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# Ready, Set, Learn

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Integrating powerful learning skills and strategies  
into daily instruction

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# Introduction: Learning to Learn

Teachers encounter many students in their work, and students of all kinds: students with different aptitudes for learning, different learning skills and strategies, and various amounts of motivation for learning.

Some students come to school with the skills, strategies, and habits for learning in school. They are highly organized and focused; they get all the assignments and projects done; they work hard and are successful on assessments and evaluations. These students are able to follow classroom routines, put in the required effort, organize their belongings and their work, comprehend a wide range of texts for various purposes, communicate effectively, collaborate with others, begin and complete assignments, and self-regulate to set goals. These are the students who will usually be successful in school. All of this occurs regardless of how engaging a lesson is or how many competing activities, assignments, and tests these students have. These students are able to gain, organize, and share content knowledge in a way that matches the expectations school learning is based on. If you ask these students what contributes to their success, you will hear things like, “I’m smart,” “I’m organized,” “I try hard,” or “I don’t know...I just get it!”

However, for the vast majority of students, not all learning skills and strategies that are crucial to successful learning are in place when they arrive at the school door. These skills and strategies must be explicitly taught to students by their teachers.

As an educator, I have watched disorganized students leave class with the assignment sheet on the floor under their desks, taught students who have problems working in groups, and seen countless students arrive at class without completed homework in their bags or on their tablets and with no clear way to communicate the reasons. I have taught students who don’t set goals for their own learning, even when prompted, and whose only purpose in school is to “get good marks.” On the other end of the spectrum, I have also seen students who work well in groups, communicate appropriately on written and oral tests, are on time with their projects, and set goals according to their own needs. And I have seen everything in between.

Schools are places packed with activities, lessons, special initiatives, and extra-curricular choices. Every day, we are planning lessons, assessing student learning, integrating technology, and making sure students feel safe and secure so they can learn. It is important that we also teach the skills and strategies that are an integral part of student learning. To do so, we must be aware of the important *hidden curriculum* of norms, values, beliefs, and social expectations. Knowing how to learn—being organized, knowing how to communicate, knowing how to

collaborate, knowing how to self-regulate, set goals and persevere toward them, and being able to strategize for learning—is essential to knowing and understanding the content. We know that the way students learn, the skills they develop from an early age, and the habits they develop to approach and complete work are crucial to student success. Now, we just have to teach them!

*Ready, Set, Learn* supports the development of important learning strategies and skills in your classroom. It will show you how to teach students to organize, strategize, and set goals to improve their own achievement, how to use the learning skills purposefully in a teachable moment, and how to plan for direct instruction to support learning to learn.

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## Learning Skills and Preferences

“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.”—Alvin Toffler

Research indicates that using good strategies helps students to learn and that these strategies can certainly be taught. If you are asked about the importance of students “knowing how to learn,” you will likely agree that the skills and strategies involved in learning are crucial to school success and student achievement. Our most successful learners are those who know about and use a wide range of learning skills and strategies.

Traditionally, students might be told to be organized, reminded to be good collaborators, and asked to work independently. However, as teachers, we realize that teaching students what, when, and how to develop and apply learning skills and strategies is more than just telling them to use these skills and strategies. What constitutes the shift from telling to teaching?

1. Understanding which component learning skills and strategies are important for success with a given task.
2. Within the context of any lesson, teaching the particular skills or strategies that students need.
3. Giving students a chance to practice until they are able to apply strategies independently, that is, until learning skills and strategies are habituated.

### Learning Skills and Strategies vs Learning Goals

Students need clarity on these terms in order to improve in these areas.

**Learning goals** are statements that describe what a student should know and/or be able to do by the end of lesson, set of lessons, or unit. They should be phrased in language meaningful to students. Sharing learning goals with students allows them to understand what they are learning, set their own goals for learning, and monitor their own progress towards those goals. Learning goals answer these questions:

- What am I expected to learn?
- What are the curriculum expectations addressed in this lesson/unit?

When students know the learning goals, they can take ownership of and reflect on their own learning.

**Learning skills** (e.g., memory skills, organizational skills) are the *what* of knowing how to learn, and they are closely connected to the learning strategies necessary to accomplish them. Knowing *what* (e.g., that using mnemonics is a good memory strategy; that it is necessary to have a system to keep learning materials organized and accessible) is different from knowing *how* (e.g., how to apply a mnemonic and in what context; which digital or paper-based organizational system to use and when).

**Learning strategies** are the *how* of successful learning, the deliberate acts or plans that improve thinking (e.g., *How can I remember this best? How can I use the “My Homework” app to become more organized?*). Students require knowledge about *how* to accomplish tasks in order to learn.

**Work habits** are routines that happen automatically. They can be positive or negative; i.e., in order to create productive work habits, some work habits might need to be unlearned and relearned. For example, if negative habits involved in collaboration (monopolizing the conversation, avoiding eye-contact, disregarding others’ opinions) have been established, these behaviors will need to be relearned differently in order to support good work habits.

Generally, teachers are comfortable sharing the learning goals of a lesson or unit with students. However, in order to achieve these learning goals, students need to be aware of the learning skills involved. For every learning goal, there should be a focus on a particular skill and strategies to achieve that goal. You can share learning skills with students in a number of ways:

- Listing the *Learning Goal* and then the *Learning Skill*, both with criteria for success, on lesson/unit outline shared with students:

**SAMPLE UNIT OUTLINE : ANIMAL HABITATS**

Learning Goal	<i>Identify different habitats</i>
Success Criteria	<i>Explain the differences between the characteristics of habitats</i>
Learning Skill	<i>Organization</i>
Success Criteria	<i>After the model is shown, I will begin and complete the organizer independently using available print and digital resources.</i>
Self-reflection	<input type="checkbox"/> I paid attention during the lesson. <input type="checkbox"/> I accessed necessary resources. In order to be more independent, I will _____ _____

Use the Goal Tracking Chart on page 17.

- Creating and providing a Goal Tracking chart. In a Goal Tracking chart, one column can represent the learning goal, a second column can represent the learning skill/strategy required to accomplish the goal, and two columns can support students in tracking their progress. This will keep students focused both on what they are learning and on how they are refining their skills of learning to learn. See page 17 for a Goal Tracking chart template.



SAMPLE GOAL TRACKING CHART

Learning Goal	How am I Doing? (Circle one)	Learning Skill/ Strategy	How am I Doing? (Circle one)
<i>I am learning to edit my writing using feedback from teacher/peers.</i>	JS = Just started MP = Making Progress GI = Got it	<i>Collaboration/I will participate fully in honest reflections about my work and the work of the others</i>	JS = Just started MP = Making Progress GI = Got it

- Creating an anchor chart that outlines the learning skill/strategy and the criteria associated with that skill or strategy for the unit. For example, responsibility is an important learning skill because it is tied to elements of learning to learn that are greatly valued—responsibility for behavior, responsibility for assignment completion, etc. It turns out that choice, voice, and autonomy in learning are crucially important to learning engagement. This, in turns, promotes responsibility.

SAMPLE ANCHOR CHART

Success Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The student fulfills commitments within the learning environment.</li> <li>• Class work, assignments, and homework are consistently submitted on time.</li> <li>• Each student manages his/her own behavior consistently, without supervision.</li> </ul>

It is important to include student input into the success criteria in order for them to express their own strengths/strategies for a given skill.

## Knowing Your Learners

Perhaps the most important part of teaching is knowing your learners and using this understanding to tailor instruction to groups of learners using the most appropriate instructional strategies. Equally as important to the teaching and learning cycle is the idea that learners know themselves. This is particularly true as students learn to learn.

### Students' Learning Preferences

The way that a student most naturally and successfully approaches learning and studying is his or her *learning preference*. Learning preferences include how one approaches a learning task (e.g., attacking the task question-by-question, skimming content and expectations before beginning, or seeing/hearing a model before beginning); what environment works best for studying (e.g., lighting, noise level, with music or food available); where one prefers to learn/study (e.g., at a desk, in a table group, spread out on the floor); and when one likes to learn/study (e.g., in the morning, at night, right before bed).

Research tells us that it is good practice to represent information in a wide variety of ways through more than one approach or modality, grouping students for instruction rather than trying to match a particular or narrow instructional

approach with individual learners. However, awareness of a variety of preferences is important when teaching students.

Even though there are general approaches to teaching learning skills and strategies that seem to benefit most students, all students have different strengths and different learning preferences. It is important to match our knowledge of students and their learning preferences to the learning strategies we teach. Students will have different background knowledge, interests, and preferred methods of taking in, organizing, and making sense of information. Some tasks will be easier than others for different students. For example, there are students who

- prefer paper and pencil to technology
- do not need the scaffolding of a graphic organizer prior to writing
- can cram and learn large amounts of information quickly
- remember information the first time they hear it
- read for enjoyment to the extent that they are reading a book a day

Knowing our students, their background knowledge, learning preferences, and interests helps us tailor specific teaching strategies and parts of any lesson to the students in the classroom. Spending the time to get to know students' learning preferences and strengths, as well as making the effort to match instruction to these learning preferences, can contribute to improved student achievement, as you support students as they become more engaged, independent learners. So how do we gather and use information about learning preferences positively in the classroom?

### **Prompting Students**

We can use specific prompts and questions to know our learners better. We know that there are many ways we can set our students up for successful learning: e.g., closely matching our instruction to their learning preferences, knowing their strengths and needs. Questions and prompts can help us gather information from each individual student to better plan effective instruction.

<p>Students learn most effectively when the strategies used are closely matched to their learning preferences.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Do you prefer to work alone or with a friend or group?</i></li> <li>• <i>Where do you get you best studying done?</i></li> <li>• <i>What time of day do you do your homework?</i></li> </ul>
<p>Students can improve their learning by knowing what their strengths are and then doing more of what they're good at.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What are you most interested in?</i></li> <li>• <i>What sparks your curiosity and interest?</i></li> <li>• <i>What are you really good at in school? Outside of school?</i></li> </ul>
<p>Students can improve their learning by knowing what their weaknesses are and trying to enhance their skills in these areas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What are you least interested in at school?</i></li> <li>• <i>Where do you feel you have to work the hardest to be successful?</i></li> <li>• <i>Which learning skill is most challenging for you: organization or collaboration?</i></li> </ul>