Starting off on the right foot

The first week of school sets the tone for the entire year. That is why it is important for teachers to present a list of the rules to students first thing. New teachers always can lighten up later in the year, but it is much harder to rein students in after being easygoing at the start. Teachers can briefly discuss the rules with students and have parents sign them so there are no surprises later on. Students should keep the rules in the front of their notebook as a constant reminder.

In addition to a list of rules, an information sheet that students complete with their name, parent(s) name, address, home and work phone numbers, and e-mail is a valuable teacher tool. I always leave space on the sheet for students to state special needs, seating arrangements, sensitivities to strong chemical smells, allergies, reactions, or ailments. The main office usually passes this information along to teachers if parents put it on the emergency card, but it is smart to have it from day one.

During the first couple of weeks and throughout the school year, teachers must model the behavior expected from students by using appropriate language and addressing inappropriate language and behavior. Teachers should warn students when they break rules the first time and enforce consequences the next.

That first week or two of school can be pretty rough: memorizing names and faces, trying to keep order in the room, filling out paperwork properly, learning who to ask for what, and teaching bell to bell. For learning names and faces, I find it helps to arrange tiny, self-stick notes on
a sheet of paper as a seating chart. I then write the students’ names on the notes and reposition them as changes to the seating arrangements are made. I keep the chart in a plastic sleeve to write on and wipe off comments or participation points.

**Get organized!**

Being organized is probably the best advice for any new teacher. Precise records of student progress, behavior problems, and parent contact makes conversations with parents easier and provides good background material in case an administrator has to get involved.

Creating an organized process for collecting, sorting, and correcting homework each day can also make life much easier! Some teachers walk from desk to desk at the beginning of class to check on completed assignments. They then take time to go over the right answers. This maximizes class time and works as a review or introduction for the next lesson.

Notes in a lesson plan book about a lesson or lab can be used as a reference for the following year. The notes provide valuable feedback when it comes
I then ask them to write down observations to prepare them for an activity making slime with glue, water, and borax.

By keeping lectures and notes short, teachers can gauge what information students are getting and what they do not understand. This allows students to comfortably participate and ask questions. After the slime demonstration, I point out that chemistry is part of everything in the world and is used everyday. Students see how many parts of their life involve science concepts and why chemistry and science are important. They can answer some questions, such as “How do you use chemistry in your everyday life?” and “Why did you take this class?” A teacher learns more about students this way and can choose examples and analogies students relate to throughout the year.

Labs, activities, and safety
Another way to keep students engaged, on-task, and excited about the course is with demonstrations, activities, and labs—all excellent ways to help teach and reinforce concepts. During demonstrations, students can record observations and answer a few questions to check for understanding. When students write about the demonstration, they improve observation skills, make a connection between the demonstration and the concept, and practice technical writing.

The difference between an activity and a lab in my own classroom is the part of the room where it takes place. For example, an activity that includes students using molecular model kits at their desk does not require goggles. However, goggles are required for a laboratory that takes place in the desig-
nated lab area. Safety is imperative. Teachers must model proper lab techniques by enforcing the use of goggles. The template for a lab safety contract, signed by students and parents, is available either through the school district or from a catalog or lab manual. Early in the year, students should learn how to read chemical labels and a Material Safety Data Sheet. Teachers can demonstrate what a strong acid does to an egg white to simulate what would happen if acid entered the eye. This is a great opportunity for teachers to locate and demonstrate the eyewash station, shower, and other safety equipment. A handy bucket and small dustpan are great for picking up broken glass. Teachers should always clean up broken glass themselves.

Additional safety activities include giving a lab safety quiz covering lab rules and showing a video on safety in the lab. Laboratory handbooks that show step-by-step procedures for a variety of techniques are great for teachers without a lot of lab experience.

Teachers can leave out the equipment and chemicals from a lab for a couple of days. Students need to know they have limited time to make up missed labs, and teachers should provide a couple of options for students to complete them. Keeping chemicals and equipment set up longer than necessary leads to broken equipment and a disorganized, cluttered lab area.

**A support system**

The best place to turn for expert “tricks of the trade” is a mentor. Ideally, a mentor is someone the new teacher meets with every week to talk about the upcoming unit or chapter, and discuss how the last one went. Mentors can provide helpful advice for labs, demonstrations, and activities that correspond with the unit. They also can point to equipment location and the best way to explain a particular concept. Department members often share copies of their labs, worksheets, and tests. New teachers should not be afraid to reach out for help from colleagues. The best time to run ideas by colleagues is between classes.

**Learning outside the classroom**

Many districts provide professional development courses for teachers throughout the year and offer specific ones for new teachers. While these are very beneficial, local conferences or summer workshops are great places to meet other teachers and hear what works and what doesn’t. For instance, my best demonstrations, labs, and ideas come from colleagues and other science teachers. Attending conferences provides a chance to network, meet vendors, and get catalogs. Many of the summer workshops are sponsored by corporations or universities, so there is a possibility of receiving free classroom materials or even free graduate credits.

**Have fun and get involved!**

As a first-year teacher, time is precious and free time is a commodity, but new teachers should jump right into the school scene and attend a few after-school activities. By attending sporting events, plays, musicals, and a couple of dances, teachers let students know they are interested in what goes on outside the classroom. It usually takes a year or two to establish a reputation, but there may be fewer behavioral issues with students who see teachers outside the classroom. Aside from helping to reduce classroom discipline problems, administrators also appreciate the effort.

The first year of teaching is tough, and for new teachers, especially, everything will not turn out the way it was intended. New teachers should continue to try their best and not get frustrated. To avoid becoming overwhelmed, it might help for new teachers to choose just one or two things to focus on improving, such as lesson plans or classroom procedures. The following year they could pick a few other things to focus on. In the end, every teacher has to figure out what works best for them and know they are not alone!

Lynn Hensley is a chemistry teacher at South Lyon High School, 1000 North Lafayette, South Lyon, MI 48178; e-mail: hensleyl@southlyon.k12.mi.us.