

How to Set Up Your Classroom From Scratch: A (Refreshingly Honest) Step-by-Step Guide

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Teacher in Delta



1. Keep your body calm

Contain your panic. Everything you need to know you have already seen on TV. Think of this is an episode of *Love it Or List it* (...just so we're clear listing is not an option). Imagine Jillian Harris. You ARE Jillian Harris: "This space has a lot of potential!!"

2. Take inventory

Even if you have a completely empty room get acquainted with it. Find out where the outlets are. Look at the window situation. What areas of the room are best lit? What is your board situation like? Whiteboard? Chalkboard? Corkboard? What other areas in the school are you close to? Sketch your space and take measurements.

3. Throw Things Away and Say "No"

This step may sound counterintuitive. You might be thinking "BUT I HAVE NOTHING!". Your classroom should not become a convenient dumping ground for other teacher's castaways or garbage. Look carefully at everything you are offered. Is it in good condition? Can you think of a purpose for it? Do you like it? Is it older than you are? It can be tempting to just say "yes" but think about each item another teacher or a friend wants to give you. It can be hard to say no, especially when people are doing this out of kindness but keeping it simple will help you stay organized.

4. Go for a Scavenger Hunt

Walk around the school and search common areas. For example look in the library, staff room, hallways, gym, stage etc. Look for things that look un-used or underused and ask others politely. Remember that school furniture doesn't necessarily 'belong' to any single person it belongs to the school. Even if everyone says "no" and you don't end up with any of the 'school' furniture it's not out of line to ask. See if you can borrow some items for the year, especially if you notice someone who has two of something.

5. Think About Money

This part can be hard and really overwhelming. If you have a budget to start up your class you need to think about prioritizing big items that are too costly for you to cover personally and should already be in the school. Big items could be cubby units, large rugs or carpets, whiteboards, tables, shelving or desks. These items are the kind of things that make your classroom a classroom and need to be in the room for the next teacher when or if you move on to another school. Anything you buy with school or PAC funds will stay at the school. For this reason be judicial in what you purchase with school funds. While you may LOVE to have a hot pink carpet remember that teachers years from now may have to live with that decision. Items that you might consider spending your own money on are ideally small, inexpensive, easy to transport, and reflect your own teaching style. Big items should be purchased with school funds whenever possible. I was in a lucky situation and had a reasonable budget to work with. Despite this I budgeted very carefully so I could use some of the money to buy other more expensive resources for the class. For example finding my cubby units used on craigslist, instead of brand new from Ikea, meant that I had more money for Lego and a really beautiful set of blocks. Decide on your priorities.

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How to Set Up Your Classroom From Scratch: Continued

6. Go Shopping and Collect Your Stuff!

Big box stores have some items you may need but based on my budget priorities I sourced a lot of materials from the Thrift stores, Craigslist and garage sales. In my community I also found a lot of my items off an app called Varage Sale. Utilize your personal contacts to see what you can get for free. One of my friends moved to Toronto and he give me a variety of things from his apartment. Keep every single receipt from purchases.



Mahima took an empty classroom and transformed it into this warm space.

7. Gather Your Tools

Here is a non-exhaustive list of things you may need based on my experience: masking tape, packing tape, box cutter, screw driver, hammer, nails, stapler, scissors, paperclips, string, fishing wire, Velcro, drill, superglue, neutral coloured paint, tracing paper and permanent markers.

8. Get Set Up

You have done enough collecting now and you should get started. Start by deciding where you want your big items. Everything else will fall in to place after that. Consider the flow of your room and keeping pathways open. Think about your teaching style as well as storage. Where do the students keep their stuff? Where will you display student work? What kind of teacher space do you need? Make a playlist of fun music. Buy some snacks. Don't do anything that isn't work safe. Enlist your friends. If you get stuck go back to one of the previous steps and revisit! Maybe you need another shopping trip or maybe you found a great deal on something and can revisit your budget. Stay positive!

9. Let Go

The students are coming if you are ready or not. Your classroom doesn't need to look perfect on the first day, but it does need to be functional on the first day. Clear out any garbage or tools from your set up. You have all year to add new things, move things around and make changes. Your classroom space is dynamic and it will be important to the students to be a part of the process of making it a place they enjoy and feel a sense of belonging to.

10. Be Generous and Help Others

Thank the people who offered you resources, helped you set up or gave you advice. The other teachers at my school were really supportive and helped me stay focused and be practical. Look at anything you didn't use and see if you can offer it to a friend in a similar situation, gift to another teacher at your school, or donate to a good cause.

Mahima is starting her second year of teaching. She is a kindergarten teacher and has a side gig in classroom design consultation. To book her services send Starbucks c/o BCECTA