



Getting Started— The Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How

Here it is: the Organization and Management of a Classroom (OMAC) system. It's an easy-to-understand, easy-to-implement, and very effective system for organizing and managing all types of classrooms for students with special needs.

There are six basic questions that need to be addressed before we begin. They are:

1. **Who** should use this information?
2. **What** exactly is the OMAC system?
3. **Where** or in what type of setting should the system of organization be implemented?
4. **When** or at what developmental level classroom can it be used?
5. **Why** should I use this system of organization?
6. **How** do I implement this system?

Let me answer these questions, and then we will walk together step by step to quickly get you started.

WHO?

Who can implement this system? This is an important question, and the answer is: *anyone*. This is not only a book for first-year teachers; it is also a book for veteran teachers. It is not a *how to teach students with autism* book; it is a *how to organize your teaching environment so that you are implementing research-based best practices that are designed to meet all the needs of your students* book. That's a mouthful, but that is what this system is about. It can be used by anyone and for students with a variety of special needs.

This book is for the veteran teachers—the old-timers who have been around for 25+ years and can remember the beginning stage of education specific to students on the autism spectrum. I put myself in this category. I remember my first student with autism. Being that it was my first year, I didn't have a clue where to start or where to turn for help. In the past 27 years, the field of special education has changed, especially the field specific to autism. Veteran teachers have a great deal of knowledge, experience, and gut instinct under their belt when it comes to managing a classroom, but, speaking from experience, we can all benefit from fresh ideas.

This book is for that teacher in the middle of his or her career, standing on the brink of burnout, thinking that the stress of managing a classroom and meeting the needs of students is just too much. This may give those middle-of-the-roads some fresh ideas and a gentle spark of creativity where none is left.

This book is also for the rookie, the green teacher fresh out of college, filled with both fear and excitement. It will add to the knowledge and expertise they have amassed through years of study and give an extra boost of confidence to help them successfully embark on their first classroom adventure.

WHAT?

What is the OMAC system? It is made up of six organizational layers, and this book devotes a chapter to each of these layers. You should think of it as a step-by-step process, similar to a recipe. It is a recipe in which the product or end result is to create a model program or classroom that is not only organized and simpler to manage but also is steeped in research-based best practice. Let me go over what you will encounter during each of the chapters.

1. *Organization of the Classroom Environment* (Chapter 4) pertains to the basic environmental setup of your classroom. This includes how to arrange the furniture, plan for traffic flow, and manage the visual clutter all while using best practice in the field of special education. I will also introduce the concept of purposeful spaces and teaching boards as a way to make the most of the classroom you have. The suggestions given in this chapter not only pertain to a large regular education classroom with 25 students, but it is also applicable to a smaller size special education classroom that has only five or six students.
2. *Organization of Communication and Visual Supports* utilizes best practice in the field to intervene in the area of communication. Best practice supports the use of visual aids that are designed to enhance the students' ability to use communication for both expression and understanding. The creation of an environment that will level the communication "playing field" for students with autism spectrum disorders is a time-consuming task but one that is vitally important in meeting the needs of each child within the classroom. Chapter 5 will discuss, in detail, a variety of visual supports that can be used in classrooms for not only students with autism but also for students with other types of special needs.
3. *Organization of Teaching Methods and Materials* (Chapter 6) addresses how to organize teaching materials and manage the different teaching methods that are used in special education. There is so much required of teachers in this area: the creation of lesson plans, learning centers, the organization of materials, and the management of a variety of best-practice teaching methods used in today's classroom.
4. *Organization of Behavioral Interventions* (Chapter 7) contains tips and hints on how to structure the many items that teachers use in their behavior programs. This chapter not only gives ideas on various token economies and reinforcement techniques used in the classroom, but it will also help by giving creative ways of managing the behavior programs and paperwork.
5. *Organization of Paperwork and Data* is sometimes the thorn in the side of special education teachers. This chapter will discuss several ways of managing the mountains of data and paperwork required in a special education classroom. Chapter 8 gives practical ways teachers can easily organize and store daily data, manage individualized education program (IEP) paperwork, organize student work samples, create emergency plans, and manage the stacks of other paperwork required of today's classroom teachers.
6. *Organization of Classroom Staff and Home Supports* (Chapter 9) refers to creative ways that the teacher can not only support the additional staff that serve the classroom, but also support and build communication between home and school. Included are several innovative ways to manage multiple staff members and ways to enhance the relationship between school and home.

7. *The appendix* on the CD ROM contains several items such as printable forms and organizational templates. These may be helpful in continuing to organize the classroom environment. The appendix also includes a reference list that may be helpful in the further exploration of autism spectrum disorders and the best practices included in the OMAC system.

WHERE?

Where can this system of organization be implemented? The answer is easy: anywhere.

As discussed in Chapter 2, all teachers need a system of organization. Special education teachers, above all, have extraordinary amounts of paperwork they are required to manage, and some system of organization is mandatory for survival. The general educators who serve children with special needs in their inclusive classroom setting can also use some of the ideas contained in the chapters. The information will help them manage their setting while implementing several of the best practices in the field. The OMAC system is simple and can be implemented wherever you serve students with special needs, particularly if you serve students with autism spectrum disorders. As the prevalence of autism continues to rise, all teachers, regardless of the setting, will need to be well-versed in best-practice interventions and will need innovative ways to manage the ever increasing requirements of a 21st century classroom.

Remember that the OMAC system can be implemented in any setting because it is but a compilation of best practices. These best practices should be implemented in all types of classrooms: in inclusive regular education settings, in pull-out resource settings, in self-contained settings, and in home-school settings.

WHEN?

There are really two parts to this question: when, during the school year, is the best time to implement these steps, and when, during what developmental age or grade level, can this system be used?

Although you can begin to implement the system of organization anytime during the year, it may be best to implement it during the summer, before the school year starts. This way you can begin the year on an organized footing.

But, is this always possible? No. So, you can begin at anytime and it is never too late to start. Take it a step at a time, carefully implementing each of the organizational foundations to completion. To create an optimal setting for your students, it is recommended that you finish one step before moving on to the next. Remember that you will glean the things that work for your classroom from each chapter and you should implement those. The chapters are a way to get your creative juices flowing. Know always that your classroom is unique and all things do not work for all classrooms. The main thing is to just begin.

As to when in the student's developmental age or grade bracket the OMAC system should be implemented, the answer is: at any age and at any grade—preschool, elementary, middle, and even high school. Organization is needed at every age and in every setting. There is nothing worse than an unorganized, poorly managed kindergarten classroom except for an unorganized, poorly managed high school classroom. There is no one exempt from the need to implement best practice in an organized way.

Now, what you do within each of these areas and the interventions you will implement will certainly depend on the developmental level of your students. For example, teaching organization is going to encompass the steps involved in organizing your teaching environment, methods, and materials. The types of teaching methods you implement are up to you. If the students are special education preschoolers, you will implement different teaching methods than if they are included in a high school general education setting. Organization is universal with no age limit.

WHY?

In Chapter 2, I discussed the teacher stress and teacher burnout that are associated with the job and the fact that this burnout is more prevalent among those teaching special education. I also spoke of the part that organization and classroom management plays in student achievement. For all of these reasons, the adoption of some form of organized classroom management is important.

The OMAC system's six components cover every aspect of setting up and efficiently running a classroom. Each of the components includes research-based best practice. Another way to answer the "why" question is to give you the goals for the OMAC system. OMAC was developed with six specific goals in mind. The overall goal is to ***create an easy step-by-step method that will help teachers implement best practices in the field of special education, particularly in the area of autism, into any classroom environment.***

The system has five other goals. These goals aim at creating a classroom environment that will

1. Create classroom organization so that you feel less stressed at the end of the day
2. Enhance the camaraderie between you and your classroom staff and the parents of your students
3. Make use of all of the research-based best practices in the area of autism in order to meet the students' complex needs
4. Enhance the ability of your students to be independent
5. Decrease the frequency and severity of inappropriate student behaviors by meeting the students' specific needs using best practice techniques

HOW?

Getting Started: On Your Mark...

The first suggestion is to get a small three-ring binder and begin an *OMAC Classroom Organization Notebook*. This is certainly not a requirement to follow the organizational system of the following chapters, but if you are a novice teacher coming into the classroom for the first time or if you feel that you need a great deal of change to your environment, this may certainly come in handy. This will become your handbook to organizing your classroom, and as you are working through the system it will be a place to keep the information you have put together so far.

The layout of the OMAC book contains several different types of planning documents in each of the chapters. Some of the chapters will contain a *Classroom Rubric* that will be completed to help guide you through the organizational process. It will serve as sort of an outline for creating organization out of all of the information that you will gather for each of your students. You will find that some of your students may require an environment that is much more structured than other students. This will guide you in organizing the environment in a way that meets the needs of each and every one.

Some of the later chapters will contain other types of forms, such as the *Staff Duty Schedule* (see Figure 9.2) or the *Student Safety Information* form (see Figure 8.12). All of these will not be needed for every student but are included to help in the organization process.

A *Suggested Material List* will be included with each chapter. This will help you take inventory of the materials already in your classroom as well as highlight what you will need to obtain. Some of the items, such as a digital camera and laminator, you will only need to access as needed. The OMAC system is budget conscious and gives creative ways of using what you already have in the classroom. We have included in the accompanying CD an OMAC Toolkit (see Appendix 3A). This CD is a compilation of most of the general materials

that have been used to set up model programs and may help you become prepared before beginning each of the chapters.

Getting Started: Get Set...
















Before proceeding, it would be helpful if you completed a few prerequisite tasks in order to fully plan the organization of your classroom. This should be specific to the needs of your students and your setting. Remember that the OMAC system can be used with students of all ages, in all settings, and by teachers of all experience levels. We will examine step-by-step tasks that will guide you as you work through the system.

The first is the *OMAC Personal Classroom Assessment* (see Figure 3.1). This is a way of helping you paint a true picture of how you feel about your current classroom organization. Be honest as you complete this form. It will help you identify where you should focus.










APPENDIX 3B

Let's take a Personal Assessment of your classroom. Read the following statements and be honest with yourself about where and how your classroom currently stands in each area. Place an X on the face that best describes your feelings.

ENVIRONMENT

When I stand at the door of my classroom, how organized does my classroom appear to be and is it clutter free?			
How well do I use the available space that I have?			
How easily can I find the materials that I need?			
Do I have a posted schedule that organizes my day and the day for my students?			
How independently can the students function in the classroom?			

COMMUNICATION AND VISUAL SUPPORTS

Does the classroom have enough supports so that all students have some way of communicating their want and needs?			
Have I provided enough visual supports to the students to enhance their ability to learn during teaching?			
Is there enough visual support in the classroom to allow the students to follow the schedule?			



OMAC Personal Classroom Assessment

Figure 3.1. OMAC Personal Classroom Assessment.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Use one sheet for each student.
2. Read through the student's individualized education program (IEP) and determine how each subject area is to be taught.
3. Complete each of the columns of information.
4. After completing these for each student in the classroom, you can use this information to determine the most effective way to arrange your class schedule.

WHO	WHAT	WHERE	WHEN	HOW
Ann Smith	Math	Resource room	8:00–8:30	Small group
	Writing	Regular classroom	9:00–9:45	Large group with paraprofessional support
	Reading	Resource room	2:00–2:45	One-to-one instruction

Getting Started Worksheet

Figure 3.2. Completed Getting Started Worksheet.

There is also a *Getting Started Worksheet* (see Figure 3.2) included in this chapter's appendix.

The *Getting Started Worksheet* will help you organize the information that you have about each of your students in an easy way so that you can get started. It is a way of compiling all of the information you need into one complete format so that you do not forget or miss something in the planning stage.

Let's think a minute. There are all types of settings where this type of organizational system can be helpful. You may serve as an educator in a regular classroom where one or two students with special needs are included, a small pull-out type special education classroom with a small class of students with special needs, or maybe even an entire school or wing of a school that is solely dedicated to the education of students with special needs, much like a private school setting that focuses on the education of students with autism spectrum disorders. Regardless of the setting, you need to back up and plan in order to get set on a firm, organized foundation. This *Getting Started Worksheet* will ask you to gather the following information on each of your students:

- ♦ **Who you are going to teach?** For this section, you are to list your students with special needs, particularly those who have an autism spectrum diagnosis. It is helpful to use one page per student.
- ♦ **What are you going to teach?** For each student you will determine the subject areas that you need to teach by reading through his or her IEP. It will help you determine the materials that you will need and the way the environment should be structured.

- ✦ **Where you are going to teach?** This is also a very important section to complete before moving on to the environmental component. Until you know where you will teach what subject, you cannot organize your space. For example, will you be teaching math in your classroom to a small group of students or will you serve as the inclusive education teacher in a regular education setting? Will you be teaching vocational skills to one student in your classroom or will you use a vocational lab? Will you need to have a section of the room for one-to-one instruction, using Discrete Trial Training (DTT), or will you teach all subjects as a group? This information will be key to determining the layout of your classroom.
- ✦ **When you are going to teach?** This is the overall schedule for your classroom. This is a vital step because you will build your entire environment around this schedule. Your schedule may be organized by a bell schedule and administratively set time periods, or you may have the flexibility to set your own schedule around the needs of your individual students. Whatever the case, you will need to refine this schedule so that you can build your environment around it.
- ✦ **How you are going to teach?** There are many methods and techniques that educators use to teach students with autism spectrum disorders. You may be in a preschool classroom and may use DTT in a one-to-one format. This precipitates the need for a DTT center within the room with a structure all its own. You may teach using Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) workboxes for academic readiness skills. If so, you will need an area of the classroom designed to organize and manage the myriad workboxes needed for this method of teaching. How you teach will determine what your classroom looks like. It is important information to have before you begin moving furniture as it drives the organization of the teaching environment.

Getting Started: Go!

Have you completed the following:

- Created the *OMAC Classroom Organization Notebook...* check!
- Completed the *OMAC Personal Classroom Assessment...* check!
- Completed the *Getting Started Worksheet...* check!

You are now ready to organize your environment.

ABOUT YOU (write in your specialty and check one field that best applies)

Specialty _____

- Birth to Five K-12 Clinical/Medical Personnel 4-year College/Grad. Comm. College/Vocational
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