

HELP!

Paperwork weighing you down? Lighten up for spring with our expert advice. **By Caralee Adams**

Picture this: It's Friday at 3:45 and you glide out of your tidy classroom, saunter across the parking lot with nothing on your arm but the sleeve of your shirt, and slip blissfully into your car for a relaxed ride home. It's a gorgeous May afternoon and you've got a lot to do this weekend, all of it fun.

Sound unfamiliar? Here are 10 ideas (from professional organizers, education experts, and successful classroom teachers) for saving and organizing your time, so that this fantasy can become a reality! After all, it's time to take back your weekends. It just might make you a better teacher, too.

1 STAY LATE (OR COME IN EARLY)

Coming in an hour early once or twice a week can make the difference between a weekend grading papers on your sofa, or hot air ballooning through wine country (or even just taking your kids to the park).

It's been years since Cheryl Ansley, a fourth-grade teacher at Spring Hill Elementary School in Anchorage, Alaska, worked on a weekend. It wasn't always that way. In her early days of teaching, Ansley says she practically lived at school.

Since then, she hasn't discovered any magic fairy dust to make all that work go away. But 16 years later, work-free weekends are Ansley's goal. She relishes the quiet of her building in the morning and gets an hour >>

of work done before school starts. She always has a “to do” list on her desk and grades papers daily.

Plus, “When students get their work back quickly, if there is a need to re-teach, you know right away,” she says. That means she’s not already on adjectives when she finds out her students aren’t getting nouns. Not to mention that putting in a couple of long days means more time to ride motorcycles or go to the movies with her husband on the weekend.

2 NEVER GIVE TESTS ON FRIDAY

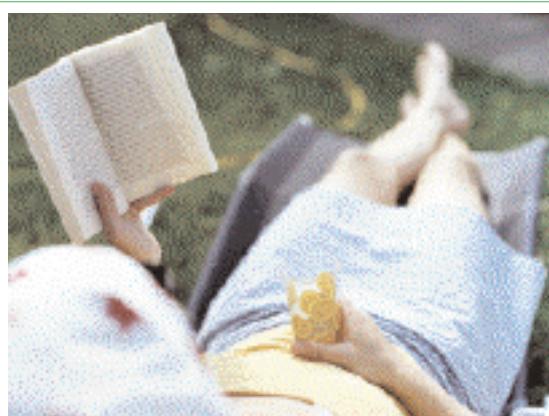
To reduce your weekend work, stay on top of your paperwork during the week. Rotate due dates, and don’t give tests (or have that big endangered-animal research paper due) on Fridays, if you can help it. Your students will thank you, since their deadlines, too, tend to load up at the end of the week.

What if Friday really *is* the only day you can give that state capital quiz? Have students trade with a partner and grade their work right then. They’ll learn from their mistakes while their knowledge is fresh, and you can cross off another item on your weekend to-do list.

3 PRE-ALPHABETIZE

When Steve Geiman has his students at Wilson Memorial High School in Fishersville, Virginia, turn in papers, they arrive efficiently on his desk in alphabetical order. Students are seated in alphabetical order across in rows. Each student is assigned a number. They turn in their papers by passing them across the rows, putting their own on top. One student then picks up the papers by row, keeping them in numbered order.

It may sound rigid, but Geiman says the system “teaches the students to take responsibility for the orderliness of what we are doing. They aren’t slapping each other over the head or tickling each other in their ears with the papers.” A health, P.E. and driver’s education teacher of 36 years, he says the system, inspired by Dr. Harry Wong (author of *The First Days of School*), helps him grade and return work more quickly.



The Weekend Belongs to You!

How can you get there? “Work smarter, not harder,” say Sara Bubb and Peter Early, authors of Managing Teacher Workload. Here’s what else you can do:

WORK AT YOUR BEST: Fit work around energy highs and lows. Save easier tasks (like photocopying) for the lows.

SET BOUNDARIES: Not every lesson deserves three hours of your time. Set deadlines and stick to them.

DO LESS MULTITASKING: Focus on doing one thing at a time. You will get more done.

BUILD IN REWARDS: Like stress-free Sundays.

4 SHARE THE WEALTH

Educators, says Jahn Wiegand, should look to the business world’s emphasis on teamwork. “Teachers tend to repeat tasks over and over in classrooms,” says the kindergarten- through fourth-grade teacher at West Elementary School in Storm Lake, Iowa. At her school, teachers make it a point to share lesson plans and swap best practices. The teacher who is most successful at planning geography lessons, or creating great reproducibles, for example, should share their work with everyone else, rather than having each teacher spend hours struggling to create a fascinating and memorable oceans of the world unit. “That way we aren’t recreating the wheel all the time. It’s amazing how much paperwork is eliminated,” she says.

5 GRADE LESS

Bev Taylor, a reading specialist for third through fifth graders at Wasco

Elementary School in Wasco, Illinois, says much of the work that is generated in her class is for practice and she merely marks it as completed. She also looks for ways to give kids more hands-on experiences instead of worksheets. As the kids work with magnetic letters or do math games, Taylor will observe and give them quick verbal feedback or takes notes. “It’s cut down drastically on the amount of paperwork to grade, and still I have good information on what they are learning,” she says.

6 THROW 5 THINGS AWAY EVERY DAY

Looking for materials in your classroom can be a real time zapper—especially if your piles of stuff have become out of control.

Rita Emmett, author of *The Clutter-Busting Handbook*, suggests cleaning out your closet every few months and getting rid of the stuff that tends to accumulate—craft supplies are a big-time culprit. To keep stuff from piling up again, set boundaries on how much you need and how long you keep it. Throw away all those daily and weekly notices from the office.

Next step: your desk. If it’s cluttered with student trinkets, consider parting with a few. You can experience the joy of receiving a gift without feeling as though you have to make a commitment to it for life, Emmett adds.

7 E-MAIL OFFENSIVELY, NOT DEFENSIVELY

For the past three years, Carol Brooks, a sixth-grade teacher at Palmetto Middle School in Williamston, South Carolina, has e-mailed every parent, every day with a short group message about what’s happening in her math class. Parents like

being kept in the loop, yet she isn't bargained with responses. Using e-mail to be proactive with communication saves on parent complaints and eliminates phone tag, Brooks says.

"Parents love it," she says. "When the kids come home and say they don't have any homework, they can't deny it—the parent often has it printed out."

If you're worried about inundating families with information, you can always allow the option to opt out of the daily e-mail—though we doubt you'll have any takers.

8 PROCRASTINATE!

The old adage is wrong—it's not always better to do today what you could save until tomorrow. Consider setting some boundaries so you don't get bogged down swapping e-mails and telephone calls all day. Tell parents, for instance, that you will check messages once a day in the morning or evening.

When returning calls, keep conversations brief and to the point by having a few notes close at hand that summarize what you want to say. Keep a log of your conversation so that you can save on later paperwork should you need to write an IEP, a recommendation letter, or report card comments.

9 ENLIST YOUR STUDENTS

Not only can kids help to grade their own work, they can also help to keep track of supplies in the classroom, suggests Donna Goldberg, a professional organizer in New York City and author of *The Organized Student*.

Try posting a supply checklist that students mark off when supplies, such as glue sticks, are depleted. Then at the end of each day, have the students work together to tidy up the room. You may find that your helpers have an increased sense of pride—and your classroom won't get as messy in the first place.

10 SCHEDULE YOUR FUN

When you take a task away from a teacher, it's like taking a bucket of water out of a lake—something soon fills its place. The key to freeing up time for you is not to focus on eliminating tasks, but rather to schedule time for things you love, says Rita Emmett. Make a date to go shopping with a friend or to visit a museum. Not just once in a while, but regularly. "When we make time for fun, the other stuff really does get done," she says. Not carving out personal time for something you enjoy can lead to burn out, Emmett adds.

Patricia Smith, a third-grade teacher at Golding Elementary School, in Cobleskill, New York, agrees. For her, the answer has been trying to get in a short run every day. "That has been a lifesaver. It's like triage time. Things that seem overwhelming get into perspective," she says. □

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