

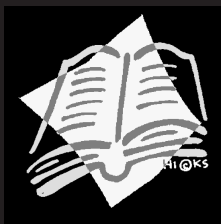
# Seven Tips for Improving Instructional Skills: Reminders for Teachers

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# Introduction

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Teachers' content knowledge and instructional skills play a critical role in improving students' academic achievement. This presentation focuses on seven ways to improve instructional skills, which often are overlooked amid the daily give-and-take of the classroom.

The tips have been gleaned from my 38 years of observing teachers and tutors in classrooms and in-service professional-development settings. Even so, the tips reflect extensive research studies and professional opinions. The attached reference page lists some of these opinions and research findings.

While the tips are addressed individually to emphasize their importance, they need to be connected. Each one has the same goal: improving teachers' abilities to promote critical thinking about the subject matter.

When teachers have a firm foundation of content knowledge and mastery of effective instructional skills, students are very likely to achieve at high levels. These seven tips can make that end result possible. Everyone whose job involves teaching should consider and apply these tips.

Walter R. Jacobs Jr.  
San Francisco, California  
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In the late 1800s and early 1900s, two African-American women accumulated collectively almost 100 years of teaching service at what was called the Aberdeen Colored High School in Aberdeen, Mississippi. One was my great-grandmother, the late Alzira Lomax. The other was her daughter, my grandmother, the late Dora Lomax Hambric. I was privileged to have known both, and I dedicate these seven tips in memory of them.

## Tip 1:

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### *Help students combat fear of academic failure.*

Research and professional opinions are focusing on effective ways to unravel the conditions that cause poor academic performance. For example, Turner, Husman and Schallet (2002) recently addressed how shame leads to academic failure. Demaray and Malecki (2002) looked at how students' perceived social support is associated with various academic, behavioral and social indicators. In his book *How Children Fail*, Holt (1995) contended that children fail primarily because they are afraid, bored and confused. I strongly believe that **fear** is the precursor to failure. My observations indicate that fear of academic failure manifests itself in student **apathy**.

Apathy is a good way to hide a fear of academic failure. Researchers at the University of Nebraska reported during a Middle Schools Network session at the 1998 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) convention that fear of failure was at the top of middle school students' list of concerns, which also included drug/alcohol abuse, physical appearance, uncaring people and unwanted pregnancies.

How can you help alleviate students' fear and the apathy it brings?

- Constantly remind students that they have the **ability** to do their assignments. Stress that you support them, that you expect them to work hard to succeed and that failure is not an option.
- Include “real-world” connections when you demonstrate concepts and principles. Indicate how the subject matter is meaningful to them **now**.
- Emphasize that good jobs in the future will demand mastery of the knowledge and academic skills you are teaching them **now**.
- Help your students to believe that, as many prominent leaders have said, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

## Tip 2:

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### *Determine grades based on academic accomplishments rather than on classroom behavior.*

I routinely ask teachers these questions: “What really counts in your classroom to get a passing grade of C? What really counts to get a grade of A or B?” Teachers repeatedly define the criteria for earning a C as “doing the work, being in class, not creating a disturbance.” They usually say that earning an A or B involves “doing more than what’s asked, never missing a day.”

Unfortunately, none of those responses measures what students know and can do academically. Core curricula and preparation materials for standardized tests describe the knowledge and skills that students should have; please refer to these descriptions when you grade students’ work. If you need a guide for organizing your thoughts and judging whether students have mastered content, *Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956) offers the following definitions of skills (which I have abridged) that students should acquire:

- Recall** — to list and/or merely describe facts, information or ideas.
- Comprehend** — to have a firm understanding and to be able to put an idea into one’s own words.
- Apply** — to use old information effectively in a new situation.
- Analyze** — to distinguish the parts of a concept, principle or formula and to show how the parts fit together.
- Synthesize** — to reassemble the parts of a concept, principle or formula in order to create a new product.
- Evaluate** — to measure facts or information against an “external yard stick” (a concept, principle, belief or formula).

High-stakes tests, as described in the National Research Council’s executive summary *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion, and Graduation* (2001), commonly include many questions that involve the **bottom four objectives**. Does your classroom instruction help students develop these skills that they need for high-stakes tests?

## Tip 3:

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### *Ask questions dealing with “how,” “why” and “what if.”*

Many teachers have asked me how they may help students handle the critical thinking that underpins important skills such as those described in Bloom’s *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. One clear way is to ask questions about “how,” “why” and “what if.” These questions are more involved and consume more time, but students may be more willing to address such questions if you get your students emotionally involved in the topic. Getting them emotionally involved in academics also can be useful in reducing the academic achievement gaps among racial/ethnic groups, according to Bell (2002).

Discussion of any content may begin with simple questions:

- “What is this?”
- “When did it happen?”
- “Who was involved?” or “Who did it?”
- “Where did it happen?”

However, do not stop there. Whenever possible, continue with critical-thinking questions, such as:

- “How is this done or organized?”
- “How do the pieces fit together?” or “How is it related to \_\_\_\_\_?”
- “Why do we need this?” or “Why did this happen?”
- “What are some consequences of this idea, innovation, discovery, etc.?”
- “What would have happened if this piece of information had been omitted?”
- “What will happen next?” or “What comes next?”

As you prepare for classroom instruction, do you include such critical-thinking questions? In an article about the “average teacher,” *Teacher Magazine* (2002) reports that, “not surprisingly, most spend abundant hours preparing for class, untangling red tape, and working to expand their knowledge and professionalism.” I contend that, despite the extensive time that teachers spend on preparing for class, most pay very little attention to how to promote critical thinking by their students.

Many questions on high-stakes tests require critical thinking. If you do not give your students repeated practice with these types of questions in the classroom, their test scores are unlikely to be what you expect or desire!

## Tip 4:

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### *Do not feel compelled to cover all specific topics in the textbook.*

The textbook may provide the wide domain of information for an academic subject, and much of the lesson plan is based on this information. Nevertheless, covering **all of the specific topics** in the textbook is neither possible nor desirable for several reasons:

1. In this age of “information explosion,” it is impossible to cover all parts of topics in a course.
2. Because it commonly requires two years to write, edit, print and distribute a textbook, some parts may be obsolete by the time the book reaches the classroom.
3. Teachers are “constantly bombarded by information and by demands to do something about that information,” according to O’Day (2002). The same could be said of students.
4. Students remember information that comes to them through various sources **in addition to** textbooks. Other sources may include the Internet, electronic references, additional printed materials from the library, discussions, lectures, projects and term papers.

Some teachers still may be concerned that students will suffer on standards-based end-of-course tests if some content in the textbook is not covered. On the contrary, students will suffer if they are not given practice in organizing specific information around basic concepts and principles. This practice will enable them to reason toward conclusions that otherwise may have been scattered throughout a mass of facts about the topic.

Students will not be shortchanged if you do not cover everything in the textbook. However, you do have to **expose them to a variety of information sources**. You will observe the results in improved academic achievement.

## Tip 5:

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*Use state and local standards to promote what your students need to know and be able to do in a “global community.”*

Several national curriculum-reform initiatives were launched in the mid-1980s. Since then, there has been vigorous concern about what students should know and be able to do. The current focus on **standards** is a step in the right direction.

*Making Standards Matter 2001* reveals that 29 states and the District of Columbia “... have clear standards in the core subject areas of English, mathematics, social studies, and science at three education levels — elementary, middle, and high school.” Reform efforts to set standards have put the emphasis where it belongs — on academics — but may not have gone far enough. For example, *Making Standards Matter 2001* reports that “... no state has a fully developed model curriculum — learning continuums, instructional strategies, performance indicators, lesson plans — in the four subject areas.”

While a focus on achieving the four components of a fully developed model curriculum is beneficial, it can distract teachers from the “bottom line”: what students need to know and be able to do **to be competent and competitive in a “global community.”** I submit the following “bottom lines” by subject area:

- **English/literature** — The student needs to develop strong skills in oral and written communication.
- **Mathematics** — The student needs to develop skills not only for making computations but also for solving “real-life” mathematical problems.
- **Science** — The student needs to know and understand the fundamental concepts and principles of the natural world and the importance of scientific inquiry.
- **Humanities/history/social studies/the arts** — The student needs to develop a sophisticated knowledge of his or her cultural/ethnic heritage and a deep appreciation for **all** cultures.

In general, the “bottom line” for competency in a global community is that the student can gather necessary information about himself or herself and about his or her environment and can make appropriate decisions based on that information.

## Tip 6:

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### *Build on what your students know; respect diversity of opinions.*

Students will enter your classes with different views about the academic subject matter under consideration. Some of these views may border on sheer superstition. However, it is important that we take students from where they are to where they need to go. I agree with authorities who say that students learn better when we present evidence for a fact or idea and permit students to debate the evidence with one another. This approach requires you to play a greater role in promoting options to various points of view. Here are some suggestions by subject area:

**English/language arts** — The key word is “**communication.**” The language of “the streets” is not the language of employment, business training manuals, college and technical school instructional materials, sales contracts, standardized tests and the law of the land. Upward mobility is based on **standard English**. Help students to respect this requirement regardless of the language they observe in the media or “on the street.” Consistently show that students must build their communication skills in order to succeed in the “real world.”

**Mathematics** — There may be several approaches to solving a mathematics problem. In some cases, trial and error may be the most efficient. Making a graph or chart, looking for a pattern, determining a different representation of a quantity and estimating proportions are other examples of problem-solving approaches. Students certainly will need to know various approaches when they encounter math questions on high-stakes tests.

**Science** — Science is the discipline that most often involves the formation of new ideas from old beliefs and theories. In this regard, an accepted teaching technique is to ask students what they think will happen before carrying out a laboratory experiment. The variety of opinions may surprise you. Help students discuss scientific evidence to promote the learning of laws, principles and big ideas.

**Social studies** — Students will memorize dates and events in history, locations of countries, and some distinguishing features of the social sciences. They will recall this information for tests, only to forget most of it afterward. You may help students **retain** information by demanding more critical thinking related to memorized dates, events, geography and selected features. Ask questions such as “how does this aspect of the subject fit into the main idea?” or “why is this date or event important?”



## Tip 7:

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*Especially in language arts, emphasize reading as a “literary experience.”*

To some extent, all instruction should involve the teaching of reading! Reading is important in science, mathematics, social studies, foreign languages and fine arts. It is critical for academic achievement in English/language arts. The reading frameworks developed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) give us an idea of the levels of reading that students need to master.

These frameworks were organized around three purposes of reading: (1) reading for literary experience; (2) reading for information; and (3) reading to perform a task. The 1992 and 1994 NAEP data show that students had the most difficulty with questions associated with the first purpose. These questions appeared to demand more critical thinking.

You may help students improve their critical-thinking skills by asking certain kinds of questions in class. Certain questions also will reflect the NAEP-defined aspects of reading literacy. The following examples pertain to reading for “literary experience” and to the NAEP reading-literacy aspects.

1. **NAEP reading-literacy aspect: Initial understanding** — The reader must provide an initial impression or “unreflected” understanding of the material.

*What is this story/plot about? How would you describe the main character?*

2. **NAEP reading-literacy aspect: Developing interpretation** — The reader must go beyond the initial impression to understand the material more completely.

*How does the plot develop? How did the character change throughout the story?*

3. **NAEP reading-literacy aspect: Personal reflection and response** — The reader must connect knowledge from the text with his or her own background knowledge.

*How did this character change your idea of \_\_\_\_\_? How does this story compare with your own experience?*

4. **NAEP reading-literacy aspect: Demonstrating a critical stance** — The reader must stand apart from the text and consider it.

*How does this author’s use of \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g., irony, humor) contribute to \_\_\_\_\_?  
What could be added to improve the author’s argument?*

# Summary

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Before your next teaching assignment, ask yourself this question: “What would I wish for my students long after they have left me?”

To make sure you are doing everything you can to implement the seven tips presented in this report, consider these questions:

- Will my students fearlessly engage themselves later in challenging academic work (TIP 1)?
- Will my students understand that their academic grades depend more on their academic accomplishments than on their behavior (TIP 2)?
- Will my students understand the full range of questions associated with mastery of a subject (TIP 3)?
- Will my students know that they will have to gather information about a subject from sources other than a textbook (TIP 4)?
- Will my students model the standards that I have set for them in order to be successful and competitive in a “global community” (TIP 5)?
- Will my students respect different opinions about a subject as they learn more about it (TIP 6)?
- Will my students read more to have “literary experiences,” instead of just to acquire information or to perform tasks (TIP 7)?

**Does your behavior encourage your students to do the things listed above? What you do every day will determine whether your students carry the lessons you teach them into their lives beyond your classroom.**

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