# The Structured Classroom

Structure in a World That Is Always Shifting

Education is a profession built on evolving ideas. Over the years, staff rooms have echoed with familiar phrases; one of the most common being that "the pendulum swings." It's often said with a shrug, sometimes even as a justification for staying the same: why adapt, why rethink practice, when the pendulum will inevitably swing back the other way?

And yes, it does swing.
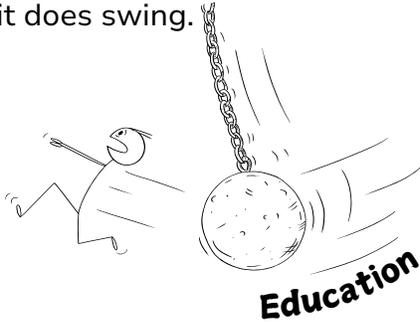
We move between eras of standardized testing and data-driven accountability, toward inquiry-based learning, toward Universal Design for Learning, and toward approaches that center student voice, equity, and well-being. These shifts are sometimes framed as trends, but at their core, they represent something more important: educators continually reaching for better ways to serve students. Like any spectrum, education does not, and cannot, exist at one fixed point. There is no single right method, no universal formula that works for every class, every community, or every moment. The diversity of learners demands a diversity of approaches.

This resource is not an argument against innovation, inquiry, or flexibility. Instead, it exists within that spectrum. It is grounded in the belief that structure is not a philosophy that swings out of relevance, but a foundation that supports many different pedagogical approaches.

The structured classroom described here emerged from necessity. Faced with one of the most compositionally complex classes I have taught, with wide academic gaps, diverse needs, and high levels of... dysregulation, the answer was not tighter control or lower expectations. It was clarity. Predictable routines, transparent expectations and consistent lesson flow. Structure, in this sense, is not about rigidity or compliance. It is about creating learning environments where students know what to expect, where cognitive and emotional energy can be directed toward learning rather than uncertainty.

In a profession where the pendulum will always swing, structure is not a step backward. It is a steady base that allows both teachers and students to move forward with confidence.
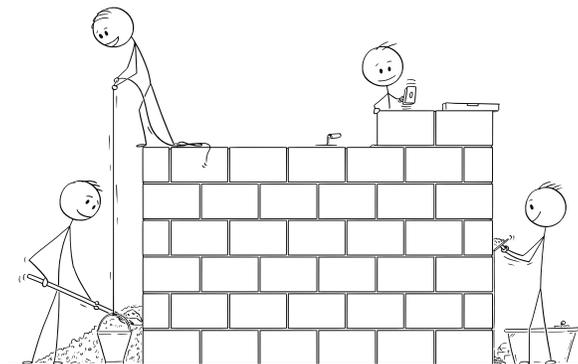
The Structured Classroom

As someone who has worked closely with incoming teachers and knows that classroom management can be an area of anxiety (as it should be), I wanted to create a practical resource. Something that offers an alternative approach for the modern classroom. Not a prescribed program or a philosophy to adopt wholesale, but a way of thinking about learning environments that responds to the realities teachers are actually facing. Many seasoned teachers will already recognize the importance of a structured routine.

This is not a resource I ever imagined creating. It emerged out of necessity. As classrooms have shifted toward increased autonomy, unlimited access to information, and technology-driven learning, many students have been given more freedom, but often with less guidance. In an era shaped by smartphones, constant stimulation, and endless resources, students are frequently expected to self-regulate, self-direct, and self-manage at levels they are not yet developmentally ready for.

My work examining learning in this context has led me here: to structure. Not as a restriction, but as a support. Structure provides the guidance that modern classrooms often assume rather than teach. It offers students boundaries that make independence possible, routines that make autonomy manageable, and expectations that make success visible. As Janine's character says in the season three finale of *Abbott Elementary*, "Structure is fun!" And she's right. When structure creates an environment where students feel safe, capable, and oriented, learning becomes lighter, classrooms become calmer, and engagement deepens.

This resource exists to demonstrate how structure, thoughtfully applied, can create classrooms where learning is not only more effective but genuinely more joyful.

Structure in the Era of Smartphones and Technology

In today's digital environment, the need for structure in learning has become even more pronounced. Adolescents are growing up in an ecosystem shaped by algorithms, constant stimulation, and an overwhelming abundance of information. Social media platforms are engineered for immediacy and novelty, rewarding rapid attention shifts rather than sustained focus. Artificial intelligence tools now place instant answers at students' fingertips, often bypassing the slower processes of thinking, questioning, and constructing understanding. At the same time, research has documented rising levels of distraction and declining attention spans among teenagers, with some studies suggesting the average sustained attention window has shortened significantly over the past decade. In such an environment, expecting students to independently regulate their focus, manage time, and structure their own learning without explicit guidance can be unrealistic (and honestly, exhausting, for both teacher and student).
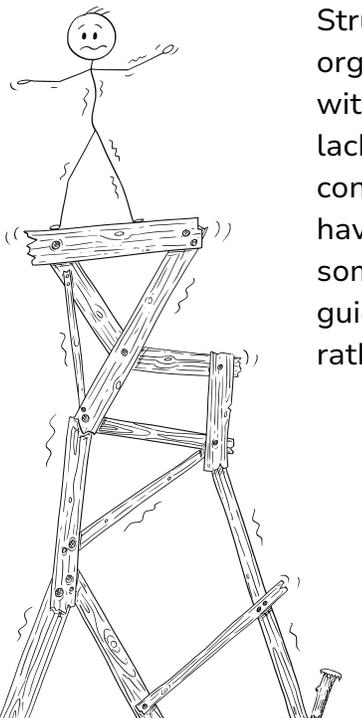
The Structured Classroom

Within this landscape, many educators are noticing a phenomenon that extends beyond the classroom. Some teenage boys, in particular, are increasingly drawn to online communities sometimes referred to as the "manosphere." While these spaces often contain troubling or harmful ideologies, it is worth examining why they are appealing in the first place. Sociologists and media researchers have noted that these communities frequently package messages about masculinity alongside promises of discipline, routine, personal responsibility, and self-improvement (Ging, 2019). In other words, they offer structure. The danger is that this structure is often bundled alongside messages about power, dominance, and rigid identity roles.

When healthy environments fail to provide guidance, other spaces will eagerly fill that gap.

In a chaotic world, it is no surprise that human beings crave stability. Students often enter classrooms asking, "What are we doing today?" On the surface, this question can feel repetitive or even frustrating for teachers who have already explained the plan. But more often than not, the question reflects something deeper. Students are seeking orientation. They want to know where they are in the day, what the expectations are, and how they will move through the learning ahead. Cognitive Load Theory suggests that when learners spend mental energy figuring out procedures, directions, or expectations, fewer cognitive resources remain available for learning itself (Sweller, 1988; Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006). Predictability lowers cognitive load. When students understand the structure of a class, their mental energy no longer goes toward figuring out what is happening, but toward engaging with the work itself.

Structure in the classroom serves a purpose that goes beyond organization or classroom management. It provides students with a stable learning architecture in a world that increasingly lacks one. Clear routines, transparent lesson flow, and consistent expectations create a space where students do not have to navigate uncertainty alone. In doing so, educators offer something many young people are quietly searching for: guidance that is steady, supportive, and grounded in learning rather than ideology.

The Structured Classroom

## What a Structured Classroom Is and What It Isn't

When many people hear the word structure, they imagine rigidity: drill sergeants, raised voices, compliance for compliance's sake. In education, structure is often misread as harshness or control, and that misunderstanding is one of the reasons it gets resisted. A structured classroom teacher is not a drill sergeant. They are a teacher with clear expectations, steady routines, and a strong sense of purpose. They are consistent, not intimidating. Firm, but fair. In *Harry Potter* terms, think **Professor McGonagall**, not **Dolores Umbridge**.

A Structured Classroom Is:

- **Predictable**
  - Students know how class begins, how learning unfolds, and how it ends. The content may change, but the rhythm does not.
- **Clear**
  - Academic, behavioural, and social expectations are explicit rather than assumed. Students know what success looks like and how to work toward it.
- **High-Expectation, High-Support**
  - A structured classroom holds all students to meaningful standards while providing the scaffolds they need to reach them.
- **Consistent**
  - Routines are reliable, and responses are measured. Students experience the classroom as fair rather than arbitrary.
- **Grounded in Care**
  - Structure communicates belief in students' ability to rise to expectations. It is an expression of trust, not suspicion (and yes, this can take a lot of time and patience).

A Structured Classroom Is Not:
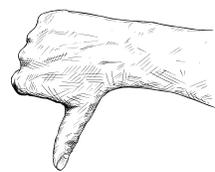
- **Militaristic or Authoritarian**
  - There is no barking of orders and no emphasis on obedience over understanding.
- **Punitive**
  - Structure is proactive. It prevents many behavioural issues rather than reacting to them with consequences.
- **Joyless or Silent**
  - Structure does not eliminate discussion, creativity, or even chaos. It often makes space for them.
- **Inflexible**
  - A structured classroom adapts to context and students' needs.
- **Fear-Based**
  - Students are not motivated by intimidation or shame. They are supported by clarity and consistency.

At its best, structure creates classrooms where students feel safe enough to take risks, independent enough to engage deeply, and supported enough to succeed. The authority of the teacher does not come from fear; it comes from reliability.

4

The Structured Classroom

The How of the Structured Classroom
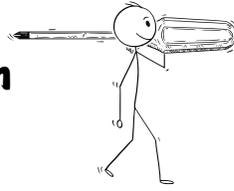
Over the past few years, I began creating what I now call a "slide of the day." At its simplest, it shows the date, the focus of the class, a link to a short video or piece of media that serves as a warm-up, and an outline of the day ahead. Over time, other things found their way onto these slides: a quote, an interesting fact, reminders about upcoming quizzes or assignments, sometimes even something small I simply wanted students to notice. Admittedly, I created these slides as much for myself as for the students. Having a consistent format meant I could reuse the structure and flow from one class to the next. But the benefits quickly became obvious. Many students—though never all, there is always that one—stopped asking, "What are we doing today?" Instead, they sat down, looked at the screen, and began taking out the materials they knew they would need: a pen, a notebook, their device. The start of class became calmer, and if I am being honest, so did I. Did I always follow the plan perfectly? Of course not. Lessons sometimes ran long, conversations went in unexpected directions, and activities needed adjusting. Structure is not about rigidity. It is about guidance.

Example: Slide of the Day~ English

Example: Slide of the Day~ Spanish

Example Lesson Flow

Students see something like this when they enter:

Today's Focus: Macbeth

- Warm-up: Why do people make bad decisions?
- Mini lesson: Character motivation
- Passage analysis (pairs)
- Analytical paragraph
- Debate: Who is responsible for Macbeth's downfall?
- "Take two" (What stuck from the day?"

This rhythm intentionally alternates between:

- **Thinking → Listening → Discussing → Writing → Reflecting**

Students experience frequent shifts in cognitive activity, which maintains attention while reinforcing the same core concept. Just as importantly, the predictability reduces uncertainty. Students learn that each class follows a recognizable arc: start thinking, learn something new, practice it, apply it, end with reflection.

5

The Structured Classroom

Designing the Structure of a Class

A structured classroom does not require complex systems or elaborate planning. In many cases, it simply means giving each lesson a predictable rhythm that students come to recognize. When students know the flow of a class, they spend less time wondering what will happen next and more time engaging with the learning itself. One useful guideline is to avoid long stretches of a single activity. Attention research consistently suggests that students benefit from shifts in activity approximately every 15–20 minutes. This does not mean constant entertainment, but rather intentional variation in how students engage with the material.

A typical structured lesson might include the following elements...

1. Opening Routine (3–5 minutes)
The beginning of class sets the tone. A consistent opening routine helps students transition from the hallway into a learning mindset. This is where the Slide of the Day becomes useful. It might include:
  - The date and class focus
  - A warm-up question or short prompt
  - A short video, image, or quote

The key is that students can begin immediately without waiting for instructions.

2. Learning Block 1 (10–20 minutes)
This is often the direct instruction or initial exploration of new material.
  - Mini lesson or explanation
  - Guided reading or listening activity
  - Modelling a skill or process

The key here is clarity and focus. Students should know what they are learning and why.

3. Learning Block 2 (10–20 minutes)
After input comes active engagement. Students might:
  - Work through practice questions
  - Discuss ideas with a partner
  - Analyze a short text or example

Shifting from listening to doing helps maintain energy in the room.

4. Learning Block 3 (10–20 minutes)
This block allows for a different mode of learning. Variety is important here. For example, in a language classroom, this might look like:
  - Listening activity
  - Vocabulary game
  - Small group conversation

Switching between modalities keeps the lesson dynamic while reinforcing the same learning objective.

5. The "Carrot" (5–10 minutes)
Whenever possible, it helps to give students something to look forward to near the end of the class.
This does not need to be elaborate. It simply provides a sense of closure and motivation.
  - A short review game
  - A challenge question
  - A creative task

Students often work more productively when they know there is something engaging coming at the end.

6. Closing Routine (2–5 minutes)
The final minutes of class help students organize what they learned and prepare for what comes next.
This might include:
  - A "take two" ~ quick summary of the key idea from the lesson
  - A reminder about upcoming assignments or quizzes
  - A preview of tomorrow's topic

Outsmarted: Lisa Green
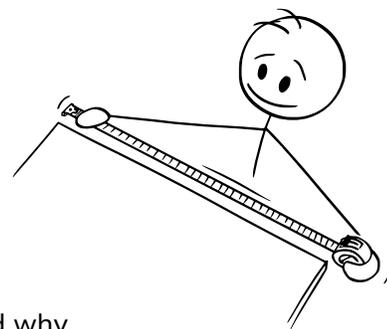
The Structured Classroom

Extending Structure to the Week

Now, jumping off the success of the daily lesson structure, I began experimenting with something similar on a larger scale: a weekly rhythm for the class. Again, this structure is not gospel. Things change. Lessons take longer than expected, school events interrupt schedules, and sometimes the class simply needs something different. But for the most part, having a weekly flow has helped both my students and me understand the purpose of each day.
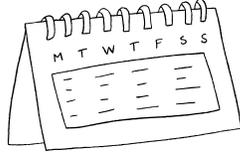
For my Spanish language class, the week gradually developed into something like this:

Monday ~ New Grammar / Vocabulary Concepts
Monday is when new material is introduced. This might be a new verb tense, a set of vocabulary related to a theme, or a grammatical structure the class will practice throughout the week. Mondays tend to include more direct instruction, modelling, and guided practice so students leave class with a clear understanding of what they are learning.

Tuesday ~ Listening Focus
Tuesday shifts the skill focus toward listening. This might include short audio clips, conversations, songs, short videos, or listening comprehension activities. The goal is to expose students to authentic pronunciation, pacing, and context while reinforcing the concepts introduced on Monday.

Wednesday ~ Speaking Focus
By Wednesday, students have had time to encounter the language several times, so the focus shifts toward speaking. This might involve partner conversations, role-play activities, interviews, or small discussion tasks. These classes are often more active and a bit noisier, but they are also where confidence begins to grow.

Thursday ~ Juego Jueves (Game Day Thursday)
Thursday is where the energy shifts again. Juego Jueves introduces games that reinforce the week's vocabulary and grammar. These can be review games, team competitions, movement-based activities, or digital quizzes. Students often look forward to this day, and the playful format still allows for meaningful repetition of the language.

Friday – Día de Cultura (Culture Day)
Friday focuses on culture. Language learning is not only about grammar and vocabulary; it is also about understanding the people and places where the language is spoken. Culture days might include short documentaries, music, food traditions, holidays, geography, or current events from Spanish-speaking countries. These lessons broaden students' perspectives and remind them that language exists within a living culture.

Whether they are aware or not, over time, students begin to anticipate the rhythm of the week.
They know Monday will introduce something new. They expect to listen on Tuesday, speak on Wednesday, play on Thursday, and explore culture on Friday. This does not mean every class is identical, but the pattern gives students something valuable: a sense of direction.

Just like the daily structure, the weekly rhythm reduces uncertainty (for me as well). Students know what kind of thinking will be asked of them each day, and that predictability helps them engage more confidently with the learning.

The Structured Classroom

Additional Ideas That Support Structure

1. Visible agendas
When students can see the outline of the class, uncertainty disappears.

2. Consistent routines
 For example:
- How class begins
- How group work starts
- How questions are asked
- How class ends

Consistency reduces behavioural friction.

3. Clear transitions
Transitions are often where classrooms lose momentum.
Simple signals such as countdowns, timers (see #6), or phrases like "You have two minutes left" help maintain flow.

4. Predictable expectations
 Students should know:
- What materials to bring (Doesn't always help ~ have pencils and paper on hand!)
- What participation looks like
- What happens if they finish early

Predictability reduces confusion and anxiety.

5. Occasional disruption of routine
Ironically, structure allows flexibility. When routines are strong, you can break them intentionally with a guest speaker, an extended discussion, or a spontaneous activity.

6. Visual work timers
Displaying a visible timer during work periods can help create a shared sense of urgency and focus. When students can see how much time they have, expectations become clearer: work time is work time. Whether it is a timer on the board, a projected countdown, or a simple classroom clock reference, the visual cue helps students pace themselves and stay on task. It also reduces the constant question of "How much time do we have left?" and helps transitions happen more smoothly. Over time, students learn that the time given for a task is intentional and that the expectation is to use it productively.

8

The Structured Classroom

Supporting Student Organization

Another simple structure that has made a meaningful difference in my classroom is providing students with weekly organizers and assignment tracking sheets. In the past, most students carried a physical agenda. Today, many rely on their phones or online classroom platforms to keep track of work and deadlines. In theory, this should make organization easier. In practice, I have often found the opposite, with many students struggling to keep track of upcoming tasks.

My solution has been simple: provide physical tools that support organization. Each week, students receive a weekly note sheet where they can record notes, vocabulary, and reminders from class. I also keep assignment tracking sheets available so students can write down upcoming work, due dates, and progress. These sheets are not complicated, but they create a visible system students can return to throughout the week.

Like any routine, this works best when it becomes a habit. Taking a moment at the start or end of class to update notes or record assignments helps students develop the organizational skills that many are still learning. The goal is not simply to keep papers in order, but to create a routine where staying organized becomes part of the learning process itself.

Example: Weekly Sheet   **Example: Assignment Tracker**

*These sheets are available for PDF download ~ included with resources at the end.

The Structured Classroom

Structure is for Teachers Too!

Just as importantly, a structured classroom works for teachers. Having a predictable rhythm to the week helps ground the work of planning. Instead of reinventing the wheel every day, I know the general focus of each class before I even begin building the lesson. Tuesday is listening. Wednesday is speaking. Thursday is a game. That framework makes planning faster and far more manageable. Ironically, the structure also creates more space for creativity. When the overall shape of the week is already in place, I can focus my energy on designing engaging activities within it rather than constantly deciding what the day should look like. Over time, this rhythm has made me a far more organized teacher. It reduces decision fatigue, clarifies priorities, and makes the work of teaching feel more sustainable.

Legendary University of Tennessee basketball coach Pat Summitt (a personal hero of mine) built one of the most successful programs in sports history not only on talent, but on clarity of expectations. She was known for establishing standards early and holding to them consistently. As she often said, "Discipline helps you finish a job, and finishing is what separates excellent work from average work." Her teams knew exactly what was expected of them, both on and off the court.

There is also a coaching principle often attributed to Summitt and many other successful leaders: it is far easier to begin with high expectations and gradually relax them than it is to begin loosely and try to tighten standards later. Once habits and norms are established, they are difficult to reverse. The tone set in the opening days of a season, or a school year, often defines what follows. In the classroom, this means setting clear expectations and boundaries from the start.

Like any teacher, I have my faults. I have days that go well, and days I would rather forget entirely. But one thing experience has taught me is that when expectations are clear and consistently upheld, students tend to rise to meet them. When I begin the year with firm boundaries and maintain them fairly, the classroom settles more quickly into a productive rhythm. Interestingly, the students who often benefit most from this structure are those who initially seem to struggle with it. Many students, particularly energetic students or those with attention challenges, test boundaries early in the year. Yet once routines are established and expectations become predictable, many of these same students thrive within that environment. Over time, they learn the rhythm of the class, the routines become familiar, and the structure provides something that can be hard to find elsewhere: consistency.

In the era of smartphones, constant connectivity, and rapidly changing technology, the classroom has become a far more unpredictable landscape for both teaching and learning. Students arrive carrying more distractions, more information, and often less certainty about how to navigate it all. While no system will solve every challenge, thoughtfully introducing structure into your classroom routines can make a meaningful difference. Structure will not eliminate every difficult day, but it can provide a steady foundation from which meaningful learning can grow.

Good luck out there!
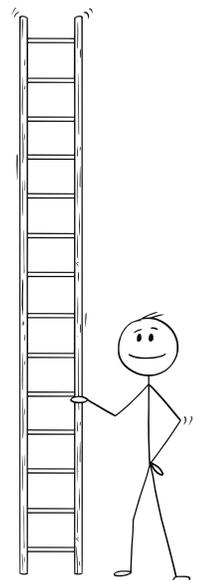
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Bonus Chapter Material From Outsmarted: The Changing Face of Learning in the Era of Smartphones and Technology
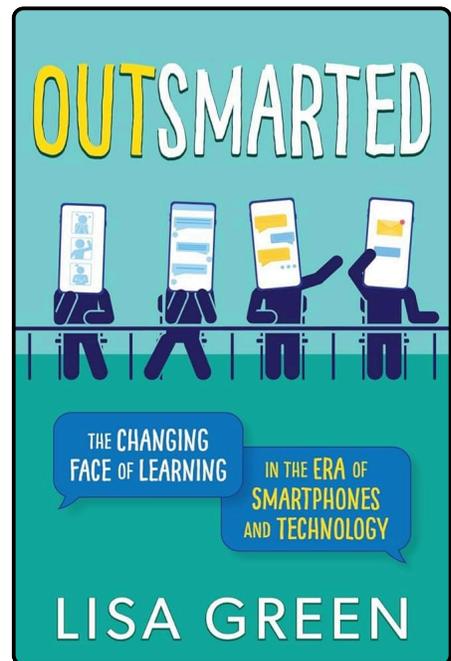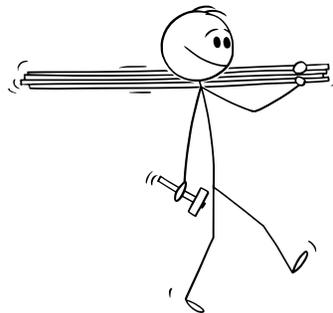
Because education, like everything else, is a work in progress.

STUDENT ORGANIZER AND ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

NAME: _____

CLASS: _____

☑ TASK

DUE DATE

- ☐ _____ ➡ _____
- ☐ _____ ➡ _____
- ☐ _____ ➡ _____
- ☐ _____ ➡ _____
- ☐ _____ ➡ _____
- ☐ _____ ➡ _____
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- ☐ _____ ➡ _____
- ☐ _____ ➡ _____
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WEEKLY CLASS ORGANIZER

NAME: _____

CLASS: _____

WEEK: _____

CLASS FOCUS: _____

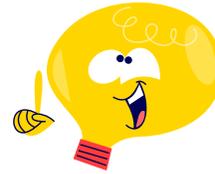## PERSONAL GOALS OR SKILLS I WANT TO WORK ON THIS WEEK

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

☑ UPCOMING ASSIGNMENTS/QUIZZES — DUE DATE

- ☐ _____ ➡ _____
- ☐ _____ ➡ _____
- ☐ _____ ➡ _____

REMINDER

MONDAY

LESSON FOCUS: _____

LESSON NOTES, CLASS SUMMARY, OR THINGS I SHOULD REMEMBER FROM TODAY

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

TAKE TWO
2 BIG TAKEAWAYS FROM THE DAY

1. _____
2. _____

TUESDAY

LESSON FOCUS: _____

LESSON NOTES, CLASS SUMMARY, OR THINGS I SHOULD REMEMBER FROM TODAY

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

TAKE TWO
2 BIG TAKEAWAYS FROM THE DAY

1. _____
2. _____

WEDNESDAY

LESSON FOCUS: _____

LESSON NOTES, CLASS SUMMARY, OR THINGS I SHOULD REMEMBER FROM TODAY

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

TAKE TWO
2 BIG TAKEAWAYS FROM THE DAY

1. _____
2. _____

THURSDAY

LESSON FOCUS: _____

LESSON NOTES, CLASS SUMMARY, OR THINGS I SHOULD REMEMBER FROM TODAY

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

TAKE TWO
2 BIG TAKEAWAYS FROM THE DAY

1. _____
2. _____

FRIDAY

LESSON FOCUS: _____

LESSON NOTES, CLASS SUMMARY, OR THINGS I SHOULD REMEMBER FROM TODAY

_____
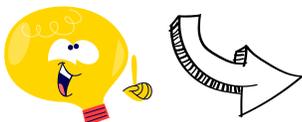_____
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TAKE TWO
2 BIG TAKEAWAYS FROM THE DAY

1. _____
2. _____

NEXT WEEK

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY