

You can't do it all, but where can a teacher really cut corners?

by Angela Watson

The question I'm answering today is one of the most blunt and honest questions I've ever received from a teacher. She wrote:

"Everyone knows that a first year teacher is not going to perform at the same level as a 30 year veteran. I would like to be intentional about where I am cutting corners so that my inexperience has the least impact on my students. What areas do you think are most important for first year teachers to focus on? How do I ask for guidance about where I can cut back without sounding like I'm incapable of doing my job?"

Here are six things to consider as you figure out where it's okay to cut corners.

1) Refuse to internalize the pressure to be as good as a veteran teacher.

I commend this teacher for realizing that it's highly unlikely that a new teacher will be as good as a 30-year veteran.

And that in all likelihood, new teachers will need to cut corners. Recognizing this is one of the biggest hurdles new teachers face because they internalize the pressure to DO ALL THE THINGS and do them all perfectly. That is not possible, and you cannot allow yourself to take on such a heavy burden, no matter what pressure you're facing in your school.

Mentally, you have to tell yourself, Nope, I am not expecting myself to be an expert in every single area of curriculum, instruction, pedagogy, and classroom management in the first few months of the job. This is complex stuff that takes years to master, and I refuse to feel guilt or shame because I'm at the beginning of the process. I'm learning more every day, and that's all I can ask of myself.

2) Focus on cutting corners in areas that have the least impact on students.

I also think it's wise to realize that the shortcuts should come from areas that have the least amount of impact on students. Your priority should be the stuff that matters most for students and their learning. And that can be challenging because it's often easiest to take shortcuts with the kids. The kids are far less likely to call you out on it than your principal or the parents!

Students often get our leftovers because the adults in our lives demand our time and energy in ways that are harder to ignore. As teachers, we all have moments when we scramble around to find some busywork for students so we can handle a paperwork or data request that was made at the last minute.

We have all had moments where we assigned something to keep students out of our hair while we finished lesson planning or grading papers or something else we just weren't able to keep up with during non-instructional hours. Please don't think for a moment that this is not happening at least occasionally in every classroom across the country.

And it creates tremendous guilt and frustration because we're spending our very limited time on things that don't have the biggest impact on kids.

There's nothing we want more than to have dynamic, engaging lessons fully prepared in advance and to be completely present and tuned into our students while teaching those lessons, and it's easy to get discouraged when that's not a reality 100% of the time. You have to start by realizing that's not possible and be prepared to cut corners.

3) Don't try to do all your lesson plans alone or create everything from scratch.

Lesson planning is too big (and too important) of a job to struggle through alone when you're new. Co-plan with your team members whenever possible. Buy ready to use activities from TeachersPayTeachers. Even if you don't love your colleagues' lessons or the materials you find on TpT are not a perfect fit with your teaching style and your students' needs, you're better off utilizing them than staying up until 2 a.m. every night trying to reinvent the wheel.

I promise that some other teacher has already figured out a way to teach the skill you need to teach in a way that's going to work for most of your students. Over time, you will learn what works for YOUR students and you'll be able to adapt ideas you find online very quickly and easily. But that day will only come after you've had more teaching experience, so don't beat yourself up about not being in that place right now. Use pre-made activities and experiment with small adaptations until you can really make them the lessons your own.

Do not buy into the idea that is perpetuated in some education circles, particularly on Twitter, that you're not a REAL teacher if you don't make all your lesson plans and activities yourself from scratch. There are some very outspoken people in education who seem to think that teachers are somehow cheating their students if they re-use lesson ideas from year to year and don't make brand new activities for each group of students they have. They pressure teachers to not only personalize all resources for their class but to then spend their evenings and weekends online sharing everything they made with other educators.

If you can do that, great. But I think it's putting way too much pressure on teachers to insinuate that they should be customizing every set of materials that they use in their classrooms and that they should not find or buy ready-to-use materials online.

Really high-quality resources do not require a ton of modifications, especially for a new-ish teacher who is probably better off doing things the way an experienced teacher says has worked best for them, rather than trying to carve out a brand new, uncharted path for five or six lessons every single day.

Of course, you don't want to be teaching the same exact lessons the same way five years from now, and you always want to make sure you're reflecting on what works and what doesn't and adapting things for your kids' unique needs. But during those first few years in the classroom or when you've moved to a new grade level or subject area, it is perfectly fine to rely on what your coworkers or other teachers have created so that you can keep your head above water with all the other tasks that are on your plate.

4) Reach out to other teachers unabashedly.

Find someone who is fantastic at teaching your grade level or subject area and mooch off them constantly. Seriously, if you're a first-year teacher, it's okay. Truly excellent teachers love to share what works in their classrooms and enjoy mentoring new teachers who are enthusiastic and willing to learn. It actually makes them feel bad when they find out you were muddling your way through something unsuccessfully when they had everything you needed the whole time and just didn't realize you were struggling.

So ask colleagues whom you admire for activities, forms, materials — anything you're lacking. You should feel no guilt about this. And when you hit your third year of teaching, remember how needy you were and reach out to someone else who is new. (You will have a tremendous amount of experience and wisdom to offer by your third year in a grade level, believe me!)

5) Cut the cutesy and let go of perfectionism.

You don't have time right now to make things beautiful. If you make an activity, leave it plain. You can improve it next year when you re-teach the lesson.

In the business world, people talk about the MVP: Minimum Viable Product. You know how a lot of new stuff comes out in a beta version? Or they release a product and then three days later there are a bunch of updates?

That's because they released the MVP. The company sent something out in the world that is far from perfect, they announced that it's far from perfect, and then they learned from what happened as real people used the product to figure out how it needs to be improved. In the meanwhile, they were able to keep moving forward instead of being stuck on trying to get every single detail of an item exactly right before showing it to anyone.

The MVP is an important part of letting go of perfectionism. As a new teacher, you cannot afford to spend hours creating center materials, rearranging your file cabinet, or leveling your classroom library. Yes, these are worthwhile tasks, but they're not top priority.

You have to **learn how to prioritize tasks when everything seems urgent**. You do not have to do everything your first year. Remind yourself of this over and over when you feel like you are not measuring up.

6) Reflect on what works/what doesn't so you can learn to trust your own judgment.

The most important part of knowing when you've done enough and where you can cut corners is being able to trust yourself. That's hard as a new teacher because you feel like you don't know what you're doing and you can't trust yourself yet. Your judgment and discernment as a teacher are still questionable.

But you ARE the only person in the world who truly understands what needs to be done for your unique teaching situation and group of kids. You know your classroom dynamics better than anyone else.

And so you can learn to trust that feeling in you that rises up and says, I can stop here. *This is enough. I am enough. My value and worth as a teacher are not defined by what I do, but who I am.*

Remember, no one in the school system is likely to ever tell you that. They're not going to say, *yep, it's fine to cut corners here so you can go spend time with your family and rest up a bit.*

YOU are responsible for drawing your own boundaries around your time and figuring out how much energy you're going to expend on every task. You decide. You can't let guilt or comparison sway you from what you know is right deep in your heart or cause you to sacrifice your health or your family.

I encourage you to allow yourself to stop short of what is perfect and cut corners where you need to in order to survive. Keep pursuing excellence, and know that it's something you will achieve over time and not overnight...and that's okay.

About the author

Angela is a National Board Certified Teacher with 8 years experience as a K-12 instructional coach and 11 years experience in the classroom. As founder of Due Season Press and Educational Services, she has created [printable curriculum resources](#), [online courses](#), [4 books](#), the [Truth for Teachers podcast](#), and the [40 Hour Teacher Workweek Club](#). She's been supporting teachers through this website since 2003.

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