Crabby's tips for elementary school teachers

Crabby Office Lady

It's summer still, but I know that you teachers are already starting to plan out next year. This column is for elementary school teachers, but I'm guessing all can benefit.

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Two years ago, I wrote a column called Crabby introduces you to innovative teachers, in which I introduced you to seven elementary school, middle school, and high school teachers — all using Office in a variety of unique ways. This column became — and remains — one of my most popular.

Even though it's July and school kids are not (nor should they be) thinking about the upcoming school year, you can bet that their teachers are. Although some people may believe that teachers have these great three-month vacations (if they aren't teaching in year-round school districts, that is), that just isn't true. In fact, my father was a public school teacher for more than 30 years, and I know that the three month vacation myth is just that: a myth.

So, in order to try and give you teachers a leg up on your plans for the coming school year, I'm going to write a series composed of three columns this year:

- This week's (July 18th) column is for elementary school teachers. I'll reintroduce you to Elaine Smith, one of the innovative teachers I interviewed for the last column I did for teachers. Elaine is still using Office and has some really interesting ways she uses it for teacher-parent communication, teacher-student communication, and keeping track of everything a teacher needs to keep track of.
- For my July 25th column, I'll introduce you to Ron Lamb, an old college buddy of mine and a middle school teacher involved in a unique program at Nevin Platt Middle School in Boulder, Colorado.
- And finally, on August 1st, I'll share my conversation with Karen Grace, a high school teacher at Roosevelt High School in Seattle, Washington.

Then, after I have the teachers covered, for my August 8th column, I'll offer some tips for you parents revving up the back-to-school activities. I'll pony up some organizational tips in the forms of ideas and templates to try and help ease that overwhelming feeling comes from of juggling multiple calendars for multiple kids and their multiple activities.

Communicating with the kids and their parents

When I first introduced you to Elaine, a third grade teacher at Alice V. Hedden Elementary in Edgewood, Washington, we talked mostly about the book reports she and her kids accomplished using Word and PowerPoint. When I spoke to Elaine a few weeks ago, we opened up the conversation a bit more.

When I sheepishly mentioned to Elaine that yes, it's July, and gosh, is she really thinking about the upcoming school year, she got all excited about, well, the upcoming school year. (Note to parents: This is the kind of teacher you want your kid to have — so take notes.)

Forms, forms, and more forms

The first thing we talked about was how to communicate with the parents. Elaine (like most teachers) needs to employ the use of forms, but as we all know, when you send a form home with an 8-year-old, the chances of it getting from school to home are, well, slim. Elaine uses field trip permission slip forms, first week "introduce your child to me" forms, and also the yearly student led conference forms that parents need to fill out to let Elaine know what their time preferences are.

Here is how Elaine tackles forms with Office:

In the past, she used to prepare her forms on paper and send them home with the kids. Now, when she needs a parent to fill out a form — any form — she creates it as a downloadable Word document and posts it to the school Web page. The parents can download the document, print it, fill it out, and then send it back. Or, they can fill it out online in Word, save it as an electronic document, and then e-mail it back to Elaine. Easy as pie, and oftentimes the kids' hands never touch paper (at least not this piece).

So many letters and labels, so little time

As teachers, I know that you have a lot of communicating to do — with parents, with the kids, and with administrators. Elaine mentioned to me that although the school district keeps an online database of all the families' information, sometimes she needs her specific information in a format that works for her.

Therefore, Elaine takes the district's huge database and creates her own Excel spreadsheet with all the pertinent columns — names, addresses, phone numbers, personal information, and so on — so that when the time comes to send out, for example, the welcome letter at the beginning of the year, she can utilize the mail merge function in Excel and Word to personalize each letter. What that means is that each letter has a "Dear So-and-so" that uses the parent's (or parents') names and even mentions the child's name in the letter. It's not just a standardized form that seems really impersonal. As well, using mail merge also lets Elaine automatically create mailing labels from the Excel spreadsheet.

Want to learn more about mail merge? Here are a few articles and training courses with specific information:

- Use mail merge for mass mailings and more (Training course)
- Word mail merge: A walk through the process
- Use mail merge to create and print letters
- Create a directory of names, addresses, and other information
- Create and print envelopes for a mass mailing
- Print labels by using Excel data in a Word mail merge

Orientation: Make it special

Starting the school year can be daunting for a young kid (and even for his parents). Elaine has two ways she goes about putting everyone's hearts and minds at ease.

Using entertainment to capture the spirit of the class

Elaine told me about this really neat way she can show the kids and their parents what they'll be doing *this* year by showing them what her kids did *last* year:

She takes photos all year round and then uses Windows® Movie Maker (which is available as a free download when you're running Windows XP) to put together a montage of sorts of all the activities the students did last year.

- Download Windows Movie Maker 2.1
- Create home movies with Windows Movie Maker

Present it visually

We all know that PowerPoint is used to present important information in virtually all business sectors. Education is not left out, and Elaine creates a stunning presentation to give a glimpse to the families about how third grade is going to be. She includes the curriculum, photos from last year, and other information that they'll need to get excited for the new school year.

I took the liberty of including, below, some of my favorite education-based PowerPoint templates that can be used for just this sort of thing.

- Children's drawings on blue design template
- Boy and his bubbles design template
- Green apples design template
- Writing close-up design template
- Spinning globe design template
- More academic design slides

Keeping track of all that communication

Now that we've covered how Elaine manages forms, letters, labels, and orientation, it's time to take a look at how Elaine manages to keep up with the flood of e-mail messages (and their attachments) that come pouring in to her Inbox each and every day.

Of course, Elaine is using Outlook with Microsoft Exchange Server, and she says that "there isn't any part of Outlook that I don't use." She uses the calendar and its reminders, tasks, follow-up flags, and she also has a very good organization system using different folders.

Wondering how you can make good use of Outlook to keep track of everything you need to do? Here are some links to get you started:

- So that's how! Great Outlook Calendar features to make time work for you (Training course)

- [So that's how! Great Outlook features to organize your Inbox](#) (Training course).

  NOTE If you want just the audio course, it's: [Audio course: So that's how! Great Outlook features to organize your Inbox](#)

- [Search Folders: The easy way to find, read, and organize your e-mail](#) (Training course)

Final words

I want to thank Elaine Smith for spending time talking to me. She is a wonderful teacher (as I'm sure her third grade kids and their parents are quite aware). Good luck next year, Elaine; I'm sure it will be a great one.

Teachers (and even parents), go ahead and spend some time visiting [Miss Smith's Third Grade Class](#), where you can read the class blog, take a peek at some of the work of last year's students, and even see how Elaine uses her Web site to create a newsletter.

"As you teach, you learn" — Jewish Proverb

About the author

[Annik Stahl](#), the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Was this information helpful?** tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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