

How to create a morning routine that gets you energized to teach

by Angela Watson



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There's a lot of talk about the importance of morning routines amongst entrepreneurs because when you run your own business, you don't have anyone to create a schedule for you. It's very easy to waste time and fall into bad habits. That's something that I have to be really aware of myself, and I have done a lot of research and given a lot of thought to this topic.

However, it's not something that I commonly hear discussed in teaching circles. I think for most of the educators, having to be at school so early means that the morning routine is basically just getting yourself and your family out the door as quickly as possible and making sure you're in that classroom before your students are lined up outside your door waiting for you.

How I learned (the hard way) about the importance of morning routines for teachers

As a teacher, I had to be at work at 7:30 in the morning, with kids coming in the door at 7:45, so I understand that pressure of feeling like you don't have even a minute to yourself before the day is in full swing.

Also, I am not by nature a morning person. I think I've sort of become a morning person as I got older, and I actually don't mind waking up early at this point. I feel like I do my best thinking and work first thing in the morning now. But that was definitely not the case when I was in my 20s. I would set my alarm for the latest possible time and then rush around like a mad woman trying to make sure I wasn't late. I was teaching in Fort Lauderdale and had a pretty short commute, but I had to cross over train tracks and a drawbridge to get to my school. If a train came or that drawbridge was raised, it threw me behind by at least five minutes, and I did not have five minutes to spare. Any unexpected interruption or disruption became a big problem. Because I left myself no margin and no buffer time, something as simple as a train crossing could ruin my whole morning.

Even without the train, I only had a couple minutes to myself to breathe and prepare for all the hustle and bustle that a room full of third-graders brings to a room first thing in the morning. I would still be half-asleep myself, and it would take a good 30 minutes into my first lesson before I'd feel like my head was really in the game.

Set your alarm 5-15 minutes earlier to give you a few moments to yourself before the demands of the day begin

After the eleventy-billionth time of sliding in the school doors juuuust in time, I finally decided to change my morning routine. I began setting my alarm for 15 minutes earlier. That would allow me to leave the house five minutes earlier, which means I didn't have to stress if there was a problem on the roadway. And I could use the other 10 minutes to do something that would put me in the right mindset.

I began sitting out on my apartment balcony in the mornings and either reading something that would put me in the right headspace, maybe the Bible or an uplifting book, or listening to calming music and looking out over the palm trees while I geared up for the day mentally. I also had a giant mug of coffee so that the caffeine would kick in before I arrived at school instead of after.

When I tell you that having that 10 minutes to myself in the morning — 10 minutes to just sit without anyone calling my name or asking me for anything, 10 minutes to breathe, 10 minutes to mentally prepare for the day, and drink some coffee — when I tell you that made the biggest difference in my mood, mindset, and effectiveness as a teacher? I am not exaggerating. Even my colleagues noticed. The teacher next door was like, “Angela you seem to have so much more energy lately. You used to walk into school sort of dragging and not wanting to talk to anyone until after 9 am. What changed?”

Being intentional about how I started my day and creating a motivating morning routine was the simplest thing I ever did to improve my energy level and attitude toward teaching. Having an extra 15 minutes to sleep would not have made that same difference.

It was completely worth it to get up a few minutes earlier and make sure that my head was in the game.

So I want to encourage you to create a morning routine that works for you, no matter how much you feel like you are not a morning person or how early you have to get up. You may have children or other family members who get up at the crack of dawn, and having to be up before then could be a real challenge. I'm not saying this will be easy, necessarily, I'm saying it will be worth it. Figure out if there is a way that you could wake up even five minutes earlier to give yourself time to mentally prepare for the day.

Set your intent: How do you want your day to flow?

Once you've made the commitment to set your alarm a couple minutes earlier to ensure you have time for yourself, set your intent about how you want to use that time. What does a smooth, productive morning look like to you? How would you like to begin your morning, in an ideal situation? I'm not talking about waking up on a beautiful island somewhere, but in your regular life, on a regular workday, what would be the most pleasant, productive way to begin your regular routines?

Visualizing a smooth day might sound kind of silly and woo-woo, but it really does make a big difference because it allows you to set your intentions. If you don't know what you're working toward, you'll never get it! Once you daydream a bit about how you want things to flow in your day, you can actually plan steps that will help make that a reality.

A smooth morning is going to look different for each individual teacher, so decide what that means for you.

Choose your first thoughts of the day wisely

Don't start your day by running through a mental to-do list and making yourself anxious before you even get out of bed. I used to do this and replaced that habit by thinking about all the successes from the day before. What awesome things happened the day before in your classroom that laid the foundation for the awesome things that are going to happen today?

I try to be present in those early morning minutes when I'm first waking up, rather than allowing my mind to rush ahead to all the things I need to do. Practice choosing thoughts when you first wake up — you don't have to think every thought that pops into your mind. Dismiss the anxious thoughts, and replace them with thoughts about what's going well.

Begin your day by appreciating your life. Go through a mental list of some of the things you are grateful for. This will get you in a more positive mindset even if you feel tired or haven't woken up in a good mood. Your thoughts create your moods, so choose to replace those negative thoughts that arise when you wake up with thoughts that are energizing and motivating.

Begin your day with a habit that makes you feel balanced and happy (NOT checking your phone!)

Many of us are in the habit of reaching for our phones the moment we wake up, but checking email or scrolling mindlessly through a social media feed means you're likely to see something that makes you angry, or sad, or annoyed, or moved to action ... and none of those feelings are going to help you have a productive day.

The beginning of your day is NOT a time when you can afford to get sucked into an internet black hole. Your entire morning will feel rushed if you waste 15 minutes reading a juicy bit of gossip or getting into an internet argument on someone's political post before you even get out of bed.

Checking your email while you're still laying in bed will remind you of things you need to do at a time when you are NOT supposed to be doing them. You'll either try to respond immediately (even though you know we need to get your day started and begin your motivating morning routine), OR you'll leave the messages unanswered (creating anxiety, scattered focus, and a mounting mental to-do list).

Choose a new wake-up habit that makes YOU feel balanced and happy. Do that habit first, THEN check your phone or turn on the television.

I do like reading in bed for just a couple of minutes rather than jumping right up, but I feel better if I read a book or eBook that is inspiring and motivating. This careful selection of my first media input of the day gets me excited to accomplish my goals.

Try out a new habit or routine for early morning, and plan to tweak it over time

You don't have to have the perfect morning routine planned. Just try something for a couple of days: An invigorating walk around your neighborhood, eating a quick breakfast in a quiet spot of your house with a pretty view, meditating, or sitting with a cup of coffee and looking at your to-do list to mentally prepare for the tasks ahead. Any of these options will feel like a luxury if you're used to feeling frazzled in the morning!

Choose whatever appeals to you personally, and give yourself the freedom to be flexible. Your morning routine might differ according to the days of the week. Or you might try something that works well for a week or two, then find yourself sort of dreading it.

Be prepared to switch things up and look for new options that feel nourishing to your soul and help you get in the right headspace for the day.

Get to school early when you can work undisturbed

Given the choice between going to school early or staying late, I'd pick the former any time even though I had to train myself to be a morning person. In the afternoons, I'm far more likely to let exhaustion get the best of me, or get sucked into hanging out with my coworkers to chitchat.

After a few months of setting my alarm 15 minutes earlier, I finally got the courage to move my alarm clock up an entire hour. This finally gave me time to ease into my school day the way I wanted to. My stress level decreased significantly since an impromptu mini-conference with a colleague the hallway would no longer throw me hopelessly behind time. In turn, I noticed a big change in the level of patience and productivity I had during the school day.

If your schedule will allow it even just one day a week, I encourage you to consider arriving at school a bit earlier so you have undisturbed time to think, plan, and prepare for your day.

Create a pleasant morning ritual in your classroom to transition into work mode

Use your time before the first bell to do things that get you excited about your day — a routine that you enjoy and that gets you in the mindset for teaching. I had a lot of colorful decorative lamps in my classroom, and though I could have assigned a student the job of switch them all on, I enjoyed walking around my classroom in the morning with the overhead lights off, slowly turning on one lamp at a time. I'd look at the space around the lamp, and picture the learning that would take place there later in the day and the successes my students would have.

I'd then turn on music that calmed me if I was anxious, or energized me if I was tired. I'd sit at my desk with a second cup of coffee and something simple (like yogurt) for breakfast. As you know, a quiet moment to sit down at your desk in an empty classroom and listen to relaxing music with a cup of coffee is a HUGE luxury for a teacher, so this ritual was a very special way to begin the day.

As I sipped my coffee and ate, I went through my lesson plans for that day and made sure all the materials were organized and accessible. Many times, I'd alter the plans according to my mood, rearranging lessons a bit or incorporating a different activity that better suited my energy level, the weather, or a change in our daily schedule that was beyond my control. This was my last chance to deeply consider my students' needs and reflect on my practice before I'd have to think on my feet again.

When my plans were in place and my coffee was finished, I'd turn off the music and turn on the TV, which was tuned to the school's morning announcements channel. The school played kid-friendly, upbeat music on the channel until announcements started, so listening to that was the start of my transition into the hustle and bustle that would begin shortly. I'd do miscellaneous tasks around the classroom, straightening things or making last-minute changes to the warm-up I'd posted on the board for kids to do.

Stand in the doorway while students are entering the room

This might just be an Angela problem, but as an introvert and a lover of peace and quiet, having the classroom instantly transform from a calm oasis into a bustling, noisy room full of children could feel a bit jarring. I'm not gonna lie, there were a lot of days when I dreaded hearing that first bell ring because I knew it meant I was going to have to kick my energy level into high gear as if it were a light switch, and my energy level just doesn't turn on that quickly.

I found that standing in the doorway and welcoming kids into the classroom helped me make that transition a little more easily, and it might be a good solution for you, too. It's a chance to chat briefly with the teachers next door and across the hall (rather than during your precious planning time!) and to greet students as they enter the room.

I tried to create a habit of connecting with each student. I'd read their expressions and body language to get an idea of what kind of energy they were bringing to the classroom and talk about anything they needed to discuss.

I think it's obvious that this sort of routine is beneficial for students, but if you haven't thought about how it can also be helpful for you as the teacher to start the day off on the right foot, consider what kind of routine for welcoming kids to the classroom can help you feel more connected to the kids and prepared to be "on" for the day.

Teach students warm-up/bell work routines they can complete independently

I spent a great deal of time in August teaching students how to enter the room quietly, take care of their own arrival tasks (pencil sharpening, getting a drink of water, and so on) and then begin their morning warm-up activity. This freed me to remain by the doorway and continue greeting their classmates as each one arrived.

Having a warm-up routine also meant that I wasn't responsible for teaching from the moment the kids entered the room. By teaching students to always follow the same morning routine, I was able to handle last-minute emergencies, bus incidents, tardies, and so on without throwing the rest of the class off schedule.

I recommend keeping the assignments simple and fairly predictable so students can do them independently. Self-selected reading is a great way to begin the day, for example, and lets kids ease into the workday slowly, as well. (After all, if YOU have trouble getting motivated to start the day and transitioning into work mode, students certainly have trouble, too!)

But whatever you choose, write the directions in a consistent place that's easy for every student to see. I wrote mine in red marker, so whenever students entered the classroom, they knew to look on the top left-hand corner of the board for the red writing that says "Warm Up."

The warm-up could take between 5 and 15 minutes, depending on the type of task, how long it takes students to trickle into your room in the morning, and also how much time you need before the lesson begins. You can easily extend the warm-up activity to buy yourself a couple of extra minutes if some unexpected demand on your time crops up, and the students will never know the difference. The warm-up allows you to wait to begin instruction until you are completely ready and present in the moment.

Remember: Be intentional about setting the tone for the day, and don't leave your mood up to chance

I've given you a lot of different elements to consider, but the common thread among them is intentionality. Don't just run with whatever thoughts you wake up with, or assume if you wake up in a bad mood, you're going to have a bad day. You can choose your thoughts, and you can choose your habits. Be intentional about creating a morning routine that sets you AND your students up for success.

*You'll never change your life until you change something you do daily.
The secret of success is found in your daily routine.*

About the author

Angela is a National Board Certified Teacher with 8 years experience as a K-12 instructional coach and 11 years experience in the classroom. As founder of Due Season Press and Educational Services, she has created [printable curriculum resources](#), [online courses](#), [4 books](#), the [Truth for Teachers podcast](#), and the [40 Hour Teacher Workweek Club](#). She's been supporting teachers through this website since 2003.

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My ideal morning

Morning mantra

What will I think/say to myself to set my intentions for the day?

First thing upon waking...

Morning ritual to get motivated...

Getting ready for school...

During my commute...

Transitioning into the classroom...

When students enter the room...

On weekend mornings....



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