



Good Business Habits for Easier Teaching and Less Stress

*by Wesley Schaum and Joan Cupp

Now may be a good time to start thinking about various business aspects of teaching so that any changes you want to make can be implemented at the start of the next teaching season.

Printed Lesson Policy

It's a good idea to have your policy on lesson fees, lesson payments and music payments printed and given to each parent or adult student. The same page can also include your policy on tardiness, missed lessons and makeup lessons. It could also have information regarding your recital plans.

If you have a computer, it is relatively easy to prepare a page using a word processing program. The computer file should be saved so that you can print extra copies if needed, and for ease in making future revisions or additions. If you don't have your own computer, perhaps a friend can assist you.

Raising Your Lesson Fee

If you have not raised your lesson fee for two years or more, it's probably overdue. An increase could range from 50¢ per lesson to \$1.00 per lesson. If you have students for whom this would be a financial burden, you could make a special exception in such cases.

Payment of Lesson Fees and Music

A good plan is to get payment of one month's lessons in advance, with payment due no later than the first lesson of each month. Some teachers ask for payment in advance for three months or an entire semester. For a new student, this should be clearly understood before the first lesson is scheduled. For existing students a new semester or the beginning of a new year is a good time to clarify

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Missed Lessons and Tardiness

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As with payments, your attitude toward missed lessons and tardiness must be businesslike. When you schedule a lesson, you are reserving your time for a specific student. A keyboard lesson is not a casual social meeting. It is a professional appointment. When a student is late or does not show up, your time is either wasted or used inefficiently. You need to establish a policy that will be fair and yet not tolerate those who are habitually late or who miss lessons for frivolous reasons.



Handling tardiness is quite easy. Students who arrive late simply get only the remaining time left in the lesson period. If you have no lesson scheduled afterward, you may consider giving a few extra minutes.

However, you must judge the reason for being late and take note of any previous tardiness. If you are lenient, students may assume that they get a full 30 minute lesson whether they arrive on time or not!

A policy on missed lessons requires careful thought and should be in written form. This could be combined with your policy on lesson payments (see column to left). Depending on the reason, some missed lessons can be made up at a later time, but others will not be suitable for makeup. Here are some guidelines:

1. Reasons. You must decide the circumstances that are acceptable for an "excused" lesson. Any illness or family emergency may be excused. Certainly, you will not excuse a lesson if the reason for missing is to see a neighbor's new puppy, to go shopping or to a movie.

2. Advance Notice. Common courtesy requires that you be notified as soon as possible if a lesson appointment cannot be kept. In case of illness, accident or family emergency, it is reasonable to accept notice within 2 to 24 hours before the lesson. Obviously, if a child has broken a wrist a few hours before the lesson, you may accept less advance notice. However, unless the illness is of a sudden nature

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your payment policy.

Also explain that the music you provide must be paid for by the first lesson of the following month, along with the monthly lesson fee. When selling music to your students, make it clear that you expect them to pay the full price, the same as they would if they purchased it themselves at a music store. (This should be done even if you have received a teacher's discount when buying the music.)

You're not helping anyone by being lax in collecting money that is rightfully yours. Asking for prompt payment of the lesson fees and music helps maintain a respectful, businesslike and professional attitude on the part of parents, as well as adults who are paying for their own lessons.

For those who cannot afford to pay for an entire month in advance, insist on payment at the beginning of every lesson. Music should be paid for at the lesson one week after it is given to the student. Don't let payments fall behind. It's much easier to find the money for one lesson than it is for two or three.

Lesson Appointments


Starting lessons on time is an obvious virtue. You should make every effort to avoid circumstances that would cause you to be late. If you have scheduled a 30 minute lesson, the student is entitled to a full 30 minutes. Occasionally, you may want to give a few minutes extra time, but it should never make you late for the next student.

At the Schaum Music School we use a **five minute buffer** between lessons, rather than scheduling lessons back-to-back. This has been done successfully for over 17 years. Our teachers appreciate a few minutes break between lessons because it allows time for a quick phone call or a fresh cup of coffee. It helps make four or five hours of teaching less stressful and assures starting successive students on time.

Interruptions During Lessons

It is the teacher's responsibility to minimize outside interruptions during lessons. The most common distractions are the telephone and doorbell. If possible, have someone else do the answering while you are teaching. Otherwise, a telephone answering machine should be used during the time you teach.

Other members of your household should know that you are **not to be disturbed** during a lesson.

Adult students are often particularly annoyed by disturbances, especially those which demand your time during the lesson. If there have been unavoidable interruptions, offer to give extra makeup time when it is convenient. 

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or an emergency, if you get notification just 30 minutes before lesson time, you are justified in **not excusing** the lesson. When a child is ill, the symptoms are usually evident early enough to enable parents to give you at least four hours advance notice.

If the student's family is going on vacation, you should be told at least **three weeks ahead** of time. Usually a student is not charged for vacation time off, nor is this time made up. Other circumstances, such as a school field trip, require one to two weeks advance notice.

3. Paying for Missed Lessons. If a lesson is excused, you should keep the payment (if made in advance) but allow the student to make up the lesson later, at your convenience.

If a lesson is not excused or if you have not been notified within a reasonable length of time in advance, you are justified in keeping the lesson payment and not doing a makeup.

Obviously, there's a **big advantage** to getting your money in advance. However, even if the student is paying for the lesson each week, you have a right to ask for payment for an unexcused absence.

4. Make Up Lessons. When you are notified of a cancellation in advance, you have an opportunity to fill the vacancy with a makeup lesson for another student. As soon as you have a cancellation, immediately try to contact students who are waiting for makeups. Even if you are not able to fit in a makeup, your effort shows parents that you are trying to accommodate them.

Relationship With Parents

Many students have to be chauffeured. If the lesson doesn't begin at the scheduled time, it will be annoying to parents who are trying to fit in the trip to and from the lesson with errands and other family activities.

There's also simple psychology at work here. If the teacher has a careless attitude toward appointments and length of lessons, it is often reflected in a careless attitude toward music study by students and parents. This is certainly not a good atmosphere for learning, and will have a detrimental effect on the teacher's reputation. 