or anything related to your curriculum.

### 5 Mixed Media (Use the Internet)

Videos, images, or music are great ways to get students interested in the lesson. Your best bets to get inspired are YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)), TeacherTube ([www.teachertube.com](http://www.teachertube.com)), and BrainPop ([www.brainpop.com](http://www.brainpop.com)). Just search for your lesson content on these sites and see what material speaks to you best. (If you add "+ song") to your search term you can probably find somebody who has written a song about your lesson.

The media doesn't have to be perfectly aligned to the lesson as long as it gets them intrigued or interested. For example, in a business class I teach, we learn about balance sheets, an accounting financial statement. I showed them [this video of professional stunt performers slacklining between hot air balloons](#) (don't worry – they had parachutes!) Then I asked students to guess why the video was relevant to what we're learning about (hint: it's all about balance!). It's exciting, it's unexpected, and it primes them for the rest of the lesson.

# Top 5 Ways to Save Time Marking

These 5 tactics let you save hours of time marking each week, while still providing helpful, descriptive feedback to your students. It's possible to do both!

## 1 Use Your Students (*Many Hands Make Light Work*)

If you have a quiz or test with closed-ended questions like **fill-in-the-blank**, **matching**, **true-false**, or **multiple-choice**, get students to pass their work to a classmate and mark them in class. Not only can this save you hours of time, it gives students a chance to go through the answers with you, and provides near-instant feedback.

To keep grades private, get student to write their student number on their quiz, instead of their name (or assign them a unique number for your class).

## 2 Use Technology (*The Future is Now*)

When marking multiple-choice questions, move past the old Scantron technology with **iOS** or **Android** apps that are dedicated to grading.

Apps like **ZipGrade** ([www.zipgrade.com](http://www.zipgrade.com)) and **Quick Key** ([www.quickkeyapp.com](http://www.quickkeyapp.com)) turn your smartphone into an optical grading machine similar to those old dusty Scantron machines. These apps also let you review marks immediately with students (no need to wait in line in the staff room to use the scanning machine). You can also export marks directly to spreadsheet software, making it much easier and faster to enter marks into your gradebook. Best of all, no wi-fi or student devices are required.

## 3 Use Rubrics (*Quick & Descriptive*)

Rubrics reduce the amount of comments and writing you need to provide for each project or assignment. Once you've created a rubric, it becomes very easy to quickly mark large numbers of assignments by simply by checking off or circling the level achieved for each element of the rubric. The more detailed the rubric, the more detailed the feedback you can quickly provide to students, so that your comments only need to discuss specific strengths or areas of growth.

To quickly create rubrics for free, try **Rubistar** ([rubistar.4teachers.org](http://rubistar.4teachers.org)) or **Rubrics 4 Teachers** ([rubrics4teachers.com](http://rubrics4teachers.com)).

## 4 Use Presentations (Talk It Out)

Presentations are a great way to save time marking because **you can mark in class** while the presentation is happening. You can add a presentation component to many types of assignments to save time marking. What's easiest is combining presentations with rubrics, so you can evaluate students by ticking off boxes as the presentation is happening, then write a couple of individual comments later.

Presentations also give students valuable experience speaking in front of their peers.

## 5 Use Group Projects (The Power of Groups)

Group projects drastically cut down on the number of individual assignments you have to mark, and give your students experience working and cooperating as part of a team.

To maintain student accountability, keep group sizes to 2 or 3, assign individual roles to each student, and have students fill in a brief group evaluation that will make up part of their grade. Group evaluation is important for accountability. Check out a simple group evaluation from **George Mason University** ([chnm.gmu.edu/7tah/unitdocs/unit10/lesson5/peereval.pdf](http://chnm.gmu.edu/7tah/unitdocs/unit10/lesson5/peereval.pdf)), or you can take a look at some of the more involved options that are listed at the **Schreyer Institute** ([schreyerstitute.psu.edu/pdf/Team\\_Peer\\_Evaluation\\_Examples.pdf](http://schreyerstitute.psu.edu/pdf/Team_Peer_Evaluation_Examples.pdf)).

Many of these strategies can be **combined** – for instance, you could use a rubric to mark a group presentation in class. Obviously, you can't use these tactics for every evaluation piece that you give, but different ways to evaluate students can expand how they interact with your material, while saving you time marking in the process.

# Top 5 Kinaesthetic Brain Breaks

Brain breaks are quick, 1-2 minute kinaesthetic activities to re-focus your room. They often involve physical movement crossing over the left and right side of your body, which re-energizes the brain as it tries to accomplish a novel challenge. These 5 brain breaks are great ways for students to get their blood flowing, get back on track, and have some fun in the process. You can re-use these over the course of the year and challenge students to improve on their performance. These breaks don't have to take long – even having students stand up gets them moving and shakes off some of the cobwebs from sitting for long periods of time.

## 1 Ear To Nose (A Funny Break)

Have students stand up and put their right hand on their left ear, and their left hand on their nose. Then, they need to uncross their arms and move their left hand to their right ear and their right hand to their nose. Then, try **switch back and forth** as fast as they can. It's hard to do this at high speed!

## 2 Twiddle Thumbs (A Tricky Break)

Ask students to stand up and link their fingers together. Then, get them to take their left thumb and move it in a clockwise direction. After that, they need to take their right thumb and move it in a counter-clockwise direction, so that their **thumbs are moving in opposite directions**. This is very difficult to do for longer than a second or two – students (and you!) will probably find that over time your thumbs naturally start to move in the same direction, even without you noticing.

## 3 X-Stretch (A Body Break)

Ask students to stand up, then **squat and touch each hand to the opposite foot** – left hand touches right foot, right hand touches left foot. Then, stand up tall on your tip-toes and reach both arms upwards diagonally in the air to form an X with your arms. Repeat 10 times. This brain break gets students' entire bodies moving, twisting, and stretching.

## 4 Elbow Drumming (A Rhythmic Break)

Get students to stand up, cross their arms, and put their palms on their elbows. They then have to **tap their elbows in an alternating pattern**: Left Right Left Left, Right Left Right Right. See how fast students can go "drumming" on their elbows.

This break is fun because students can challenge each other to see who can do it fastest.

## 5 10 Deep Breaths (A Mindful Break)

This is challenging in a different way – it requires focus. In fact, you could introduce it to students by saying that it's the most difficult brain break, because for some students it will be.

Ask students to stand up and **take 10 deep, slow breaths**, in through their nose, and out through their mouths. Discourage students from hamming it up with their breathing by adding that they should try to be as quiet as possible (there's always one student who will be tempted to take a theatrically loud breathe in and out). Tell your students that they can close their eyes if they wish.

Some students may protest, but try to get them all involved with this one. You can remind students that our brain takes cues from our body, so if our bodies relaxed and breathing deeply, this will help to calm our minds. It's really difficult to be stressed out while you're breathing deeply, just like it's really difficult to be angry when you're whistling.

This brain break works well as a mid-class transition, or to quiet down a class that has too much energy, or to get students more calm and relaxed at the beginning of your lesson.

# Top 5 Self-Care Strategies

If you don't take care of yourself, you won't be able to effectively take care of your students. These 5 self-care strategies use psychological tactics to make it easy to take care of yourself, even if you feel like you don't have time for it.

## 1 Un-Schedule (Creating Me Time)

Instead of just scheduling time for your school-related events, **schedule time for yourself**, too. That could be weekly dinner dates with friends, a recreational sports league, or a standing weekly lunch date with a colleague. By scheduling these events, you're more likely to actually take a break and retain a sense of balance that's so important as a teacher.

It's also easier to feel okay saying no to other obligations that might come up with teaching. Because hey, you already have plans!

## 2 Avoid Decision Fatigue (Reduce Your Variables)

As a teacher, you make hundreds of decisions an hour, and thousands of decisions a day. How do I plan my lesson? How do I start the class? Do I need to spend more time teaching this information? Should I continue to help this student or move on to another? And on, and on!

**Making so many decisions is mentally exhausting.** Reduce "decision fatigue" by making the rest of your life as simple as possible.

Pick out your clothes for the week on the weekend. Decide what you want to eat for dinner each night and make a list of ingredients you need. Choose a day of the week for cooking, cleaning, exercising, spending time with your family, socializing – whatever's important in your life. Reducing the number of decisions you make may seem boring, but it frees your mind to focus on the things that actually matter, and lets you look forward to the times you've set to take care of yourself.

## 3 Create Your Happy Place (What Makes You Happy?)

Keep all of the thank-you notes, cards, gifts, and anything else that students have given to you over the years to express their gratitude to you. These are the artifacts that represent why you became a teacher and why what you do is so important to so many people.

**Keep these mementos in a visible place at school:** near your teacher desk in your classroom, or in your office at school if you have one. It's even better to have this sitting on your desk in September (and then again after the holiday break and spring break) as a way to start things off on a good note.

## 4 Find Multiple Wins (Goals Outside the Classroom)

If your life and identity is caught up in being a teacher, your emotional wellbeing can take a hit if things aren't going well at school – and there's always going to be ups and downs.

**Try to aim for "multiple wins"** – ways that you can feel good about yourself beyond teaching.

In other words, set goals outside of teaching. – maybe you have a hobby, or a side career, or a family, or a physical pursuit that you can focus on alongside teaching.

They don't have to be big goals, but they should be something you're working towards, so that even if you have a tough day at school, there are other area of your life that you can feel good about.

## 5 Good Enough is Good (Anti-Perfectionism)

If you have perfectionist tendencies (and a lot of new teachers do), **nothing can ever seem like it's good enough.**

Everybody makes mistakes. Veteran teachers make mistakes. You are going to make mistakes.

Not every lesson you have is going to be perfectly planned or perfectly executed. As a teacher, you can always do more – more planning, more assessment, more evaluation, more relationship-building, more volunteering, and more extra-curricular activities.

When you're just starting out, aim for "good enough" most of the time, and shoot for one amazing lesson per week, or a couple per month. Students will remember when you wowed them, and they will forget the times that weren't perfect.

As long as you strive to improve your teaching practice year-after-year, and as long as you care about what you do, **you don't need to feel guilty for taking time for yourself.** In fact, you won't be able to take care of others without taking care of yourself first. So don't be part of the statistic of almost half of teachers quitting the profession within five years. Start slow, keep it sustainable, reflect and learn from your mistakes...and have fun doing it!

## Like what you've read?

You made it to the end of the Teacher Tactics 5x5 Starter Kit! If you like what you've read, here are your next steps:

- 1 Get out into your classroom and put these strategies into practice! Try starting out tomorrow with a new lesson hook, or do a brain break in the middle of your lesson.
- 2 If you know a teacher who could benefit from this free resource, feel free to send it to them. Just send them a link to this page: [www.teachertactics.com/starterkit](http://www.teachertactics.com/starterkit)
- 3 We love getting email! Send a note to [hello@teachertactics.com](mailto:hello@teachertactics.com) and say "Hey Colin and Michelle, just read through your Starter Kit and I what I really liked was..." Or you can send us a teaching question like "I really need help with...".
- 4 You can also say hi to Colin on Twitter: [@colindodds](https://twitter.com/colindodds)

## Prefer listening to reading?

If you enjoyed this Starter Kit and you're not already subscribed to the **Teacher Tactics Podcast**, now's the time! We take 10 minutes each week to discuss a new tactic, from how to start the year off right, to dealing with difficult parents, to the right way to set up your desk placement:



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Thanks for reading!  
– Colin Dodds & Michelle Davis

