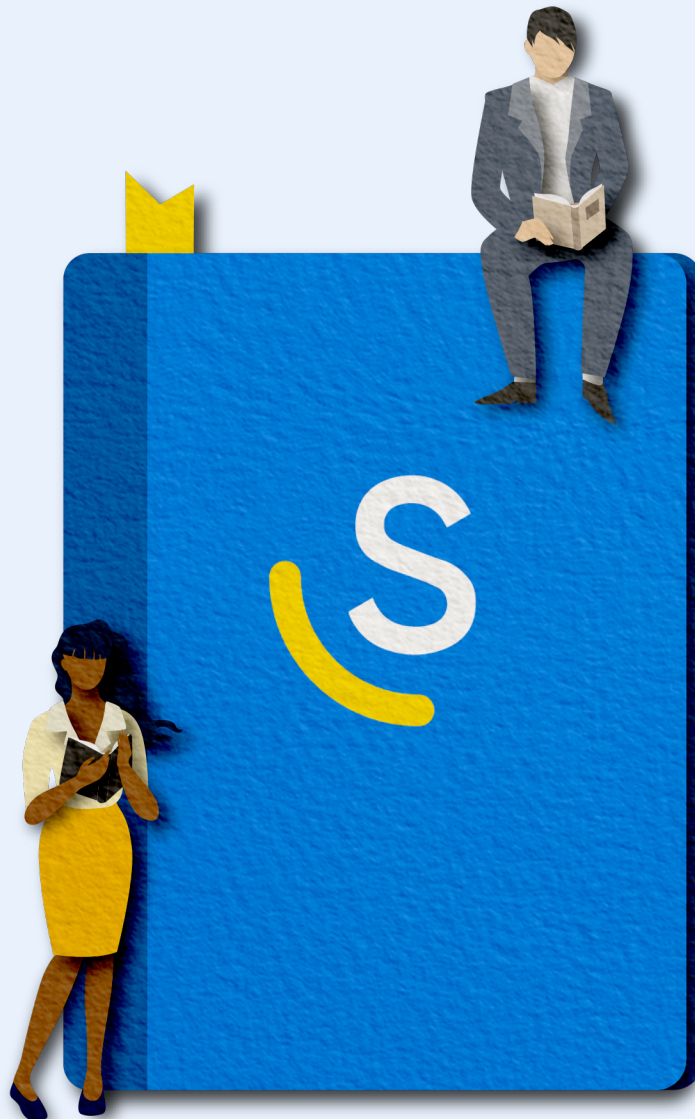




The definitive substitute teacher handbook

Your complete guide for substitute teaching in every grade and subject



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The basics

1. A typical day for substitute teachers

6:00 AM: Your day might begin with a phone call or text message, where you'll find out what school and class needs a substitute and when to be there. In an ideal scenario, substitute teacher assignments are posted in advance, so you can have more autonomy over your schedule. Once you've accepted a sub assignment, it's time to get ready for school.

8:00 AM: When you arrive at school, your first stop is likely the office. The school secretary gives you keys to your classroom and any instructions. You make your way to your destination and find sub plans, a roster, a daily schedule, and information about emergency procedures on the teacher's desk.

8:15 AM: Before students arrive, write any instructions and your name on the board. Greet students as they enter your class, introduce yourself, and get down to business. Follow the teacher's plans faithfully. Remember to take attendance!

12:00 PM: Time for lunch! If you're not sure where to eat, head to the teacher's lounge and introduce yourself; building relationships leads to more work as a substitute.

2:30 PM: As the day draws to a close, have students tidy up and turn in their assignments. Once the bell rings and students leave, write a note for the teacher including information such as how the lesson went, where students left off in their work, and any modifications to the lesson that were made.

2:45 PM: Pop into the office to drop off your keys, and you're officially done. Now head home and put your feet up — you've earned a break. Get ready to do it all over again tomorrow.



2. What to wear as a substitute teacher

From the moment you step through the door, you want your students to see someone who appears calm and capable. Dressing for the part will help you earn and retain student's respect, as well as give you the confidence you need to lead your classroom.

In case the school doesn't provide specific attire guidance, here's what we recommend based on an analysis of dress codes at our partner schools:



Tips for attire:

- Comfortable dress shoes/flats (avoid sneakers, sandals, or open-toed shoes)
- Business casual or professional attire
- Solid colored slacks — avoid jeans
- Neatly ironed buttoned up collared shirt
- Blouse and/or knitted sweater/cardigan
- Avoid anything tight or revealing



- Be sure to practice good hygiene — stay away from any strong or offensive odors, such as cigarettes or perfumes/colognes.
- Express your individuality. Kid-friendly novelty socks, jewelry, and accessories can be fun way to let your personality shine through.

3. How to leave good substitute notes



One of the most important things you can do is to write detailed notes for the absent teacher. Here are some helpful tips on how you can do just that... without adding stress to your day.

1. Use your sub plans as a framework to jot down notes for the absent teacher throughout the day. The notes can act as a tool to follow the class schedule, and they provide a place for you to write down what lessons plans were accomplished. You can also annotate any changes to the schedule. This is a great help for teachers when they return to school and need to plan out their next lessons.
2. There may be students in your class who will not want to follow the management plan set in place by the classroom teacher. So, it is important to make a separate note for any behavioral issues. Do your best to communicate these observations factually and in a non-judgmental way (i.e.: instead of noting that a student was rude, describe exactly what happened).
3. One way to stand out from other substitute teachers is to make your own “Sub Notes” form. You can create a simple template using Microsoft Word, Google Docs, or a similar program. Here are some subject headings that would be helpful to put on your template:
 - Absent students
 - Class accomplishments
 - Activities that went poorly or really well
 - Extra comments you have about the day



Grade level tips

4. Elementary school

- 1. Be patient:** Elementary-school students are still very early in their development, of course, so they may require additional time to comply with directions. A big part of succeeding with this population is to avoid assuming that students will know how to do something. As the adult in the room, they are looking to you to tell them what to do and how to do it.
- 2. Mean what you say and say what you mean:** Elementary-school students are the first ones to hold you to your word. Your word is trust in their mind, so you have to adhere to it as much as possible. If you tell students that something is going to happen at a particular time, it needs to happen at that time. Often, students will misbehave if you do not follow up with your word.
- 3. Follow the schedule:** Elementary-school students find comfort in the structure of a schedule. They are used to doing certain activities at certain times, so you should attempt to follow the schedule as much as you can. This is also a great way to show students that you know what is expected of them while they are with you.
- 4. Give positive reinforcement:** Elementary students thrive on positive reinforcement because they frequently seek to please. Tell students when they are following directions and/or doing something well. This can either be done verbally or non-verbally. When other students see that you are praising their peers, they will want to emulate the same behavior to receive the same praise.



Activities for elementary school

1. Tell a communal story: Ask students to generate a story that begins with “once upon a time” and incorporates a list of concepts or words you select from class material. You can also use story cubes (or make your own!) to inspire them with images. They’ll enjoy the fun that comes with the randomness of rolling dice.



2. Create a card: Give students time to make a card for someone special in their lives. This incorporates drawing, coloring (which are both excellent activities for developing fine motor skills), and writing.



3. Play ‘Would You Rather’: Findings by Stanford researchers show games help develop patience, engagement, and discipline — skills that correlate with success even more highly than IQ. “Would You Rather” is a fun, silly game that has the added bonus of helping you get to know your students a little better. You simply ask questions such as, “would you rather be turned into a giant bunny rabbit or a miniature giraffe?” or “would you rather sneeze 75 times every single day or always have to wear flip-flops everywhere you go?”



4. Read aloud: Never underestimate the power of story time. There are many benefits to reading aloud to children. No matter what their age, most elementary students transform once they are captivated by a book. Whether you have them remain seated at their desks or invite them to sit in a circle around you, choose a book or two from the teacher’s collection (or ask if anyone has a favorite they can share) and let them get lost in a good story.



5. Middle school

- 1. Remember, they're still kids:** Some middle-school students look like young adults. Don't let this fool you! Behind that rapidly growing exterior is a young person in flux. Keep that in mind when setting expectations. It's helpful to circulate around the room to verify students are on-task. Also, keep the sarcasm out of the classroom. Your students won't likely understand it, and they developmentally take that type of humor to heart. Instead, speak literally when communicating to all students. Students benefit when adults say what they mean and mean what they say. It also garners a lot of respect.
- 2. Own being the adult in the room:** Like all students, middle schoolers sometimes push boundaries — especially when there's a substitute teacher in the room. They may strategically “forget” rules that have been in place all year and bend the truth to suit their purposes, especially if they think there's little chance they'll be caught. Always consult any sub plans or behavioral guidelines that have been left behind. When in doubt, ask the teacher next door or the site admin.
- 3. Provide clear expectations up front:** Before class begins, review any behavioral guidance the full-time teacher left behind; let students know at the beginning of class what's expected of them. Tell students where they should sit, what materials they are allowed to use, and, generally, what they should be engaged in at all times during activities. Let them know whether talking and collaboration are allowed and what volume students can speak at. Tell them what they're expected to turn in at activity's end. And give students reminders to stay on-task. Once students are aware of the expectations, it is important that you hold them to that standard.

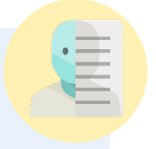


Activities for middle school

1. Play ‘Telephone’: In this classic game, players whisper a message from person to person. Inevitably, the message changes along the way. When the last person says what they think the message is aloud, it’s often very different from where it began. Telephone teaches kids about the importance of listening closely. It also might be an interesting jumping off point to talk to older kids about how information changes when it passes through different channels (as it does constantly on the internet).



2. Play ‘20 Questions’: “20 Questions” is a guessing game that helps students learn how to use reason and logic. Choose one student to be the “answerer” who knows the “answer” — a person, place, or thing that the other students will try to guess. Students will have 20 opportunities to narrow the question down and find the answer.



3. Hold an open question session: Sometimes, students just need an open forum to ask questions during a particularly complex lesson. Before jumping in and answering, open each student’s question to the class and guide and refine their answers as needed.



4. Write a short story inspired by one of their favorite songs: Ask students to think of one of their favorite songs and write a short story. They can write about the storyline, images, or themes of the song. Students can volunteer to read their stories aloud if time permits.



5. Write a poem about an upcoming event: Writing about the holidays or other special events is a great opportunity to engage students in descriptive writing. As a bonus, encourage students to share their poem as a heartfelt gift for their family members.



6. High school



- 1. Channel your inner Boy Scout:** A confident teacher creates a confident student, and a great way to show confidence is to be prepared. One of the best ways to do this is to come in as early as possible on the day you sub to give yourself plenty of time to review the teacher’s lesson plans. Remember: kids are kids, even in high school. They need to know that someone, besides them, is in control.
- 2. Remember the golden rule:** The simple rule of treating students the way you would want to be treated rarely fails. Speak kindly and gently. Say “hello” and “goodbye.” Say “please” and “thank you.” In the event that you must take disciplinary action, such as sending a kid to the office, do so with respect. You might be surprised at the number of high-school subs who don’t even introduce themselves to the students — a basic courtesy. Word will spread about how you treat students, and your reputation will precede you in every classroom in which you sub. It is up to you what that reputation will be.
- 3. Be firm and kind:** Kindness will usually squelch any disciplinary issues; however, if you find yourself at odds with a student, don’t engage with the student in the classroom. Ask the student to step into the hallway with you. Gently, but firmly, explain what the student was doing and what you expect them to do. You will usually find students to be much more compliant when removed from an audience. In the rare case when a student is completely out of hand, stay calm and call the office or send a student next door with a note to a neighbor, asking for assistance.

Activities for high school

1. Write a letter to a local, national, or world leader: In this activity, ask students to write a letter to an elected official or other leader and persuade them on a matter of policy. The letter can be imaginary or something the students will actually send. This is an exercise in persuasive writing intended to influence the reader. Ask them to support their reasoning with concrete evidence and logic.



2. Pair up and quiz each other: Students can use review questions provided in their textbooks, by their teacher, or that they come up with on their own. This is a great activity for early-finishers, and can be treated as part of the overall lesson.



3. Play the 'ABC Game': In this game, you divide the class into teams. Name a topic, such as “animals” or “the Great Depression” and have teams take turns naming things that fit into the topic, going through the alphabet. For example, they might say, “aardvark, badger, cougar...” or “Agricultural Adjustment Act, Black Tuesday, Calvin Coolidge...”



4. Create review crosswords: Hand out graph paper. Have students create a crossword puzzle for their classmates using words from the chapter they're studying.



5. Write a letter to their future selves: Another spin on letter-writing is to ask students to address their future selves. Pick an age — 10 or so years in the future — and ask them to write to them as they would a friend or mentor. They can ask questions, imagine what their life is like, and share their dreams for the future. This is an exercise in descriptive and expository writing. Students will get excited about the personal nature of the assignment.





Subject area tips

7. English Language Arts



The beauty of substitute teaching in an English Language Arts class is that you can often do a lot with fairly minimal source material. Ideally, the teacher has provided a lesson plan for you to review as well as information regarding classroom rules and students' needs. It's important to follow these instructions and lesson plans. This goes a long way toward maintaining a productive classroom environment and keeping students on track.

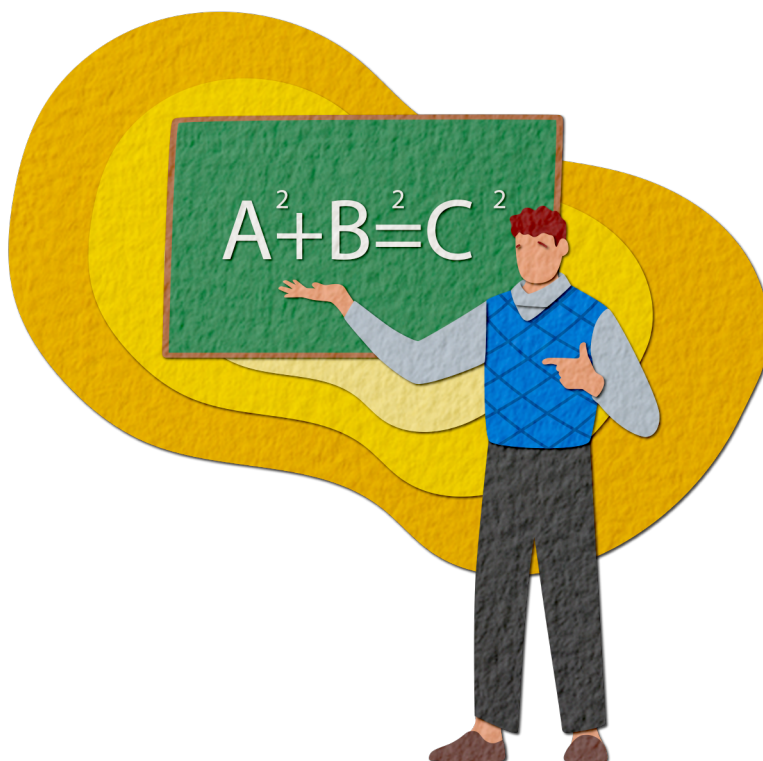
If clear sub plans are not available, there will likely be reading material that can serve as the foundation for the day's lesson. To keep things simple, you can read to the students or have them read aloud and "popcorn" to each other. If you feel comfortable going a step further, you can facilitate a class discussion about what you have just read or even have students write and share reflections on the material.

Remember, even if English Language Arts isn't your speciality, any critical thinking that students engage in when reading, discussing, and writing about a text helps them build their skills. English Language Arts lessons don't have to be complicated to be effective and you don't need to have the answers to facilitate an interesting class. Create space for the students to share their thoughts and opinion – ultimately, giving them the floor (with clear guidelines and discussion prompts) will create a rewarding and successful lesson for everyone.

8. Math

When you're subbing in a math classroom, it can be much easier to feel confident if math education is in your wheelhouse, but even if it's not, there's no need to discount your knowledge to your students. Avoid making comments like, "I'm not a math person," and instead project confidence and competence.

Many math teachers have "emergency assignments" or activities ready to go in case they need to miss a day that give students something of educational value in case a substitute doesn't feel confident to step in at the current point in the sequence of topics. Try to determine whether the assignment is of this nature, or whether it's simply picking up from where the last lesson left off. If this isn't clear, see if you can find another grade-level math teacher who would know, or ask the class what they worked on during the previous class.



If you're not quite comfortable explaining the "whys and hows" of math concepts, remember that your role is that of a facilitator or guide, not the source of all answers. There's a good chance that a student might have a question for which you don't have an immediate answer — in fact, you should expect it! It's okay to not know everything so just be honest!

Above all, don't try to save face by giving an answer you're unsure about. Encourage students to work in pairs or groups to answer questions — this can be a great starting point for a classroom discussion. Students will be far more appreciative if you're honest instead of giving them a potentially misleading answer.

9. Science

As a substitute teacher in a science class, it is unlikely that you will be asked to introduce new content. You probably won't be asked to do any sort of lab experiment either. Students will most likely be working on an extension of a prior day's lesson. In the event that you are asked to present new material, try to familiarize yourself with the content and do any last-minute research before the students enter the room.

Once students have begun to work on their assignment, it's important to circulate the room and provide assistance. Remember, science can be tricky, and students will appreciate the support your presence provides. If specific questions arise, do your best to clarify any problems the students encounter. If you aren't necessarily a science expert, you can encourage students to ask a buddy for help, consult their books or, if allowed, the internet for help.

If students complete their assignments with time to spare, this is a great opportunity to review the material as a class, leveraging the knowledge of those who have a better understanding of the material to explain to others. To prepare for this, decide which students will share and ask them ahead of time to share their answer and reasoning with the class.

At the end of the day, even if students didn't learn new material, the opportunity to engage with their science assignment and dive deeper into specific topics will help ensure learning continuity and set them up for success when their full-time teacher returns.



10. Foreign languages



Foreign language teachers won't task you with teaching the language, but it is very important to understand the expectations that the absent teacher has set. The absent teacher will likely want students to stay on task (completing work, engaging in topical conversations using the language, writing prose in the language, etc.).

The good news is that almost every foreign language teacher creates review lessons for substitutes. They would never expect you to magically learn a language overnight, and they know that reviewing things the students have already learned will be much more beneficial than introducing new material.

If there's a question that no one in the class can seem to figure out and you're not familiar with the language, there are a number of resources that can be helpful. First, encourage students to look for the answer or explanation in their textbook. While this may seem like common sense, students might not initially think to look to the book because their teacher most likely delivers the material in more dynamic ways, such as videos or visual aids.

If students can't find what they're looking for in the textbook or the explanation is confusing or unclear, there are many useful internet resources that might help, though these should generally be a last resort unless specified otherwise by the absent teacher; most foreign language teachers generally discourage the use of internet translators.

When it's all said and done, it's not the end of the world if students struggle with parts of the lesson. This is to be expected in a foreign language class, as everyone learns at a different pace.

11. Physical education

There are three grade-level groupings for physical education: K-5, 6-8, 9-12. Each grouping brings its own unique characteristics, challenges, and goals.

Don't worry if athletics is not your thing. Today's modern gym class is more about helping students stay active and interactive.



There may be a quiz now and then about the specifics of a sport, but no deeper knowledge or experience is needed. So, stay comfortable — wear sneakers/clothing appropriate for movement (and bring sunscreen if you'll be outside) — and be confident in your ability to lead a gym class for any age group.

Above all else, know your school's safety protocol — i.e. nurse's station, concussion protocol, CPR/AED, etc. If this information is not given to you by the absent teacher, then make certain to ask a school official prior to your first class. Remember, the students' safety is your primary concern.

For all P.E. classes, make sure to provide clear and concise directions for the activity. It's even better if you can model how the activity should work as well as any time constraints. For example, you might say, "We are only playing this game for 15 minutes, so freeze and look at me when the timer goes off."

Finally, and this is a modern issue, know your school's phone policy. Some schools allow students to access their phones freely throughout the day, while other schools have stricter rules regarding usage. It's best if you know so that you can nip any potential issues in the bud.

12. Special education

If you are not familiar with working as a special education substitute teacher, give yourself plenty of time to prepare for the day. In certain situations, the school may give you the option to shadow the full-time teacher or meet up with them before the assignment begins. However, an unexpected teacher absence may not make this possible, and it's especially important to arrive early in those situations.

Either way, it's also important to familiarize yourself with the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) of the students you'll be working with. IEPs outline the specific needs and accommodations for each student with special needs. Take the time to review these documents before the class begins to understand the unique requirements of each student, such as when/if students have to take medication or any other medical conditions you need to be aware of (i.e. seizures, allergies, etc.).

Collaborate with the regular classroom teacher, special education staff, and any support personnel. They can offer valuable insights into the classroom dynamics, individual student needs, and effective teaching strategies. Clear communication ensures a cohesive approach to meeting the diverse needs of the students.

Special education classes often thrive on routines. Establishing a clear and predictable schedule helps students feel secure and supported. Be consistent with transitions, activities, and expectations to create a structured learning environment. That being said, special education classes may also require on-the-spot adjustments. Stay flexible and be prepared to adapt your teaching methods to accommodate different learning styles and abilities. Flexibility is key to creating an inclusive and supportive environment.



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