

7 Principles of a Top-Notch Class

What Great Teachers Understand

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Introduction

So what is a top-notch class? A top-notch class flows so tight and smooth that students are just along for the ride, waiting to see what's next. Each and every element is planned, thought-through, tried and tested. Rules are clear, and fully and respectfully enforced. Class has its natural rhythms, its quiet, silent times, then its engaged times. It moves and flows in predictable ways, then it surprises. Each and every lesson segment is solid and tight; each is rich in well-structured content, rich in excellent, well-chosen visuals, and followed by well-thought-out questions that maximize learning for wherever your students' skill levels may be. It includes a variety of opportunities to process material—through discussion, drawing, hands-on lessons, and more. It inspires, stimulates critical thinking, and consistently emphasizes positive life skills and character education. It's chalk-full of information, but equally full of stories and wisdom, quotes and life lessons. It's serious about learning, but it's also fun. It's a class that students will miss once they're done, and they'll come back and tell you that. It leaves them believing in their potential for greatness; it leaves them feeling better about humanity and life, and they will never forget it.

I know, that's a lot. And it won't happen overnight. It will take years, and the tweaking and augmenting will never end. But it's an endeavor that's worth putting your heart and soul into, a purpose that will fulfill your life in ways that money can't buy.

The idea for this book started out as *7 Principles of a Top-Notch Class*. Then, as I started writing, what came first was *7 Principles of Top-Notch Class Management*. These are:

1. If You Don't Bring It, You've No Right To Ask For Respect.
2. If You Don't Clearly Teach the Rules and Class Procedures, You Can't Expect Them to Know Them—Take Responsibility.
3. Four Things You Must Have:
A Seating Chart

A Class Syllabus

A Clearly Explained and Enforced No Phone Policy

An Understanding Around Why Swearing and Disrespect are Unacceptable in Most Professional Environments

4. Kids Want Structure—They Want You to Take Charge, to Lead, and They Want Everything Clearly Explained.
5. Kids Want Love.
6. It's All About Enforcement and Fairness.
7. Make It Fun—Connect With Them, Help Them Cultivate Themselves, and They Will Gladly Follow The Rules. (+Prevention Steps & Consequences)

Then, in the name of conciseness, and because the 7 Principles of a Top-Notch Class had naturally found their way into the class-management principles, I thought maybe that was the book, a trim volume focusing on class-management. It made sense. Class-management, after all, is the foundation; without it, a top-notch class can't be built. Then, as I began to piece the project together, the original 7 principles beckoned. These are:

1. It Inspires...
2. It All About Attitude: Yours. Teaching as a Spiritual Practice...
3. It Always Includes Visuals and Ambiance...
4. It Includes Ongoing Connection...
5. It Includes Ongoing Information Credibility Analysis and Character Education...
6. It's Organized Tooth and Nail—Think Like a Scientist, Then Let Go...
7. It's Fun & Full of Surprises...

Sure, each of these principles had woven themselves into the class-management principles, but each also wanted its own time, wanted elaboration and examples. It became clear that this would be part two. Then, as creativity did its thing, the importance of process and renewal kept surfacing. I had, after all, been teaching for twenty-three years, and for as long as I can remember, I'd used the same process, each and every year, to continually learn, grow, build, adapt, and nourish inspiration and a sense of renewal. It's an ongoing process, but one that particularly utilizes the summer months so each school year would begin with new inspiration, new ideas, lessons, classroom props, art, and decorations. It became clear that this would be Part

Three—The Top-Notch Process of Renewal and Inspiration—not only what I did and exactly how I continually thought-through it, but also a few of the specific methodologies I used, what I call “Beautiful Additions” (which I’ve included at the end of the book), synopses of good teaching ideas and techniques, along with the questions I’d use for each summer brainstorm and renewal. Also included is a list of suggested readings, for there are many great books on teaching. So there you go, the three parts of this book:

Part I—7 Principles of Top-Notch Class Management

Part II—7 Principles of a Top-Notch Class

Part III—The Top-Notch Process of Renewal and Inspiration

Why Principles?

In the late 1980’s, as a young man seeking to find my way in the world, I discovered the wonder and beauty of reading. I’d always read, but not within a routine, not with the clear purpose of learning and growing, so this discovery felt different. I carved out hours every day, usually in the early morning, usually with three to five books on hand, to dutifully read and annotate, to learn. It is a process that has continued throughout my life, a bedrock, one I emphasize to students in the form of continually highlighting the power and wonder of daily, diligent reading, by often mentioning books I’m reading, by talking about what they are reading and suggesting books they might like, and even by buying them books myself when warranted. Indeed, it’s another underlying theme of a Top-Notch Class: Learning is, and should be, fun, and daily reading makes us and life all the more interesting. And the beauty of this kind of consistent, voracious, and curious reading is that, in my experience, it began to feel like the books found me. I’d see an author mentioned, then stumble upon one of their books, one book led to another, and this process has gone on uninterrupted ever since, for the past 34 years. One such book, early on, was Stephen Covey’s *7 Principles of Highly Effective People*. In it, Covey outlines the

importance of building a life based on tried and true principles, and he goes on to outline what those principles are. This resonated with me. I was reading widely, within so many different specialties—science, philosophy, history, psychology, anthropology, theology, you name it—and I was seeing many connections and patterns. Dogmas, strict rules, ideologies, none seemed to have answers that were broad enough for the vast and varied world I was seeing and absorbing as I traveled and studied. It was clear that the world was multifaceted and complex, and that most ideologies were derived within a particular history, place, and time; no one idea, theory, or system seemed to provide an answer that felt whole, felt broadly true. But principles...now those felt more like guideposts worth following; those were pillars that could build a life, and now, in this context, could build a Top-Notch Classroom. Principles transcend ideology, culture, theology, all “ologies”; they are sound in most all scenarios. I teach high school Social Studies—World History, U.S. History, Government, and Economics—in Northern California. It is working-class and suburban with a diverse student body. I’ve been fortunate to have been given a lot of creative freedom that allowed me to experiment, to have been challenged with many “at-risk” youth who forced me to be better, to think differently, to adapt. Through the years, all of the Top-Notch Principles have shown and proven themselves. They are tried, tested, and verified. Whether you teach kindergarten, middle school, high school, even college or professional courses, this book is for you. Whatever your scenario (and I know there are many, with many different political and cultural challenges), follow the Top-Notch Principles and Processes, and you will build a thing of beauty. You’ll still have to do the diligent work, but little by little, with the principles as your foundation, you’ll create a top-notch class. And more top-notch classes means a better world.