

NEW TEACHER JETPACK

**25 TIPS AND
TRICKS TO
HELP YOU BE
BRILLIANT AT
SCHOOL**

A GUIDE FOR
NEW TEACHERS

JON
SELICK

NEW TEACHER JETPACK

By Jon Sellick

Introduction

Your decision to enter the world of teaching implies that you have the required work ethic to succeed in the classroom, and by the time you finish your initial teacher training, that will have been tested out to the max. Your lectures, seminars and placements will have introduced you to professionals generous enough to share their expertise with you. Your assignments will have exposed you to swathes of educational theory and research. You will have honed your presentational skills during numerous observed hours in the classroom, where you will have also tested out your communication, timing, and interpersonal skills.

All that said, your journey really is just beginning.

You will continue to develop your skills at a fast pace - staff training, CPD opportunities and pure, hard-earned experience will see to that. But perhaps the most overlooked and valuable learning opportunities will come in the form of the know-how you pick up from your colleagues. Your observations, your working relationships and their generosity will provide you with an incredible number of tools to develop as a practitioner.

It is in that spirit that I have written this guide.

By packaging together 25 of the tips and tricks that I have picked up over the years, I hope to provide you with a jetpack of advice that you can use (or discard) as and when necessary. That's far better, I say, than waiting for the years to pass by and possibly picking these ideas up by chance.

There's a randomness to the order - which reflects the way you would come across this sort of know-how in real-life. But also, I hope the guide lends itself to being tucked away in your desk drawer, to be opened at random every few days in order to unearth a nugget of wisdom that happens to help you. You might even decide to try out one new tip every week for 25 weeks.

Sure, you won't use them all, but I hope it will repay your interest by giving you some ideas that enhance your lessons, help your pupils, and make life a little easier for you. If it frees up a bit of extra time for you to mark, plan, reply to emails or get home earlier to see your family, I'll be delighted.

Teaching is hard work. It takes it out of us. In truth, I think there's room for a little more kindness in the profession - not from our colleagues, who are often the most generous and talented people you could wish to meet - but from 'the system' in general.

In writing this guide, and sharing some of the ideas, techniques and 'hacks' that I have used in my career, I hope to have shown a little kindness. And I hope that it goes a long way.

With gratitude,
Jon

The Jetpack

1. **Live Marking**
2. **Wallpaper**
3. **House Activities**
4. **Micro-interleaving**
5. **Friday Fives**
6. **Free-hand Presentations**
7. **Praise**
8. **Lines**
9. **Positioning**
10. **Anecdotes**
11. **Instructions**
12. **Photocopiers**
13. **Movies**
14. **Instant Marking**
15. **Showstoppers**
16. **Strive for Fives**
17. **Assemblies**
18. **Snipping Tools**
19. **Visualisers**
20. **Zines**
21. **Topic Sentences**
22. **Other Stuff First**
23. **Questions**
24. **Scrapbooks**
25. **Batching**

1. Live Marking

Marking takes time, and it takes its toll too. But as a serious professional, you know that regularly marked work reassures, motivates, and aids pupils' progress. It also gives you a feeling of satisfaction and soothes the guilty conscience you hold when you know it's been a while. Furthermore, it reflects well on you when your line manager or a parent takes a glance at a book.

Use as much 'free time' in lessons to get round pupils' books and mark away! Of course, there's never really any true "free time" - we know that. But that time when pupils are busy working away and you're scanning the room, or distracting them by giving them endless time checks, or entertaining them with your worst (best) jokes, or hollering hollow 'well dones' because you feel a little bit at a loose end, well that's the

time you should be scooting round the room with your green pen and marking work. Talk about using your time economically - this is a winning tactic on every level! Not only do your pupils' books look so much more impressive; your communication with them is tangible, you have an opportunity to give genuine advice and/or praise, and you get the opportunity to have a meaningful individual interaction with the pupils who you feel need it most.

2. Wallpaper

Wallpaper is brilliant. It is low-fi, visual and just the right side of quirky to hold its own as a captivating and effective lesson resource. Wallpaper lining is even better because it is cheaper. But if price remains an issue, ask your local wallpaper supplier for odds, ends and end-of-line rolls. A cheeky mention of their shop in your schools' newsletter in return should guarantee you a year's supply. So how exactly are you going to use it? In a nutshell: to document learning; to document the learning that takes place over the course of a unit of work.

You use the plain side of the roll, some coloured markers, and a decent stick of adhesive, and you write on or stick on everything that is learnt in each lesson. A lesson's worth of wallpaper might feature objectives, lists, headings, worksheets, pictures, diagrams, summative statements, speech bubbles or questions. You can showcase particularly excellent examples of pupils' work by adding them to the display. The wallpaper becomes a permanent and portable record of the raw learning that has taken place in your lessons: lessons, which otherwise - no matter how outstanding - would be fleeting, transitory and - let's face it - often disposable episodes of learning.

And the advantages are multiple! Here's a few:

- If you ever ask pupils to write responses on post-it notes to stick on a board or desk, you now have an ideal place to make that work permanent.
- By rolling out the wallpaper at the beginning of the next lesson, you provide your pupils with the perfect, pre-made re-cap of their previous learning.
- Providing pupils with a mini-quiz, crossword, post-it notes or suchlike that they can stick on the wallpaper as they leave the classroom becomes the ideal plenary/exit ticket.
- Prior to an assessment or exam, you can roll the unit of work out down the corridor and allow pupils to walk along it and write themselves a list of revision questions, or, alternatively, allow them to use their mobiles to take photos of it.
- You give yourself half a chance of keeping your desk tidy, because that excess of lesson resources no longer has to sit in a 'to sort' pile - instead it is stuck to the wallpaper.
- Completed wallpaper 'units' make fantastic future wall displays!

3. House Activities

There are so many variations of starters and plenaries out there. If you can't find one that suits your specific purpose, you'll likely add to the catalogue by inventing your own! That's fine, of course, but do consider that starters and plenaries are usually diagnostic in purpose; they all share the same aim of assessing pupils' progress. So, the number of variations that exist is perhaps a little unnecessary. A quick three-question quiz is most often all that is required

Establishing a house style by settling on three or four 'go to' starter/plenary activities that work for you and your pupils is a far better plan than constantly striving to add to your repertoire. This helps you because it takes away what could quickly become a debilitating decision-making process, and it helps your pupils because they enjoy the familiarity and routine you are embedding.

Aside from quick quizzes, here's a couple I use on a regular basis:

54321:

Add this to your box of go-to plenaries:

- Firstly, pupils write a summary of their learning in **5 sentences**.
- Next, they write a summary of their learning in **4 words**.
- Next, they filter a summary of their learning down into **3 sentences**.
- Next, they write a summary of their learning in just **2 words**.
- Finally, challenge them to write a summary in just **1 sentence**.

Run this activity a couple of times and before you know it, you'll only need to shout out 54321 and your pupils will be away. Of course, depending on the amount of time you have, you can change this activity to 321!

A nice companion starter is achieved by beginning the next lesson by shouting out a number from 1 to 5 and asking pupils to remember their corresponding word or sentence from the end of the previous lesson.

Acroscopic Name Challenge:

Another consolidating exercise - useful at either end of a lesson - is to ask pupils to write their name vertically down their margin. Pupils then use the letters to structure a piece of summative text about their previous learning.

So, if **Jon** had just been taught about paragraphs, he might write:

Join sentences

On similar topics in to

Nice, readable chunks.

Or, if **Mary** had been taught about volcanoes in her geography lesson, she might write:

Margins in the earth's surface cause volcanoes.

A volcano is formed when two crustal plates move together or apart.

Rising magma fills the gap between them.

You could say a volcano is basically an exploding mountain.

Whereas Mary's classmate **Ellie** could write:

Earth's crust is

Living.

Live volcanoes occur when crustal plates move towards each other.

In doing so they force magma to rise.

Exploding molten rock bursts out of the gap.

The process of deconstructing knowledge and then reassembling to fit the arbitrary parameters of their name encourages active retrieval, in addition to providing a sometimes-tricky literacy challenge to pupils. It is worth remembering that the partaking in the cognitive challenge of this exercise is more important than whether they complete a satisfying acrostic.

4. Micro-interleaving

Interleaving - the planning model whereby topics are interspersed with one another over a term's worth of lessons, rather than taught independently of one another - works. You should certainly make long-term plans in this way.

However, interleaving also works on a micro-level too. You achieve this by firstly introducing the new lesson's topic, objectives and aims. Next, you momentarily drop the new topic to revisit the previous lesson's topic with some questioning or a low-stakes quiz. Only once this is complete do you return to the new topic and proceed with the day's lesson.

This approach has its advantages both presentationally and cognitively. The alternative to embedding revision in this way is to bolt it on to the beginning of a new lesson, often meaning that you must effectively start your lesson twice - this can lead to behaviour issues, and it can be jarring for pupils to have to reset ten minutes into the lesson. Micro-interleaving makes the transitions so much smoother, especially over time (as pupils become familiar with your routines). Furthermore, it provides pupils with lots of in-built retrieval practice - exposing them to multiple retrieval scenarios. And finally, it helps give pupils a broader lense through which to view your subject - they will come to see the topics in a much more joined-up fashion. Hence appreciating the breadth of your subject more and applying their knowledge accordingly.

5. Friday Fives

On the day on your timetable that makes most sense to you (I try to choose Fridays because this is a treat and I enjoy the alliteration), make thirty copies of five different worksheets. Place them on a desk at the front of the classroom and instruct pupils that they are to spend the lesson working through the worksheets in any order they like. The topics on the sheets might all be related to your current topic. But they don't have to be - you might take a more generic approach. As an English teacher, I tend to select two or three spelling and punctuation worksheets and a couple that relate directly to the current topic. Ideally, pupils should write the answers in their books so that you can use the worksheets again in the next lesson. When a pupil finishes a sheet, they are to return it to the pile and select their next one.

This approach has multiple advantages. The one I like the most is that your Friday planning takes care of itself each week. But before your teacher guilt kicks in, consider the other plus points: you get to practise your live marking; you provides pupils with another episode of micro-interleaving; you can ensure your worksheets challenge the pupils with retrieval activities; you provide pupils with some variety within your subject; whilst at the same time, you provide them with the stability of predictability and routine - it's Friday - they know what that means, and so do you - Friday Five time!

6. Free-hand presentations

Sure, there's a place for PowerPoints in our classrooms. But creating a PowerPoint every time you want to communicate written text to the class is time-consuming and cumbersome. If the purpose of the communication is as straightforward as objectives, key words, or a couple of sentences you want your pupils to copy out, then your best bet is to handwrite this content directly onto your board, using the +page function to create new 'slides'. It's a low-tech way to use a hi-tech resource. It takes a lot less time than making a PowerPoint, and the idiosyncrasies are often

more interesting to pupils otherwise fed on a visual diet of Arial and Calibri. Furthermore, you can save it for next time just as easily as you can a PowerPoint.

7. Praise

Get buy-in from your pupils by praising what they achieve outside of your lesson as well as in it. If you overhear a colleague chatting about how well a pupil has done in a different subject, praise them for it in yours. If you hear about a great goal that a pupil scored in yesterday's school fixture, heap praise on them for it. If the cast of the school production contains lots of pupils you teach, let them know how impressed you are. This is a simple but impactful way of increasing your pupils' morale and motivation.

8. Lines

Not that type. Instead, this little tip helps you monitor the amount of work pupils are doing in your lesson whilst offering the additional advantage of motivating them too. You circulate the classroom and draw a small, pencilled line in the margin of the pupils' books level with wherever they are up to. Next time you get round to them, you'll be able to see how much work they've done since you were last there. For those who need an extra push, you can draw an asterisk in the margin to let them know exactly where you expect them to have got to by the next time you get to them.

9. Positioning

When speaking to the whole class, experiment with different positions around the room. This is a subtle and effective way of making sure your pupils are alert. You can help highlight the particular importance of specific information by standing in a new place in the room to say it. When discussing an image on the board, it can be effective to stand at the back of the classroom, to take yourself out of the picture, allowing you to observe the image with the pupils and offer a commentary. If a pupil is causing some low-level disruption, simply moving to stand next to their desk whilst continuing to speak to the whole class is often enough for them to get the message!

10. Anecdotes

We are all programmed to enjoy a good story. Pupils are no different. So, that is why an anecdote (real or imagined) can be a wonderful tool for illuminating a tricky concept, formula, or technique. But tread carefully! Offering an anecdote off-the-cuff can often be distracting. Many times, anecdotes can dominate the cognitive load of a pupil to the extent that this becomes the only part of the lesson they remember. I speak from experience!

11. Instructions

If you need to tell the class some important information or preamble before they complete a worksheet, tell them it before you hand out the worksheet. Otherwise, you are choosing to actively divert their attention from your speech to the paper you have just placed in front of them. Instead, wait until you've finished talking to them. A good worksheet will consolidate the verbal communication you have just given. An even bigger distraction is choosing to give out the sheets as you speak. Don't stress about the time it will take you to give out the sheets – you're looking at a worst-case scenario of a minute or so here; if anything pupils will appreciate being given this time to let what you have just said sink in!

12. Photocopiers

Make friends with the photocopier! If you have a well-resourced reprographics department, this will be an actual human being (a big shout out to Sue from my first school, who saved my life on numerous occasions). But even if, in your school, the noun 'photocopier' simply means a machine, get to know it very well!

13. Movies

If watching a movie (or documentary) is a necessary part of your curriculum, then show it *before* you read the book or do the study. I've learnt that offering to watch the film as a reward for getting through the book is the wrong call. It sends out the wrong message and it means you are missing a great opportunity. Given that our primary concern is to inform, not entertain, we shouldn't dwell on 'spoiling the book'. Allowing the pupils to see the movie or documentary first can give them a fantastic overview of the plot, concept, or event. You then have a strong reference point for all your future reading and teaching of the topic. It also avoids any sub-conscious message you might be sending out to pupils that reading a book is a chore that needs to be incentivised.

14. Instant Marking

You don't have to mark everything your pupils write. But when you do decide that something needs marking, do it that night! And give it back to pupils in your very next lesson with them.

15. Showstoppers

Routine and structure are vital to your day-to-day success in the classroom. Pupils thrive in environments that they can predict - and consequently trust. Happily, however, routine can paradoxically create the perfect environment for surprise. This is a quirk you can take advantage of. Novelty lessons aren't so much fun when they happen every day (they're not much use either). However, a 'showstopper' is worth its weight in gold if it temporarily breaks a well-built routine, leaves an impression, makes learning fun, showcases your creativity, and builds rapport with a class. And whilst you shouldn't rely on it to cover all your bases, cognitively speaking, if it is successfully accomplished, it can serve as an excellent reference point for future learning. So, go for it; make sure you don't rely on it, ensure 'showstoppers' aren't weekly occurrences, but go for it: build a bunkhouse out of the desks, take pupils around the school on a shape trail or create your own game show. And do so with conviction.

16. Strive for Fives

'Strive for Fives' are worksheets I started making a few years ago. They are worth their weight in gold. They are essentially lessons on a sheet, encompassing, as they do, five separate activities. My subject being English, I have one activity for each of the following five topics: spelling, punctuation, grammar, reading and writing. You would design yours to cover an equivalent broad array of topics within your subject. Having a stock of them at hand is very useful because they have multiple uses: cover lessons, extension activities, Friday Five solutions (see tip number 5), and last-minute planning emergencies. Once again, when pupils become familiar with them, they flourish in the routine and structure you are providing. If you're an English

teacher and you like the sound of these, they're available for free in the resources section of brilliantatschool.com.

17. Assemblies

If you have never taken a school assembly, get your name down to take one. It's one of the most fulfilling things you can do outside of your lessons. Assemblies are brilliant for developing your presentational skills, excellent for boosting your profile around the school (both with colleagues and pupils), and fabulous for showcasing your passion and/or knowledge about either an aspect of your subject or another noteworthy topic.

18. Snipping Tools

When I was shown the snipping tool on my desktop, it changed my life. Perhaps a tech-savvier generation of teachers will no longer appreciate being told about Microsoft's ingenious tool (or equivalent free screen capture downloads) quite so much as I did. A colleague of mine, noticing that I was spending far too much of my free period 'PrintScreening' and cropping, pointed me in the direction of the snipping tool and, in doing so, opened a world of possibilities. Even to this day, colleagues thank me for passing on this nugget! So, if a snipping tool isn't currently one of your resource making tools, make it so. And learn a lesson from my experience: always be on the lookout for new features that can make your planning and creating a little easier - perhaps screen recording devices like Screencast-O-Matic or OBS Studio? - because it simply doesn't make sense to be too stuck in your ways. And if you find something good, pass it on and pay it forward!

19. Visualisers

When it comes to classroom equipment, visualisers shouldn't be too far behind whiteboards and exercise books in the importance stakes. They have multiple fabulous uses; if you haven't got one already, you should go and demand one from you HOD immediately! Primarily, they're great for sharing and demonstrating. My favourite way of using one is to model answering a question live, mistakes-and-all. It's even more beneficial for pupils if you can offer a commentary of your thought-process as you develop your answer.

20. Zines

Like many of the tips in this guide, this is one that can become an excellent 'go-to' exercise once it has been established as one of your class routines. To that end, it is worth investing some initial classroom time in the development of pupils' origami skills. All the pupils need is a single sheet of A4 paper. You can then take your pick from a number of YouTube videos - I tend to show *either* ['How to make a one-page zine'](#) on the National Museums Liverpool channel, or ['How to make a zine from a single sheet of paper'](#) by Austin Kleon. Once pupils have mastered the folding, they are enabled to produce their own summative document on whatever suits!

21. Topic Sentences

Acknowledge topic sentences. Whenever you present pupils with an extended text, focus their attention on the topic sentences, what they are, and the job they do. Especially so if the text forms part of their revision for an upcoming assessment.

Knowing about topic sentences means they have all the tools they need to skim read effectively, which will have powerful revision and retention benefits for their learning. Furthermore, an appreciation of topic sentences will mean they can plan their own writing - on paper or in their head - with greater clarity; their essays will benefit from a much better sense of precision.

22. Other Stuff First

By its nature, a typical week in the classroom will churn up lessons that don't fit into the neat boxes you'd imagined for them. Self-contained lessons - on paper, in your head, and in actuality - are a satisfying occurrence, but they're rarer than you might expect. You will have to deal with a huge amount of 'other stuff'. The other stuff might be generated by you (in the form of information you need to pass on about wet break arrangements, an upcoming trip, or required reply slips). Alternatively, it might be generated by the pupils, who arrive to your lesson with questions, dramas, excuses, requests, and incorrect uniform.

It can be very tempting to wait until the end of the lesson to deal with all this 'stuff'. It sometimes feels easier to say, "see me at the end", especially when your PowerPoint slide is readied, and everything is just so. However, this is most often the wrong call.

Those issues at the front of pupils' minds aren't going to disappear as soon as you start outlining lesson objectives. So, whilst on the surface your lesson will look like it has begun, the reality is that pupils will not be anywhere near as engaged as you need them to be.

You really need to free up their cognitive load. Therefore, the best approach – within reason - is to deal with as much of that 'stuff' as possible first. You want your pupils to be as settled and as free from anxieties as possible. So, if it's obvious that a lesson can't just 'start', stick to your opening routines (lining up, standing behind chairs, equipment out, register etc.), but then – in an orderly manner – answer those questions and deal with pupil issues swiftly and effectively *before* you begin your lesson proper.

23. Questions

Make it clear to pupils that the best type of notes they can make aren't really notes at all, but questions. Writing a list of questions instead of notes is an incredibly effective method for learning and revising material. Once written, a list of questions becomes the revision itself. Pupils can then test their knowledge by asking themselves the questions and retrieving the answers (they don't even have to write the answers down so long as they make a note of what they need to look up).

So, to exemplify, let's say you need to learn the following information about condensation:

When cold air turns water vapour back into liquid, clouds are formed. We call this condensation. You can observe this process at home or in school by pouring a glass of cold water on a hot day. After a short amount of time, water will appear on the outside of the glass. This is because the warm water vapour turns to liquid as soon as it gets cold.

Instead of asking pupils to write notes or *answer* questions, ask them to *write* questions, like this:

1. *What does cold air turn water vapour into?*
2. *What is formed when this happens?*
3. *What could you do to observe this process at home or in school?*
4. *What will appear on the outside of the glass?*
5. *Why has this appeared?*

If, that night, or next lesson, or next week, or the night before the exam, pupils can answer those five questions confidently, then it will be safe to say that they have learnt it!

At first, it might not seem like an entirely natural process for the pupils – their default settings might prefer highlighting – but it won't be long before they get it.

24. Scrapbooks

Give all pupils a scrapbook at the beginning of the year. If integrated into your routine, it becomes a great 'catch all' document. You can use them in a number of ways: as a place in which pupils can draft (often they feel freer to make mistakes here than they do in their exercise books); as a place in which pupils can consolidate their learning with answers to low-stakes quizzes or lists of revision questions (see above); as a place in which they can complete their own creative projects; or indeed, as a place in which they can do some good, old-fashioned, actual scrapbooking!

25. Batching

Batch! Batching is the process of completing all jobs of a similar type in one sitting rather than flitting between different types of jobs in the name of variety. It might be tempting to alternate between jobs; many of us do this because we mistakenly believe that - variety being the spice of life - it will keep our brains refreshed, alert, and producing higher quality work. However, research suggests that this is simply not the case; in fact, this approach is more likely to distract us from the tasks at hand, encourage us to procrastinate, and waste lots of our time as we strive to refocus.

So, in teaching, if faced with a workload that encompasses the marking and planning of several different classes for next week, rather than working through class by class, you could batch the following hypothetical jobs together like this:

1. Marking of all baseline KS3 spelling tests
2. Marking of all baseline KS4 spelling tests
3. Make 'Strive for Five' worksheets for all classes
4. Create all introductory PowerPoint slides
5. Plan key questions for all classes.

I often envisage this as 'vertical' planning. Once you have completed these tasks, you can revert to 'horizontal' planning by checking what else you need for each class, safe in the knowledge that the bulk of the work is complete, and you are simply completing some odds and ends that are particular to each class.

And that's that – for now, at least! As teachers, the greatest resource we have is each other. Finding time to facilitate the sharing of ideas should be a priority for all

schools, but as an individual teacher, there's still plenty you can do: join Substack (and subscribe to [Teaching People](#) by Jon Sellick!); start a blog; listen to podcasts; sign yourself up to the best CPD you can find; attend teachmeets; suggest to your HOD that the majority of time in meetings is given to sharing ideas; and read all the books!

Good luck!

Jon