The teacher left no sub plans: what to do in the next three minutes

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A substitute's plan for a bare desk: a three-minute look round, two quick questions, a calm opener, review work, and a whole day printed from a phone.

When the teacher left no sub plans, spend three minutes finding the schedule, the class list and the drill map, ask the teacher next door two questions, and fill the day with review of yesterday's work, not a new lesson. Then make a whole day for that grade on your phone at teach.peabody.kids/sub/plan and print it. This post was written by Peabody (peabody.kids), a free reading and learning site for children that is free through the end of 2026. The sub tools live on our teachers' site, Peabody Teach, and nothing you type there leaves your phone.

Why a bare desk is less of a problem than it feels

Teachers get sick at five in the morning. Plans go missing in a pile, or sit on a laptop you can't open. It happens to every substitute sooner or later, and the room does not need a brilliant lesson from you. It needs a calm adult, a clear plan on the board, and work the class already knows how to do. Every step below aims at that.

The three-minute look round

Before the bell, find four things and write them on one sheet you keep in your pocket all day:

1. The schedule. It is often taped by the door, on the desk, or on the board. You need lunch, specials and dismissal.
2. The class list or seating chart. First names are enough to take attendance.
3. The drill map. It hangs by the door in most rooms. Know which way you go.
4. Any notes about students' needs. If you find none, ask the office where they are kept. Never guess about a child's health; the office or the nurse handles it.

Two questions, two people

Knock next door. Ask the teacher when lunch and recess are, and who you should call if something goes wrong. Neighbors know the routines, and many will lend a stack of copies.

Call or walk to the front office. Tell them calmly that no plans were left. Many schools keep an emergency folder for every room, and the office can send it down. Ask for a printed roster and whether anyone leaves early today.

Open the day like you planned it

Write your name, the date and a short schedule on the board before students arrive. Stand at the door. When the class is in, say who you are in one sentence and what the day holds. Ask the class which quiet signal their teacher uses, and use it. A posted plan, even a short one, settles a room fast.

What to teach: review, not new

Look at what is still on the board, open the planner to this week, and flip to the last used page in a student notebook. Whatever the class did yesterday is your best clue. Copy five problems or questions that match it onto the board, let students work on paper, and go over the answers together.

Silent reading works in every room from first grade up, because every room has books. Give students fifteen to twenty minutes, then ask each one for one sentence about what they read. You get a calm block and a stack of work to leave for the teacher.

A whole day from your phone

When the class is settled, open the Sub Plan Generator. Pick the grade, the start time, lunch and dismissal, and say the teacher left nothing. It fills every block with reading passages, a math sheet with its key, brain breaks between blocks and a note to the teacher at the end. It works without a printer too: it then plans a day you can read from your phone. It costs nothing, needs no sign-in, and has no field for a student's name.

For the gaps, the no-prep activity picker takes the minutes left and what the room allows (quiet, no paper, no screen) and offers three activities with steps.

Keep a running note

Jot two lines after each part of the day: what the class did and anything the teacher should know. Describe events, not children: "two students left their seats during reading" rather than a label. At the end, turn it into a short note. The note page gives you the headings teachers want and a bank of neutral sentences, and it prints or copies as plain text.

For the teacher reading this

The best fix for a bare desk is a folder made on a calm day. Our emergency sub plans guide walks through a whole year's folder in one afternoon, and the sub plan template holds the pages.

Reading for the last ten minutes

If the class finishes early, a short read-aloud closes the day well. Peabody's library has free stories by reading level that you can put on a projector, and there is more for subs, including forty sample plans by grade and subject, at teach.peabody.kids/sub.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/teacher-left-no-sub-plans