

Gratitude: A Powerful Tool for Your Classroom

By exercising the “gratitude muscle” with a journal, students can harness positive thinking to increase their grades, goals, and quality of life.

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Character Education



Would you like to improve the culture in your classroom and your life? Try gratitude. Based on my 10 years of teaching experience, this is the most powerful tool that I know.

Gratitude has empowered me to teach more effectively, appreciate my individual students, grow in my profession, and enjoy life. Utilizing gratitude, I am able to model one of the most important lessons in life, having a positive attitude,

especially about the aspects of life that challenge me.

Gratitude Journal

To get started in your classroom with gratitude, I recommend actually writing your own gratitude list for a few weeks and feeling its power. Then you can share your example and start the activity with your students. You might start your gratitude journal with being thankful for being alive, for having food to eat and clothes to wear. If you can think about something related to teaching that you're grateful for, that's even more powerful.

My students use a composition book and start every day by writing five gratitudes. If you have computers or iPads, you might have the students start a file to save their daily gratitude journal. By the end of the year, we each have almost 1,000 gratitudes. I show the students an example or let them see this form:

1. Thanks for _____.
2. Thanks for _____.
3. Thanks for _____.

Once a week, we go around the class and share our favorite gratitude. I am always encouraged and pleasantly surprised by what my students share. I get to learn about things going on in their lives that I might not hear about otherwise. This

helps build a positive culture in our classroom.

In addition, I suggest that the students should be specific. For example, instead of writing, "Thank you for lunch," I would write, "Thank you for the tomatoes and lettuce in my salad and for the cool, sweet iced tea with friends," or "Thank you for the nutritious lunch made by loving hands."

Exercising the Muscle

Gratitude seems to work like a muscle, and the physical act of writing a gratitude list helps develop gratitude muscles. And Professor Philip Watkins of Eastern Washington University says that [those who are the least grateful seem to gain the most from making this effort.](#)

That's good news to those us who may find it hard to start a gratitude list.

Sometimes I really challenge the students by asking if they can be thankful for homework or chores. This challenge enables them to see what is good about homework—that it helps them learn and prepares them for school and life.

In her article "[Gratitude Activities for the Classroom](#)," Vicki Zakrzewski of the Greater Good Science Center lists many more gratitude activities to try in your classroom. This year, a new activity that I started in my classroom is writing down gratitudes on sticky notes and putting them on our

classroom door, so that we have a positive reminder every time we enter and leave the room. Students will even take this idea home and post gratitudes on sticky notes around their homes, reminding them to stay grateful.

Visible Change

Recent research by two leaders in the field of gratitude and education, Dr. Robert Emmons and Dr. Jeffrey Froh, supports the idea that gratitude improves the lives of students and adults. They have found several benefits for students and adults.

Keeping a gratitude journal on a daily basis helps students achieve higher grades; higher goals; more satisfaction with relationships, life, and school; less materialism; and more willingness to give back.

Keeping a gratitude journal enables both students and adults to be more optimistic, experience more social satisfaction, exercise more often, have less envy and depression, have fewer physical complaints, and sleep better.

I see these positive changes in my students. One of them saved her allowance and bought gratitude journals for her family. Her mom was in nursing school and very stressed. At the dinner table, they would share their gratitudes for the

day and grow as a family. The mom came to me and thanked me for teaching gratitude to her daughter and helping her family. She said it helped her get through nursing school.

Tapping the Potential

Dr. Kerry Howells, a leading researcher into gratitude and education, actually trains teachers to utilize gratitude in the classroom. Watch the following powerful video where she gives examples and evidence of the power of using gratitude in education:

I challenge you to try it yourself and see how it works. My friends who have written a daily gratitude journal for at least two weeks speak positively of the experience. Gratitude has transformed many lives. It is true that our focus can stimulate growth. If I focus on the good and I am grateful, more comes into my life. Conversely, if I complain and focus on the negative, more of that is drawn into my life. For me, the fruit of the focus on gratitude is happiness. Finally, check out [Gratefulness.org](https://www.gratefulness.org) for extra gratitude resources.

Research

- Jeffrey J. Froh, William J. Sefick, Robert A. Emmons, [Counting blessings in early adolescents: An experimental study of gratitude and subjective well-](#)

[being](#), *Journal of School Psychology* 46 (2008), pp.213-233 (PDF, 410KB).

- Jeffrey J. Froh, Robert A. Emmons, Noel A. Card, Giacomo Bono, Jennifer A. Wilson, [Gratitude and the Reduced Costs of Materialism in Adolescents](#), *Journal of Happiness Studies*, Volume 12, No. 2, 2011 (PDF, 356KB).
- Robert Emmons, [How Gratitude Can Get You Through Hard Times](#), *Greater Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*, May 13, 2013.