

Rules and routines

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Classroom environments that enable students to focus on and engage with lesson content provide an important foundation for learning success. Rules and routines support students in being ready to engage, and can facilitate their learning.

A rule is usually a short instruction for conduct or action that everyone is expected to know, follow and refer to regularly.¹ Routines are sequences of recurring tasks or actions – for example, daily review – designed and taught by the teacher and practised by students so they become automatic.²

With clear rules and routines, students understand and are more able to demonstrate what's expected of them. Rules and routines also ensure students know what they can expect from their teacher during the learning process, and how actively participating will help them achieve their goals. The experience of predictability and safety in a learning environment that includes routines contributes to positive relationships and learning success.

This practice guide will help you reflect and take action to develop your practice with a greater understanding of:

- the ways rules and routines support learning
- how to equip students with the skills to participate in routines that support their learning.

Establish rules and routines that support students to focus on learning (*Rules and routines*) is one of 18 interconnected practices in our Teaching for How Students Learn model of learning and teaching. This practice sits in the **Enabling** phase, which focuses on positive, respectful relationships in a learning-focused environment. This practice is interconnected with:

- **Planning**, which focuses on developing and using a sequenced and structured plan for the knowledge and skills students will acquire
- **Instruction**, which focuses on managing students' cognitive load as they process and acquire new learning
- **Gradual release**, which focuses on maximising students' opportunities to retain, consolidate and apply their learning.

Enabling

Planning

Instruction

Gradual release

Understanding this practice

These examples demonstrate what establishing and maintaining rules and routines might look like in the classroom, and potential misapplications in practice.



What it is

- Rules and routines are aligned with school-wide processes for consistency and predictability, and used across the school so students know what is expected of them and what they can expect from their teachers.
- A consistent and predictable approach to the way tasks and activities are completed and lessons are structured, so students can focus on the content of their learning.
- A small number of rules and routines designed for simplicity, explicitly taught and practised so students can develop automaticity and focus on their learning.
- Rules and routines that are responsive to students' needs and [how students learn](#), to support them in achieving learning success.



What it isn't

- Expectations for students that vary throughout the day and across the school due to inconsistent approaches or inconsistent application of whole-school policies.
- Regularly varying the way lessons are structured, increasing the cognitive load of students and distracting from the intended focus of the learning.

The importance of rules and routines for effective teaching and learning

Key points from the research

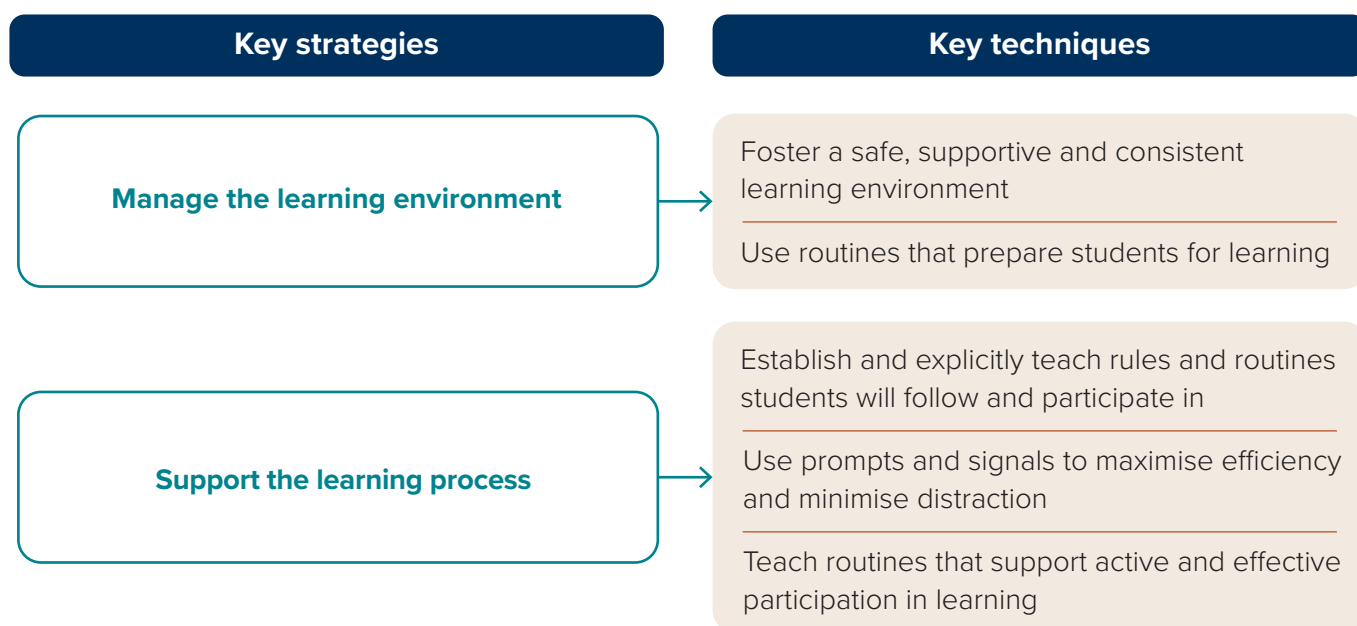
- Overloading working memory with inconsistent expectations and environmental distractions can interfere with learning by hindering the transfer of information to long-term memory.³
- Rules and routines structure the learning environment, helping to manage cognitive load with a consistent and predictable approach to support students’ focus, engagement and efficient information processing. Their efficient, productive and automatic execution reduces wasted learning time and helps free up students’ working memory to focus on learning.⁴
- To create safe learning environments, rules and routines should reflect culturally responsive and inclusive practices.⁵
- Routines that target different aspects of the learning process support students in being ready for and successful in their learning, enhance self-efficacy and increase motivation and effort.⁶ They can also be used to express shared values, norms and aspirations, such as routines for celebrating success, recognising positive effort in learning and providing constructive feedback.⁷

Our resource [Teaching Routines: Their Role in Classroom Management](#) provides further information about the value of routines and how they should be taught.

Key strategies and techniques

This section identifies evidence-based strategies and techniques (see summary in Figure 1) for creating and managing culturally safe, learning-focused environments, that support students with actively participating throughout the learning process.

Figure 1: Key strategies and techniques for rules and routines



Manage the learning environment

Foster a learning-focused environment

Rules and routines can be used to foster a learning-focused environment by establishing [positive teacher–student relationships](#), [high expectations for student behaviour](#), [clear communication](#) and by providing [structure, consistency and predictability](#). Follow the links for our practical guidance on how to foster a learning-focused environment.

Use routines that prepare students for learning

Routines that help students prepare for and stay focused on learning include routines for [entering the classroom](#), [exiting the classroom](#), [gaining all students' attention](#), [students gaining your attention](#) and [moving to other areas of the school](#). Follow the links for our practical guidance on each of the routines that prepare students for learning.

Support the learning process

Establish and explicitly teach rules and routines students will follow and participate in

Proactively [engage with families](#) and communities to build trusting relationships so the rules and routines you and your school develop and enact are understood and valued by all students and their families. [Establish and maintain rules and routines](#) that are based on the school community's values, taught explicitly and practised to automaticity to create effective and appropriate learning environments.

Use prompts and signals to maximise efficiency and minimise distraction

Develop cues, prompts and [verbal](#) or [non-verbal signals](#) for rules and routines that are embedded throughout the lesson. This ensures students' valuable and limited attention and mental workspace remain focused on the content of their learning. For example, a talking stick passed from person to person can be a cue to hear from each member of a group. A teacher tapping on their own shoulder can remind students of an established routine for sharing an answer to a question with a peer. Focus your prompts and signals on preventing interruptions, off-task behaviour, and excessive time spent providing verbal instructions, while supporting students with focusing and participating actively. Some routines for learning and established rules may overlap – for example, a classroom rule about taking turns to speak may also be part of a routine for participating in group discussions.

Teach routines that support active and effective participation in learning

Examples of routines that support students in engaging in learning efficiently and effectively include:

- **daily, weekly and monthly review** routines for quickly recalling, reviewing and sharing what was learned in previous lessons as a whole-class exercise.
- **starter activity routines** for tasks students do quickly and independently at the outset of a lesson, such as writing a response to a question that requires them to revisit learning from the previous day.
- **random selection** routines to reinforce a non-volunteer (or 'hands down') culture during discussion so all students remain focused – for example, using names on pop sticks to select students, then returning the selected name into the set in a way that's visible to students.
- **call and response** routines for calling on students, such as asking a question, waiting a certain amount of time, randomly selecting a student, using their name, and the student answering in full sentences.
- **discussion routines** for how students participate and interact in a whole-class or group dialogue, such as hand signals for 'I'm thinking', 'I have an answer' and 'I agree with what I've just heard' and a behavioural expectation to focus on the person speaking.
- **turn and talk** for peer-to-peer conversations during activities could include routines so students know who they're paired with that lesson/day/week, how they move into pairs when at tables, desks or in open space, and how they take turns to speak.
- **combined and sequenced** routines to check for understanding can help provide a predictable structure to lessons, such as TAPPLE, which includes a consistent sequence of (T)each first, (A)sk a specific question, (P)ause and Pair-Share, (P)ick a random non-volunteer, (L)isten to the Response, and (E)ffective Feedback.^{8,9}
- **peer support** routines for students who've mastered a task and can test and consolidate their own thinking by helping other students. This can be supported by consistent modelling by the teacher of 'thinking aloud', and by explicitly teaching students to demonstrate and model the approach they took with a peer rather than just sharing the answer.
- **peer feedback** routines to scaffold a culture of feedback and recognition of student effort and success. Once students have lots of experience seeing feedback given by the teacher, they can be taught to rehearse sharing feedback with their peers: 'When you shared your story with me, I noticed you used commas, full stops and capital letters consistently and correctly'. Providing question stems or feedback starter scripts related to the success criteria of the lesson can prompt and scaffold peer feedback.
- **self-review routines** to set up and scaffold students to evaluate their progress against success criteria can be supported by providing supportive checklists, rubrics and finished examples.
- **help seeking** routines for how students can access guidance, use scaffolds or gain attention from the teacher, or from a peer where appropriate.

Developing your practice

Consider what's informing your current practices, expectations and beliefs. Use these questions to reflect, make a plan to develop your practice and seek feedback to monitor the impact for your students.

- » What rules or routines in your classroom contribute to:
 - creating a consistent and predictable learning environment?
 - supporting students' focus on learning, including limiting distractions, maximising time 'on task', and fostering thinking?
 - supporting students' self-efficacy?
 - building a positive learning and feedback culture?
- » How do you establish rules and routines in your classroom or school? What helps all students to understand the value of rules and routines, and actively participate in them to benefit their own learning?
- » How does forming relationships of trust with local communities impact the development of rules and routines in your classroom? How might having these relationships make you more responsive to diverse student needs when developing and enacting routines?
- » Review the 6 steps in our [focused classroom checklist](#) to support the enactment of rules and routines. How are these steps reflected in your current practice? What area might be an important focus for your next professional learning goal?
- » What would others (peers, students, leaders) notice about your approach to rules and routines? What might they notice you do, create or say to communicate and use rules and routines to create and maintain a learning focused environment? How could you invite and use their feedback to strengthen your approach?

Further reading

Wong, H. K., & Wong, R. T. (2018). *The first days of school: How to be an effective teacher* (5th ed.). Harry K. Wong Publications. (pp. 201–203)

This book provides practical advice about how to structure and organise the classroom to support student success, including specific advice about key rules and routines.

Lemov, D. (2021). *Teach like a champion 3.0: 63 Techniques that put students on the path to college*. John Wiley & Sons.

This book draws upon the techniques of high-performing teachers to provide practical advice about techniques teachers can use to motivate students, increase learning success and redirect student behaviour.

Archer, A. L., & Hughes, C. A. (2010). *Explicit instruction: Effective and efficient teaching*. Guilford Publications.

This book explains how to structure and implement explicit instruction to support student success, including advice about effective rules and routines.

Endnotes

- 1 Bennett, T. (2020). *Running the room: The teacher's guide to behaviour*. John Catt Educational.
- 2 Lemov, D. (2021). *Teach like a champion 3.0: 63 techniques that put students on the path to college*. Jossey-Bass.
- 3 Willingham, D. T. (2021). *Why don't students like school? A cognitive scientist answers questions about how the mind works and what it means for the classroom* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- 4 Willingham, D. T. (2021). *Why don't students like school? A cognitive scientist answers questions about how the mind works and what it means for the classroom* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- 5 Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2022). *Building a culturally responsive Australian teaching workforce: Final report for Indigenous cultural competency project*. <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/intercultural-development/building-a-culturally-responsive-australian-teaching-workforce>
- 6 Lemov, D. (2021). *Teach like a champion 3.0: 63 techniques that put students on the path to college*. Jossey-Bass.
- 7 Lemov, D. (2021). *Teach like a champion 3.0: 63 techniques that put students on the path to college*. Jossey-Bass.
- 8 Dataworks. (2014). *Checking for understanding*. <https://dataworks-ed.com/checkingunderstanding/>
- 9 Hollingsworth, J. R., & Ybarra, S. E. (2012). *Explicit direct instruction for English learners*. Corwin Press.