

# Lesson Plans and Unit Plans: The Basis for Instruction

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You have set yourself up for success by learning everything there is to know about school and district policies and where to find correct answers to questions; setting up an organized classroom with every book, paper, and handout ready to go; working out basic rules to create a classroom that is a welcoming and safe place for intellectual development; determining consequences to support the rules; and planning for procedures, schedules, and seating charts that make sense. Now it is time to get to the actual purpose of the job—teaching students.

With the standards and pacing guide in hand, you are ready to write lesson plans that will inspire students and generate success. The eight-phase lesson plan template described in this chapter delineates the key components of great lessons, making the best use of every teaching moment. When lessons flow sequentially, always reviewing prior knowledge and then constructing deeper understanding based on new concepts and skills, learning is relevant, organized, and comprehensible. Yesterday's learning is complemented by today's lesson, which leads to achievement tomorrow and beyond.

## The Challenge

In college I majored in French and minored in physical education. Why? Because I loved both and knew that each would be fun to teach. I never considered that the two might be a tough combination for someone who might want to hire me. I just wanted to learn more in subjects I loved.

Two French instructors stand out in my mind for deeply expanding my knowledge of the language. Mme. Gambieta was ornery and frightening, and she taught grammar with the power of a hurricane, making clear her extremely high expectations. Each night we had a pile of homework to complete. The next day she would call on one or two of us to go to the board to translate a complicated sentence she had written there. Any mistakes meant a demeaning tirade that each of us dreaded.

Whenever she chose me, I committed errors and then endured her ridicule, which caused me to feel helpless and hopeless as a student of language. No matter how I studied or performed at the board, my work was never of the quality that Mme. Gambieta demanded. I did learn—though through tyranny and fear—and I memorized and eventually mastered her required skills. Fortunately, I loved French so much that she could not defeat me.

The second professor who stands out in my mind is Dr. Bertollo. A tiny man physically, his immense adoration of the language brought magic to everything we did in class, whether it was reading, writing, speaking, discussion, or just taking in his mesmerizing lectures. Each moment in his presence increased my confidence and my love of French.

When Dr. Bertollo described and explained great literary authors and their works, he closed his eyes and transported his learners into an enchanted world of learning. Each class was inspirational and motivational and multiplied my knowledge and understanding. He treated each of us as if we were uniquely bright and gifted. He wanted us to love French language and literature as he did. And we did.

## Lessons Learned

These two instructors were each teaching the same subject area to college students, but they possessed very different attitudes about igniting student learning. They were both passionate and knowledgeable, but very dissimilar in their lessons and delivery. I learned, but which teacher and type of lessons best illuminated my learning?

## Lesson Plans: Success by Design

It is strange, but some teachers do not complete detailed lesson plans every day and then wonder why students do not learn. Although years of experience can shore up less-than-complete planning, nothing compares to well-planned lessons. Comprehensive plans increase the likelihood that lessons run smoothly, so that students receive quality instruction.

By planning ahead, you are always set for the day. If you become ill, you do not have to drag your sick body from a cozy, warm bed to write plans and then drive in a semiconscious state to the classroom to organize each aspect of the upcoming day, including additional activities and backup materials for a substitute. How nice to remain inert and under the covers knowing that thorough lesson plans are complete and on the desk, with all supplementary material prepared!

Few factors are as vital to teaching success as having well-designed lessons. Imagine a doctor who does not plan adequately for surgery, a contractor who builds a house as he pounds along using scrap lumber and duct tape wherever he finds them, or a teacher teaching a lesson with no foundation or clear direction. Students attain desired learning outcomes through excellent lessons. Creating the plans should not take longer than presenting the actual lesson—but it may feel that way at first.

Textbooks and supplementary materials for the subject or grade level provide many lesson plan outlines, strategies, and activities. Being fully familiar with the materials and with grade-level and subject requirements leads to solid instruction. Excellent materials sit on shelves or are available online while teachers spend hours trying to design lessons instead of taking advantage of what already exists. Refer to and implement ideas and lessons from these materials, and then modify or fill in when no available tool can adequately meet instructional needs.

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## Lesson Plan Phases

After studying, observing, and reflecting upon lessons and lesson plans for many years, I have manipulated and adapted ideas to create a sequential design that reaches each diverse learner. Although on-the-spot modifications are almost always necessary while teaching, I use an eight-step model that engages students by building on their knowledge. The design provides many opportunities for teachers to recognize and correct students' misconceptions while extending understanding for future lessons.

### Phase 1: Introduction

**Set a purpose.** Describe the overarching reason for this lesson.

**Introduce the key concepts, topic, main idea.** Get students on the right track. This step may be a note on the board, a diagram, or a probing question of the day's lesson focus.

**Pull students into the excitement of learning.** Seize students' attention with items like an amazing fact, a funny quirk, a challenge, or other mind tickler.

**Make the learning relevant.** Explain how this lesson extends past learning and leads to future learning—that is, the significance of the concepts, skills, and focus of the lesson.

## **Phase 2: Foundation**

**Check on previous knowledge.** Verify what students already know.

**Clarify key points.** Double-check on learning from the past.

**Focus on specific standards, objectives, goals.** Link the lesson to the standards, and let students know exactly what they will know and be able to do as a result of this lesson.

**Check for correctness and add to background knowledge.** Add extra information for the day's learning and beyond—just enough to launch into the main lesson.

**Introduce key vocabulary.** See it; say it; read it; write it.

## **Phase 3: Brain Activation**

**Ask questions to clarify ideas and to add knowledge.** Engage students in the learning and build background with probing questions.

**Brainstorm main ideas.** Fill students' heads with ideas, concepts, possibilities; allow them to expand and clarify their thinking.

**Clarify and correct misconceptions.** Engage students in activities that will inform you as to whether students are confused or have incorrect ideas so corrections can be made before the misconceptions become worse or detrimental to learning.

## **Phase 4: Body of New Information**

**Provide teacher input.** Lecture, add key points and new information, read the text or articles, and solve problems. Present the body of the lesson. This may be a whole-class lecture, a small-group activity with teacher supervision, or a partner activity with teacher supervision. The learning is active (not silent reading without specific goals or mindless completion of a worksheet).

## **Phase 5: Clarification**

**Check for understanding with sample problems, situations, questions.** Have students practice with the information just taught. Guide the learning.

## **Phase 6: Practice and Review**

**Provide time for practice and review.** Allow students time to practice under your supervision. You and the students work together.

## Phase 7: Independent Practice

**Supervise students' independent practice.** Select additional strategies for small groups of students who still do not "get it." Other students may begin to work independently, with the final goal being that all students can work on their own. This practice prepares students for successful homework, and it prepares them for future learning.

## Phase 8: Closure

**Bring the lesson to closure.** Link the lesson phases and information together. Summarize the learning of the day, and discuss how it fits into the big vision for learning. Have students demonstrate what they know and can do by writing a brief note to hand in as they leave; the note may include questions, problems, or ideas on the learning. Alternatively, they may write in their journals or explain their understanding to a partner.

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## Lesson Plan Template

Figure 7.1 shows a sample lesson plan for an 8th-grade history lesson on the Civil War. The key parts of the template underlying the lesson plan are the following:

Time allotment—How much time to spend with each lesson phase, such as the introduction and the body of new information.

Lesson phase—An explanation of the elements of each phase.

Details—Space for writing a supply list, page numbers, predetermined discussion questions, and other key lesson points.

The plan assumes a time slot of 50 to 70 minutes. Because a period or day has a finite number of minutes, it is critical to plan lesson phases carefully. (See Appendix A for a template you can use to plan a 50- to 70-minute lesson.)

### Figure 7.1. Sample Lesson Plan

8th Grade History Lesson on Civil War		
Time Allotment (Minutes)	Lesson Phase	Details

<p><b>5</b></p>	<p><b>Introduction</b></p> <p>Set a purpose. Introduce the topic with a grabber and information to get students thinking. Make the learning relevant.</p>	<p>Write the phrase "All men are created equal" from the Gettysburg Address. Have students explain what this phrase possibly meant in the 1860s.</p>
<p><b>5–10</b></p>	<p><b>Foundation</b></p> <p>Check on previous learning. Clarify key points of the coming lesson, including standards, goals, and objectives, building background knowledge and key vocabulary.</p>	<p>Quick discussion of the grabber.</p> <p>Discuss slaves, women, uneducated white men, educated white men.</p> <p>Goal: To explain the significance of the Gettysburg Address in American history and to link the learning to voting rights today.</p> <p>Key terms: <i>equal, conceived in liberty, dedicated, proposition</i></p>
<p><b>5</b></p>	<p><b>Brain Activation</b></p> <p>Ask questions; clarify; provide additional background knowledge. Perhaps include a brainstorm activity on the topic to check learning.</p>	<p>What do the words mean?</p> <p>Why did Lincoln phrase his speech this way?</p> <p>What would happen today if Lincoln gave this same speech?</p> <p>What do we know about the United States in the 1860s based on this speech?</p> <p>How does the phrase "All men are created equal" tie to the rest of the speech? To history at the time? To a deep understanding of American history?</p> <p>How does the opening paragraph lead to the ideas of paragraph two? Paragraph three?</p>
<p><b>10–15</b></p>	<p><b>Body of New Information</b></p> <p>Build background knowledge, lecture, and introduce key new points of understanding, correcting misconceptions. Read text; complete whole-class problems; conduct class discussion.</p>	<p>Discuss the Battle of Gettysburg; refer to information on pages 273–281 in the textbook. Discuss pictures of battle on pages 282–285. Write key notes/ideas on overhead. Have students add information to history notes.</p>

<b>5–10</b>	<b>Clarification</b> Provide sample problems and situations. Pose questions to move students toward independent work.	Students write their reflections on the information presented in the text in their notebooks/journals.
<b>5–10</b>	<b>Practice and Review</b> Students work with teacher and whole class, in small groups, or with a partner to clarify learning.	Discuss in small groups the significance of the speech, the battle, the fact that President Lincoln came to the battlefield to make the speech, the turning point of the Civil War.
<b>10</b>	<b>Independent Practice</b> Students practice on their own. Begin homework. Struggling students get additional practice.	Students select two or three other key phrases from the Gettysburg Address and write a brief summary of each.
<b>5</b>	<b>Closure</b> Connect the lesson details together. Answer questions and respond to wholeclass difficulties.	Students share phrases with a partner. They write their favorite phrase with a brief explanation as to why on an "exit pass."  Teacher collects exit passes as students leave to assess learning and understanding and to use as a guide to tomorrow's instruction.

As the lesson is taught, the teacher pays close attention to how well students understand key concepts so she can later write notes in her lesson plan book to inform future lessons. Every detail, from the minutes necessary for each phase to notes concerning the best questions for student response, provides insight for the next lesson.

Pacing the lesson means balancing content delivery, practice time, and checks for student understanding. If the opening of the lesson lasts 15 minutes, less time is available for the main focus and practice that are necessary to improve skills. A brief introduction that draws students into the learning transitions them into the heart of the lesson with adequate time left for questions and practice. The same is true if the main portion of the lesson lasts for 45 minutes of a 50-minute period. Students will not have time to review and apply their learning or practice independently before they leave the classroom with homework that they may not understand. Because teachers expect homework to be done completely and correctly, they must be certain that students have the skills to accomplish the task.

A timer can help you practice pacing lessons. A kitchen timer with a short beep when time is up does not disturb the class and reminds you of the time elapsed. A timer on the overhead or projector screen is also useful for keeping students on task because they can see the seconds ticking away as they work. When students know they have a set number of minutes (always slightly less than it seems it will take them to

complete the task), they stay on task and finish within the time slot. Good timing means all lesson phases can be completed.

When I work with teachers, it scares me to death when they inform me that they do not have a lesson plan or do not have anything special planned for the day. Every day is special, every day students need to learn, and every day you must have a plan. Change your plan, modify it, carry parts over from today's to tomorrow's lesson, but never, ever leave school without lesson plans for tomorrow and the upcoming week

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## Essentials to Learning: Practice and Closure

Most teachers have lessons that contain an introduction and a body or main focus (Phases 1 through 4), but several of the other phases are missing. It is crucial that students receive adequate information and are able to understand and apply it accurately when they are on their own. This is why Phases 5 through 7 are so important. You can think of these phases in these terms:

"I do"—Clarification (Phase 5: Teacher demonstrates, explains, models for students)

"We do, we do, we do"—Practice and review (Phase 6: Students and teacher work together)

"You do"—Independent practice (Phase 7: Students work independently)

By incorporating these phases into lessons, you ensure that students understand the lesson (because they have observed your demonstration or heard your explanation) and that they can continue working outside class (because they have practiced and have models to refer to).

An excellent closure activity is the exit pass (Figure 7.2, p. 113). On a note card or small piece of paper, students respond to a question you have posed orally, summarize what they have learned in class, or ask their own question about the learning or lesson. Student responses in these sorts of closure activities provide you with instant feedback for adjustment of your instruction. If another group of students is coming to class for the same lesson, you can make modifications based on the information just gathered from your students. This feedback is also helpful for determining the effectiveness of instruction.

### Figure 7.2. Sample Exit Pass

Student's name:
Summary or your response to learning/lesson:
Question about today's learning:

Char Owen, a 4th grade teacher with many years of experience, calls her exit passes "passports." She uses them as a ticket to recess or lunch. The passes transform into "passports" with several pages, and the students' responses become their visas and stamps from countries (learning) they have visited. After

each of Char's lessons, she writes her lesson reflections on a manila folder designed around the key concepts of the unit of study. She indicates what went well and what needs reteaching and creates a table of contents for the papers inside the folder. The handouts and activities in the folder are readily available if she needs extra copies now, and everything is ready for future lessons as well. She simply pulls out the folder, gathers materials she needs and copies them, places a check mark on the front to show what she has used, and then returns the masters to the folder.

Lesson plans are essential for clear, organized instruction. Although they are time-consuming and sometimes tedious to prepare, never be caught without them. When planning is incomplete, timing and organization are off and students suffer.

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## Additional Considerations

*As you plan your lessons, keep the following things in mind:*

- Attention span of your students, age group, and diversity of learners.
- Complexity of material and time requirements for each instructional component.
- Decisions concerning whether whole-class presentation, small groups, or partners are best for teaching and learning a particular concept.
- The best configuration of student groups for optimal learning, for example, homogeneous or heterogeneous ability groups, complementary interests, or personalities that work well together.
- Activities that best facilitate the learning of each student.
- Preassessment of skills and background knowledge to determine what students already know, what they need to know, and what their misconceptions are.
- Selection of regular and supplemental materials to augment learning.
- Strategies for frequently monitoring and adjusting the lesson.

*As you think about lesson plans, consider the following:*

- ★ Is there enough information written to make the lesson clear?
- ★ Have you selected a variety of activities? Are the goals and objectives clear and attainable, and do they match the proposed instruction?
- ★ Does this lesson build on previous knowledge and lend itself to future lessons?
- ★ At lesson's end, are students set for independent success?

Good lesson plans are always well worth the effort. During my first years of teaching I always had the plan book opened on my podium for easy reference as I walked by during instruction. Later, after writing the formal plans I created note cards with reminders to carry with me so that I did not have to refer to the formal plans as often.

For my junior high and high school students, I designed a study guide. The guide highlighted the goals, objectives, assignments, and due dates for one or two weeks at a time so students knew what we would be learning. Every step I took in planning led to ease of implementation. Even plans I had to discard



because they ended up not meeting the learning needs of my students increased my knowledge and understanding of the essentials of good lessons.

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## After the Lesson

After each lesson, consider what went well and what needs to be adjusted. This is easily done with a post-lesson appraisal, such as the one in Figure 7.3. Great teachers always reflect on their lessons. An appraisal form can also be completed by paraprofessionals, volunteers, or substitute teachers who have worked with your students to provide feedback on their instruction and student learning.

### Figure 7.3. Post-lesson Appraisal

1. What went well? Why?
2. What needs work? What will I do to improve the lesson?
3. What do I need to do in tomorrow's lesson? How will I get it done?
4. What special considerations are there, and how should I handle them?
5. Additional comments and thoughts:

In addition to critiquing your own lessons and lesson plans, ask students to give you feedback on the lesson quality, organization, clarity, and goals reached. This feedback is especially beneficial when students analyze a unit of study that may have caused them to struggle with time management, such as a unit involving a research paper. A question I use is "What will you do differently next time?" The best-ever answer: "I'll have my mom get started a lot sooner so next time she can do a better job." Sometimes lesson feedback is more insightful than you could ever imagine.

No matter how well-planned lessons are, there are always things that just happen. Time and practice make lessons flow more smoothly. The more you teach, the more experience you gain and the greater the number of activities and strategies you will have in your repertoire for excellent instruction.

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## Closing Advice

Teaching is a conglomeration of best teaching practices, intricate lesson and unit plans, and the expertise of the teacher guiding students to learning. It is exhausting and exhilarating. Those who remain in the profession over time develop a tremendous knowledge and understanding of children, their perceptions, and how young minds work. Although you may not make the multimillion-dollar salary of a sports celebrity, a movie star, or a CEO, your reward for teaching will be worth far more.

On the most troubling days, when frustration and worry levels appear to be at their highest, remember that there is nothing more exciting than observing students when the "Aha! I get it" light pops on. You may never know the difference you made in the lives of students, but teachers always leave a mark. Great lessons and well-planned units increase knowledge and leave imprints of competence and understanding.

Teaching and learning are a never-ending cycle. Although all of the work may wear you out, when students' minds shine, you will be refreshed and ready for the next challenge.