

# Crabby's tips for middle school teachers



Crabby Office Lady

For my second installation of columns for teachers, I introduce you to a middle school teacher from Boulder, Colorado, whose work in a unique learning program incorporates Office programs just beautifully.

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In last week's column, [Crabby's tips for elementary school teachers](#), I re-introduced you to Elaine Smith, a third grade teacher in Edgewood, Washington, who uses Office to keep her various types of communication between herself and her students running smoothly.

This week, I want to tell you about Ron Lamb, a middle school teacher at Nevin Platte Middle School in Boulder, Colorado (a former home town of yours truly).

**NOTE** Ron and his partner, Ramona, are old college buddies of mine, and no, I won't be sharing any stories of our shenanigans during that time.

I don't know about you, but when I think "middle school" (which, in my day, was known as "junior high"), I am reminded of adolescent angst, sullen teens, peer pressure, and pimples. (In fact, I think I'm still recovering from those years: I still keep zit cream in my medicine cabinet...just in case the most popular boy in school — also known as the "Robert Redford of the 7th grade" — ever does ask me out. Am I carbon dating myself?) Ron, however, seems completely oblivious to all of this. In fact, he is so into his kids and the methods he uses to teach that I'm becoming less fearful of my own daughter's adolescence (which is, thankfully, years away).

Ron is a teacher in the CHOICE Program at his middle school. Before I tell you how Ron uses Office to make the most out of the exceptional work he does with his kids, I first want to tell you a bit about the CHOICE program itself. Known as an "alternative experiential middle school program," the CHOICE program is a school-within-a-school, and Ron works on a team with four other CHOICE teachers. Some of the hallmarks of this program:

- The classes are multi-age and multi-grade. Therefore, the teachers get to know the students very well over the three years that they're enrolled in the program and parents are actively involved in nearly every aspect of instruction.
- Social studies and science are combined into a single, semester-long, integrated course.
- Language arts and math are taught by the CHOICE teachers in multi-age or ability-based groups.
- One day a month, students participate in an all-day field trip directly related to the curriculum.
- The kids get individualized instruction designed to challenge them.
- Both long-term and short-term assignments are given, teaching the kids how to prioritize tasks, set goals, and work as teams.
- Kids learn leadership and team-building skills.

- There is no "regular grading" system. Teachers and students come up with a self-assessment and use a body of evidence for evaluation, rather than just percentages and grades. Students assume leadership by defining goals and then demonstrate proficiency by presenting a portfolio of work to faculty and parents throughout the year.

(As you can probably guess, there is a long waiting list to get into the CHOICE program at this school.)

Ok, now onto the nuts and bolts of how Ron uses Office in this unique classroom setting.

## PowerPoint: It's just intuitive

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Along with his work as one of the CHOICE teachers, Ron also teaches an 8th grade language arts seminar each year. He creates all his lessons in PowerPoint, and yes, starts with one of our slide design templates. As Ron puts it, "I like having something visual to go along with me blabbing at them."

### Vocabulary

One of the lessons Ron and I talked about covered when the kids had to read the classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As Ron explained to me, the traditional thing to do is call out vocabulary words, teach them directly by having the kids study them, then memorize them, and then take a test to see what they've remembered. As we all know, many of those words just slip out of our heads right after such a test, never to return again.

Last school year, Ron created a very simple PowerPoint presentation that presented all the vocabulary words visually, and he examined with the class how they are used in sentences, what parts of speech they are, what their definitions are, and so on. Ron's theory is that the kids will have a better understanding of the words (and therefore the story) if they can see the words in context. And, as we all know, context is everything (which is why I don't wear my Crabby Office Lady outfits to cocktail parties — you know, in case "Robert Redford of the 7th grade" happens to be there).

**NOTE** Speaking of reading, there is a great Excel template for tracking reading tasks: [Reading list](#)

### Social studies

When Ron taught a class on world geography called "There's no place like home," in which the class looked at the world geographically, and studied typical families from different countries. The class used the book [Material World: A Global Family Portrait](#), which offers extraordinary images of families from all over the world in front of their dwellings with all (or nearly all) of their possessions. Ron had his class scan photos from the book, put them into a PowerPoint presentation, and then add slides about the demographic information for each photo. This work was the skeleton structure of the class.

For the same class, Ron and his kids created a PowerPoint presentation about the five major religions of the world. Ron said, "Anytime I have to present factual information, I use PowerPoint — it's just very intuitive."

### Crabby's PowerPoint template suggestions for Ron's classes

- [Idea design template](#)
- [Parisian hike design template](#)
- [Spinning globe design template](#)

- [More academic design slides](#)

**NOTE** I also recommend this Visio template for Ron's social studies classes: [Historical cause and effect diagram \(US units\)](#)

## Word: For just about everything

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As Ron said, "I can get by in Word for almost anything." That "anything" he was referring to is: worksheets, tests, flyers, and even newsletters.

As far as the kids go, they type all their assignments, either at home or on school computers, using Word. As well, Ron estimates that 95% of kids in his district — the Boulder Valley School District — have access to computers at home.

### Crabby's Word template suggestions for Ron and his students

- [Basic field trip permission slip](#)
- [Lesson plan](#)
- [Test template](#)
- [School newsletter \(3-col., 4-pp.\)](#)
- [Classroom newsletter \(2-col., 2-pp.\)](#)

**NOTE** Although Ron can (as he puts it) "get by" in Word when it comes to creating anything for his classes, I suggest that he consider using some of our Publisher-based newsletter templates. In fact, Publisher really is — in my opinion — a better way to go when you have graphic-intensive documents with a lot of information.

## Excel: Use it as a simple database

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With 125 kids in the CHOICE program (and many more clamoring to get in), Ron and his team often act as administrators too, and they use Excel almost like a database. They can keep track of the students, their classes, their performance, their home info, and so on. Ron thinks Excel is very easy to use, works well, and isn't complicated. For example, when he takes kids on a field trip, he needs to see, very quickly, who has their permission slips; he can easily filter and sort to view this information at a glance.

### Crabby's Excel template suggestions for Ron

- [Weekly class attendance record](#)
- [Weekly class schedule](#)
- [Teacher's weekly class plans](#)

**NOTE** Although Ron uses Excel to keep track of his kids and their information, I recommend an Access template that can handle the job with even more depth: [Classroom management database](#)

# Don't stop there, Ron

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Now that we know a bit more about Ron and the work he does, here are a few more templates for middle school classrooms (or any level, really) that can make any teacher's life a bit less hectic and a whole lot more efficient.

- [Periodic table of the elements \(US units\)](#)
- [2006-2007 academic year calendar \(1-pg., U.S.\)](#)
- [Classroom expectations](#)
- [Classroom materials sign-out sheet](#)

Thanks for talking to me about the CHOICE program at your school, Ron. We've come a long way since our crazy college days, now haven't we? Namaste, teach.

**"The purpose of education is not to produce more scholars, technicians, and job hunters, but integrated men and women who are free of fear; for only between such human beings can there be enduring peace." — Krishnamurti**

## About the author

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[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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