

Setting rules

OVERVIEW

Rules are the fixed boundaries of the classroom. These are the never-changing requirements that apply to all students in the room. They may also be called boundaries, limits, or policies. Expectations, in contrast, are the behaviors students are learning to function within those boundaries. They are often called procedures or routines.

*Both rules and expectations must be decided **before students arrive**. When rules are unclear or expectations are taught on the fly, students fill in the gaps themselves. This usually occurs in ways that create conflict and lead to lost learning time.*

PROCEDURE

1. **Identify your non-negotiables.** Ask yourself: *What must students always do in my room?* Consider what will make your room a safe place for the kids and what will ensure learning happens.
2. **Limit the list.** You can only have 3-5 rules. If everything is a rule, nothing is a rule. Save your energy for instruction instead of constant enforcement.
 - a. For each rule, ask yourself: *Am I willing and able to enforce this consistently?* If not, rewrite or remove it.
3. Write the rules in clear, universal language. Each rule should apply to every activity, every day, without exception. State them positively when you can.
 - a. Example: “Be on task” is superior to “Don’t play with toys/phones.”
4. **Check your rules against school or district policy.** You’ll want to ensure you include all required non-negotiables. If your administration requires cell phones stay put away, for example, that must be one of your 3-5 rules. You can’t enforce ten rules from an administrator and five from yourself.
5. **Post the rules.** Make sure it’s large enough and clear enough to read from all corners of the room.
6. **Teach rules like content.** Introduce them explicitly, model what they look like, and practice them briefly.
7. **Plan and practice** what you will say and do the first time each rule is violated (“*We don’t _____ in this classroom*” often works well).
8. **Reteach** the rules when routines change, behavior slips, or after a break.

TIPS/TRICKS

- If a classroom rule doesn’t **protect your ability to teach, regulate, and think clearly, it’s a bad rule.** Well-meaning rules that fail those goals – no matter how attractive they look on paper – create more problems than they solve.
- **Not everything has to be a rule.** Students of most ages know not to steal, for example. There’s no need to reinforce every aspect of the social contract with a written rule. Just choose the behaviors that bother you the most.
- **Rules must be clear.** Generic rules like “be respectful” leave too much room for interpretation and are hard to enforce consistently.
- **Post your rules in a clearly visible space and refer to them often.** It’s not enough to just say them or just post them. You need both.
- **Your real rules are the ones you enforce.** Teachers who state rules they don’t enforce teach students to ignore them.