

# How to plan lessons

- Why plan at all?
- What are the aims of a plan?
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- What questions do we need to ask?
- What form should a plan take?
- How should teachers plan a sequence of lessons?

## Why plan at all?

Some teachers with experience seem to have an ability to think on their feet, which allows them to believe that they do not need to plan their lessons. However, most teachers go on preparing lessons throughout their careers, even if the plans are very informal.

For students, evidence of a plan shows them that the teacher has devoted time to thinking about the class. It strongly suggests a level of professionalism and a commitment to the kind of preparation they might reasonably expect. Lack of a plan may suggest the opposite of these teacher attributes.

For the teacher, a plan – however informal – gives the lesson a framework, an overall shape. It is true that he or she may end up departing from it at stages of the lesson, but at the very least it will be something to fall back on. Of course, good teachers are flexible and respond creatively to what happens in the classroom, but they also need to have thought ahead, have a destination they want their students to reach, and know how they are going to get there.

Planning helps, then, because it allows teachers to think about where they're going and gives them time to have ideas for tomorrow's and next week's lessons. In the classroom, a plan helps to remind teachers what they intended to do – especially if they get distracted or momentarily forget what they had intended. Finally, planning helps because it gives students confidence: they know immediately whether a teacher has thought about the lesson, and they respond positively to those that have.

No plan is written on tablets of stone, however. On the contrary, the plan is just that – a plan, possibilities for the lesson which may or may not come about, in other words. Of course, we will be happy if things go 'according to plan', but they often don't. As we said at the very beginning of this book (page 6), all sorts of things can go wrong: equipment not working, bored students, students who've 'done it before', students who need to ask unexpected questions or who want or need to pursue unexpected pathways etc. That's when

the teacher has to be flexible, has to be able to leave the plan for however long it takes to satisfy the students' needs at that point in the lesson. Sometimes, the plan has to be abandoned completely and it is only after the lesson that the teacher can look at it again and see if some parts of it are recoverable for future lessons.

There is one particular situation in which planning is especially important, and that is when a teacher is to be observed as part of an assessment or performance review. The observer needs to have a clear idea of what the teacher intends in order to judge the success of the lesson.

**What are the aims of a plan?**

As we saw in Chapter 1, a good lesson needs to contain a judicious blend of coherence and variety. A good plan needs to reflect this.

Coherence means that students can see a logical pattern to the lesson. Even if there are three separate activities, for example, there has to be some connection between them – or at the very least a perceptible reason for changing direction. In this context, it would not make sense to have students listen to a tape, ask a few comprehension questions and then change the activity completely to something totally unrelated to the listening. And if the following activity only lasted for five minutes before something completely different was then attempted, we might well want to call the lesson incoherent.

Nevertheless, the effect of having a class do a 45-minute drill would be equally damaging. The lack of variety coupled with the relentlessness of such a procedure would militate against the possibility of real student engagement. However present it might be at the beginning of the session, it would be unlikely to be sustained. There has to be some variety in a lesson period.

The ideal compromise is to plan a lesson that has an internal coherence but which nevertheless allows students to do different things.

**What should be in a plan?**

The kind of plan that teachers make for themselves can be as scrappy or as detailed as the teacher feels is necessary. If you look at experienced teachers' notebooks, you may find that they have simply written down the name of an activity, a page number from a book, the opening of a dictation activity or notes about a particular student. Such notes look rather empty, but may, in fact, give the teacher all she needs to remind her of all the necessary elements. Other teachers, however, put in much more detail, writing in what they're going to do together with notes like 'remember to collect homework'.

On teacher training courses, trainers often ask for a written plan which follows a particular format. The formats will vary depending on the trainer and the course, but all plans have the same ingredients. They say who is going to be taught, what they are going to learn or be taught, how they are going to learn or be taught, and with what.

The first thing such a written plan needs to detail is who the students are: How many are there in the class? What ages? What sexes? What are they like? Cooperative? Quiet? Difficult to control? Experienced teachers

have all this information in their heads when they plan; teachers in training will be expected to write it down.

The next thing the plan has to contain is what the teachers/students want to do: study a piece of grammar, write a narrative, listen to an interview, read a passage etc. Looking through a plan, an objective observer should be able to discern a logical sequence of things to be studied and/or activated.

The third aspect of a plan will say how the teacher/students is/are going to do it. Will they work in pairs? Will the teacher just put on a tape or will the class start by discussing dangerous sports for example (see the Eddie Edwards tapescript on page 107)? Once again, an objective reader of the plan should be able to identify a logical sequence of classroom events. If four activities in a row are teacher-led dictations, we might start to think that the sequence is highly repetitive and that, as a result, the students are likely to get very demotivated by this incessant repetition. For each activity, the teacher will usually indicate how long she expects it to take and what classroom materials or aids she is going to use. The plan will say what is going to be used for the activities: A tape recorder? Photocopies? An overhead projector?

Lastly, the plan will talk about what might go wrong (and how it can be dealt with) and how the lesson fits in with lessons before and after it.

In order to be able to say these things, however, we need to go a little bit deeper and ask some searching questions about the activities we intend to use.

**What questions do we need to ask?**

For each activity we intend to use in the lesson (whether it's a role-play about building supermarkets or a writing activity while listening to music), we need to be able to answer a number of questions in our own minds. They are:

**Who exactly are the students for this activity?** As we said above, the make-up of the class will influence the way teachers plan. Their age, level, cultural background and individual characteristics have to be taken into account when deciding to use an activity. Teachers often have a section called *Description of the class* in their plans to remind themselves and/or show an observer what they know about their students.

**Why do you want to do it?** There has to be a good reason for taking an activity into a classroom apart from the fact that the teacher happens to like it or because it looks interesting.

**What will it achieve?** It is vitally important to have thought about what an activity will achieve. How will students have changed as a result of it? It might give the students a greater understanding of an area of vocabulary. It might give them greater fluency in one particular topic area, or it might have the effect of providing students with better strategies for coping with long and difficult stories told orally, for example. It might achieve a change of atmosphere in the class, too. If it is difficult to say what an activity

might achieve, then it may well be that the activity is not worth using. In a plan, this is often called *Aims* and most trainers expect the aims to be quite specific. 'Writing' is too general an aim for observers to get much of an idea of what the teacher wants to do, whereas 'to train students to use appropriate paragraph construction' does describe exactly what the teacher intends.

**How long will it take?** Some activities which sound very imaginative end up lasting for only a very short time. Others demand setting-up time, discussion time, student-planning time etc. One of the things that undermines the students' confidence in the teacher is if they never finish what they set out to do. One of the things that irritates them most is when teachers run on after the bell has gone because they have to finish an activity. Thinking about how long an activity will take is a vital part of planning. Most teachers indicate the intended *Timing* of an activity in their plan.

**What might go wrong?** If teachers try and identify problems that might arise in the lesson, they are in a much better position to deal with them if and when they occur. The attempt to identify problems will also give the teacher insight into the language and/or the activity which is to be used. Teachers often call this *Anticipated problems* in their plan.

**What will be needed?** Teachers have to decide whether they are going to use the board or the tape recorder, an overhead projector or some role cards. It is also important to consider the limitations of the classroom and the equipment. In their plans, teachers usually indicate the *Teaching aids* they are going to use or attach copies of print material the students are going to work with.

**How does it work?** If teachers wanted to use the poetry activity on page 76, how would they actually do it? Who does what first? How and when should students be put in pairs or groups? When does the teacher give instructions? What are those instructions? Experienced teachers may have procedures firmly fixed in their minds but even they, when they try something new, need to think carefully about the mechanics of the activity. Teachers often call this *Procedure* in their plans and indicate what kind of activity it is, sometimes in note form. For example, 'TQ → SA' means stages where the teacher leads a question and answer session with the students, and 'S → S' means pairwork.

**How will it fit in with what comes before and after it?** An activity on its own may be useful, engaging and full of good language. But what connection, if any, does it have to the activities which come before and after it? Is there a language tie-in? Perhaps two or three activities are linked by topic, one leading into the other. Perhaps an activity has no connection with the one before it: it is there to break up any monotony in a lesson or to act as a 'gear change'. The point of answering this question for ourselves is to ensure that we have some reasonable vision of the overall shape for our lesson and that it is not composed of unrelated scraps.

**What form should a plan take?**

There is no 'correct' format for a lesson plan. The most important thing about it is that it should be useful for the teacher and for anyone who is observing him or her. Some teachers, for example, might write their plan on cards. Others will prefer handwritten sheets from a notepad, others will type it out immaculately on a word processor.

Some teachers highlight parts of their plan with coloured pens. Some divide their plans into columns with timings on the left, procedures in the middle and comments in a right-hand column. Still others have an 'introduction' page with facts about the class and the aims of the lesson before going into detail.

Some teachers write down exactly what they are going to say and note down each sentence that the students are going to say. Other teachers use note-form hints to themselves (e.g. 'T checks comprehension') or just write 'pairwork' or 'solowork' or 'whole class', for example.

When teachers are in training, it will be sensible to take the trainer's preferences into account. Practising teachers should experiment with plan formats until they find one that is most useful for them. By looking at the plan in the Task File on page 171 with its strengths and weaknesses, it will be possible to come to some conclusions about how to design your own.

**How should teachers plan a sequence of lessons?**

In Chapter 1, we discussed the need for variety in classroom activities and teacher behaviour as an antidote to student (and teacher) boredom. This means that, when teachers plan a lesson, they build in changes of activity and a variety of exercises. It may well be that the lesson has an overall theme, but within that theme the students do different things. This was demonstrated by our classroom sequences in Chapter 4 and Chapters 6–10. What was being sought for in each case was a confidence-inspiring coherence lit up by variety and interest.

The same principles apply to a sequence of lessons stretching, for example, over two weeks or a month. Once again, students will want to see a coherent pattern of progress and topic-linking so that there is a connection between lessons and so that they can perceive some overall aims and objectives. Most find this preferable to a series of 'one-off' lessons.

However, two dangers may prejudice the success of a sequence of lessons. The first is predictability and the second is sameness. Despite the need for coherence, teachers must remember that if students know exactly what to expect they are likely to be less motivated than if their curiosity is aroused. In the same way, they may feel less enthusiastic about today's lesson if it starts with exactly the same kind of activity as yesterday's lesson.

An ideal two-week sequence has threads running through it which are based on a topic or topics. During the two weeks, all four skills will be covered appropriately. During the two weeks, the language being taught will happen in a logical sequence. Most importantly of all, there will be a range of activities which bring variety and interest to the learning process.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember, however, is that a long teaching sequence (e.g. two weeks) is made up of shorter sequences (e.g. six lessons) which are themselves made up of smaller sequences (one or two per lesson perhaps). And at the level of a teaching sequence we have to ensure the presence of our three elements, *Engage*, *Study* and *Activate*.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter we have

- discussed the purpose of planning: it helps to focus our minds, it helps to have something to refer to in the middle of the class, it shows students that we are professional and that we care.
- said that, whatever the format of a plan, it should tell us who is going to learn or be taught, what they are going to learn or be taught, how they are going to do it and what with.
- asked a number of important questions which teachers need to consider before they start to plan an activity: *Why do you want to do it? What will it achieve? How long will it take? What might go wrong? What will you need to do it? How will it fit in with what comes before and after it?*
- introduced the terms 'description of the class, aims, timing, anticipated problems, teaching aids, procedures' as headings which some teachers use to organise their plans.
- suggested that the actual format of a lesson plan is very much a matter of personal preference, but that trainers may want to guide trainees into certain formats.

## **Looking ahead**

- In the next and final chapter of this book, we will turn our attention to the 'what ifs?' of teaching – problems that frequently crop up – and how to solve them.

## Top 8 Components of a Well-Written Lesson Plan

### 1. Objectives and goals

Clearly, specifically determine what you want your students to be able to do after the lesson is completed.

- ⊙ What will students accomplish during this lesson?
- ⊙ To what specific level will the students perform a given task in order for the lesson to be considered satisfactorily accomplished?
- ⊙ Exactly how will the students show that they understood and learned the goals of your lesson? Will this occur through a worksheet, group work, presentation, illustration, etc?

Example: After reading the book "Life in the Rainforest," sharing a class discussion, and drawing plants and animals, students will be able to place six specific characteristics into a Venn diagram of the similarities and differences of plants and animals, with 100% accuracy.

### 2. Anticipatory set

Before you dig into the meat of your lesson's instruction, set the stage for your students by tapping into their prior knowledge and giving the objectives a context.

The purpose of the Anticipatory Set is to:

- ⊙ Provide continuity from previous lessons, if applicable
- ⊙ Allude to familiar concepts and vocabulary as a reminder and refresher
- ⊙ Tell the students briefly what the lesson will be about
- ⊙ Gauge the students' level of collective background knowledge of the subject to help inform your instruction
- ⊙ Activate the students' existing knowledge base
- ⊙ Whet the class's appetite for the subject at hand
- ⊙ Briefly expose the students to the lesson's objectives and how you will get them to the end result

To write your Anticipatory Set, consider the following questions:

- ⊙ How can I involve as many as students as possible, piquing their interests for the subject matter to come?
- ⊙ How should I inform my students of the lesson's context and objective, in kid-friendly language?
- ⊙ What do the students need to know before they can delve into the lesson plan itself and direct instruction?

Anticipatory Sets are more than just words and discussion with your students. You can also engage in a brief activity or question-and-answer session to start the lesson plan off in a participatory and active manner.

Examples:

- ⊙ Remind the children of animals and plants they have studied earlier in the year.
- ⊙ Ask the class to raise their hands to contribute to a discussion of what they already know about plants. Write a list on the blackboard of the characteristics they name, while prompting them and offering ideas and comments as needed. Repeat the process for a discussion of the properties of animals. Point out major similarities and differences.
- ⊙ Tell the children that it is important to learn about plants and animals because we share the earth with them and depend upon each other for survival.

### 3. Direct instruction

If your 8-step lesson plan were a hamburger, then the direct Instruction section would be the all-beef patty. After writing the objective and anticipatory set, you're ready to delineate exactly how you will present the most important lesson information to your students.

Your methods of direct Instruction could include reading a book, displaying diagrams, showing real-life examples of the subject matter, using props, discussing relevant characteristics, watching a movie, or other hands-on and/or presentational steps directly related to your lesson plan's stated objective.

When determining your methods of direct instruction, consider the following questions:

- ⊙ How can I best tap into the various learning modalities (audio, visual, tactile, kinesthetic, etc.) to meet the learning style preferences of as many students as possible?
- ⊙ What materials (books, videos, pneumatic devices, visual aids, props, etc.) are available to me for this lesson?
- ⊙ What relevant vocabulary do I need to present to my students during the lesson?
- ⊙ What will my students need to learn in order to complete the lesson plan's objectives and independent practice activities?
- ⊙ How can I engage my students in the lesson and encourage discussion and participation?

Think outside the box and try to discover fresh, new ways to engage your students' collective attention to the lesson concepts at hand. Avoid just standing in front of your students and talking at them. Get creative, hands-on, and excited about your lesson plan, and your students' interest will follow.

Before you move on to the guided practice section of the lesson, check for understanding to ensure that your students are ready to practice the skills and concepts you have presented to them.

Examples:

- ⊙ Talk about characteristics of plants and animals mentioned in the book.
- ⊙ Show the class a real, living plant and walk them through the functions of the different parts of the plant.
- ⊙ Show the class a real, living animal (perhaps a small pet brought in from home or a classroom pet borrowed from another teacher). Discuss the parts of the animal, how it grows, what it eats, and other characteristics.

### 4. Guided practice

Outline how your students will demonstrate that they have grasped the skills, concepts, and modeling that you presented to them in the direct Instruction portion of the lesson.

While you circulate the classroom and provide some assistance on a given activity (worksheet, illustration, experiment, discussion, or other assignment), the students should be able to perform the task and be held accountable for the lesson's information.

The guided practice activities can be defined as either individual or cooperative learning.

As a teacher, you should observe the students' level of mastery of the material in order to inform your future teaching. Additionally, provide focused support for individuals needing extra help to reach the learning goals. Correct any mistakes that you observe.

Examples:

- ⊙ Students will split into pairs to work together on drawing.
- ⊙ On a piece of paper, students will draw a picture of plants, incorporating characteristics they learned about in this lesson (listed on board).
- ⊙ On the other side of the paper, students will draw a picture of animals, incorporating characteristics they learned about in this lesson (listed on board).



## 5. Closure

Closure is the time when you wrap up a lesson plan and help students organize the information into a meaningful context in their minds. A brief summary or overview is often appropriate. Another helpful activity is to engage students in a quick discussion about what exactly they learned and what it means to them now.

Look for areas of confusion that you can quickly clear up. Reinforce the most important points so that the learning is solidified for future lessons.

It is not enough to simply say, "Are there any questions?" in the closure section. Look for a way to add some insight and/or context to the lesson.

### Examples:

- ⊙ Discuss new things that the students learned about plants and animals.
- ⊙ Summarize the characteristics of plants and animals and how they compare and contrast.

## 6. Independent practice

Through independent practice, students have a chance to reinforce skills and synthesize their new knowledge by completing a task on their own and away from the teacher's guidance.

In writing the independence practice section of the lesson plan, consider the following questions:

- ⊙ Based on observations during guided practice, what activities will my students be able to complete on their own?
- ⊙ How can I provide a new and different context in which the students can practice their new skills?
- ⊙ How can I offer independent practice on a repeating schedule so that the learning is not forgotten?
- ⊙ How can I integrate the learning objectives from this particular lesson into future projects?

Independent practice can take the form of a homework assignment or worksheet, but it is also important to think of other ways for students to reinforce and practice the given skills.

Get creative. Try to capture the students' interest and capitalize on specific enthusiasms for the topic at hand.

Once you receive the work from independent practice, you should assess the results, see where learning may have failed, and use the information you gather to inform future teaching. Without this step, the whole lesson may be for naught.

Examples: Students will complete the Venn Diagram worksheet, categorizing the six listed characteristics of plants and animals.

## 7. Required materials and equipment

Consider:

- ⊙ What items and supplies will be needed by both the instructor and the students in order to accomplish the stated learning objectives?
- ⊙ What equipment will I need in order to utilize as many learning modalities as possible? (visual, audio, tactile, kinesthetic, etc.)
- ⊙ How can I use materials creatively? What can I borrow from other teachers?

Keep in mind that modeling and the use of hands-on materials are especially effective in demonstrating concepts and skills to students. Look for ways to make the learning goals concrete, tangible, and relevant to students.

## 8. Assessment and follow-up

This is where you assess the final outcome of the lesson and to what extent the learning objectives were achieved.

Learning goals can be assessed through quizzes, tests, independently performed worksheets, cooperative learning activities, hands-on experiments, oral discussion, question-and-answer sessions, or other concrete means.

Most importantly, ensure that the assessment activity is directly and explicitly tied to the stated learning objectives.

Once the students have completed the given assessment activity, you must take some time to reflect upon the results. If the learning objectives were not adequately achieved, you will need to revisit the lesson in a different manner.

Student performance informs future lessons and where you will take your students next.

### Examples:

- ⊙ Quiz
- ⊙ Test
- ⊙ Class discussion
- ⊙ Hands-on experiment
- ⊙ Worksheet
- ⊙ Cooperative learning activities
- ⊙ Illustrations or graphic organizers

## Six Common Mistakes in Writing Lesson Plans

1. The objective of the lesson does not specify what the student will actually do that can be observed. Remember, an objective is a description of what a student does that forms the basis for making an inference about learning. Poorly written objectives lead to faulty inferences.
2. The lesson assessment is disconnected from the behavior indicated in the objective. An assessment in a lesson plan is simply a description of how the teacher will determine whether the objective has been accomplished. It must be based on the same behavior that is incorporated in the objective. Anything else is flawed.
3. The prerequisites are not specified or are inconsistent with what is actually required to succeed with the lesson. Prerequisites mean just that -- a statement of what a student needs to know or be able to do to succeed and accomplish the lesson objective. It is not easy to determine what is required, but it is necessary. Some research indicates that as much as 70% of learning is dependent on students having the appropriate prerequisites.
4. The materials specified in the lesson are extraneous to the actual described learning activities. This means keep the list of materials in line with what you actually plan to do. Overkilling with materials is not a virtue!
5. The instruction in which the teacher will engage is not efficient for the level of intended student learning. Efficiency is a measure that means getting more done with the same amount of effort, or the same amount with less effort. With so much to be learned, it should be obvious that instructional efficiency is paramount.
6. The student activities described in the lesson plan do not contribute in a direct and effective way to the lesson objective. Don't have your students engaged in activities just to keep them busy. Whatever you have your students do should contribute in a direct way to their accomplishing the lesson objective.

### BOX 15.3: WAYS OF VARYING A LESSON

#### 1. Tempo

Activities may be brisk and fast-moving (such as guessing games) or slow and reflective (such as reading literature and responding in writing).

#### 2. Organization

The learners may work on their own at individualized tasks; or in pairs or groups; or as a full class in interaction with the teacher.

#### 3. Mode and skill

Activities may be based on the written or the spoken language; and within these, they may vary as to whether the learners are asked to produce (speak, write) or receive (listen, read).

#### 4. Difficulty

Activities may be seen as easy and non-demanding; or difficult, requiring concentration and effort.

#### 5. Topic

Both the language teaching point and the (non-linguistic) topic may change from one activity to another.

#### 6. Mood

Activities vary also in mood: light and fun-based versus serious and profound; happy versus sad; tense versus relaxed.

#### 7. Stir-settle

Some activities enliven and excite learners (such as controversial discussions, or activities that involve physical movement); others, like dictations, have the effect of calming them down (see MacLennan, 1987).

#### 8. Active-passive

Learners may be activated in a way that encourages their own initiative; or they may only be required to do as they are told.

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### Guidelines for ordering components of a lesson

#### 1. Put the harder tasks earlier

On the whole, students are fresher and more energetic earlier in the lesson, and get progressively less so as it goes on, particularly if the lesson is a long one. So it makes sense to put the tasks that demand more effort and concentration earlier on (learning new material, or tackling a difficult text, for example) and the lighter ones later. Similarly, tasks that need a lot of student initiative work better earlier in the lesson, with the more structured and controlled ones later.

#### 2. Have quieter activities before lively ones

It can be quite difficult to calm down a class – particularly of children or adolescents – who have been participating in a lively, exciting activity. So if one of your central lesson components is something quiet and reflective it is better on the whole to put it before a lively one, not after. The exception to this is when you have a rather lethargic or tired class of adults; here ‘stirring’ activities early on can actually refresh and help students get into the right frame of mind for learning.

#### 3. Think about transitions

If you have a sharp transition from, say, a reading-writing activity to an oral one, or from a fast-moving one to a slow one, devote some thought to the transition stage. It may be enough to ‘frame’ by summing up one component in a few words and introducing the next; or it may help to have a very brief transition activity which makes the move smoother (see Ur and Wright, 1992, for some ideas).

#### 4. Pull the class together at the beginning and the end

If you bring the class together at the beginning for general greetings, organization and introduction of the day’s programme, and then do a similar full-class ‘rounding-off’ at the end: this contributes to a sense of structure. On the whole, group or individual work is more smoothly organized if it takes place in the middle of the lesson, with clear beginning and ending points.

#### 5. End on a positive note

This does not necessarily mean ending with a joke or a fun activity – though of course it may. For some classes it may mean something quite serious, like a summary of what we have achieved today, or a positive evaluation of something the class has done. Another possibility is to give a task which the class is very likely to succeed in and which will generate feelings of satisfaction. The point is to have students leave the classroom feeling good.