

# GETTING AND SUCCEEDING IN YOUR FIRST TEACHING ROLE



# INTRODUCTION

Are you searching for your first teaching job and curious about methods for interview practice that will lead to confidence and success? Are you wondering how you can find the best people to support you and help you build confidence in your new position? If you're interested in this and more, explore this Toolkit of chapters from bestselling Routledge Eye On Education titles. We hope they help you through the interview process, into your first year of teaching, and beyond!

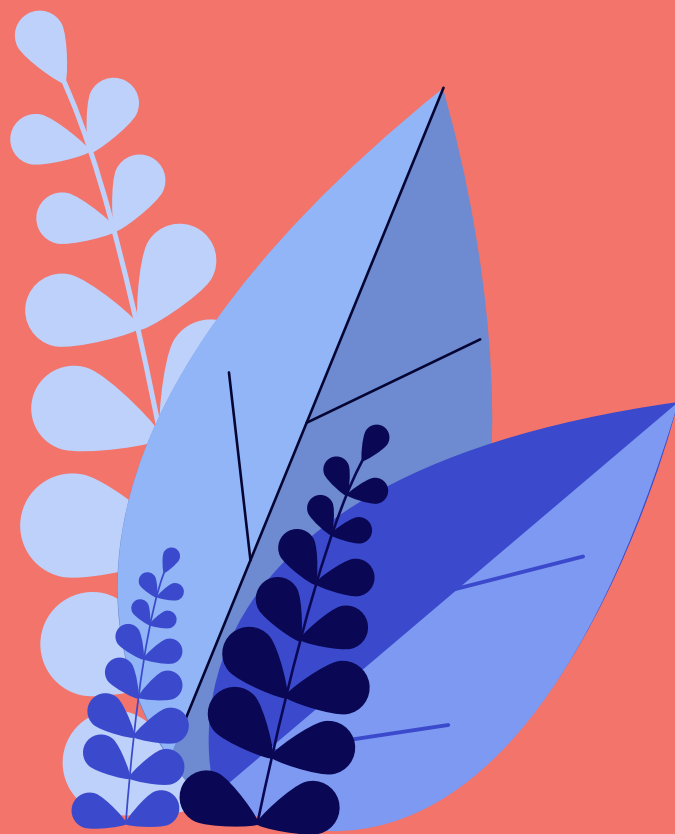
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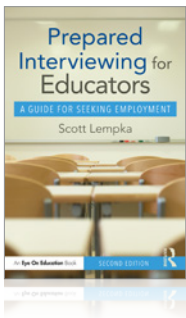
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*From* **Prepared Interviewing for Educators: A Guide for Seeking Employment** by Scott Lempka.

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*From* **Your First Year: How to Survive and Thrive as a New Teacher** by Todd Whitaker, Madeline Good and Katherine Whitaker.





The following is excerpted from *Prepared Interviewing for Educators* by Scott Lempka.

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## EXAMPLE SANDWICHES

Practice is what separates a polished interviewee from one who hesitates and struggles to put together a clear thought. I have seen hundreds of applicants stare at the ceiling, question after question, searching for what to say next. Don't let the interview be the first time you have organized your thoughts and reviewed your qualifications.

In this chapter, you will learn my proven methods for interview practice that will lead to confidence and success. Start by going through your compiled questions and writing notes under each to guide your answers. Some people like to write an actual essay answer for each question in paragraph form. Be careful if you do this, because you don't want to develop "canned" answers. For this reason, I recommend instead writing bullet points or outlining the answer. Use what works for you, though. The key is getting the essential information on paper so you can review it later.

## INTENSION VS. EXPERIENCE

In Chapter 2, we talked about the different kinds of questions you can expect from an interview committee. Many of these seek to uncover your prior experience in an effort to determine whether you know how to respond to various situations common to your chosen field. As you write your answers, be sure to include examples whenever possible.

Telling an employer how you would hypothetically handle a situation or respond to a need is one thing. Being able to share how you have handled a situation shows true grit and is what gets people hired. When creating your notes, always seek to include real examples from past experience to set you apart from the other candidates. Even if the experience was gained as part of a practicum or student teaching experience, you are better off to speak from a place of "This is what I have done," rather than "This is what I would do." Far and away, the greatest and most common mistake I see candidates make during the interview is failing to provide examples. Far too often, candidates provide clear and concise answers, but leave their answers grounded in the realm of the hypothetical.

Let me explain my point with a brief story. A number of years ago, my wife and I took a single-engine plane trip to a remote fishing location in Alaska. As we waited by the plane for other passengers to load their things, I struck up a conversation with the youthful-looking pilot. "So, how long have you been doing this?" I asked. He quickly replied, "First time! But I've been practicing for a while now." My heart sank. I was about to embark on a single-engine plane flight through the bush of Alaska with a pilot who had not been adequately tested by experience. Soon a grin appeared on his face and he said, "I've been doing this for a few years now. I'm just messing with you." I'm sure my instant relief was obvious.

The truth is, experience always wins over intention. Employers want to know that you have been there and will know what to do in various situations. This being the case, examples of proven experience are, well, the proof that you've been there and know what to do. When used correctly, they frame the candidate as a proven and experienced professional. When neglected, they leave the candidate looking like a lot of talk and no action.

Let's take a look at a very simple strategy to help you quickly formulate answers that don't just tell what you would do, but rather what you have actually done. Whenever possible, I encourage candidates to organize their verbal answers into a framework

I have created to help them better understand this concept. It is called the Example Sandwich.

I would try to talk to the student privately to determine what is causing him to be upset. I would explain my expectations clearly and the consequences if he chooses not to follow the expectations. Finally, I would try to create an incentive for the child that would encourage him to focus on appropriate behaviors.

On the surface, this is a solid answer. It shows that the candidate balances clear expectations for student behavior with a proactive plan to deal with the root cause of the behavior. If you look closely, however, you will notice a theme. "I would," is repeated three times, signaling potential employers that this candidate has never actually done what he or she is describing. Unfortunately, it is an answer that is firmly grounded in the world of "what if." Because the candidate fails to provide an example, the committee is left to speculate on whether the candidate could actually implement the plan successfully should he or she be required to in real life. Let's look at another way to answer the same question:

Whenever I deal with chronic student behaviors, I believe it is important to balance clear, firm expectations with positive relationships and proactive measures. For example, during my student teaching experience, I had a student who was consistently defiant and disrespectful. Early on, I pulled the student aside privately and addressed the situation. I reviewed my classroom rules with the student and shared that I wanted her to be able to remain in my class rather than the office, but that I expected her to follow my directions and speak to me in a respectful tone at all times. Later on, I created a point sheet that allowed the student to earn a point for each day she was successful. I knew the student liked guitars, so when her point sheet was full, I allowed the student to earn thirty minutes of time playing my guitar during recess. Immediately, the student's behaviors began to turn around. The student knew what my expectations were, but she also knew I cared about her success and, in the end, this led to significant improvements in the child's behavior. This student is now a member of the school patrol, a position she earned in part due to her positive behavior change.

Now let's compare the second answer to the first. Which one leaves you feeling the candidate has a firm grasp on student behavior? The first candidate comes across as a person with good theories related to shaping positive behavior in students. The second candidate, however, by incorporating an anecdotal example, stands out as a proven and experienced practitioner. This second answer is structured using the Example Sandwich. Next, let's dissect this second answer to fully understand how the Example Sandwich works.

## AN EXAMPLE SANDWICH'S THREE INGREDIENTS

The Example Sandwich, as I've developed it, has three parts:

- 1 First, share a core belief or philosophy that drives your work.
- 2 Next, provide an example from your practice to demonstrate your theory in successful action.
- 3 Lastly, close the answer by restating or summarizing how your core belief or philosophy yielded success.

Now let's label where these three components show up in the second candidate's answer.

- 1 **Belief/Philosophy**  
"I believe it is important to balance clear, firm expectations with positive relationships and proactive measures."
- 2 **Successful Example**  
"For example ... I had a student who was consistently defiant and disrespectful. Early on, I pulled the student aside privately and addressed the situation ... point sheet ... playing my guitar .... Immediately, the student's behaviors began to turn around."
- 3 **Revisit Belief/Philosophy**  
"The student knew what my expectations were, but she also knew I cared about her success and, in the end, this led to significant improvements in the child's behavior. ... [She's] now a member of the school safety patrol."

It is common for interview questions to include a statement such as "Please provide examples, if possible." More often than not, however, questions simply ask you to share what you know or what you would do. It is up to you as the interviewee to ensure that your answers demonstrate not only knowledge or philosophy, but proven experience as well. Let's look a little deeper at this concept by studying another example.

This question often shows up in educational interviews: "Describe how you use assessment results to drive instructional decisions."

Using the Example Sandwich, your answer might look something like this:

**Belief/Philosophy:** “I believe it is important to use both formative and summative assessment measures to inform my instructional practice. For this reason, I am constantly collecting ongoing informal assessments of student progress.”

**Example(s):** “For example, when teaching math, I often end the period by having students complete an exit slip where they accomplish a problem that is representative of the day’s learning. I look over these before the next class to determine whether I need to review any concepts before moving on to new material. Another method I often use is to review the learning target or goal at the end of the lesson and have students rate their progress toward the target on a three-point scale. I also use benchmark assessment data collected three times per year to determine whether students are making expected progress. I use the results from these assessments to drive my intervention groups, because they help me determine who is lacking number sense or place value understanding.”

**Revisit Belief/Philosophy:** “I feel strongly that the constant, real-time feedback that ongoing formative and summative assessments provide are essential for being able to accurately diagnose the needs of my students.”

# INTERVIEW PRACTICE

Excerpted from *Prepared Interviewing for Educators*

## EXAMPLE SANDWICH WORKSHEET

The Example Sandwich has three parts:

**1**

First, share a core belief or philosophy that drives your work.

**2**

Next, provide an example from your practice to demonstrate your theory in successful action.

**3**

Lastly, close the answer by restating or summarizing how your core belief yielded success.

Belief/Philosophy:

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Example from Practice:

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Restatement of Belief/Philosophy:

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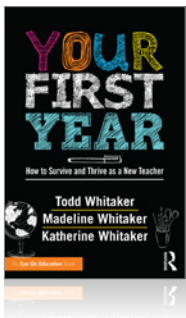
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The following is excerpted from *Your First Year* by Todd Whitaker, Madeline Whitaker Good and Katherine Whitaker.

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## THE EMPOWERERS AND NAVIGATING THE WATERS

During your first year, you are going to work unbelievably hard to attempt to make sure things go smoothly every day. You will spend hours planning lessons. Each day will be spent building relationships with your students. You will also work hard to smile and greet everyone you come in contact with because you want to be a positive influence in your classroom and in your building. Then, the unexpected will occur.

No matter how hard we humans try, at some point every one of us will end up with one of those unexpected terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days. Those days might be caused by a lesson not going well, a student interaction that did not end the way you had hoped, a negative teacher, or an upset parent. When these situations arise, what do you do?

For a while you can work through these ups and downs alone. Hopefully at first you can reach out to family and friends for guidance. However, eventually it is beneficial to find another expert educator to turn to in those times of strife or frustration. Someone who has a similar educational philosophy, but more importantly, someone you can trust to be there for you. We call these special educators your “empowerers.” Since this is an original word, we are going to include a definition. An empowerer is someone who builds confidence, happiness, and strength in another. True empowerers are precious gifts but where can we find them?

## FINDING YOUR EMPOWERER

The work day(s) before school starts is a perfect time for the first year teacher to begin this empowerer search! The year is new and everyone is excited, including yourself. Even if you are a bit nervous, there are people in your faculty who are so looking forward to meeting you! New teachers always help to rejuvenate the passion of a school. Many people are going to be drawn to that and will want to help you in any way that they can and also learn from the knowledge you bring to the school. Use this time to not only plan your classroom, but also get to know the people in your building.

You will probably start off interacting with teachers from your grade level, team, or department. Typically you also have chances to interact with others who are new to the school. This is a perfect time to sit back, listen, and observe. Take mental notes: Who is the person who brings positive energy to the situation? Who seems excited about the new school year? Identifying individuals who can assist when needed and provide the big picture when you feel discouraged is very important for new teachers. Empowerers are consistently positive and the type of people you want to associate and interact with regularly.

You may find your empowerer your very first day on the job. Ideally, your empowerer would be someone assigned to you officially as a mentor. But what about those who may not end up so lucky? Let us pretend that you are placed on a team or in a department where things are not as supportive as you had hoped. If your empowerers are not handed to you, then you are going to have to start searching for them. You have to find like-minded people to lift you up and those like-minded people may not be in the classroom adjacent to yours. So how do you find them?

There are four places you could look: your school, your district, outside professional development, and social media. We mentioned the preservice days, but what about all



the other meetings? Take those as opportunities to sit by and meet people outside of your grade level, content area, or team. What about others who share a lunch with you or have a common plan time? Most teachers have to serve on a building-level committee. These committee meetings are great ways to meet people who you may not see on a regular basis. These people could be a source of optimism and support.

Use any district event as a way to do the same thing. Whole district curriculum-writing groups, serving on a district committee, or in-service days are a few examples of ways to interact with people outside of your building. Usually whole district meetings have break times for lunch, so feel free to go with people from other buildings. See if anyone you meet at these meetings could be a source of strength or support for you.

Outside professional development is another option. Ask other teachers or your principal about conferences in the area or state. Use Google to find some based on your interests and schedule. Sometimes getting a sub your first year can be scary. Try to find conferences that occur on the weekend such as Edcamps. The reason we encourage you to try and attend conferences is that people who are passionate, care, and try, flock to them. These conferences can be huge learning experiences but also unbelievably rejuvenating.

If, for whatever reason, you do not have any of those opportunities, there is one last resort. And honestly, we may have saved the best for last: Twitter. Make a Twitter account (right now!). There are so many amazing educators all over the Twitter universe. Just search “education” or #NTChat (New Teacher Chat). Thousands of people, articles, lesson plans, and inspirational quotes will appear in seconds. All of these can be used as constant reminders as to why you became a teacher and why your job is so important.

Keep in mind that everyone needs empowerers and you just might end up being someone’s empowerer too! If this happens, not only will you go to them to brainstorm solutions to problems within your classroom, but they will also come to you. Just remember that they should fill your cup much more than empty it, and vice versa. Work together to create a safe and positive educational relationship that will get you through the hard times and help you celebrate the great ones.

## WHAT ABOUT EVERYONE ELSE?

Empowerers will always be your number one “go-to” when things tend to get hard, but the other people in your building can play huge roles in helping you develop as an educator. These people all have various skills that they bring to the table, and many of these individuals have something that you can learn and draw from. For example, a teacher on your team might not be a strong classroom manager, but the way they organize field trips is impeccable. Work with them to learn that skill. The band teacher may not teach your subject matter, but you have heard through the grapevine that their technology integration is jaw dropping. Although these teachers may not be your empowerers, appreciate them for the gifts they bring.

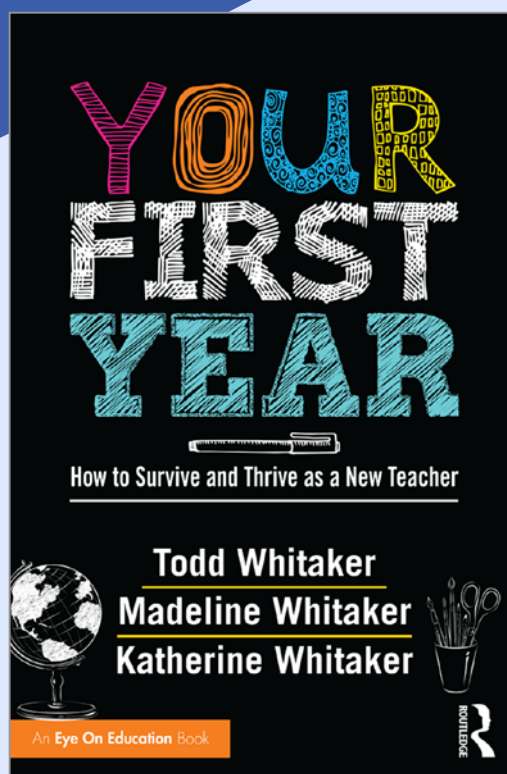
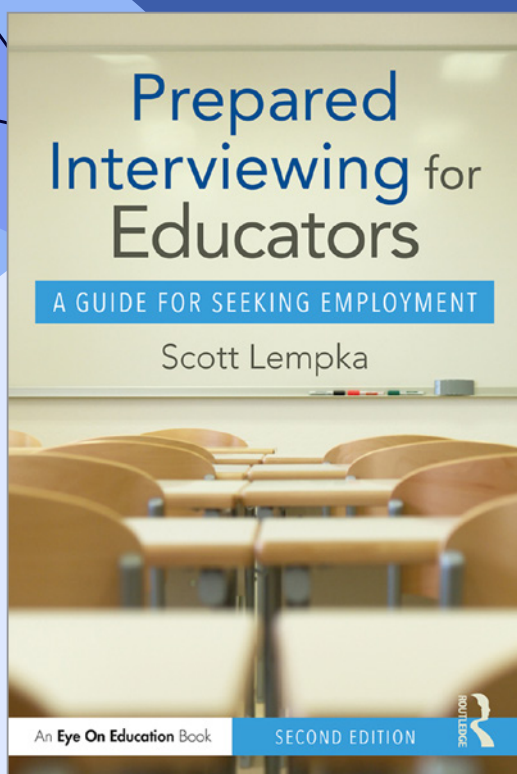
Fortunately for you the majority of the teachers in your school have insights and ideas that will help you grow professionally. And the majority of them are more than happy to share, especially if you ask for their assistance. Unfortunately there may be a sliver of your peers that do not always have an altruistic purpose. This final category of

teacher might be called the 2 percent. They exist in the majority of schools. If we give them too much power, the 2 percent can certainly damage the morale of the school. The 2 percent are often the teachers who complain the loudest and most frequently. They also, ironically, may be the ones who work

the least. The 2 percent can sometimes be seen sleeping or texting throughout staff meetings (if they even come). They may even be known for secretly wanting others, including the students, to fail so they can have more proof as to why they cannot succeed in their classroom.

These teachers are going to be negative, they are going to complain, and they may try to get you to do the same. Your one and only goal is to always be nice to them but never join in with them. Stay positive and strong because it is best for the students in your school. Learn to avoid this 2 percent and stick close to your empowerers. Through them you will grow to become the teacher you want to be and impact your students positively every single day.

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