

“Student Responsibility and Organization” by Angela Powell

Excerpted and adapted from [“The Cornerstone: Classroom Management That Makes Teaching More Effective, Efficient, and Enjoyable”](#).

I had an extraordinarily disorganized student one year. In April, he was *still* shoving books from our class library anywhere on the shelves. I knew he came from an upper-class family who bought lots of children’s books, and I was so incredulous that I chided him one day, “These books are all facing different directions!! Is this how you put away books at home?!” He blinked and said, “No. I just shove them all under my bed!”

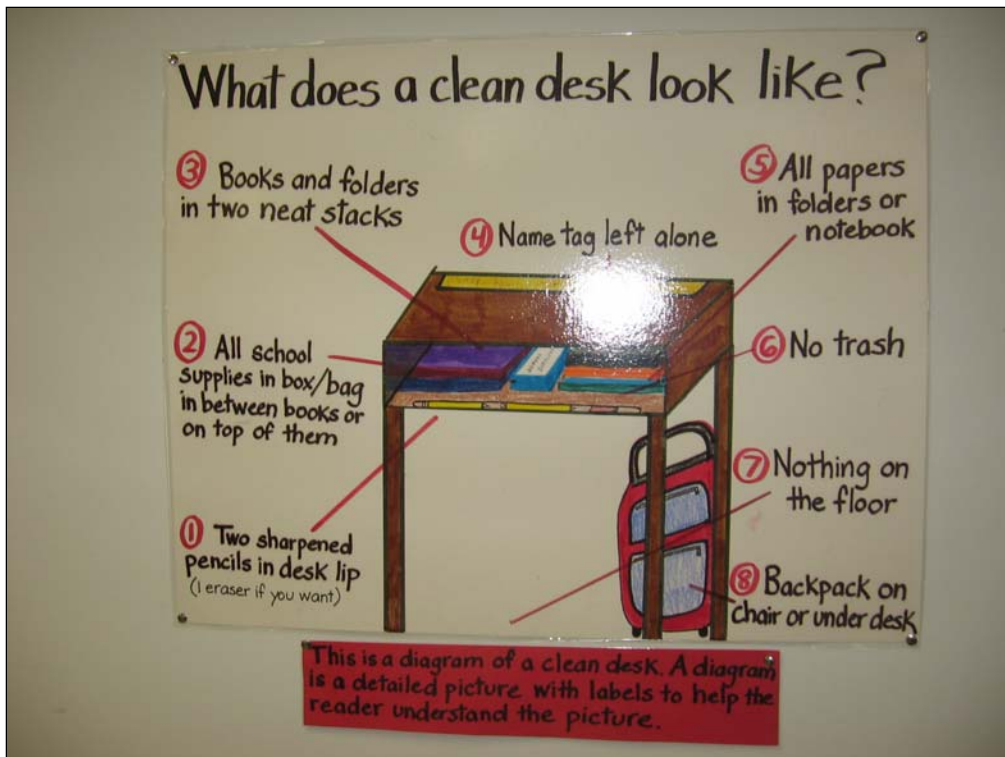
Don’t assume kids have seen *any* sort of organization before! Some parents, just like some people in general, are more organized than others. Also, many parents baby their children and clean up after them constantly. ***Either way, your classroom might be the first time a child is expected to stack something neatly or keep a desk tidy.*** Even the teachers your students had previously may not have taught or enforced organizational skills.

Children NEED to learn to organize themselves, especially at school—why not be the one to instill in them that value? I once had a particularly messy little girl from an affluent but highly disorganized family who told me at the end of the year, “This was the first time I ever knew where anything was in my desk.” I smiled and said, “Doesn’t that feel good, to know that you are taking care of your things and you know how to find them?” She was beaming from ear to ear. Her natural tendency was still to leave things strewn everywhere, and that was reinforced by her home environment. But, she had experienced pride in keeping her belongings neat, and I truly believe that will inspire her for life.

IT IS WORTH EVERY MINUTE YOU SPEND TEACHING ORGANIZATION AND CLEANLINESS TO KIDS! Taking care of one’s belongings may not be a skill on standardized tests, but is a critical component of being an efficient and productive adult.

Teaching Organizational Skills

What Does a Clean Desk Look Like?



Your criteria for a clean desk is probably very different from that of a seven-year-old! Clarity in expectations takes on an even greater importance when it comes to organization. Make a class list or diagram of what a clean desk looks like, or what the classroom looks and sounds like when children are cleaning up. Brainstorm qualities of a clean room together, and leave the poster up to serve as a benchmark for expectations. Be specific about what you want and teach for it.

Do lots of modeling in the beginning of the year and throughout as needed. Have the class watch certain students “show us how to do it” and use reinforcement narration and performance feedback. Always compare their demonstration to the diagram or list of expectations.

Keeping the Appropriate Amount and Type of Supplies

Some supplies are used by students daily and are kept in their desks (such as pencils, notebook paper, and erasers). Sometimes a child has an entire pack of paper or 20 pencils, and I offer to keep them in a cabinet until the child needs them (putting a sticky note on top labeled with the child’s name so I don’t get confused).

Some years I kept paper and pencils as communal supplies so that every child would have enough. The simplest way to manage this was to pass out additional paper and pencils once a month or so to make sure everyone had plenty. Another option that I used for awhile was to have the kids fill out supply slips during Morning Work time. Then every other day (or once a week, depending on the class), a student helper filled the requests and filed away the slips. That way I had a record of how often the kids ran out of supplies. The slip also required the students to explain why they needed more supplies (e.g., ran out, used it up, lost it, took it home, or someone borrowed it), so if parents questioned why they needed to send in more, I had documentation from the child. Too-frequent requests were not filled.

Teaching Students to Clean Up After Themselves

Throwing Away Trash

Consider a class rule: no throwing away trash at ANY time without permission. Some kids will find a staple or paper scrap and walk the long way around the room to the furthest possible trash receptacle and then slowly wander back to their seats. Not only does this rule eliminate that problem, it also creates order when the entire class needs to throw away trash, such as after a cutting project.

In recent years I stopped using this rule because my class size is low, making it less disruptive for those kids who physically need to get up and move sometimes, but I do still use it during projects when we’re all cutting at once. Then I call kids to the trash cans one row at a time, or boys then girls, so it doesn’t get too chaotic. If you call one side of the room (or group) at a time to throw away trash, you can see who should and should not be at the trash can. You can also train students to automatically throw away trash when they line up to go to music or lunch, if those activities follow your lesson.

The information in this document was adapted from [The Cornerstone](#) book’s twelfth chapter, “Student Responsibility and Organization: Giving Children Ownership of Their Learning Environment”.

This chapter explains the concepts mentioned here in more detail. It also explains how to teach children to care for school supplies and manage what’s in their desks. For example, many children have difficulty keeping the appropriate amount of pencils in their desk: either they have nothing to write with (ever), or they store fifty-seven pencils that come clattering out every time they try to remove materials. Students must be taught how many pencils to keep and when to sharpen them, and Chapter 12 explains that. It also teaches you how to establish routines for cleaning up and provide related rewards and consequences when students do or don’t meet your expectations. Finally, the chapter will show you how to give students the responsibility of keeping the classroom running smoothly through an effective classroom job/helper system.