

In The Classroom

How-to Lesson Plan

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HERE ARE THE BASICS STEPS I follow when I present my how-to lesson plan, along with examples of how I used this lesson with my fourth-grade students. I include some suggestions for modifying this lesson for different subjects and different writing forms at the end of this article, but the possibilities for variation are endless.

Materials needed

- A model how-to (Try to find one that works with the subject you're working in. See the list of ideas for models at the end of this article.)
- Any materials associated with your model how-to (should you choose to do an activity as part of reviewing your model)
- Blackboard/SmartBoard
- Chalk/Markers
- Writer's notebook/paper
- Pencil

Directions

Connect how-to lesson to prior lessons/knowledge

It's important to me that students believe that they

can be successful in the new tasks I ask them to undertake. Part of my strategy is to make sure that they are aware of what they already know, or know how to do, that will help them in the new task we are undertaking. I like to ask students to help me review the skills we already have. In the case of my fourth-graders, I asked them to remind me what we learned in previous classes about details, why they were important, and how to choose which details to include in a piece of writing.

Review anatomy/basic steps of how-tos

After we review the importance of details, I ask my students what they know about how-tos, and we discuss the basic steps (shown on the previous page), writing them in the correct order on the board.

Demonstrate or review a model how-to

With my fourth-grade students, I chose to model a how-to by demonstrating making a peanut butter sandwich, writing out the steps with the students as I proceeded. Before I began making the sandwich, I asked students to help me brainstorm a list of materials. Initially, they said I'd only need peanut butter, bread, and jelly. But, when we moved on to the directions, we realized that we'd left out a knife and plate, so we added them to our list.

I called on various students to give me directions, and through a comical series of trials and errors, the importance of details was reinforced. For example, when the first student I called on told me to, “put the peanut butter on the bread,” I smeared a line of peanut butter across the top of an entire loaf of bread. This led to students giving much more detailed instructions throughout the rest of the demonstration. “Take one piece of bread and spread a layer of peanut butter over one side of it.” We wrote these instructions on the board, discussing the chronology of the instructions, sequencing and transitional language, clarity and specificity as we went along.

I asked my students to write out this how-to in their writer’s notebooks as I made the sandwich, encouraging them to put the instructions into their own words, and add their own details and tips as well. You can also distribute copies of a model, go over it with students, and have them take notes on it (marking the parts of the how-to, underlining good use of details, vocabulary, transitional words, etc.) as you read and discuss it. I enjoy doing this demonstration because I get to share the sandwiches I’ve made with students as they write (I make enough for the class in advance).

Assign or give students time to choose a topic for a model how-to

Depending on the subject and desired learning outcomes for this activity, you may choose to assign topics to students rather than letting them select their own.

Because my demonstration took the majority of the class period, I ended the first class session by asking students to brainstorm and list at least three ideas for their own “how-tos.” With a brief demonstration, it might be possible to move on to the next step in a single class period.

Give students time to write their own how-tos

Depending on the grade level and subject, graphic organizers can be used for this. With my fourth-graders, we reviewed the basic anatomy of the how-to (Introduction, Materials, Directions, Conclusion, Tips), discussed how to organize the page, and wrote the how-to without a graphic organizer. I like to circulate throughout the room to answer questions, make suggestions, and offer encouragement while students write.

Invite students to share their how-tos with the class

This aspect of how-to-ing is my favorite. Students get to share their unique voices, their expertise, and their hard work with their classmates.

The how-to is a fun, novel means of helping students to process the stuff that they are learning, organize it, and put it into a new form, using their own words and imaginations.

We know how to do a lot of stuff, and we have the capacity to learn and do even more. The how-to is a fun, novel means of helping students process the stuff that

they are learning, organize it, and put it into a new form, using their own words and imaginations. My fourth-grade students wrote basic how-tos about everything from throwing a perfect spiral in football, to making scrambled eggs, to making new friends. They wrote about topics with which they felt comfortable while enhancing the informational writing skills emphasized in the Common Core. But the how-to also offers infinite possibilities for imaginative variations, as well as further cross-curricular work and core curriculum enhancement.

Variations

Variations on the How-to Form

Although the how-to seems straightforward, its well-

known formula actually opens up a wonderful space for play and imagination. In addition to the standard form, how-tos can take the form of:

- poems: www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/30299
- recipes: www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/how_to_boil_and_eat_lobster
- comics or storyboards: wikihow.com/make-a-comic
- short stories: www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/20/specials/moore-writer.html
- and even plays, songs, or films.

Using the How-to in Various Subjects

Science: Writing how-tos can help students master the concepts they are learning in science class and see their applications in the world beyond the classroom. Students can write step-by-step descriptions of metamorphosis, photosynthesis, chemical reactions, the classification of living organisms, and other scientific processes. More advanced grades and students can identify the practical applications of what they learn in the classroom and write how-tos that demonstrate scientific concepts at work (e.g., the changing states of matter seen when boiling water to make rice or spaghetti). Writing about scientific experiments and discoveries via the scientific method can also be seen as a how-to of sorts.

Social Studies: When it comes to social studies, writing a how-to can help students better understand the people, places, and events they are learning about, by asking them to process the knowledge differently. Students can write how-tos based on political events, movements, and trends (how to start a revolution, how to build a pyramid, how to get the right to vote, how to write a constitution). These types of how-tos can help students find patterns across history, see relationships between the past and present more clearly, and understand the implications and relevance of what they are studying.

Language Arts: Because they are such great tools for re-thinking and re-framing information, how-tos

can be used to re-frame and reinforce what is being taught in the English classroom as well. They can be assigned as book reports or as a means of accounting for the plot of a story (how to solve the mystery of the old clock, how to survive the Hunger Games); character development studies (how to stop being a wimpy kid, how to grow up); a way of accounting for patterns in literature (how to be an epic hero, how to construct a tragedy); or a means of defining important terms, philosophies, or ideas (how to write a simile, how to be an existentialist). ☺

Online How-to Models and Demonstrations

How to Make Stuffed Celery Sticks

www.howtodothings.com/food-drink/how-to-make-stuffed-celery-sticks

A simple recipe, helps students to focus strictly on specificity and sequencing.

How to Make a Sun Print

www.timeforkids.com/files/homework_helper/aplus_papers/HowtoArticleSampler.pdf

Science model, can be modified to include explanations of the scientific phenomena at work.

How to Create a Credible Villain in Fiction

www.wikihow.com/Create-a-Credible-Villain-in-Fiction

Literary model, can be modified for specific characters or character types, or to discuss a book through its literary genre.

How to Do Long Division

www.coolmath4kids.com/long-division/long-division-lesson-1.html

How to Start a Revolution

www.wikihow.com/Start-a-Revolution

Great for modifying for a history or social studies unit on the French, American, Russian, Egyptian, etc. revolutions/uprisings.