

Setting the Tone on Day One (and Keeping it Going)

Do-nows are one of my most important go-to teaching tools. They aren't suitable for every lesson in every classroom in the world. But when they do work, they solve one of the biggest problems a teacher can face: How to get students to transition smoothly into class time.

The Problem

When I first started teaching, I did a lot of one-to-one tutoring. So my first time teaching a big class took some adjusting. I got to class ten minutes early, and students started shuffling in shortly thereafter. As they came in, they threw down their bags on their desks and started congregating in the back to chat. Some students sat down, but leaned sideways in their desks to talk across the aisle. A few students would come in to cries of, "Hey, Peter. What's going on?" A handful of students would come in, settle into their seats, getting out books and pencils. But as class hadn't quite started yet, they quickly got bored and started playing on their cellphones or doodling.

When it came time to start class, no one was looking up at me and there was quite a bit of background noise. After trying to talk over it several times with no result, I ended up turning out the lights. That quieted them down, but it was hardly a permanent solution.

The Solution: Do-Nows

Instead of letting students get distracted in all that [dead time](#) before class, give them a focus as soon as they walk into class. That's what a do-now (or bell ringer) is: an activity students do as they walk in the door. It sets the tone for the class—this is a place

where we work. There's a nice story here that suggests that do-nows are [particularly effective on the first day of school](#) because they set the tone for the whole school year.

What Makes a Good Do-Now?

THEY DO IT ON THEIR OWN

In order for students to be able to do a do-now as they walk in, it needs to be a clear task that students can do with no input from the teacher. That means the directions should be available and obvious, whether it be on the board or on a handout. They shouldn't need to check their answers with you from part one in order to go on to part two, either. A do-now is something they can do on their own, while you are getting ready for class. (I gather these are sometimes called teacherless tasks (And Rachel Roberts has a rather nice post up on [what makes a good teacherless task](#))).

One great way to make sure students grasp the task without teacher input is to have a limited set of kinds of Do-Now activities. In my classroom, if students walk into class and see a proverb on the board, they know that their job is to interpret the meaning and decide if they agree or disagree. If they see a word cloud, they know they must guess the connection or the theme of the class.



ENGLISHADVANTAGE.INFO

Being able to do it on their own also means that they shouldn't need any additional materials. Everything they need should be readily available to them. A student can't do something now, if they are waiting on something you give them, or even waiting for a partner to arrive. Ideally, they shouldn't need anything more than a pen and perhaps a handout that you leave in a conspicuous location. Since do-nows are a sort of warm-up activity, you don't want students spending 10 minutes finding a book on the bookshelf or collecting objects around the room or looking up a lot of information on a website. You also don't want to give students an excuse not to do the activity, so make sure they have everything they need.

REAL WORK, JUST FASTER

Doing it on their own also means that the activity is leveled to the students. It shouldn't be too hard for the student to need assistance, but not too easy to be boring. And there should be a clear time limit. I like a good do-now that takes 10 minutes, with the possibility of an extension. My rule of thumb is 5 minutes before class time and 5 minutes into class.

A good do-now shouldn't be busy work. It should relate to the theme of the class. Some teachers use class activities or test questions as do-nows. As an English teacher, I like using a do-now that is a bit more fun and engaging than a typical grammar activity, for example. But my do-nows always have students working with the English language. It shouldn't be meaningless fun. Students shouldn't feel that they have wasted their time.

In fact, some teachers argue that a do-now should result in written output which is assessed by the teacher. Otherwise, students will not take it seriously. I don't necessarily agree that every time you start class, you need an activity that requires an output and a grade. But there should definitely be some result that is at the very least discussed openly in class.



THE PERFECT DO-NOW

My go-to do-now is a proverb or quotation on the board. As I

mentioned, students can then figure out what it means and decide if they agree or not. Then we discuss it briefly. I then try to link the proverb to the theme of the class.



Other great follow-ups include:

- Translate the proverb into your language
- Think of a proverb from your culture that is similar.
- Think of a story that proves or disproves the proverb
- Since proverbs often contain an idiom or metaphor or some nonstandard grammar, we can talk about that language feature and try to use it elsewhere.

If you're looking for a collection of quick and easy do-nows, check out my book, [On the Board](#). It's full of 200 proverbs, brain-teasers, riddles, puzzles, and jokes that make perfect fast, no-prep do-nows for your classroom!

And share your ideas for do-nows in the comments.

Cross-posted on the [Alphabet Publishing blog](#)