Twenty top tips for NQTs

Advice overload? Sue Cowley picks out surefire, straightforward ideas to give you the confidence to manage your classroom from day one and throughout the year.

When you start work as a newly qualified teacher, you get bombarded with advice from well-meaning colleagues. It can be difficult to know who to listen to, or where to start when putting all the great ideas into place. To simplify matters, here are twenty top tips for you if you are new to teaching.

Before you start

Tip number 1:
There is little point spending lots of time planning before you even meet your class – you have got to get to know them a bit first.

It is hugely tempting to plan lots of exciting lessons and schemes of work over the summer. But you do not know your children yet, so how can you figure out what they need, and how best to get them learning? Planning for children you are unfamiliar with is like packing a suitcase for a trip to a mystery country. The weather could be hot but what if it is a ski resort? You would not want to have packed a swimsuit if a snowsuit is required.

Tip number 2:
Keep a look out for cheap or free resources over the summer – at charity shops, in the garden, at the beach.

Great resources often make for a great lesson, but resources need not be expensive or complicated to work well for learning. Often the best resources are those that you stumble across: a pine cone, a beautiful shell, an abandoned bird’s nest, a rusty old key. These simple items will inspire your children and encourage you to think creatively when planning.

Tip number 3:
Be bold about adapting your classroom layout - it is your classroom! (Experiment with paper cut-outs first though.)

It is very exciting as a teacher when you have your ‘own’ classroom for the first time. It can feel a bit odd to take control of the space and change things around, but that is exactly what you should do. Mark your room as your territory, by rearranging the furniture, displays, desks, chairs, and so on to match your own teaching style and approaches. Use paper cut-outs first to experiment with different formats. Think creatively about the possibilities – for instance, you could try ‘flipping’ the whole space around 180 degrees.

Tip number 4:
Practice your ‘first lesson speech’ in the mirror. If you do not have a ‘first lesson speech’, figure one out now.

Remember that your children will be judging you (certainly subconsciously) from the moment you first open your mouth. Make sure that your first lesson speech is clear, concise and memorable. You only have one chance to make a first impression – make sure it counts. Develop a ‘script’ (mentally or on paper) and then practice it over the summer – in a mirror, on camera, or with a friend. Be sure of what you are going to say so that the words can flow freely and you can feel relaxed.

The first few weeks

Tip number 5:
Teaching is not just an intellectual occupation – it is a physical, emotional and creative one as well.

The physical demands of the job mean that will feel exhausted during your first few weeks of teaching. You should not be surprised if you find...
that your voice gets very tired as well. Give yourself time out whenever possible to recover from the demands of full time teaching. Use your breaks for the right reason – to have a rest – rather than seeing them as potential work time.

Tip number 6:
Do not be a perfectionist. Learn to say ‘that’s good enough’ and mean it.
You will feel a powerful drive to do the very best for your children. But you need to achieve a balance between working hard for them and not becoming completely exhausted. As a teacher you will never have enough time to do everything as well as you might wish. Accept this reality: learn how to say ‘that’s good enough’ and then stop. Be kind, gentle and generous to yourself, because then you will be in the best mental and physical condition to help your children. When you make a mistake, learn from it, forgive yourself and then move quickly on.

Tip number 7:
Figure out methods for learning and remembering names – this is crucial for building relationships.
Consider the strategies you will use to learn your children’s names. Learn names as quickly as possible, and then use them as often as you can. This helps you start to build relationships and to bond with your class. There are lots of ways to make sure the names stick: for instance, you might design name plates or badges, or play some drama-based name games.

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Tip number 8:
A pause is one of the most useful techniques you can use in your classroom. And while you pause, breathe!

When you are getting routines for behaviour and learning in place, it is tempting to hurry the children into following your routines by using lots of verbal instructions. However, it is far more effective to explain the routine, and then to allow the children time to comply by themselves. For instance, if you have told your class that a raised hand means ‘I’m waiting for silence’, then raise your hand and pause. Use targets to encourage the children to fall silent more quickly each time you do it.

Taking care of yourself
Tip number 9:
Protect your voice. Catch yourself when you talk too much and find non-verbal ways to ‘speak’ instead.

When you first start teaching, there is a huge temptation to stick to whole class teaching, and to talk more than is necessary in order to manage the children. You want to get information and ideas across, and keep the children focused and listening: doing this verbally seems the quickest and easiest way. The downside is that you end up overusing your voice, and it is not always an effective method for learning or for controlling behaviour.
I met a teacher recently who used a xylophone to communicate non-verbally with his class. He trained the children to understand that different tunes meant different things (line up, tidy up, waiting for silence, and so on). Think creatively for diverse ways to communicate with your children.

Tip number 10:
Of course you can smile before Christmas, just make sure it is an ‘I’m in charge’ smile not an ‘I’m terrified’ one.

This well-known piece of advice for teachers is really just a metaphor. Of course you can smile at your children, but it needs to be in a way that suggests confidence, control and relaxation, rather than nervousness, fear and tension. Balance that kind, friendly feeling with a sense of the teacher being in control. ‘Firm but fair’ is a good aim.

Supporting individuals
Tip number 11:
You will like some children more than others. Some may even irritate you. The secret is – never let it show!
This is something that you will realise early on, although we rarely talk about it. It is completely normal to like some children, and to find others annoying. The secret is to ignore your personal feelings and treat everyone the same. Be aware
that your emotions might be apparent without you even realising it: children are very sensitive to the subliminal messages that adults send.

Tip number 12:
Let parents and carers know how they can help and support you – they want the best for their children.

Find lots of ways to get parents and carers involved – they can have a huge impact on how well children do. Be specific about how they can support their child’s learning at home. Communicate with parents via a class newsletter, a reading diary, a class blog, in person, and invite them into school to see what the children have been doing.

Tip number 13:
Flag up any potential special needs issues for children in your class, even if you are not sure if there is definitely a problem. Do not assume someone else will do it.

It can feel awkward to say ‘I think this child has a problem’ when you are new to the profession. However, the sooner a special need is identified, the quicker support can be put in place. Take time to talk with your special needs coordinator; he or she will give you great tips and advice for supporting individual children.

Dealing with difficult behaviour
Tip number 14:
Think long and hard about the behaviour you expect from your children. Get three priorities clear in your mind before day one.

To be successful at behaviour management, you need to have clear expectations. If you want your children to behave, they have to know what ‘behaving’ looks like, and what will happen if they refuse to do so. Talk with the children about your expectations of their behaviour right at the start of your time together. Some teachers like to do this through a discussion with the class.

Tip number 15:
Do not talk over your students, ever. This is the hardest tip to follow, but quite possibly the most important.

I love the rule: ‘One person speaks at a time’. This expectation makes it clear that we all have respect for each other’s ideas, thoughts and opinions. When we listen to each other, we can learn from each other. It can take time to train your class to fall silent and listen carefully, but it is very worthwhile.

Tip number 16:
Someone has to be in charge. If not you, then it will be the most difficult children. Be the adult in the room.

Although you want children to be independent, and have input into their learning, a classroom is not a democracy. Someone has to be in control, and it needs to be you, because you are in charge of ensuring that learning happens. Get structures, patterns and routines into place so that children feel secure and know how to behave and what to expect.

Teaching and learning
Tip number 17:
Lesson plans are not ‘set in stone’ – view them as a flexible template, not as a blueprint. Adapt to survive.

Try not to spend hours planning each individual lesson. You need to be responsive to the children who are actually sat in front of you, rather than ‘sticking with the plan’ at all times. It is not possible to plan ahead for every eventuality, so do not even try. Learn to respond to the class, using flexibility and lateral thinking as appropriate.

Tip number 18:
It is really hard to give clear instructions. Structure what you say and avoid giving too much information at once.

It is surprisingly tricky to give effective instructions; learning how to do this is one of the key skills you will develop as an NQT. First, make sure everyone is focused on what you are saying. Be clear and concise, using repetition to reinforce what has to be done. Back up your instructions by using visual signals – these could be hand gestures, writing on the board, or resources such as a timer. Go through an example so that everyone knows what to do.

Tip number 19:
Learn the value of target setting – it gives pace, purpose and a sense of forward momentum to a lesson.

Whenever you ask your children to complete an activity, make sure that you give them a target to keep them moving forwards. Your target might be to do with how much they achieve – ‘I’d like everyone to write at least five sentences’ – or to do with how much time they have – ‘You’ve got five minutes to get this done: ready, steady, go.’ Any time that you sense the children’s energy flagging, incorporate a quick target to re-energise the class.

Tip number 20:
Children have body clocks, just like adults do. Take account of when they will be lively or tired in your teaching.

As the saying goes, ‘there’s no point in flogging a dead horse’. Adapt your teaching during the week to take account of when your children are at their most receptive, and equally when they are likely to need a break or a rest. Watch out for wet and windy Wednesday afternoons, when everyone’s mood is low. Have a bank of lively or creative ideas to use with your children when tiredness hits.