
Prepared by the American Psychological Association (APA) Committee of Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPSS)

With special thanks to:

Will Elmhorst
Jeanne Blakeslee
Nancy Fenton
Steve Jones
Jann Longman
Katherine Minter
Kimberly Patterson
Janie Wilson

July 2012
Revised: January 2014
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**INTRODUCTION**

New high school psychology teachers may have a number of questions about how to proceed with instruction in their first psychology teaching assignment. What is the best way to choose a textbook? How do teachers find substantive and effective activities? How can teachers find quality support resources? Questions like these are just a few that are repeatedly posted to listservs when new teachers are looking for help. The purpose of this document is to present new high school psychology teachers with some resources and helpful suggestions from teachers with many years of teaching experience. This resource begins with suggestions for preparing to teach psychology, textbook selection, course-pacing formats, and lesson planning - the underpinnings of an effective psychology class. The next set of topics address specific issues faced by high school psychology teachers and are designed to help new teachers be proactive when deciding how to run their class, make rules, and make daily ethical decisions. The authors believe that this resource will prove very useful to teachers new to the teaching of psychology. It can facilitate their being able to approach their new assignment with more confidence and poise, equipped with strategies for effective instruction.

**HOW TO GET STARTED**

Teaching a psychology class for the first time can be a daunting task. A good way to begin preparing is to look at discipline resources that can help teachers avoid common pitfalls in teaching psychology. For example, new teachers often assume they are responsible for covering all the content in a textbook, while in reality this is usually not the case. In addition, many new teachers do not realize how valuable an experienced colleague can be as a mentor. The following information is provided for new high school psychology teachers to help them develop strong background knowledge and to help them avoid spending time reading irrelevant and unscientific resources. Please note that the information that follows was developed by the authors of this resource and is not intended to be a comprehensive listing.

**Organizing the curriculum and lesson planning**

First, several publications can help new teachers become familiar with the “lay of the land” when it comes to areas of focus and what types of misinformation to watch for and avoid when looking at resources for class. A list of resources can be found in the appendix of this resource, but three are mentioned here because they provide a foundation for teaching the high school psychology course and for engaging students in active learning:


Web resources are numerous, and a comprehensive list would be difficult to include in this resource. A list of websites is listed in the appendix to help new teachers get started.
Connecting with colleagues

All new high school psychology teachers are encouraged to join APA as a High School Teacher Affiliate. APA High School Teacher Affiliates automatically become members of the APA Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPSS). TOPSS is the voice of high school psychology teachers within APA, and TOPSS makes available high-quality resources for psychology teachers, such as unit lesson plans, the National Standards, and the Psychology Teachers Network newsletter (PTN). The TOPSS Committee, supported through the APA Education Directorate, works to meet the needs of all high school teachers of psychology whether they are teaching a regular, Advanced Placement (AP), or an International Baccalaureate (IB) class. Many TOPSS resources are available on the TOPSS website, and others can only be accessed with TOPSS membership. The TOPSS website is http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/topss/index.aspx.

APA’s Division 2, the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP), is another valuable resource for psychology teachers. STP represents the interests of psychology teachers in all types of academic institutions—from secondary schools through graduate schools. STP promotes teaching excellence, research on teaching, and professional development; sponsors teaching-related programs at national and regional psychology conventions; publishes the Teaching of Psychology journal; disseminates teaching and advising materials through the online Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology (OTRP); and administers the annual STP Excellence in Teaching Awards. To learn more about STP, visit http://www.teachpsych.org.

Helpful Tip: Working with a mentor is another way a new psychology teacher can make smart decisions when preparing for the classroom. Based on their years of experience teaching high school psychology, mentors can provide helpful answers to a variety of questions and can offer valuable advice on course organization.

When working with a mentor, new teachers should keep in mind that their mentors are teachers as well and therefore be mindful of their mentors’ time and be sure not to be too demanding. It is also important to note that new teachers should expect to need to adjust their mentors’ suggestions in order to fit their own classes, since their class needs will differ from those of their mentors’. Mentors can often help with resources, and mentors at the same school can help new teachers understand the school culture.

Participating in professional development

Helpful Tip: Conferences are a great way to build a network with other teachers and access professional development opportunities in psychology that often are not available at state social science conferences. Professional development opportunities in psychology include:

- STP Annual e-Workshop on Teaching Psychology: http://teachpsych.org/conferences/eworkshop/index.php
- AP Psychology Institutes: http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/Pageflows/InstitutesAndWorkshops/InstitutesAndWorkshopsController.jsp
In addition to these conferences, which attract teachers from across the country, many local or regional teaching conferences are held each year, such as the Enhancing the Teaching of Psychology Conference (sponsored by the University of Wisconsin system) and the Midwest Institute for Students and Teachers of Psychology (MISToP; http://www.cod.edu/psychology/mistop/). There are also seven regional psychological associations across the country that sponsor annual conventions, some of which include teaching conferences prior to the annual meetings. For information, see http://www.apa.org/about/apa/organizations/regionals.aspx.

For additional conferences on the teaching of psychology, visit http://www.teachpsych.org/conferences/conferences.php. In addition, the Psychology Teacher Network (PTN) newsletter regularly announces workshops and conferences (see http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/ptn/index.aspx).

SELECTING A TEXTBOOK

Selecting a textbook for a psychology course at any level is an important decision deserving careful consideration since it is likely to remain in use for a number of years. **Helpful Tip:** Regardless of the course level, it is important to see if the text aligns with the National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula. This will make it easier for teachers to determine what to teach since they will have so much content to choose from when they begin their teaching assignment. As mentioned above, the National Standards are available free at the APA website: http://www.apa.org/education/k12/national-standards.aspx. Next, teachers can visit textbook publishers’ websites and search for available options. These websites will provide information about ancillary materials and online support options for each text. Textbook companies will generally supply exam copies for teachers and department leaders to view while making their textbook choices. After evaluating the options on the websites, teachers can narrow their choices down to several finalists and order exam copies of each of these.

**Reading level**

**Regular-level course**

High school psychology textbooks are available at a variety of reading levels. To determine the reading level of a particular text, teachers can contact the publishers’ representative or have a reading specialist in their district evaluate the book. Teachers can review the reading level in a variety of chapters because some topics, such as biopsychology, may have higher reading levels than other topics. Any differences among chapter reading level may require the instructor to look for other resources to use when covering those topics. In addition to reading level, teachers can consider the author’s writing style and ability to engage and interest students.

**Honors/AP/IB level course**

Neither the College Board nor the International Baccalaureate Organization recommend any particular textbook, but the College Board does publish the materials included in the exam on their website: http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/repository/ap-psychology-course-description.pdf. Often, instructors of honors, AP, or IB level courses in psychology choose textbooks designed for college courses. However, several versions of honors-, AP-, or IB-level books designed specifically for high school students are available.
Controversial topics

Since most school districts require approval by the school board prior to textbook adoption, teachers often recognize that some topics might be considered sensitive to the citizens in a specific district. In addition, many instructors of AP-, IB- or honors-level courses utilize college textbooks and these are even more likely than books written for use in high schools to include potentially controversial topics. However, there are a number of textbooks written specifically for the AP-, IB-, or honors-level classroom, which can help address these issues. For all class levels, the National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula may be used to support the inclusion of potentially controversial subjects.

Content development

Websites for publishing companies usually include unit organization materials and detailed chapter supplements, all of which can help with course planning. Some textbooks are available in online or audio formats, which may be required in order to meet certain student accommodations. Online options may allow students to carry fewer materials to class. Online textbooks often come in interactive formats, allowing students to highlight text and click on links to other material. As another bonus, instructors can customize some online books by adding comments or links to websites. Finally, some instructor manuals include ideas for differentiation of instruction, including materials for English language learners.

Lesson plans

Textbook lesson plans may include lecture notes, PowerPoint presentations, transparencies, art and illustrations, and/or video clips. Supplements that include short, high-interest video clips are excellent resources because time constraints often prevent showing full-length films. Materials to enhance instruction such as recommended readings and teaching tips are also often available from publishers. Many textbooks provide information to guide instruction, such as learning objectives and section summaries that can be included in the student text, teacher plans, or both. Lesson plans are often available in electronic and hard-copy versions. Helpful Tip: TOPSS, through the APA Education Directorate, has produced 19 unit lesson plans for teachers of psychology, all available at http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/topss/lessons/index.aspx for TOPSS members (see the section on Lesson Planning). As mentioned above, you may want to join TOPSS so that you can access these lesson plans to guide your teaching. Lesson plans for college-level textbooks often include a variety of challenging and specialized topics not covered in the text. Other materials to consider are options for differentiated lessons and materials for English language learners and other groups.

Web support

Many textbooks include online website support for both students and teachers. Students may have access to diagnostic tests and quizzes, review materials, concept maps, short videos, and demonstrations of key concepts. Some online quizzes give students feedback on incorrect answers, suggesting pages in the text for them to consult and review. Instructor and student websites can include Internet-based assignments and activities. Instructors can often find online versions of lesson plans and teacher resources as well as methods of collecting data on student tests for formative or summative assessment purposes. Some publisher websites allow for viewing of sample online resources. In addition, greater web support and online materials are often available to accompany college level texts.

Test banks

Test banks are often available in either print or electronic formats and allow instructors to easily alter questions or add additional items. Test banks often include data on the level of difficulty and type of
question such as application of concepts, definitions, or critical-thinking skills. Some items indicate the textbook page number to which each question corresponds.

ORGANIZING THE COURSE

New high school psychology teachers often ask how to design pacing calendars for their psychology classes. Courses can vary in many ways — there are AP classes, IB classes, and regular classes, and courses can be one semester or year-long, block or regular schedule. The following resources offer some pacing calendar options:


- Additionally, the TOPSS Committee has compiled some sample pacing calendars online at http://www.apa.org/education/k12/sample-pacing-calendars.aspx for high school psychology teachers to review and use as needed. APA does not endorse these calendars, but they are being provided as examples for teachers to view and consider. Please note that as of mid-2012, these pacing calendars are being realigned to APA’s revised National Standards.

LESSON PLANNING

TOPSS and the APA Education Directorate have produced unit lesson plans for high school teachers for nearly two decades. Teachers who join TOPSS can access these unit lesson plans for the high school classroom, available online at http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/topss/lessons/index.aspx. The following units cover main content areas within the introductory psychology course:

- An Introduction to the Field of Psychology
- Biological Bases of Behavior
- Development
- Emotion
- Learning
- Memory
- Motivation
- Personality
- Psychological Disorders
- Sensation and Perception
- Social Psychology
- States of Consciousness
- The Stats Pack
- Stress and Health Promotion
- Treatment of Psychological Disorders

TOPSS has also produced the following unit lesson plans, which cover topics that may accompany the main content areas of a course:

- An Introduction to Cross-Cultural Psychology
- Positive Psychology
- Psychoanalysis and Psychodynamic Psychology
- Psychology of Sexual Orientation
The TOPSS lesson plans are aligned to the *National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula*, and APA encourages all teachers to align their lesson plans to the *National Standards*.

Thanks to funding from the American Psychological Foundation, the Education Directorate will be revising the older unit plans between 2011-2015. New online modules are also being developed to accompany the unit plans.

**ACTIVITIES**

Today’s textbooks are packaged with ancillary materials with so many activities that no teacher could ever incorporate all of them into the course. So, the question becomes: “When should I include an activity, and what should be my criteria for choosing which activity to use?” There are as many ways to create dynamic courses as there are good teachers teaching them. With experience, instructors will find their own special “style” that will include ideas, methods, and activities modeled by great teachers they have had, plus many ideas and syntheses of techniques they have developed on their own. There are many “correct” ways to teach.

One heuristic that can be applied in choosing an activity is to try to determine how useful the activity is for enhancing learning, particularly of hard-to-grasp concepts or the most important concepts in a unit. A question teachers may ask is: “Will spending 45 minutes (or an hour) on this activity be the best use of time to get this concept across?” The authors of this resource have used activities that took an entire class block to set up, run, and clean up, while only reinforcing a simple concept that could have been mastered in 10-15 minutes of note-taking and class discussion. However, they have also experienced several full blocks spent using hands-on activities that teach the complicated nervous system, for example, in ways that promote a deep and detailed understanding seldom achieved through class notes and discussion.

**Variety in classroom delivery promotes learning**

There are a number of techniques teachers may want to use in the classroom to add variety. Some of these include:

- Using PowerPoints;
- Using colored markers or chalk on the board to add novelty;
- Occasionally engaging students in group-work;
- Having pencil-and-paper quick tasks;
- Showing video clips at pertinent times;
- Having guest speakers;
- Planning field trips into the community (if there is funding available);
- Having projects in service-learning; and/or
- Planning cross-curricular activities/lessons with the science and math departments.

Practice will help teachers move seamlessly from one technique to another, and those activities that do not work well in the classroom may either be modified for next time they are teaching this content, or not used the next time around. Teachers are strongly encouraged to try new things. **Helpful Tip:** Teachers may want to try an activity for three years before determining their success with the activity.

**Research**

Two of the most critical components of any psychology course are research methods and statistics. These topics actually can be the highlight of the course if student groups are allowed to conduct a human-
behavior experiment at school. The planning and implementation of a simple experiment illustrates the need for controls through careful design, methodology, and procedures. As an added benefit, the statistics that are taught through the research process become relevant because they inform students about the hypothesis. Groups of 3 or 4 can run the same simple experiment and serve each other as “confederates.” Then, each student may write up the experiment in APA style and perform the computations individually, or the group can work on the statistics together and produce one report collaboratively. Ethical standards are taught in the planning and implementation of the experiment (see the Ethics section in this resource), and when the experiment is completed, students will have learned an incredible amount about the scientific method – no matter what the results are. The authors of this document have had positive experiences with this activity, and teachers will get better and better each year as they become familiar with it.

A TOPSS manual was produced in 2004 for high school teachers called Conducting Psychological Research for Science Fairs: A Teacher's Guide and Resource Manual (available online at http://www.apa.org/education/k12/science-fair-manual.pdf). Teachers may refer to this resource for helpful information on guiding students through research projects. Additionally, the APA Online Psychology Laboratory (OPL; http://opl.apa.org) offers teachers and students the opportunity to participate in online studies and compare their results to other schools.

**Helpful Tip:** When teaching high school students, teachers should carefully consider the potential concerns of most social psychology research. Issues such as embarrassment and harm are more common in social psychology research than in other areas. Alternatively, topics in cognitive psychology (e.g., memory, visual search, Stroop Effect) can provide great ideas for replicating a simple experiment.

**ETHICS**

The following resources on ethics might be useful to high school psychology teachers:


Additionally, APA has published multiple books on ethics, which can be found at [http://www.apa.org/pubs/books/index.aspx](http://www.apa.org/pubs/books/index.aspx). The following websites might also be of interest:

MAINTAINING YOUR HEALTH: STRESS AND COPING

Psychology is a fascinating subject, and it is a terrific class to teach because it is so interesting and because students get so excited about it. However, there is a lot to learn when teachers are first starting out. Those teaching a regular psychology class probably have some choice in what they are teaching and in how much time they are spending on each unit. Helpful Hit: Teachers who choose a good textbook, follow the National Standards, and make use of the TOPSS unit lesson plans will have the basic tools they need to begin their new teaching assignment.

Those teaching an AP or IB class may feel more stress, since there is an abundance of material to cover before the AP or IB test in the spring. It is easy to get overwhelmed and to feel like it is not possible to finish on time. Those teaching IB classes may want to consult the International Baccalaureate Organization for guidance: http://www.ibo.org. Helpful Tip: Hopefully, new AP Psychology teachers will have an opportunity to attend an AP institute before teaching the class. These institutes are a huge help to teachers who are new to AP. They cover what is on the test, how to write the essays, how to help students prepare, and much more. Teachers who did not get to attend a summer institute might want to contact the College Board to see if there is a one-day institute in their area. There are often one-day institutes in the fall. The College Board AP Psychology website is also a good resource (http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/courses/teachers_corner/2265.html). Here, teachers can find old test questions and a description of what the test will cover. Another good resource is one of the review books for the AP Psychology test. This will condense the different units and also explain how the test works and how students can do their best. Teachers will hopefully enjoy their classes and their students.

Stress can hurt relationships just when relationship support is needed the most. The APA Center for Psychology in Schools and Education (CPSE) has an excellent brochure on stress and teaching. Teaching is Fundamental was created to help friends and spouses support teachers, especially when they are starting out or when they have a new challenge. The brochure has excellent information on the causes of stress in teachers’ lives and ideas on what can be done to combat it. The brochure can be accessed at http://www.apa.org/ed/schools/cpse/teacher-stress-brochure.pdf. CPSE has also produced a number of modules for teachers on topics such as classroom management, bullying, and research in brain function and learning. These are excellent resources for new or experienced teachers, and can be accessed through the CPSE website at http://www.apa.org/ed/schools/index.aspx.

Another resource on stress is the TOPSS unit lesson plan, Stress and Health Promotion. Although it was created for students, it has excellent information teachers can use as well, including a section on coping with stress.

Preventing burnout

Teachers are encouraged to take care of themselves to prevent burn out. Helpful Tip: Teachers can do this by setting aside a time every day to do something for personal enjoyment. Teachers will want to spend time with people they enjoy; people who socialize with others are happier and healthier. They may not want to talk about and think about school all of the time; it is important to give oneself some space. Teachers may want to think about the positive experiences they have had in the classroom; they are often overwhelmed with what they didn't do and discount all of the small victories.
CONCLUSION

The high school teachers who authored this document have found teaching high school psychology to be an extremely fulfilling and exciting profession, and hope users of this resource will have the same experience. As has been mentioned in this document, all new teachers are encouraged to join TOPSS and the TOPSS community (they can join through the APA website at http://www.apa.org/membership/hs-teacher/index.aspx). If new teachers have any questions, they should feel free to reach out to the current TOPSS Committee, or to the APA Education Directorate at education@apa.org. The authors hope new teachers will have a good school year!

References


Appendix: Resources for High School Psychology Teachers

Please note that the resources listed in this appendix were compiled by the authors of this resource; this is not intended to be a comprehensive listing.


Websites

American Psychological Association
http://www.apa.org/

Annenberg Learner
http://www.learner.org/

AP Psychology (College Board)
http://www.collegeboard.org/

APA Center for Psychology in Schools and Education

APA Divisions
http://www.apa.org/about/division/index.aspx

APA Education Directorate
http://www.apa.org/ed

APA Public Interest Directorate
http://www.apa.org/pi

APA Practice Directorate
http://www.apa.org/practice

APA Science Directorate
http://www.apa.org/science

APA Teachers of Psychology in Secondary Schools (TOPSS)

Archives of the History of American Psychology
http://www3.uakron.edu/ahap/

Association for Psychological Science
http://www.psychologicalscience.org/

Classics in the History of Psychology
http://psychclassics.asu.edu/topic.htm

Educational Page of the Nobel Prize’s Website
http://www.nobelprize.org/educational/

Encyclopedia of Psychology
http://www.psychology.org/
ePsych: An Electronic Psychology Text
http://epsych.msstate.edu/

National Alliance on Mental Illnesses
http://www.nami.org/

National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Psychology Community
http://connected.socialstudies.org/home

National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula

Neuroscience for Kids
http://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/neurok.html

Online Psychology Laboratory
http://opl.apa.org/

Personality Pedagogy
http://personallitypedagogy.arcadia.edu/pmwiki/pmwiki.php

Psychology Exchange
http://www.psychexchange.co.uk/

CROW: Resources for the Teaching of Social Psychology
http://jfmueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/crow/

Scientific American Frontiers Homepage
http://www.pbs.org/saf/

Social Psychology Network
http://www.socialpsychology.org/

Society for the Teaching of Psychology (APA Division 2; STP)
http://teachpsych.org/

STP Teaching of Psych Idea Exchange (TOPIX)
http://topix.teachpsych.org/w/page/19980993/FrontPage

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
http://www.samhsa.gov/
http://bblocks.samhsa.gov/educators/
Includes free teaching resources

Teach Psych Science
http://www.teachpsychscience.org/
Listservs and Online Communities

From Appendix C of the National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula (APA, 2011)

The following lists are of particular interest to psychology teachers:

- **Psych-News** is designed for people interested in the teaching of psychology at the high school level. Most of the list members are high school psychology teachers, although many college and university teachers are members as well. To join Psych-News, send the message “subscribe Psych-News your name” to listserv@list-serv.uh.edu.

- **TIPS, Teaching in the Psychological Sciences** is designed more for teachers at the college/university level. Many high school teachers are members, but the discussions usually center on post-high school education. Please be aware that TIPS can generate a large amount of e-mail. If your service provider limits the size of your mailbox, you may not want to subscribe to TIPS. To join TIPS, send the message “subscribe TIPS your name” to listserv@fre.fsu.umd.edu.

- **PsychTeacher** is an electronic mailing list sponsored by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (APA Division Two) and designed for both the high school and the college/university level. The electronic mailing list is monitored, which means each message is reviewed before being sent to the list. To subscribe to PsychTeacher, send the message “subscribe PsychTeacher yourfirstname yourlastname” to listserv@list.kennesaw.edu. Be sure not to include anything else in the body of the message (e.g., a signature file at the end of the message). Or, you can go to http://list.kennesaw.edu/listserv/wa?A0=PSYCHTEACHER and click on the option of joining the list.

- **APA TOPSS** also has an electronic mailing list for high school psychology teachers. To subscribe to the TOPSS electronic mailing list, visit http://lists.apa.org/cgi-bin/wa.exe?SUBED1=TOPSS&A=1.

- The College Board now sponsors an **Advanced Placement (AP) Teacher Community** for AP Psychology teachers, which allows teachers to discuss teaching strategies, share resources, and connect with each other. To join the online community, visit https://apcommunity.collegeboard.org/.