

1998

## Do or die : a survival guide for new teachers

Peggy A. Martin  
*University of Northern Iowa*

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

Copyright ©1998 Peggy A. Martin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Martin, Peggy A., "Do or die : a survival guide for new teachers" (1998). *Graduate Research Papers*. 1131.  
<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/1131>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uni.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uni.edu).

---

## Do or die : a survival guide for new teachers

### Abstract

This article is written in an effort to help new middle school teachers with classroom management. Beginning teachers are well prepared in terms of curriculum, theory, and strategies, but until one actually experiences the myriad of personalities and situations in a classroom, there is little they can do except hang on for the ride. The author hopes to encourage new teachers to adopt attitudes which will foster a learning environment for students and create confidence in the teacher which will result in a classroom that is amicable and filled with students eager to learn.

**Do or Die:  
A Survival Guide for New Teachers**

**A Graduate Journal Article  
Submitted to the  
Division of Middle School/Junior High Education  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA**

**by  
Peggy A. Martin  
December 5, 1998**

This Journal Article by Peggy A. Martin

Do or Die: A Survival Guide for New Teachers

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts in Education

12-18-98  
Date Approved

Donna Schumacher-Douglas

Graduate Faculty Reader

12-23-98  
Date Approved

Greg P. Stefanich

Graduate Faculty Reader

12-24-98  
Date Approved

W. P. Callahan

Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction

## Table of Contents

Title Page .....	i
Approval Page .....	ii
Table of Contents .....	iii
Abstract .....	iv
NMSA Title Page .....	1
“Do or Die: A Survival Guide for New Teachers” .....	2-15
References .....	16
Appendix A-Editorial Guidelines .....	17-19

Do or Die:  
A Survival Guide for New Teachers

Abstract

This article is written in an effort to help new middle school teachers with classroom management. Beginning teachers are well prepared in terms of curriculum, theology, and strategies, but until one actually experiences the myriad of personalities and situations in a classroom, there is little they can do except hang on for the ride. The author shares classroom situations from her first year of teaching and encourages new teachers to try some of the techniques that worked for her.

The author touches on topics ranging from creating a safe learning environment to alternative assessments. She presents how pride time and talking the talk may help students gain confidence. Sections on setting up an advisor/advisee program and working with reluctant students focus on student interactions and fostering a team concept.

Being optimistic and prepared highlights areas for teachers to concentrate on to model positive behaviors for students to emulate. Dealing with missing assignments and giving meaningful homework assignments helps new teachers with practical insights. Setting up the classroom by dealing directly with rules and routines offers a jump start on the year by preparing both teacher and students with concrete guidelines.

By capitalizing on the unexpected and using humor to diffuse what may become problem areas, new teachers can feel confident that they are showing students how to deal with a variety of situations positively.

The author hopes to encourage new teachers to adopt attitudes which will foster a learning environment for students and create confidence in the teacher which will result in a classroom that is amicable and filled with students eager to learn.

# **How to Survive Do or Die: A Survival Guide for New Teachers**

## **A Survival Guide for New Teachers**

**Peggy A. Martin**

**Teacher, Middle School Language Arts/Social Studies  
Sac and Fox Settlement School  
1349 Meskwaki Road  
Tama, IA 52339**

**Home Address and Phone:  
1502 South Second Street  
Marshalltown, IA 50158  
515-752-8305**

**Submitted to the Middle School Journal on January 1, 1999, by Peggy A. Martin. This manuscript is not under review by any other publication nor has it been previously published.**

# Do or Die: A Survival Guide for New Teachers

Upon graduation from college as an undergraduate, I felt prepared to teach. My first assignment was to teach 7<sup>th</sup> grade language arts in a medium sized school district. I was responsible for approximately 135 students in five classes each day. I had “Madeleine Hunter” down pat, and felt I was a creative and innovative educator. Imagine my distress as that first year wore down when I realized that I HATED teaching. As a non-traditional student who had raised two children to high school age, I was stymied as to why I was less than thrilled when I completed that first year. I sat back and took a long, hard look at my first year and realized that I was spending a disproportionate amount of time on discipline! UGH! I wanted to ensure that I would never put in a year like that.

I spent several days simply dreading my next year when it dawned on me that the students were not the problem. How on earth could I possibly expect to change the attitude and personalities of 130 students to fit my preconceived ideas of “good” students? That left only one alternative—I was the one who needed to change. One word seemed to come back to me and that was **attitude** with a capital A. I struggled with some of my prior theories and beliefs and knew that I also had to be able to be myself with my student since I knew I could not completely rearrange my personality. I pondered my situation over a period of a few days and kept coming back to the thought that I simply did not want to repeat my first year. Many educators continued to encourage me and told me that the first year was the toughest!

Finally the thought hit me! What would the “best” teacher do? How would the “best” teacher

respond? I had read an article about developing a new habit in three weeks, and I had tried with success to establish a new habit—flossing my teeth. I knew that this strategy had worked for me in one area so I began to plan for the coming year with this strategy and the desire to be the “best” teacher. I replayed in my mind repeatedly what the most appropriate response would be if I were the “best” teacher in various scenarios. I knew that if I could be consistent for at least three weeks, I would have given it my best.

The new school year rolled around, and I was actually excited to try to be the “best” teacher. Each time I felt drawn into a situation in which I could feel my emotions changing, I whispered inside my head “What would the “best” teacher do?” I couldn’t believe it! I was able to change my reactions to situations and the difference in my classroom was immediate and lasting. That is not to say that I did everything right or that the classroom environment was perfect, but one thing was changed: I got up in the morning knowing that I could handle whatever came my way.

As the years of teaching have accumulated, I frequently have been asked for advice from first year teachers who were struggling with classroom management. Even my principal felt that I had a “secret” way of addressing management issues. I did not have a unique “secret” to successful classroom management, but rather just a liberal dose of common sense with quite a bit of trial and error thrown in. In an effort to share my advice and experiences with other teachers, I have written down the following bits and pieces in the hopes it might help others have a great first year or be able to get a new attitude towards teaching young adolescents.

## **Lessons I Have Learned**

**Create A Safe Haven.** The first few days of my second year of teaching set the precedent of the atmosphere for the rest of the year. I continually tried to create a “safe haven” for middle school students. They were so full of bravado but I found that was often just a cover for insecurity and fear (Dale, 1995).

One of my experiences while teaching poetry served to solidify my belief that my management style was on track. The students were to write formed poetry. This is a very non-threatening activity since they simply had to “fill in” their own thoughts and feelings. The poem was titled, “I Am”. One line began “Who fears...” students filled in three things of which they were afraid. Seven students filled in that they were afraid of a particular teacher or class. I knew I was creating a safe climate for learning when they were able to express to me their fears.

Middle school students need all the safe places they can find. Though we, as adults and educators, do not see why they would be fearful of certain situations, we need to validate their feelings and take seriously their concerns. Middle school students are characterized as having feelings of insecurity and they are easily offended (National Middle School Association, 1992).

**Enjoy the Unexpected.** Students come to expect certain behaviors from teachers much as teachers expect certain behaviors from students. Teachers’ consistent behavior and a dependable classroom environment create trust and yet sometimes it is important to show a playful or spontaneous side of your personality. Teachers who bring all their moods into the classroom can surely expect their students to do the same.

Start each day with a smile and a clean slate for every student. Cultivate humor. I have often been too serious and sincere about teaching. After all, this is serious business! Kenny was one of the students that taught me the value of a good spontaneous laugh. I was reading a novel to the whole class and Kelly was “resting his eyes.” I read the phrase “she felt *queer*,” and given the etymology of the word and its more recent connotations, Kenny burst into laughter! He literally fell off his chair. The other students’ eyes widened, and I could feel that they were waiting to see me reprimand him. I began to laugh. I had easily defused a tense situation and provided Kenny with a place he could be himself. Kenny, who was a problem for many teachers, became very dear to me. He did not become a model student, but our relationship improved from that day onward!

**Be Optimistic.** Share the visions you have for your students as a class and individually. Recently, I helped our eighth graders write speeches to be delivered during the graduation ceremony. I also was expected to speak. I realized the best thing I could say was my vision for each of their futures. From their reactions that day, I perceived that I should have shared this vision with them earlier in the year.

Each student has qualities that they do not comprehend and pointing that out to them can be helpful in enhancing how they see themselves. Shoot for the stars! Without a vision, these students usually see themselves simply in the present. Through activities such as this they begin to create their own future. Let them know that they can determine their future.

**Model the Trust and Respect You Want from Students.** There is nothing more important

than showing appropriate behavior. If I lose my temper and shout, students will see this as an acceptable response and use shouting to make their point. After all, I modeled the behavior so it must be acceptable. Let each student know they are responsible for their own actions, as are teachers. Appropriate behaviors can be taught but are more likely to be “caught”. Lack of respect by me for others will lead to lack of respect given me (Canter, 1996).

**Proximity Control.** Like medicine, the best discipline is preventative. By keeping the classroom running smoothly, a learning atmosphere will prevail. To prevent disruption in a large classroom, stay on your feet. Students rarely misbehave unless they are left to their own devices. By walking around the room, teachers monitor not only the work but also the behavior. An additional benefit is that students are much more likely to ask questions when you pass by. Very few of us have questions until we start on the assigned task. I realized this when I was taking classes as a graduate student. It is premature to say “Any questions?” at the end of instruction. Try saying, “I’ll answer your questions as you begin working on the assignment.” Then proceed to walk around the room. Students are more likely to respond when you are in their area.

**Use the Hall.** I have suffered embarrassment when I was criticized in front of others. What is said in private is easier to hear. I ask students to step outside to defuse a situation that could blow up. I give them a few moments alone and give myself a cooling off time if I am feeling any tenseness. When talking to students, I keep my voice low. It is their decision to confide the conversation to classmates, not mine. Students respond well to question about *what* not *why*. *What happened?* can be explained, but *Why did you?* can be confusing. Even as adults, we often

can not explain why we do what we do. Hallway talk can also be used to simply ask a student how things are at home or to give a compliment in private. I make it a habit to ask students to step into the hall for non-discipline conversations. This takes away the “you’re in trouble” stigma.

**Fighting in My Room? Never!** Never say never. I had complete confidence in my students during instruction and class, but time in the hall was an entirely different matter. Students that were polite and respectful in the classroom somehow pulled a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde once they left the haven of the classroom. Hallway duty had become an unwelcome break several times a day. Then came the day that a student stuck her head out of my classroom door to report a fight. At about that same moment I heard an ominous crash from my room. I rushed in to see the fan cover lying in pieces and two boys hanging their heads way, way down. They both started talking at once and blaming each other.

Somehow my brain functioned on the “best” teacher mode and I told them that they would come to my room immediately after lunch rather than go to intramurals. A few hours later the boys arrived and I asked each of them to write down their version of what happened—the *what* not the *why*. Within a few minutes the boys had written very little but were more than willing to offer to replace the fan and both apologized. The fan was not broken, their papers were surprisingly void of blame and the apologies were sincere. The simple act of waiting and then writing helped the boys resolve the problem with limited direction on my part.

**Pride Time.** Most middle school students do not want attention or to be singled out regardless whether it is positive or negative. I use a very low voice to praise the student’s work

or behavior and ask permission to display their work or share a particular incident. If they say no, I honor that, but I have not had a student turn me down yet. Displaying a student's work outside the classroom is a big deal no matter how they try to play it down.

The best instance of displaying came when I assigned a "shoe paragraph" for descriptive writing. Each student simply puts one shoe on their desk and describes it in the first person. The final draft is written on a bright iridescent shoe sole shape. Then all the soles are matched up right with left and taped to the walls beginning as far from the classroom as possible with the message "Walk Along to Seventh Grade Language Arts." In this way no one student is singled out and all work is displayed.

**Field Trips!** Premise #1: field trips are always linked to the curriculum and the guidelines are laid out far enough in advance that everyone is clear about behavior. Premise #2: if a field trip is a culminating activity for a unit of study, then it is valuable for all students. Premise #3. If a student's behavior is unacceptable prior to the field trip, they may be denied this trip. Students often are much more rigid than teachers are when it comes to acceptable behavior. It is best if the whole school has a policy on field trips, but if not, I ask the whole class to come up with guidelines, keeping in mind that negative behavior can cost individual students the trip. The field trip does not have to be earned, but it can be withheld.

**The Reluctant Student.** It is very easy to let the quiet, unobtrusive student slip through the cracks. One such student I had was Angela, and she was Native American. Angela was a very capable student so when I called on her to answer a question I expected that she would answer,

but she didn't. I remembered the "best" teacher would give her time to formulate an answer; so I waited and waited and waited. I rephrased the question and waited again. The other students began looking first at me, then at Angela. I began to feel that it was becoming a test of wills. If I moved on, would that suggest to other students that it was okay to remain silent? There was no time to get out a theory rehash so I moved on with the lesson and at the end of class I asked Angela to stay for a moment.

Although I could not get her to tell me why she wouldn't respond, I did come up with an alternative. I told her that whenever I tapped lightly on her desk in passing, it would mean that the next question was hers. Happily, it worked. I don't like to be surprised by the need to give a public statement and apparently neither did she. Many of our students need time to formulate the right frame of mind before answering...so did Angela. In my classes it is okay for students to say "pass" if they can't answer. I have had this rule and have only occasionally had to remind a student that it may not be overused.

**"Let's Find Out."** Three little words that every teacher should know. By being able to say these three words, I let my students know that I am fallible. Encourage students to look for solutions on their own or refer them to a student who can help. When teaching a new concept and a student just can't seem to "get it," glance around the class and ask if anyone would feel comfortable explaining it to the student. It has never failed. There is always a student ready to explain it in different words. I like to call it "kid-talk." Their vocabulary is kid-friendly and the point gets made.

**Be Prepared!** If I want everything to go wrong, I just walk into the room a minute before the students arrive without a clue of what I am going to do with that class. This is inviting disaster. Students need to see a teacher prepared. This means having the appropriate materials and supplies ready. It means having the assignment written clearly on the board or displayed in the same place each day. It means that I must be mentally and physically prepared for the class. Students can see if I am hesitant and many will seize the opportunity to lead the class in a direction that is counterproductive to learning. It did not take me long to realize that getting up a little earlier or staying a little later will pay off. If I am not prepared, how can I expect the students to be?

**A Time to Chat.** My path often crosses those of my students in our small community. Oftentimes middle school students suffer from embarrassment when confronted with a teacher outside of the classroom. I never fail to acknowledge their presence. Just a quick hello gives them recognition and an opportunity for me to connect with them. I try to find some common ground. If they appear to want to spend a few minutes visiting, I try to find a non-threatening topic for us to chat about.

This brings to mind one of my first year students. Becky was a fine student and never gave me reason to suspect that she saw me as anything other than a teacher. She lived near the school and during the summer, after she had been in my class, she appeared in my doorway with an offer to help if I needed it. I was swamped trying to clean out the materials left by the previous occupant of my “new” classroom. Becky helped me while I prattled on about nothing much. I did notice that she was often quiet, but I chalked that up to my being a teacher and her being a

young adolescent. the teacher thing. It wasn't until months later that I learned Becky's father had tried to commit suicide that summer. Becky just needed that sense of safeness that is so essential in the classroom. She and I still keep in touch.

**Missing in Action: Assignments not Turned In.** The bane of class work and homework for me during my first year were assignments that had not been turned in. In spite of my efforts to keep on top of them, oftentimes students slipped by without completing some assignments. Suddenly it was mid-term, and I realized that several students had missed handing in work.

I now try to be clear about my expectations. When I give the whole class an assignment to be completed during class, there will be some students that will not be able to get the work completed in the time given. This is when I individualize. This does not necessarily mean a separate lesson plan, it means modifying the time or quantity factor of the assignment. If an essay is assigned, I don't expect to hold each student to the same standard. I design a variety of rubrics to help with individualization. The special education teacher has been a great source for ideas to help my students.

**Alternative Assessment.** There has recently been much study and I have found out that using portfolios is a great way to assess students on their progress. Being able to point to a student's actual work at the beginning of the term and then having a piece of comparison work is a more accurate way to show progress than and of the letter grades I have given in the past.

Some students may fall further and further behind with each year. By identifying their level and starting from where they are, not where they should be, I have been able to note progress.

By continuing to ignore the differences in ability and grade level, I believe students are being set up for failure.

**Meaningful Homework.** This is an area that was constantly an issue with my students. Some students simply didn't do it while others loudly complained. I began to think about student activities at home. I created assignments that that need to be completed at home as the basis to pique their interest in the in the upcoming learning activities. I also found it is important to make the assignment match what is important to them. (Sequeira, & Sullivan 1996)

**Advisor/Advisee.** I have found that the advisor/advisee program is the single best way to create an atmosphere that is beneficial for learning (Dale, 1995). My program focuses again and again on bringing out the best in each student. Each group of students is kept small so that there is maximum interaction between an adult and each group.

As the advisor, I become a student advocate. I plan activities and discussions that foster disclosure by the students. I have discovered that it is imperative to build trust with the group. To do this I disclose to the students information about myself and share memories of being their age. I share my hopes and fears from when I was an adolescent and I talk about my family (immediate and extended). I share some of my educational experiences and talk about my teachers and how they helped me.

I don't let students focus on the negative within the group, but instead set aside some time to speak with them privately. The personality of the group is formed early in the year, so I take time to develop a positive climate with activities that foster cohesiveness. It is important to

emphasize confidentiality so that no one feels threatened. I have also become familiar about school and community services that may be helpful if any of my students need a referral.

I have found only one downside to active advisor/advisee groups. Some staff may feel threatened by a teacher who spends the extra time and effort to create the desired atmosphere and who leads an active group. The students will talk to others about the activities they are doing and then these students report to their advisors and want to know why “we never do anything fun!” As a teacher I simply have to do what I know is best for my students. What better compliment than to have upcoming students asking to be in your group? I suggest that if you find yourself in a similar situation, you and your school would benefit by (1) encouraging other teachers to become more active, (2) sharing your materials and ideas, and (3) providing in-services and workshops where staff can use their creativity to become facilitators and take an active part in designing activities.

**Rules and Routines.** Every classroom needs some rules. I am up front about the behaviors and routines that I need to keep the class running smoothly. Enlist the aid of the students to write three or four rules that they feel are important so they can learn. By middle school, students are comfortable having classroom rules and are often tougher on themselves than the teacher would be. I keep rules at a minimum and share my classroom routines and expectations. I use Canters’ (1992) p. 115 sequence for teaching my classroom discipline plan. The following are key points:

- Create lessons to teach students the classroom discipline plan.
- Explain to students why you need rules.
- Teach the rules.

- Explain how you will positively recognize students who follow the rules.
- Explain why you have consequences.
- Teach the consequences.
- As soon as you've taught the lesson, immediately begin reinforcing students who follow the rules.
- Review rules frequently at the start of the year. Review as needed as the year progresses.
- Post your discipline plan in the classroom.
- Send a copy of your classroom discipline plan home to parents.
- Share the plan with the administrator and be willing to share it with others (my addition).

**Support Personnel.** There will be days that you will think that nothing is going to work.

Look around and find teachers who display the qualities that you would like to possess. Confide in the people you respect and admire. Establish professional relationships that can help you over the rough spots. Talk to your principal or curriculum consultant. After all, they are in the best position to know who is an outstanding classroom manager in your building or school district. Create close ties with someone you admire in your building so that when you need someone to lean on, they will not be too far away.

### **Reflections**

As a direct result of changing my attitude, I have enjoyed teaching more than I thought possible. Giving students the respect they deserve has proven to be a powerful management tool—one that I should never have misplaced. Designing and implementing an advisory

program for my students was a powerful step toward building an atmosphere that nourished young adolescents and created a positive learning environment. By providing a safe haven, my middle school students flourished and became more confident. While suggestions and tricks of the trade help teachers build success, not only for students but also for themselves, each teacher needs to discover his or her own style and what works in their classroom. These techniques helped me produce an atmosphere that allowed me to focus on teaching more than behavior management and they helped students grow in responsibility for themselves, confidence, ownership of our classroom, and a sense of belonging among their classmates and with me as their teacher and mentor.



# Middle School Journal

## Editorial Policy and Guidelines for Authors

*Middle School Journal*, a refereed journal, is an official publication of National Middle School Association. The *Journal* publishes articles that promote middle level education and contribute to an understanding of the educational and developmental needs of youth between the ages of 10 and 15.

Articles submitted should specifically relate to the theory and practice of middle level education and should speak directly to practitioners in the field. The *Journal* seeks reports of successful programs, descriptions of effective techniques, thought-provoking essays, and application of research. The editor especially welcomes articles that focus on middle level schooling in urban settings and in rural or small schools.

The *Journal* publishes both thematic and general interest issues. *Middle School Journal* invites articles that have not been previously published and are not under review by any other publication. Manuscripts that do not meet the submission requirements will be returned to the author.

### Submission Requirements

---

- Length** Manuscripts, including bibliography and references, should be in the range of 10 to 20 double-spaced pages. Tables, charts, and figures should be kept to a minimum, and if included should be placed at the end of the text.
- Format & Style** All text, including title, headings, quotations, bibliography, and references should be double-spaced with wide margins. The editor strongly encourages the use of sideheads which increase readability. For matters of style, authors should follow the guidelines of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (Fourth Edition).

### Submission Process

---

- Copies** Submit five clear copies, one with a cover page giving author(s) names, professional affiliation, home and work addresses and telephone. The names of the authors should appear only on the cover page.
- Submit to** *Middle School Journal*, Attn: Joe Ball, Publications Assistant, National Middle School Association, 2600 Corporate Exchange Drive, Suite 370, Columbus, OH 43231. Faxed or electronic submissions are not accepted.
- Acknowledgment** *Middle School Journal* acknowledges receipt of manuscripts by postcard. Manuscripts that meet submission requirements will be logged and sent to referees. Authors will be notified by letter of this action.
- Review Process** Three members of a manuscript review board read and evaluate independently each manuscript. A decision regarding publication will be reached within four months of the date that the manuscript is sent out for review. This decision will be communicated to the lead author. Articles will not be published until a copyright assignment form is received. Assignment forms will be sent with the letter of acceptance.
- Editing** *Middle School Journal* reserves the right to edit manuscripts to improve clarity, to conform to style, and to fit available space.

## Information for Contributors

---

*Middle School Journal* has a circulation of over 27,000 and is published five times during the school year—September, November, January, March, and May. *Middle School Journal* encourages manuscript submissions on all phases of middle school education. Manuscripts are initially reviewed by the editor. Each individual manuscript is given a careful reading. Manuscripts that meet the *Journal's* guidelines are forwarded to a panel of reviewers who are practicing professionals in all phases of middle school education. Author identities are kept confidential.

Manuscripts that do not meet the guidelines or are not ready for the complete review process are returned to authors with specific commentary. Often, authors are encouraged to resubmit the manuscript in a revised format or to an affiliate journal.

Contributors should be aware of additional points that influence a positive review at each level. Authors should avoid the following:

- generalities
- excessive adjectives
- personal asides
- passive verbs & constructions
- academic jargon
- references to "this author"

Manuscript references must be in correct APA style. Please consult the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (Fourth Edition).

The *Journal* will not consider manuscripts that are undergoing review by another publication or have been previously published. If accepted, authors must sign a statement that transfers copyright to National Middle School Association.

Based upon reviewer comments, the following is a partial list of reasons for the rejection of manuscripts:

- The manuscript relates a personal, not a professional experience.
- The subject is so overly specialized it would appeal only to a small segment of readers.
- The material in the manuscript is neither timely nor new in its insights.
- The manuscript is largely in list format.
- The manuscript is a research report rather than an interpretation or application of research.
- The manuscript promotes a person or commercially available product.

## Policy on Letters to the Editor

---

The *Journal* publishes brief comments in response to articles it publishes. Letters to the Editor are published in accordance with these guidelines:

- Must be limited to 200-300 words.
- Should directly address a point made in a published article.
- Must be issue-oriented and not personal.
- Must not promote commercial products or services.
- Will be subject to editing for clarity and space considerations.