

Timer Tips

Experience has taught me a few things about using a digital timer that I'll share with you so that you won't have to experience the same learning curve.

Assessing How Much Time for Activities

It will take a while to get a feel for how much time you need to provide for certain activities. Although ten minutes for independent reading and a five minute "time out" work well, how long should I give my students to answer a set of social studies questions or complete a math activity sheet?

Recommended:

1. Set your timer[†] for what you think is an appropriate amount of time.
2. Announce the time to your students.
3. Let them know it's time to get started.
4. Start your timer.
5. Start to circulate around the room to check on progress.

As you work your way around the room checking on your students, you'll begin to get a feel for whether you've set your timer for the proper amount of time. (Don't use the pace of your overachievers as you assess their progress. Overachievers will give you a false sense of success and achievement. Look, instead, to the handful of average students.)

If, by your observations, you feel that the amount of time you've given them is not going to be enough, it's important that you adjust the time before the timer beeps.

MR. MORRIS

Getting the attention of his students (see pages 5-32 through 5-43 for suggestions):

I think I goofed on how much time you're going to need to complete this activity. In fact, check your papers. If you are on track to be finished on time, you should be on problem number 12.

STUDENTS

Checking their papers and gasping at their appalling lack of progress:

Oh, no.

MR. MORRIS

Resetting Max:

Everybody calm down. I'm going to add 10 minutes to the time I gave you. You now have 20 minutes to have this assignment finished. Back to work.

STUDENTS

Thanks, Mr. Morris.

[†] If the only thing you've got is an old, tired, spin-the-top kitchen timer, don't despair. It's still superior to the standard clock on the wall.

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MR. MORRIS

Smiling benevolently:

No problem. Just wanted to make sure I'm taking good care of you guys.

If, on the other hand, I hadn't intervened when I should have, and the timer went off as originally set, I'd find myself with a whole host of unhappy-because-their-assignments-are-unfinished students. This would be especially true if they really hadn't been given enough time to complete the assignment.

MAX

Having counted down to zero:

Beep-beep-beep, beep-beep-beep, beep-beep-beep.

MR. MORRIS

I need to collect your activity sheets now.

STUDENTS

What?

Already?

I'm not done yet!

That wasn't enough time!



I'm now faced with two options:

1. Add more time to what was originally given.
2. Tell them we'll work on this assignment tomorrow and collect it then.

Adding more time is fine. (After all, teachers make mistakes and need to address them with their students.) However, if I make a habit of adding time, my students will eventually begin to see Max, the timer, as something that can be ignored rather than obeyed. Extending the activity until tomorrow falls into the same category: fine as long as it's not overdone.



With a bit of practice, though, you'll get good at setting your timer. And, by learning how to judge appropriate time frames, you'll not only avoid the perils of extending the time, you'll reinforce your consistency and fairness.

Breaking Up Long Times

Whenever you find yourself needing to set your timer for a period of time greater than thirty minutes, you might want to think about keeping them apprised of the passage of time.

I've made it a practice to announce the halfway point.

MR. MORRIS

With Max in hand:

You have 40 minutes in which to complete page 2 of your social studies activity packet. Any questions?

Not a peep.

MR. MORRIS

Well, then, I have a question. What are you going to do when you finish early?

STUDENT

Put your packet in your paper folder and check the E.T. Chart.

MR. MORRIS

That's a good plan. Okay, 40 minutes. Let's get to work.

And with that, I'd set Max for 20 minutes. The beep we'll hear at the halfway point will enable me to remind them about how much time they have remaining.

MR. MORRIS

With the now beeping Max in hand:

Max is telling us we have just 20 minutes left in which to complete this assignment. If you're stuck or confused about anything on this page, please ask for help. Back on task, please.

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This simple technique helps to prevent time from getting away from us. It also enables me to encourage students who now realize that they are not sure about part of the assignment to seek help before it's too late.

Two Minutes Left? Time to Prepare

One of the subtle advantages to using a digital timer is that you'll be able to adjust what you're doing according to the time left. As you near the end, check the display to see how much time still remains.

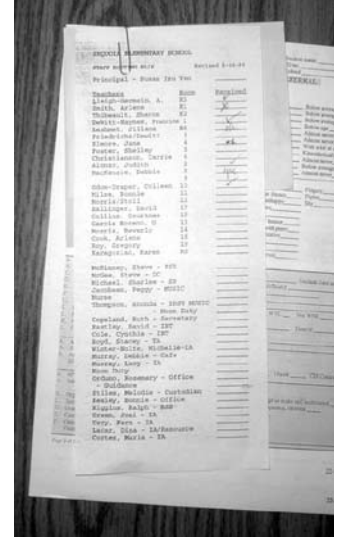
Less than two minutes?

... Don't get yourself involved in something that will take more than two minutes. You need to be ready to make a smooth transition to the next activity you have planned for your students.

Although most of your time during independent activity periods should be devoted to "working the room" so that you're available for students who need your assistance, there will be times when they are doing fine and you're free to take care of some type of classroom business.

One minute left?

- ... Write a quick note to a parent regarding something positive one of your students did today.
- ... Check off your name on the routing slip attached to the announcement sent to you by the office. These things can pile up if you allow them to. Find a student who has finished the assignment, give him the routing slip and announcement, and send him to the next room on the list.
- ... Check your plan book to reassure yourself that you have already prepared all of the materials you're going to need for later in the day.
- ... Go sit with one of your underachievers and provide some emotional support.

*Thirty seconds left?*

- ... Collect your thoughts.
- ... Think about how you want to transition to the next activity.
- ... Double-check to see that you have what you're going to need.
- ... Relax and smile.

Max is beeping?

- ... Allow them a moment to disengage from their activities.
- ... Give transition directions in a slow, calm voice.

Transition music: If you have the book, *Eight Great Ideas*, you should read Chapter 4: *Using Music for Student Management*. It describes, in step-by-step fashion, how to use something as simple as the *Jeopardy* theme song as a transition timer. I've found that TV theme songs are well suited for this purpose. For one, they are usually of a short duration. For another, most of the songs are familiar enough that the students can use the music to pace themselves. By the time the song is hitting its final few measures, they'll be ready for the next activity. You gotta try it to see what I mean.