



# THE GOLDEN SLATE

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## New Teachers, the Advice is Not Criticism... it is to Help You Grow

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Stepping into your first classroom is exhilarating. It's also a little terrifying. You've spent months—years—preparing lessons, observing master teachers, and collecting strategies. Yet the moment you close your door and face twenty-five (or thirty-five) diverse learners, everything becomes real in a way that no textbook or teacher prep program can simulate.

If you're reading this, you're likely already receiving advice—from mentors, administrators, veteran colleagues, parents, and even students. Some of it lands well; some of it stings. This "essay" is penned as a letter to you, a reminder that the feedback you receive is not an indictment of your talent or your worth; it's an investment in your growth. The advice is not criticism. It is a hand on your shoulder, pointing you toward practices that will sustain you, protect your energy, and amplify your impact.

Below, you'll find practical guidance organized into themes that matter most in your early years: mindset, planning, instruction, relationships, classroom culture, assessment, professional collaboration, and personal sustainability. Take what helps. Leave what doesn't (for now). Revisit often. Teaching is cyclical, and your growth is worth protecting.

### 1) Adopt a Growth Mindset—For Yourself and Your Students

You'll hear the phrase "growth mindset" everywhere—often directed at students. But it starts with you. Early-career teachers sometimes interpret feedback as evidence that they're "not cut out for this." Resist that narrative. Feedback is a set of coordinates, not a verdict. When a mentor notes that transitions are taking too long, they're not saying you can't manage a classroom; they're saying, "Here's a lever that, when adjusted, will give you minutes back and reduce stress."

#### Practical moves:

- Normalize iteration. Treat each lesson as a prototype. After class, jot down two tweaks: keep and change. If you do that daily, you'll compound improvements rapidly.

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- Separate person from practice. “You are a caring, capable educator” and “your exit ticket needs to be clearer” can both be true.
- Ask for specific, actionable feedback. “What would make my directions clearer in the first five minutes?” focuses advice on the practical, not the personal.

## 2) Plan Backward and Teach Forward

Planning is where you protect your future self. Backward design—starting with the learning goal and evidence of understanding—prevents you from crafting beautiful lessons that accidentally miss the mark. Teaching forward—breaking the goal into digestible steps, with daily checks—keeps students oriented and you responsive.

### Practical moves:

- Clarify the destination. Write the unit’s “students will be able to...” statement in student-friendly language. Post it. Refer to it.
- Map the mile markers. Identify 3-5 key sub-skills students need (e.g., “identify claims,” “cite textual evidence,” “explain reasoning”). Build mini-lessons around each.
- Plan checks for understanding. Quick, low-stakes checks (thumbs to chest, one-sentence summaries, a two-question exit ticket) give you real-time data without derailing pacing.

A word on pacing: If you’re behind, it’s likely because transitions or directions are taking longer than you expected. That’s normal. Script the first minute: the hook, the one-sentence objective, and the first task. Practice it out loud. Clarity at the start pays dividends all period.

## 3) Instructions: Make Thinking Visible and Time Feel Predictable

Students thrive when they know what to do and how long they have to do it. Ambiguity breeds off-task behavior, not because students are defiant, but because they’re human.

### Practical moves:

- Use the “visible three”: (1) Task posted in concise steps, (2) a model or exemplar, (3) the time box. Example on board:
- Do Now (5 min): Read the prompt. Underline the claim.
- Task (12 min): Find 2 pieces of evidence.
- Share (5 min): Pair-share; prepare one sentence to report out.
- Model briefly. A 60–90 second think-aloud often saves five minutes of confusion later.
- Narrate the why. “I’m timing this for 7 minutes because we’re practicing quick retrieval—it helps your brain solidify concepts.”

When you make instructions crystal clear, you’re not “controlling” students; you’re gifting them cognitive bandwidth to think deeply.



#### 4) Relationships Are Not a Bonus—They Are the Infrastructure

You cannot out-instruct a broken relationship. The classroom runs on trust. Students must believe you see them, that you respect them, and that you will be consistent. Trust converts feedback from you into growth for them. It also converts feedback about you into professional learning for you.

##### Practical moves:

- Try the two-by-ten method. Spend two minutes a day, for ten days, building a connection with one student who feels distant: small talk, genuine interest, no academic agenda. Rotate.
- Name and notice. Use names early and often, celebrate small wins (“\_\_\_\_\_, I noticed you came in prepared—thank you”), and acknowledge effort publicly.
- Repair fast. If a moment gets tense, circle back privately, own your part (“I was frustrated about the noise and raised my voice; I’m sorry”), and reset expectations clearly.

Remember: Kindness does not equal softness on expectations. It means you deliver expectations with dignity.

#### 5) Classroom Culture: Procedures Are the Rails; Joy Is the Engine

A culture of learning is not an accident. It is built, taught, reinforced, and celebrated. Procedures are how students move through the day without friction. Joy is what makes them want to.

##### Practical moves:

- Teach procedures explicitly. Entry routines, turning in work, transitioning to groups, and retrieving materials—model, practice, and re-teach as needed. It should feel repetitive; it is also merciful.
- Use “attention signals.” Pick one verbal or visual cue (call-and-response, chime, hand up) and stick with it. Teach students to freeze, face, and focus.
- Design for movement. Structure short bursts of independent work, group collaboration, and quick stand-and-stretch moments. Movement reduces misbehavior by meeting human needs.
- Build celebration. Micro-celebrate: “Table three just nailed explaining their reasoning—who can add?” Lean into laughter. Humor and warmth do more for learning than stern lectures ever will.

#### 6) Assessment: Feedback Is a Mirror, Not a Score

Grades matter in systems (and to our administrators); feedback matters for growth. You will feel pressure to collect points. However, points without purpose are paperwork. The goal is to help students—and you—see what thinking looks like when it’s strong, and how to make it stronger.



### **Practical moves:**

- Use success criteria. “Strong claims: clear, arguable, specific.” Post them. Reference them during work time. Assess against them.
- Give just-in-time feedback. Circulate with one focus (“I’m only checking transitions between paragraphs”). Leave a short note or a highlight for each.
- Adopt the “one next step” rule. For each student, name the single most impactful next step. It respects cognitive load and increases uptake.
- Make retakes normal. Invite students to revise after feedback. This teaches persistence and shows that learning is a process, not a snapshot.

And when your administrator observes you and leaves notes, treat those notes like you want your students to treat yours: look for the pattern, identify the next step, act, and reflect.

## **7) Collaboration: You Don’t Have to Reinvent the Wheel—But You Do Need to Understand How It Turns**

Schools are ecosystems. No one thrives alone. Collaboration is how you build a toolkit faster and share the load.

### **Practical moves:**

- Find your “just-in-time team.” Identify two colleagues: one for classroom management strategies, one for content planning. Meet briefly each week with a clear agenda.
- Trade artifacts. Exchange lessons, slides, rubrics, and exemplars. Ask, “If you had ten more minutes, where would you improve this?” Then, go make that improvement.
- Observe strategically. Ask to watch a veteran teacher for ten minutes during transitions or groupwork—the exact moments you find challenging. Focus your observation on one question: “What is the teacher doing that students can feel?”
- Document learnings. Keep a living doc titled “What works in our department,” with short entries: “Exit tickets phrased as ‘Write one sentence explaining...’ yields clearer evidence.”

Collaboration reduces isolation, accelerates learning, and models the professional habits we want students to carry into their own teams.

## **8) Classroom Management Is About Systems, Not Stature**

You don’t need a booming voice or a rigid persona to run a calm, productive room. You need systems that lower the cost of doing the right thing.

### **Practical moves:**

- Pre-correct. Before a transition, quickly state the success criteria: “Voices at level 1, feet walking, eyes on the station label. You’ll have 90 seconds.” This prevents missteps instead of punishing them.



- Neutral follow-through. When expectations aren't met, respond with calm consistency: "We're at level 3; reset to level 1. Thank you." Avoid moralizing. Keep it brief, kind, and steady.
- Proximity and presence. Walk the room. Stand near friction points. Your presence is an intervention—no speech required.
- Offer choice. "Desk or standing station?" "Write or voice-record?" Appropriate choice increases commitment and decreases defiance.

Remember, management is not a battle to win—it's the architecture that makes learning possible.

## 9) Differentiation: Equity Is Built From Options, Not Exceptions

In a mixed-ability classroom, differentiation is both ethical and practical. It's not about creating unique lesson plans for every student; it's about giving multiple pathways to the same learning goal.

### Practical moves:

- Tiered prompts. Offer a core prompt and an extension. Let students self-select or assign based on readiness.
- Scaffolded supports. Provide sentence starters, vocabulary banks, or graphic organizers. These are ramps, not crutches; remove them when students don't need them.
- Flexible grouping. Group by skill focus, not labels. Today, Jenna and Luis might work on citing evidence; tomorrow, they may tackle counterclaims with different peers.
- Universal design principles. Vary modes: reading, audio, visuals; vary outputs: written, oral, multimedia. Choice creates access without diminishing rigor.

Differentiation respects learners' starting points and honors the journey, not just the destination.

## 10) Parent and Caregiver Communication: Build Bridges Early, Walk Them Often

Families are your allies. Communication doesn't need to be elaborate; it needs to be consistent and human.

### Practical moves:

- Send a warm welcome. Early in the term, introduce yourself and share your classroom goals. Invite questions. Keep the tone friendly and specific.
- Use "good news" touches. Every week, choose three students and send a quick positive note home. It shifts the narrative and earns trust for when harder conversations arise.
- Be concrete. "We're learning to write claims supported by evidence; here's the rubric and an example," is more helpful than "We're doing a writing unit."



- Listen first. When concerns arise, ask for the family’s perspective and history. People fight what they feel excluded from; they join what they feel invited into.

You are not required to solve every challenge alone. Families can be powerful partners—if you invite them in.

### **11) Technology: Use It to Clarify, Not To Complicate**

Tech is a tool, not a goal. If a digital platform reduces friction and clarifies expectations, use it. If it distracts from thinking, pause.

#### **Practical moves:**

- Standardize submission. Pick one platform and one naming convention. Teach it. This slashes confusion and lost work.
- Leverage formative tools. Quick polls, shared documents, or digital whiteboards make thinking visible without eating time.
- Balance screen and paper. Some tasks (annotating a poem, sketching a diagram) are faster and more personal on paper. Choose intentionally.

The right tech supports learning; the wrong tech becomes a chore. Be willing to adjust.

### **12) The Observation: Reframe It as Coaching, Not Surveillance**

Observations can trigger anxiety, especially for new teachers. An observation is a snapshot, not a life sentence. Use it as a coaching opportunity.

#### **Practical moves:**

- Pre-brief. Share your objective, the success criteria, and what feedback would be most helpful (“I’m working on tightening transitions—please watch the first 10 minutes.”).
- Post-brief quickly. Ask for one glow (what worked) and one grow (one concrete next step). Commit to trying the grow within 48 hours.
- Invite re-observation. “I’m trying your suggestion Friday. Want to pop in for three minutes?” This shows initiative and sets up a feedback loop.

Over time, observations become a rhythm of growth, not a test to pass.

### **13) Professional Identity: Lead With Values, Not With Perfection**

Perfection is brittle. Values are resilient. Decide who you want to be in the room and return to that North Star when things wobble.

#### **Practical moves:**

- Draft your teacher ethos. Three sentences: “In my classroom, we value... we practice... we believe...” Post it. Refer to it.
- Choose two non-negotiables. For example: (1) Every student is greeted at the door. (2) Every lesson ends with a reflection. Protect them.





- Track your wins. Keep a “joy journal” of moments that felt right—student breakthroughs, a smooth transition, a parent thank-you. These remind you you’re growing.

Your identity is not “the perfect teacher.” It’s “the teacher who shows up with care, clarity, and consistent growth.”

#### **14) Time and Energy: Protect the Edges**

Burnout doesn’t arrive in one day; it accumulates when the edges of your life erode. You can be deeply committed and still set boundaries. In fact, boundaries protect your commitment.

##### **Practical moves:**

- Set a grading window. Two evenings a week, 30-minutes each (or what works for you). Use rubrics and the “one next step” rule to keep it focused.
- Batch your planning. Choose a planning day. Draft the week’s hooks, checks, and exit tickets. Keep slides minimal and reusable.
- Automate routines. Use templates for emails, lesson openers, and parent updates. Decide once; apply many times.
- Leave on time sometimes. One day a week, commit to leaving (at a specific time that works for you) when that time is up. Treat it as an appointment with your future self (think of it similar to the “time-limit” feature on your favorite app, set a timer/reminder/alarm if need be to help you stick to it).

You’re building a career, not surviving a semester. Sustainable habits are not selfish—they are strategic.

#### **15) When Advice Stings: A Script for Reframing**

Even well-intentioned advice can feel sharp when you’re tired or proud of your plan. Here’s a quick reframing process:

1. Pause. Breathe. Remind yourself: This is a data point, not a verdict.
2. Clarify. “When you say my directions were unclear, which part felt muddy to students?”
3. Translate. Convert the feedback into an action: “Post steps + model + time frame.”
4. Pilot. Try it within 48 hours in a low-stakes segment.
5. Reflect. What changed? What remained challenging? What’s the next tweak? Constantly evolving makes you a stronger educator, not a weaker educator.

This moves you from feeling judged to feeling coached. Growth is a series of small steps, not a single leap.



## 16) Common Early-Year Challenges and Friendly Fixes

### *Transitions dragging on:*

- Fix: Use a visible countdown, music cue, and a posted next task. Pre-correct expectations. Celebrate the first table ready.

### *Too much talking during direct instruction:*

- Fix: Shorten the talk. Insert a think-pair-share every 3–4 minutes. Move closer to talkers. Use names and proximity.

### *Low-quality student work:*

- Fix: Tighten the task clarity and provide a model/visual cue. Add a mid-task check (“Hold up your claim sentences—thumbs side by side for spacing”).

### *Feeling overwhelmed by grading:*

- Fix: Grade for the most important skill first. Use sampling: read 30% closely, scan the rest for the targeted skill. Offer whole-class feedback where patterns emerge.

### *Inconsistent consequences:*

- Fix: Script neutral language and apply it steadily. Document patterns privately. Use restorative conversations when needed.

Remember: most problems have small, structural solutions. Dramatic speeches rarely fix systemic friction; clear systems do.

## 17) Keep Learning: PD With Purpose

Professional development can feel like a buffet—overwhelming and uneven. Choose intentionally.

### **Practical moves:**

- One focus per quarter. Q1: Transitions. Q2: Checks for understanding. Q3: Writing instruction. Q4: Student discourse.
- Micro-PDs. Watch a 10-minute video, read a short article, try one move the next day. Small bites, immediate application.
- Reflect publicly. Share what you tried in a staff email or a quick department huddle. Your learning can spark someone else’s (if it works, don’t let someone else reinvent the wheel... let them know how your “wheel” works).

## 18) The Heart of the Work

Underneath strategies and systems is the heart. Your students carry complex lives into your room—joys, worries, responsibilities, identities. Meet them with dignity. Approach their thinking with curiosity. Invest your energy in the hope that growth is possible for everyone—students and teachers alike.





The advice you receive—about pacing, checks, transitions, grouping, questioning—is not a critique of your character. It’s the craft of talking. It’s colleagues, past and present, whispering, “Here’s what helps.” The advice is not criticism; it is to help you grow. And the miracle is: you will. You’ll refine your first five minutes. You’ll tighten your transitions. You’ll craft clearer prompts. You’ll build stronger relationships. You’ll focus your feedback. You’ll protect your energy. You’ll watch students do what once felt impossible. Then you’ll realize you’ve become the person you needed at the beginning—still learning, forever growing, proud of the work, gentle with yourself, steady for your students.

### **A Final Invitation**

This week, choose one small action:

- Script the first minute of tomorrow’s lesson.
- Post a three-step task with a time box and an exemplar.
- Greet every student at the door.
- Ask a colleague for one transition move.
- Write down one classroom non-negotiable and honor it.

Then, notice what changes. Capture the win. Share it with someone. Repeat next week with another small action. This is how growth happens—quietly, steadily, joyfully.

You’ve got this. And when you don’t feel like you do, that’s okay. The advice isn’t criticism. It’s a map. It’s a hand. It’s a reminder that teaching is craft, community, and courage—and you belong here.

