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Reclaiming Your Time

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Table of Contents

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Fix Your Broken Routines: Three Rules to Live By

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I'm the worst at sticking to routines and I'm terrible at enforcing them. My classroom was never immaculate, my desks never quite aligned. Every year, I tried to implement routines and procedures I'd read about in all my teaching books, but many of them never seemed to "stick." The problem didn't lie with the kids; it was that I couldn't seem to find routines that worked for *me*, and definitely not for a whole school year. I despaired that although I may be a good teacher, I might never be like the teacher down the hall with the Pinterest-worthy room.

I'd grown accustomed to organized chaos, but after my first year I thought, *there's got to be a better way*. By pausing to reflect on the chaos in my classroom, I was able to get to the root problems and then refine my approach to routines and procedures to target persistent challenges. Reflect, (uncover the) root, and refine became the three rules that repaired my broken classroom routines.

Rule #1: Reflect

After a lot of reflection and more failed plans than I could count, I posed the following three prompts to myself (*and here are some of my responses, at the time*):

1. It annoys me most when . . .
 - a. *students ask to go to the bathroom in the middle of my lesson*
 - b. *students take materials without asking for permission*
 - c. *students don't ask for clarification when they don't understand something*
2. I lose a lot of time when . . .
 - a. *students don't transition to the next activity in a timely manner*
 - b. *students don't complete the homework that prepares them for class the next day*

c. I have to stop what I'm doing in class to fill out administrative paperwork

3. I can't tell you how many times I have had to . . .
 - a. repeat directions for how to head papers that will be turned in*
 - b. look for textbooks that weren't returned to the bookshelf*
 - c. sweep the floor after students ripped their essays from their notebooks*

These were my broken routines and I had to fix them. But how?

Rule #2: Root

Since cookie-cutter approaches weren't working, I needed to look for the root causes of each annoyance before I applied a routine to it. Let's take 2b: students aren't completing homework. There could be a million reasons for it, so I went to the source and asked my students. I found the usual suspects who forgot about it or just plain didn't want to do it, but I also found that one of my boys was the eldest of eight and his job was to babysit his siblings and make sure *their* homework got done while his parents were working their second and third jobs of the day; I found out one of my girls was enrolled in an extracurricular activity every day until sundown because her parents insisted it would make her lose weight; I found that my athletes were struggling with deadlines that had very short notice due to timing conflicts with practices, games, and other school-related responsibilities.

Rule #3: Refine

I could have easily assigned detention to those who had not completed their homework, but would it have made a difference? What if I could implement a system that would help them instead? I decided to assign homework that takes longer than 15 minutes on a weekly basis, rather than assigning it throughout the week. After all, as a professional in the real world, I usually had at least a week's notice before something was due, so I figured it was fair. Now it was time for details and refinement. What day would be best to assign and collect homework? Mondays would be logical since they start the school week, but Tuesdays meant they would have the weekend to work on it and Monday to ask clarifying questions before submitting it.

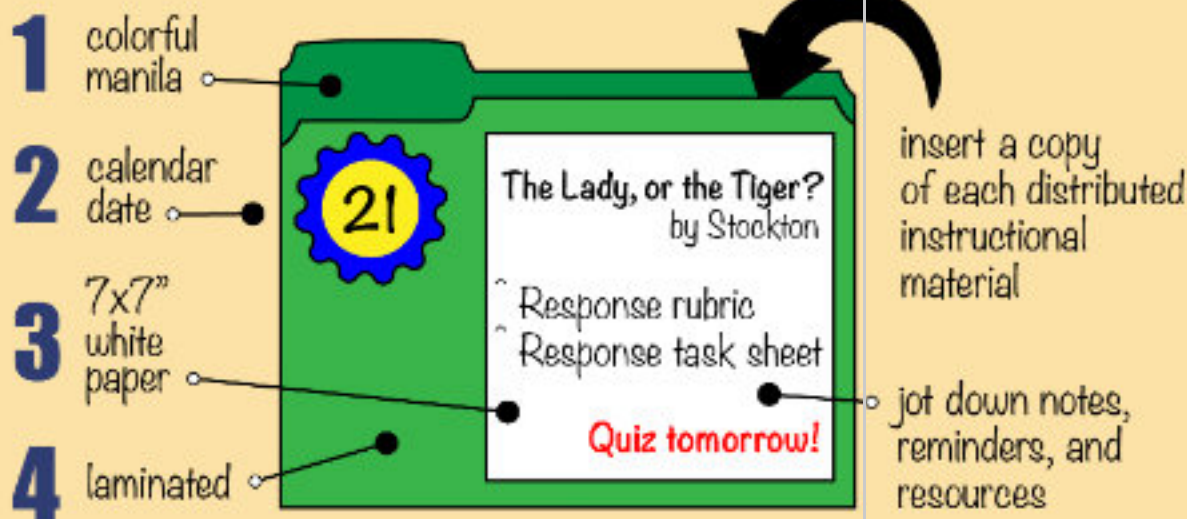
I considered my proposed solution from my students' perspectives—from the point of view of my most dedicated student in 2nd period to my class clown in 5th to my oppositional naysayer in 8th. I asked myself, *what could go wrong?* But I also wondered, *what could go right?* In the end, I went with Tuesdays and presented the idea to my classes. I asked them to brainstorm what else might help them complete their homework, so we could make better use of our class time.

My students quickly ran with the idea, and it snowballed into a class/homework organizing system: we developed a three-week wall calendar made from 21 laminated manila folders that I used to file handouts and other resources we used each day. Since they were laminated, I could use a wet erase marker to make notes and post a recommended timeline for completing their deliverables. Students could take a picture of the resource(s) they needed, and they saw at a glance what our three-week period looked like.

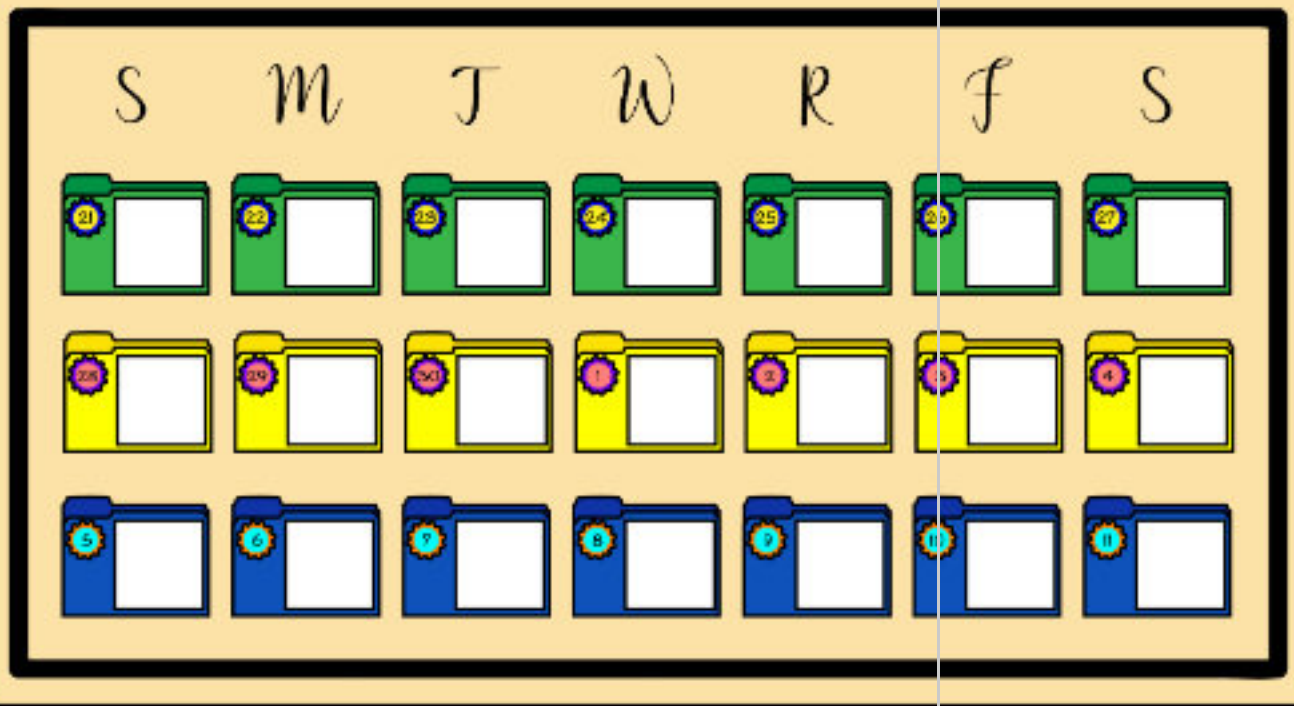
Figure 1: Our classwork/homework organizing system

Anatomy of a manila folder calendar

Step 1: Build



Step 2: Assemble



Our system worked for me and my students for many different reasons, some of which were a nice surprise:

- ♦ I only had to worry about providing feedback on homework once a week instead of throughout the week, giving me the time to give each student meaningful feedback.
- ♦ Involving students in the decision made them more invested in our system's upkeep, making it easier for me to enforce.
- ♦ The constant visual reminder helped those students with executive function challenges.
- ♦ The flexibility helped those with busy weekday schedules.

- ◆ Having access to our resources through the calendar/folder system not only helped those who had lost their handouts but also those who were absent.
- ◆ The wall calendar served as a powerful anchor to show students where we were in the unit and where we're going.
- ◆ Homework completion rates jumped from about 50 percent to 90 percent after the first three-week period of this new system.
- ◆ Since students were now completing homework, they were more prepared for class and we were able to get into higher-order activities faster.

Respond and Repeat

Remember, over time, just about everything breaks. Although this system works for my current students, different groups or generations of students are going to bring different preferences and needs, which means I must stay responsive and ready to repeat this process. Don't be afraid of what's broken—it may be just the muse you need to build truly remarkable classroom systems.

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