

The Beginning Teacher's  
**FIELD GUIDE**

Embarking on Your  
First Years

Tina H. Boogren

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555 North Morton Street  
Bloomington, IN 47404  
800.733.6786 (toll free) / 812.336.7700  
FAX: 812.336.7790

email: [info@SolutionTree.com](mailto:info@SolutionTree.com)  
SolutionTree.com

Visit [go.SolutionTree.com/assessment](http://go.SolutionTree.com/assessment) to download the free reproducibles in this book.

Printed in the United States of America



#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Erkens, Cassandra, author. | Schimmer, Tom, author. | Dimich Vagle, Nicole, author.

Title: Essential assessment : six tenets for bringing hope, efficacy, and achievement to the classroom / Cassandra Erkens; Tom Schimmer; Nicole Dimich Vagle.

Description: Bloomington, IN : Solution Tree Press, [2017] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016047169 | ISBN 9781943874491 (perfect bound)

Subjects: LCSH: Educational tests and measurements. | Academic achievement. | Motivation in education. | Effective teaching.

Classification: LCC LB3051 .E735 2017 | DDC 371.26--dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016047169>

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Tina H. Boogren, PhD**, is a former classroom teacher, English department chair, teacher mentor, instructional coach, professional developer, athletic coach, and building-level leader. She has presented at the school, district, state, and national levels and was a featured speaker at the International Literacy Association annual conference and Barnes & Noble's educators' nights.

Tina was a 2007 finalist for Colorado Teacher of the Year and received the Douglas County School District Outstanding Teacher Award eight years in a row, from 2002 to 2009. In addition to writing articles for the National Writing Project's *The Voice* and *The Quarterly*, she authored *In the First Few Years: Reflections of a Beginning Teacher* and *Supporting Beginning Teachers*. She coauthored *Motivating and Inspiring Students* and contributed to *Middle School Teaching: A Guide to Methods and Resources* and *Becoming a Reflective Teacher*.

Tina holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Iowa, a master's degree with an administrative endorsement from the University of Colorado Denver, and a doctorate from the University of Denver in educational administration and policy studies.

To learn more about Tina's work, visit [www.facebook.com/selfcareforeducators](http://www.facebook.com/selfcareforeducators) or follow @THBoogren on Twitter and Instagram.

To book Tina H. Boogren for professional development, contact [pd@SolutionTree.com](mailto:pd@SolutionTree.com).

## INTRODUCTION

# First Things

## First

**W**elcome. I am so glad you are here. Our entire K–12 system needs you. Are you ready? (Say *yes*—because you are.)

Picture this: you and I are sitting down, across from each other, in a cozy coffee shop. See us leaning in toward one another. Allow me to introduce myself so that you and I start to build a relationship together, through these pages.

I'm Tina. I've been an educator my entire life, starting with reading to my stuffed animals and assigning homework to my imaginary students in my basement in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Later I taught tennis lessons, became a summer day camp counselor, and mentored students during my undergraduate years at the University of Iowa, until I finally got my own classroom teaching middle school students outside of Denver, Colorado. That first year, in 1998, was rough. I almost didn't make it. I was so overwhelmed with attendance slips and grading and planning for four preps that I hit the (imaginary) wall—head-on—in October, just weeks after starting the school year. I have such a clear and precise memory of walking down the long hallway of my school, toward the front door, determined to take myself back to the mall to see if I could get my old job back because I was convinced that I simply wasn't cut out for this profession. It was Mary Dee Seibold who stepped out of her office and saved me that day. She picked me up as I was falling apart, put me back together, and is the sole reason

that I'm still here. And now it's time for me to return the favor and reach out a hand to help *you*.

Since 1998, my career has shifted from classroom teacher to new teacher mentor to instructional coach to administrator and educational consultant and author. I have worked with thousands of educators and am proud to still call myself a teacher above all else. Even as I've transitioned from one role to another, my heart has always been with you, the beginning teacher, first and foremost. Because I remember. I see you. I recognize you. I hear you. And I'm here to help. It is my sincere honor and pleasure to assist you on this incredible journey.

Now read the following questions and imagine me asking them of you. I encourage you to pause and really think about them, and to then record your thoughts in the space provided. Your answers can be helpful as you embark.

Who or what inspires you and why?

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What was school like for you? What would you like to change about your own childhood experience and young adult experience in school?

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How do you learn best? How does your best friend learn best? Why is it important to recognize that we learn differently?

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Why did you choose this noble profession above all the other careers available to you?

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What is your greatest hope for your first year? Your fifth year? Your twenty-fifth year?

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What fuels you? In other words, what gives you energy?

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What does self-care look like for you?

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Your answers will become your own personal foundation on which to stand. As you experience the highest of highs and the lowest of lows these first years, I'll ask you to recall your answers to these questions and provide you with some new things to consider that relate to them. That way, you never forget how you got here. Because one day, *here* might look like an overcrowded classroom with papers piling up for you to grade, email messages requiring your responses, and empty candy bar wrappers overtaking your desk, while you fight back tears and wonder how to even take your next breath. But on another day, *here* might look like an energized classroom with students so fully engaged in purposeful small groups that they don't realize the bell is going to ring any minute. You'll experience both of these days and every iteration in between. How do I know? Because I've been in your shoes. I remember. Your answers to my questions will help ground and stabilize you as you move through all of your experiences during your first years.

As you embark on this journey, hopefully you'll have colleagues, mentors, instructional coaches, and administrators who will help you along the way, thoughtfully and with care. If you'd like one, professional mentor Michael Hyatt (n.d.) offers this advice for finding a mentor:

If you have one in mind, start by building the relationship—just like you would anyone else. Don't lead with "Will you be my mentor?" (That's like asking someone to marry you on the first date.) Instead, get to know

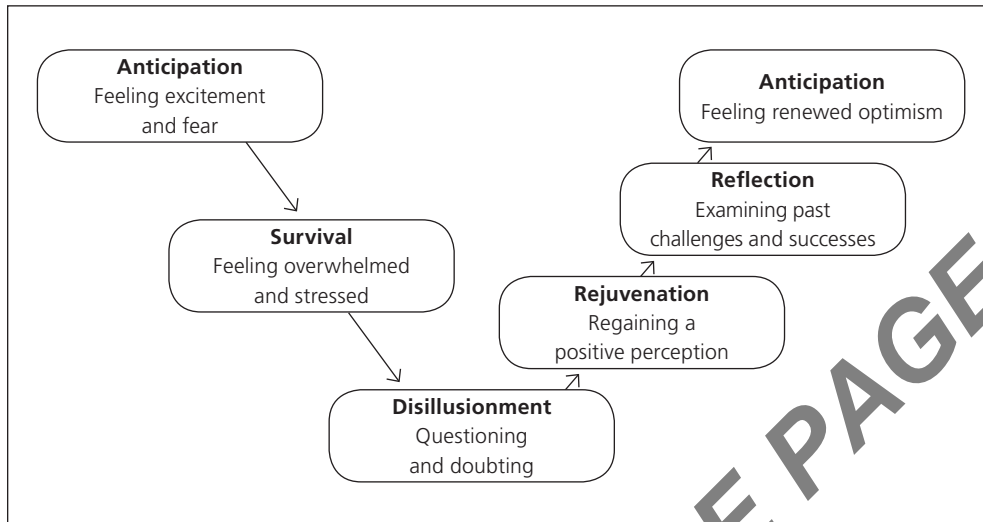
them. Look for opportunities to be generous.  
Start small and see where it goes.

Whether you do or you don't, I want to tag along. I want to share with you what I've learned over the years about implementing essential research-based classroom strategies that positively impact student achievement from day one.

But here's what I know for sure: we can't stop there. Roughly half of new teachers leave within the first five years (Allen, 2005; Haynes, 2014). In describing their first-year teaching experience, beginning teachers often rely on words like "*arduous, confusing, chaotic, and overwhelming,*" and almost every veteran teacher who I know uses these same words when reflecting on his or her first few years in the classroom (Public Education Network, 2003, p. 19). Author and professor of education Max van Manen (1995) says that "beginning teachers often seem to feel the tension of the poor fit between what they learned about teaching and what they discover is required in the practice of teaching" (p. 4). As they wrestle with everything from managing difficult workloads to finding a work-life balance and from handling classroom management issues to addressing students' effort (or lack thereof), in addition to assessment pressure and lack of resources, beginning teachers often feel that their schools do not provide adequate support structures (Anthony & Kane, 2008).

## The Beginning Teacher's Journey

First, I want you to understand how your first years in the classroom differ from the experiences of veteran teachers. Ellen Moir (2011) identifies a series of specific challenges that you will most likely encounter during your initial years of teaching. While her original work was published many years ago, these challenges still hold true. (Though they point specifically to the first year, they can occur during the first several. That's why I address beginning teachers, not just first-year teachers, in this book.) She organizes the challenges into five phases: (1) anticipation, (2) survival, (3) disillusionment, (4) rejuvenation, and (5) reflection, followed by a return to the anticipation phase at the end of your first year. Figure I.1 (page 6) depicts the typical progression of these phases during your first years on the job.



Source: Adapted from Moir, 2011.

**Figure I.1:** The phases of a first-year teacher's attitude toward teaching.

Of course, not every beginning teacher progresses through these phases exactly in this way, but having an understanding of them can help you move through the school year with more awareness, grace, and purpose. Allow me to briefly describe each phase here, knowing that I'll go into greater depth in the following chapters.

During the first anticipation phase, you are excited about the upcoming school year. You look forward to having your own classroom and the chance to make a difference in your students' lives. Your concerns during this phase may include setting up your classroom, locating curriculum materials, establishing rules and procedures, and building relationships with your colleagues, school leaders, parents, and students.

During the survival phase, you begin to realize sometimes harsh realities as requirements and expectations begin taking over the day, leaving you little time for planning or reflection. You are simply trying to stay afloat. Even in the face of these challenges and difficulties, most of you will work hard to maintain your energy and dedication, though you may find yourself falling short in some areas—typically your own self-care (less sleep and exercise as well as diminished connections with friends and family). This phase often occurs around the second to third month of school.

Hitting the wall may happen during the disillusionment phase. (It did for me.) Here, you may begin to question your own abilities and self-worth, and perhaps fall ill from stress (or wonder if your old job at Gap is still available). This phase often presents the greatest challenge for beginning teachers and typically falls between November and January. It is important for you to focus on self-care during this time and to recognize that what you're feeling is normal, even though these feelings are difficult. Know that this phase will not last forever and that by recognizing its challenges and supporting yourself, you will make it through.

The next phase—rejuvenation—often arrives shortly after winter break, once you have had the chance to reconnect and rest over the holiday break. Having a bit of time away can give you a new outlook and a renewed sense of your accomplishments. While in this phase, you begin feeling more hopeful and can begin focusing on your students' academic performances and your own teaching competence in ways that you couldn't when you were struggling through disillusionment. This beautiful rejuvenation phase can last into the spring.

Some veteran and beginning teachers I work with propose the existence of a second dip, associated with state testing, in the spring. This second dip might not drop as low as the initial disillusionment phase, but it's something to prepare for nonetheless. The second dip may also result from the long stretch that typically occurs between spring break and the end of the school year. As spring fever hits, this time can be especially challenging in the classroom for both you and your students.

Finally, as the school year comes to a close, you will most likely enter the reflection phase. Here, you begin looking back on all you have learned throughout the year, taking stock of which ideas and strategies worked best and which you'd like to change next year. At the end of the year, you may also feel powerful emotions tied to saying goodbye to your first groups of students. (You'll be glad you have photographs to remember them by.)

Eventually, you will enter a second anticipation phase. During this time, you will catch your breath and begin thinking ahead to the next year. The second anticipation phase usually occurs

during summer break, when you have more time to reflect, plan, and re-energize.

Again, each beginning teacher will have his or her own upswings and dips and may not follow this pattern. You may hit the disillusionment phase earlier in the year, as I did, or you may not hit that phase at all. Conversely, you may cycle through many phases rather than experiencing just one in a single year. It's all normal. I promise.

And while beginning teachers feel each of these phases more profoundly than those with more experience, I'm here to tell you that this cycle isn't unique to your first year or years. Most veteran teachers will admit that they, too, experience these dips and upswings, even after many years in the classroom. Take comfort in this. You're not alone in your feelings. Additionally, it is important to know that there is no right or wrong way to experience your first years of teaching. What's important is understanding that feeling these dips and upswings is normal—no matter when or how they occur.

## How to Use This Book

Ideally, this book is a resource for you—a K–12 beginning teacher—to use on your own, especially if you don't have a formal mentor. A school or district might also utilize this book as a book study for all new teachers to work through together. Finally, if your school pairs new teachers with formal mentors or coaches, they can use this book in conjunction with my book *Supporting Beginning Teachers* (Boogren, 2015) for mentors.

I organized this book chronologically, taking you through each phase in Moir's (2011) given order. As a beginning teacher, however, you may feel overwhelmed and intimidated by the sheer volume of instructional resources, strategies, and materials available to you through your school, district, and online. Knowing this, and based on my own experiences working with beginning teachers, I've deliberately selected the classroom strategies that I believe are the *most* essential for you to focus on during each phase of your first years in the classroom. I present those strategies to you in a concise and easily manageable manner, combined with a unique focus on reflection and self-care. Because of time constraints as

a beginning teacher, you may decide not to read this book all at once. Instead, you might move from chapter to chapter or section to section as you're ready.

Table I.1 outlines the essential classroom strategies and self-care practices for each phase. The table serves as a preview to and an outline for the upcoming chapters.

**Table I.1:** Beginning Teacher Phases—Strategies and Practices

Phase	Classroom Strategies	Self-Care Practices
<b>Anticipation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Organizing your classroom's physical layout</li> <li>♦ Establishing rules and procedures</li> <li>♦ Understanding students' interests and backgrounds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Getting adequate sleep</li> <li>♦ Eating a healthy diet</li> <li>♦ Exercising regularly</li> </ul>
<b>Survival</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Focusing on classroom management</li> <li>♦ Displaying objectivity and control</li> <li>♦ Noticing when students are not engaged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Practicing mindfulness</li> <li>♦ Focusing on relationships</li> </ul>
<b>Disillusionment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Developing relationships with all students</li> <li>♦ Celebrating students' successes</li> <li>♦ Focusing on positive student behaviors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Practicing gratitude</li> <li>♦ Practicing kindness</li> <li>♦ Appreciating humor</li> </ul>
<b>Rejuvenation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Demonstrating intensity and enthusiasm</li> <li>♦ Utilizing physical movement</li> <li>♦ Presenting unusual or intriguing information</li> <li>♦ Maintaining a lively pace</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Developing a growth mindset</li> <li>♦ Picturing your best possible future self</li> </ul>
<b>Reflection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Employing questioning strategies</li> <li>♦ Asking all students in-depth questions</li> <li>♦ Demonstrating value and respect for all learners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Being inspired</li> <li>♦ Writing yourself permission slips</li> <li>♦ Setting aside time to reflect</li> <li>♦ Reflecting with someone else</li> </ul>
<b>Second Anticipation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Deciding how to arrange your classroom for next year</li> <li>♦ Creating things like charts, game templates, and posters</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ Having fun</li> <li>♦ Acting like a kid again</li> </ul>

One chapter is dedicated to each phase. Each chapter begins with a personal essay that I wrote during my own first few years in the classroom. In my essays, some of which first appeared in my book *In the First Few Years: Reflections of a Beginning Teacher* (Humphrey, 2003), I share insights in hopes of helping you feel less isolated. Then I ask you to consider some thoughts before getting into the actual strategies and practices. These prompts will help you understand how each phase is playing out for you personally.

Next, I provide the specific classroom strategies and self-care practices to focus on during this particular phase. Throughout, I'll invite you to visit [go.SolutionTree.com/instruction](http://go.SolutionTree.com/instruction) for free reproducible versions of the prompts and reflections, as well as live links to additional resources. It is both well documented and common knowledge that the most important factor in student achievement is the teacher—not the curriculum, or subject-matter knowledge, or the standardized test, or the technology resources available but the actual teacher in the classroom (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 1998; McCaffrey, Lockwood, Koretz, & Hamilton, 2003; Rowan, Correnti, & Miller, 2002; Sanders, Wright, & Horn, 1997). Therefore, having the pedagogical skills to increase student achievement starting in these, your first years in the classroom, is essential. Classroom strategies will increase your expertise and significantly impact student achievement. While all the strategies are important and work any time of year, I've carefully prioritized them to correlate with the phases.

The self-care practices help prevent you from losing yourself in the midst of all these new demands. Many situations at this point in your life—even positive ones, such as a new job—lead to stress. Overwork also leads to stress, which makes us more prone to illness (Salleh, 2008). That, in turn, raises teacher absenteeism. More frequent teacher absences lead to lower student achievement (Miller, Murnane, & Willett, 2007). To compound these issues, research indicates that “many beginning teachers are reluctant to reveal problems or ask for help, believing that good teachers work things out for themselves” (Feiman-Nemser, 2010, p. 1033). That can lead to feelings of isolation, despair, and disillusionment, which in turn “are associated with high levels of stress [and] depression” (Southwick & Charney, 2012, p. 108). This reality highlights the importance of self-care for beginning

teachers. Many authors who write books designed for you overlook such practices or view them as afterthoughts. I take a firm stand that self-care practices are *as essential* as the classroom strategies because if you are not your best self, you will not be sturdy enough to face the challenges that appear during your first few years in the classroom. You can easily incorporate these suggestions into your schedule. I do not want it to feel as if you're just adding to your already overflowing to-do list. I will offer gentle reminders and daily habits that can help you feel more stable during this often turbulent time.

To increase your impact on student achievement, you must be a reflective practitioner. Reflection is an essential part of developing expertise and increasing one's pedagogical skills. As you come into your own as a professional educator, it is imperative that you reflect on what's working, what's not working, and why—for both you and your students. Research supports this as well:

Reflection, as a thoughtful and a caring act, goes to the heart of the instructional relationship. It is not only a tool of skilled practice, but also a feeling that helps educators to teach effectively and intelligently rather than unthinkingly, dogmatically or prejudicially. (Roskos, Vukelich, & Risko, 2001, p. 617)

Finally, in each chapter I provide you with reflection questions relating to both the classroom strategies as well as the self-care practices presented there. To make reflection as easy as possible, I've included space at the end of each chapter and in the margins where you can record your thoughts so you don't have to keep track of a separate notebook or journal. By using this book *as* your journal, you'll have the strategies and your reflections all in one place. That being said, you know yourself better than anyone else. Do what works for you—use a separate notebook, type your notes in a Google Doc, or make an audio recording. The medium doesn't matter. What matters is that you have a place to record your thoughts. You may choose to share some of your reflections with a mentor or coach, or you might keep them to yourself; again, it's up to you. The important part is pausing, checking

in, and recording your current observations and feelings so that you can actually *see* yourself grow, change your perspective, and improve—alongside your inevitable frustrations and setbacks.

You may focus on what is *not* going well when you reflect, but it is important to acknowledge and reflect on successes as well. Kendyll Stansbury and Joy Zimmerman (2000) point out, “Recognizing and understanding their successes not only provides an enormous boost in confidence, but helps beginning teachers build on those strengths” (p. 9). Like the balance between the professional and personal, I encourage you to focus on what is going well along with areas for growth and improvement. Reflection questions remind you of this during each phase.

In addition to prompts throughout the book, I encourage you to record anything else that you want to remember. Consider picking up a glue stick while you’re at the store so you can paste in notes from students, parents, administrators, or colleagues, current events that occurred during the year, photographs of your first classroom, your first students, your first holiday gift, your first confiscated note between students, and the like. (You can glue those mementos to the pages in appendix B, on page 119, of this book so you’ve got everything in one place.) If you are using a Google Doc or other online application, you could save notes there. Years from now, when you look back on your reflections, you will be humbled and astonished at how far you’ve come. You might even be ready to pay it forward and use your experiences to lend a hand to the next generation of beginning teachers.

Now take a deep breath.

You’ve got this; you’ve so got this.

## CHAPTER 1

# The Anticipation Phase

**C**ongratulations! You got the job! Right now, you are primed and ready to embark on your new career as an educator. You are ready to save the world and may be thinking about how to set up your classroom or drooling over new school supplies. Welcome to the anticipation phase. While here, you may recognize butterflies in your stomach. You are likely overcome by a wide range of emotions—everything from hope and excitement to wonder and nervousness—as you prepare to meet and build quality relationships with your first students. You may arrange and rearrange desks and supplies as well as locate curricula and materials during this phase. It is likely you'll spend the first few weeks focused on meeting and getting to know new colleagues, school leaders, parents, and your students. The first day of school is an especially exciting time in your career; there will never be another like this one.

I wrote the following essay after my own first few years teaching. It may provide some additional validation and support for you during the anticipation phase.

### **The First Week of School**

About a week or so before the school year, you'll start having dreams (or nightmares) about the year's impending start. In them, you'll be naked at the front of the room, or the students

will be three-headed monsters that never stop chirping. This is to be expected. Don't put too much pressure on getting quality sleep the night before school starts. Peaceful dreams probably aren't going to happen. Watch some good comedy movies and vow to get that beautiful, deep, restful sleep after the first week of school.

Prior to your first day with students, you will be at school for three or four days meeting veteran teachers, trying to set up your classroom (which you'll rearrange a million times and still never like), getting curriculum thrown at you, and playing embarrassing get-to-know-you games with staff. This is administration's attempt to make you feel more confident, but most likely it won't help. Instead, consider this time where you're building relationships with your colleagues. You'll wake up in the morning, put on your well-considered first-day outfit, and drive to school with bigger butterflies flapping in your stomach than you had on your first day of school as a student. Your palms will sweat. When you arrive, you'll immediately want to rearrange your room—again. And you'll look through the class list (which you received just this morning) and panic because you can't pronounce a single name on it.

Please remember that your students are nervous, too. They may not admit it or show it, depending on their age, but they are. Take it easy today. You won't be able to do everything that you plan on getting done, so accept that and spend the day shaking your students' hands, attempting to pronounce their names, and easing everyone's tensions. I wouldn't even begin to get into curriculum or expectations at this point. You and your students have too many other things on your minds, so consider any information given out today lost by the time your students leave your room. This is when I like to play a game like the one in which we write down two truths and one lie about ourselves on a note card, and the class tries to guess which one of the statements is the lie. Any of these get-to-know-you games are good, low-stress ways to ease your fears on this first day and will immediately start setting up the comfortable, inviting environment that you're hoping for and will help you remember students' names.