



The 8 Minutes That Matter Most

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I am an English teacher, so my ears perk up when writers talk about their process. I've found the advice handy for lesson planning, too. That's because both writing and planning deal with craft.

In writing, you want your audience to be absorbed. You want them to care about your characters. You want them be delighted by the suspense. That's not easy to pull off, and it's just as hard in the classroom. So when writers pull back the curtain on what they do, I pay attention. I look at the ways in which they create drama and tension. I study how their twists and turns pace a story much like the transitions of a lesson. I am also fascinated by rituals.

John Irving, the author of *The Cider House Rules*, begins with his last sentence:

I write the last line, and then I write the line before that. I find myself writing backwards for a while, until I have a solid sense of how that ending sounds and feels. You have to know what your voice sounds like at the end of the story, because it tells you how to sound when you begin.

That is the crux of lesson planning right there -- endings and beginnings. If we fail to engage students at the start, we may never get them back. If we don't know the end result, we risk moving haphazardly from one activity to the next. Every moment in a lesson plan should tell.

The eight minutes that matter most are the beginning and endings. If a lesson does not start off strong by activating prior knowledge, creating anticipation, or establishing goals, student interest wanes, and you have to do some heavy lifting to get them back. If it fails to check for understanding, you will never know

if the lesson's goal was attained.

Here are eight ways to make those eight minutes magical.

Beginnings

1. *Trend With YouTube*

YouTube reaches more 18- to 34-year-olds than any cable channel. One hundred hours of video are uploaded to it every minute. There's something for every grade, subject, and approach on YouTube. Not only does it make learning HD visible, it also allows teachers to make connections that could never happen before. I had my students draw comparisons between Carl Sandberg's poem "Chicago" (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/2043>) and the Chrysler Super Bowl commercial (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKL254Y_jtc) featuring Eminem. Fifteen years ago, I would have had to keep my finger on the record button of my VCR remote and pray for it to air. YouTube makes anticipatory sets a whole lot easier.

2. *Start With Good News*

If you want to create a safe space for students to take risks, you won't get there with a pry bar. Edutopia blogger Todd Finley starts his classes with two minutes of sharing good news (<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/overcoming-classroom-stage-fright-todd-finley>). Classrooms that celebrate success build the comfort necessary for students to ask critical questions, share ideas, and participate in honest and open discussions. Starting with celebrations is a short, easy way to get there.

3. *Cross Disciplines*

Toss a football around the class before you teach the physics of a Peyton Manning spiral (<http://stemjobs.com/science-behind-perfect-football-spiral/>). Play a song that makes a classical allusion (http://www.songfacts.com/category-songs_that_refer_to_mythology.php) for your mythology unit. Measure the angles of a Picasso painting (<http://pictify.com/523771/pablo-picasso-two-girls-reading-1934-oil-on-canvas-university-of-michigan-museum-of-art>) in math class. Integrating other disciplines teaches students that ideas and concepts do not stand alone but rather exist within a wider web of knowledge. Starting with another discipline can open their senses to deeper learning.

4. *Write for 5*

Kelly Gallagher says that students should write four times as much as a teacher can grade. Students need to write -- a lot -- if they are to improve. One way to achieve that is to start each day with an essential question that students must spend five minutes answering. If done day after day, it becomes ritualistic and builds stamina. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe have a diverse list of essential questions (<http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/109004/chapters/What-Makes-a-Question-Essential%A2.aspx>).

Endings

1. *Level Up*

GameStop operates 6,457 retail stores throughout the world. It's no secret that kids love video games, partly because of the constant reward for reaching new levels and earning higher rankings. This creates a

sense of accomplishment, competency, and worth. Teachers can play upon this need and develop levels of proficiency based on standards. At the end of a lesson, have students chart their own progress toward mastery based on standards. A popular game offers beginner, heroic, legendary, and mythic as levels, and they may be just the right motivation to get reluctant learners to overachieve.

2. *Exit Tickets*

Robert Marzano classifies exit tickets into four different categories (<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct12/vol70/num02/The-Many-Uses-of-Exit-Slips.aspx>): formative assessment data, student self analysis, instructional strategy feedback, and open communication. However they are used, they provide quick and comprehensive bits of data and feedback. Wiggins and McTighe also have a comprehensive list of checks for understanding (<http://www.christina.k12.de.us/literacylinks/elemresources/comprehension/techniques.pdf>).

3. *Mimic Social Media*

The digital world's spirit of collaboration and connection can be replicated in the physical classroom as bulletin boards become mock social media spaces to share ideas. Erin Klein has written about (<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/top-teaching/2014/04/twitter-instagram-and-pinterest-classroom>) the positive ways to use of Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram in the classroom. In the final four minutes, you can challenge students to compose a tweet or find an image best capturing the learning that occurred.

4. *Post-It Power*

Another way to create a positive classroom climate beyond the "good news" start is to end with notes of influence. Have students write one thing that they learned from someone else in class on a Post-it note and stick it to the chalkboard. At the start of the next day, read these notes aloud. This affirms that a classroom is a community of learners and validates participation because it does so much more than answer a question -- it helps others understand more deeply.

How do you begin and end lessons in your classroom?

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