

TeacherOS Setup Guide

Build Your Teaching Second Brain

A step-by-step guide to setting up a personal knowledge system
that makes your teaching compound year over year.

SmartChalk.AI

smartchalk.ai/teachers

Contents

Article 1: Why Teachers Need a Second Brain

Article 2: The Five Folders That Organize a Teaching Life

Article 3: Setting Up Your System

Article 4: The Capture Habit

Article 5: Your First AI-Powered Teaching Win

Appendix A: Vault Folder Structure

Appendix B: "My Teaching Context" Template

Why Teachers Need a Second Brain

Every teacher has had the moment. You're planning a lesson on fractions — or the American Revolution, or cell division — and you remember nailing it last year. The activity was perfect. The timing worked. Students were engaged. You had this great formative check that told you exactly who needed re-teaching.

But where is it?

Maybe it's in a Google Drive folder you haven't opened since June. Maybe it's on a flash drive in your desk drawer. Maybe it's in a notebook you threw away during summer cleaning. Or maybe — and this is the one that stings — it's just gone. Lost to the annual reset that happens when you pack up your classroom, take a breath, and start fresh in August.

This is the teacher's knowledge problem. Not a lack of knowledge — teachers accumulate enormous expertise — but a lack of *capture*. Every year, hard-won insights about what works, what doesn't, and what your specific students need evaporate into the summer air.

The Annual Reset

Think about what a second-year teacher knows that a first-year teacher doesn't. It's not content knowledge — that was there on day one. It's operational knowledge:

- Which warm-up activities actually get 7th graders focused after lunch
- How to explain equivalent fractions to a student who doesn't believe $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{2}{4}$ are the same thing
- When to push through a lesson and when to scrap the plan and follow a student question
- Which parent communication approach works for the family that's been unresponsive

Now imagine a teacher with 15 years of that knowledge, accessible and searchable, instead of buried in memory or scattered across platforms.

What a Teaching Second Brain Does

A second brain is a personal knowledge system — a place where you capture, organize, and retrieve everything you learn from teaching. Not a filing cabinet. Not a lesson plan database. A living system that grows with you.

Here's what changes when you have one:

You stop rebuilding from scratch. That fractions lesson? It's in your system, along with notes about what worked and what you'd change. You're refining, not recreating.

Your context travels with you. Switch grades? Change schools? Your accumulated teaching intelligence comes along. The insights from teaching 3rd grade science inform how you teach 5th grade science — if you can find them.

AI gets dramatically better. When you use an AI tool like ChatGPT or Claude with your teaching context, the output transforms. Instead of generic lesson plans, you get plans that fit your actual classroom, your actual students, your actual constraints.

You compound instead of reset. Each year builds on the last. Your system remembers what you've tried, what worked, what didn't, and why. After five years, you have a teaching resource no textbook or PD session can match.

This Is Simpler Than It Sounds

You don't need special software. You don't need to learn a new tool. You don't need to spend hours organizing. The system works with whatever you already use — Google Drive, a notes app, a folder on your desktop. The magic isn't the tool. It's the habit.

Over the next four articles, we'll walk through exactly how to set up a teaching second brain, build the one habit that makes it work, and get your first real win with AI assistance. Each step takes less than 20 minutes.

Your one action this week: Notice one moment where you think "I had a great way to teach this last year" and can't find it. That's the problem we're solving.

The Five Folders That Organize a Teaching Life

Most teachers have tried organizing their files. A "Lesson Plans" folder here, a "Worksheets" folder there, maybe a "To Do" list somewhere else. It works for a few weeks, then entropy wins. New files pile up in random locations. Downloads stay in the downloads folder. That conference handout lives in your email, unsorted.

The problem isn't discipline. The problem is that most folder systems don't match how teaching actually works.

Five Folders, One System

Here are the five folders that organize a teaching life. They're based on a method called PARA (Projects, Areas, Resources, Archive), adapted specifically for educators. Every single thing in your teaching world fits into one of these:

1. Inbox

This is the catch-all. Anything you capture goes here first — a link to an article, a rough lesson idea, a note from a parent conference, a photo of student work you want to remember. The only rule: dump it here and sort it later.

A 2nd grade teacher named Maria keeps her Inbox on her phone's notes app. Between classes, she types quick notes like "the base-ten blocks activity was confusing — try virtual manipulatives next time" or "Jayden's mom mentioned he reads at home now." Once a week, she spends 10 minutes moving items to the right folder.

The Inbox works because it separates capturing from organizing. When you try to capture AND organize simultaneously, you do neither well.

2. Projects

Projects have a deadline and a finish line. They're active work you're doing right now:

- Planning the Colonial America unit (due: start date October 14)
- Preparing for IEP meetings (due: November 3)
- Setting up the classroom library rotation (due: end of September)

When a project is done, it moves to Archive. Projects keep your current work visible without cluttering your long-term reference material.

3. Areas

Areas are ongoing responsibilities with no end date. They don't "finish" — you maintain them:

- **Curriculum** — your living curriculum documents, scope and sequence, standards alignment
- **Classroom Management** — routines, procedures, behavior strategies that work
- **Parent Communication** — templates, tone guides, communication logs
- **Assessment** — your rubrics, grading approaches, assessment strategies
- **Professional Development** — certifications, growth goals, PD notes

Areas hold the knowledge you return to repeatedly. That classroom transition routine you perfected? It belongs in Areas/Classroom Management, not buried in last September's project folder.

4. Resources

Resources are reference material organized by topic — things you might need someday but aren't actively using right now:

- Lesson ideas you haven't scheduled yet
- Research articles on differentiation strategies
- Ed-tech tool evaluations
- Student intervention approaches you've read about

Think of Resources as your professional library. A high school English teacher might have Resources/Writing Instruction with articles on conferencing techniques, mentor text examples, and notes from a workshop on teaching argument writing.

5. Archive

Everything that's finished or no longer active. Last year's unit plans. Completed projects. Old communication logs. You don't delete anything — you archive it. This is what makes the system compound over time. When you plan next year's Colonial America unit, your archived project is right there with notes about what to change.

Why This Works for Teaching

The five-folder system works because it mirrors how teachers think:

- "What am I working on right now?" → **Projects**
- "What do I need to maintain?" → **Areas**
- "Where did I put that thing?" → **Resources**
- "What did I do last year?" → **Archive**
- "Quick, write this down" → **Inbox**

Compare this to the typical "Subject > Grade > Year" hierarchy most teachers default to. That structure fails because it can't answer "where does my classroom management strategy go?" or "where should I save this differentiation article that applies to all my classes?"

A Note About Tools

These five folders work in any tool:

Google Drive: Create five top-level folders. Use Google Keep or a pinned Doc as your Inbox.

>

Obsidian or Notion: Create five top-level folders (or databases in Notion). Both support internal linking, which becomes powerful as your system grows.

>

Apple Notes or OneNote: Create five notebooks or sections. Use a pinned Quick Note as your Inbox.

>

Physical folders: Yes, five physical folders or binder tabs work too. Inbox can be a literal inbox tray on your desk.

The tool doesn't matter. The structure does.

Your one action this week: Pick one folder — Areas is a good start — and list three things that belong there from your current teaching life. Don't organize everything. Just name three things.

Setting Up Your System

You've seen the five folders. You understand the concept. Now let's build it.

This article walks through three things: setting up your folder structure, choosing your tools, and creating the single most valuable document in your system — your "My Teaching Context" file. Budget about 20 minutes. You'll walk away with a working system, not just a plan for one.

Create Your Folders

Open your tool of choice and create these five folders:

- **00 Inbox** — (the 00 prefix keeps it at the top)
- **01 Projects** — active work with deadlines
- **02 Areas** — ongoing responsibilities
- **03 Resources** — reference material by topic
- **04 Archive** — completed work

Inside Areas, create the subfolders that match your teaching life. Start with these (you can always add more later):

- Areas/Curriculum
- Areas/Classroom Management
- Areas/Assessment
- Areas/Parent Communication
- Areas/Professional Development

Inside Resources, add a few topic folders:

- Resources/Lesson Ideas
- Resources/Student Strategies
- Resources/Pedagogy

And create a Journal folder at the top level:

- **Journal/Daily** — for daily capture notes
- **Journal/Weekly** — for weekly reflections

If you're using Obsidian: Download the SmartChalk vault template from the TeacherOS start page. It includes all folders, starter templates, and an Obsidian configuration that sets up the right defaults. Unzip it and open it as a vault.

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If you're using Notion: Create a new workspace. Add these as top-level pages, then create sub-pages for the Area and Resource categories listed above. Notion databases work well for Projects (with a status property) and Journal entries (with a date property).

>

If you're using Google Drive: Create these as folders. For your Inbox, pin a Google Doc called "Inbox" to your Drive homepage — it's faster than creating a new file every time you want to capture something.

Create Your Teaching Context Document

This is the game-changer. Your Teaching Context document is a single file that tells any AI tool everything it needs to know about you as a teacher. Without it, AI gives you generic output. With it, AI gives you *your* output.

Create a new document called "My Teaching Context" and put it at the root of your system (not inside any folder). Fill in these sections:

About Me

Write 3-4 sentences: your name, school type, subjects you teach, grade levels, years of experience. Be specific — "I teach 7th grade life science and 8th grade physical science at a Title

"I middle school with 65% ELL population" gives AI far more to work with than "I'm a middle school science teacher."

My Teaching Philosophy

What do you believe about how students learn? Two to three sentences is enough. Don't overthink this — write what you'd tell a new teacher at your school. "I believe students learn best through hands-on investigation followed by structured reflection" is perfect.

My Students

Describe your student population in broad strokes: class sizes, reading levels, notable demographics, common IEP accommodations, ELL support structures. This context shapes every AI-generated lesson plan, rubric, and assessment.

How AI Should Help Me

This section tells the AI how to behave. Write something like:

- Check my existing notes before creating something new
- Keep suggestions classroom-ready — I don't have time for heavy modification
- Suggest connections to other things I've captured
- Respect my teaching philosophy when making recommendations
- Default to [your preferred instructional model] unless I specify otherwise

My SmartChalk Skills

List the SmartChalk skills you use most and a one-line note about when you reach for each one. Start with two or three — you can add more as you explore.

The Setup Guide Skill

Want help filling in your Teaching Context? SmartChalk's **Teaching Second Brain Setup Guide** skill walks you through each section with guided questions. Paste it into your AI tool, answer its prompts, and it generates a customized context document you can copy into your system.

One More Thing: Your First Inbox Item

Before you close your new system, add one item to your Inbox. It can be anything:

- A lesson idea you've been meaning to write down
- A link to an article you want to read later
- A note about something that worked in class today

This matters more than the folder structure. The system is alive the moment you start using it.

Your one action today: Create your "My Teaching Context" document — even a rough version changes how AI works with you.

The Capture Habit

The folder structure from the previous articles is important. Your Teaching Context document is powerful. But neither matters if your system stays empty.

The habit that makes everything work is capture. Not organizing. Not filing. Not tagging. Just getting things out of your head and into your Inbox before they vanish.

Why Capture Matters More Than Organization

Teachers process hundreds of micro-decisions every day. Between second period and lunch, you might notice that the vocabulary strategy you tried landed differently than expected, that one student showed surprising engagement during the lab, that the parent email you drafted needs a softer opening, and that you want to try a different warm-up tomorrow.

By 3:30, most of those observations are gone. Not because they weren't valuable — because the day kept moving.

Capture is the antidote. And it takes less time than you think.

The 3-Minute Daily Capture

Here's the entire habit: after your last class, spend three minutes writing down whatever comes to mind. That's it.

Don't organize. Don't file. Don't worry about where things go. Write messy, incomplete, misspelled notes into your Inbox. You'll sort them later (or not — even unsorted captures are searchable).

What to capture:

- **What worked today** — "The fractions number line activity clicked for most students"
- **What didn't** — "Reading aloud took too long, lost engagement at the 15-minute mark"

- **Student signals** — "Marcus asked a follow-up question for the first time all semester"
- **Things to remember** — "Need to print the lab handouts before Wednesday"
- **Ideas for next time** — "Try pairing the video with a prediction exercise"

A 4th grade teacher in Phoenix does this on sticky notes during dismissal. She writes three things max, then photographs them with her phone and drops the photos into her Inbox folder. Total time: under two minutes.

A high school chemistry teacher in Atlanta uses voice memos. Walking to his car, he records a 90-second recap. Once a week, he listens back and types the useful bits into his Inbox. He says the voice recording catches things he'd never bother writing.

Messy Beats Perfect

The biggest threat to daily capture isn't forgetting. It's perfectionism. Teachers who try to capture perfectly — writing full sentences, filing immediately, adding tags — burn out in a week.

Messy capture works because:

- It's fast. Three minutes, not thirty.
- It's forgiving. Misspellings and fragments are fine.
- It compounds. Even rough notes become findable and valuable over time.
- It lowers the bar. When capture is easy, you do it. When it's a chore, you don't.

Your Inbox exists so you can dump things without thinking about where they go. During your weekly processing time (more on that in a future article), you spend 10-15 minutes sorting Inbox items into Projects, Areas, or Resources. Some items stay in the Inbox. Some get archived. Some turn out to be useless. All of that is fine.

The Capture Skill

SmartChalk's **Daily Teaching Capture** skill is designed for this exact moment. Paste it into your AI tool at the end of the day, and it walks you through a quick guided reflection: what worked, what didn't, student signals, things to remember, one thing for tomorrow. It outputs a formatted daily note you can save straight to your Journal/Daily folder.

The skill doesn't replace the habit — it scaffolds it. Some teachers use the skill every day. Others use it for the first two weeks until the habit sticks, then switch to freeform capture. Both approaches work.

What Happens After a Month

Teachers who capture daily for 30 days report a consistent shift. They stop losing ideas. They notice patterns they missed before — a student's slow improvement, a strategy that works on Tuesdays but not Fridays, a recurring frustration that points to a systems problem rather than a discipline problem.

The capture habit turns teaching from a series of isolated days into a connected practice. Each day's notes link to the next. Your November self can see what your September self was thinking. And when you sit down to plan, you're not starting from a blank page.

Your one action this week: Tomorrow after your last class, spend exactly 3 minutes dumping whatever comes to mind into your Inbox. Don't organize. Just capture.

Your First AI-Powered Teaching Win

You have your folders. You have your Teaching Context document. You've started capturing daily notes. Now let's put it all together with your first AI-powered teaching win.

This article walks through a concrete example: using one SmartChalk skill with your Teaching Context to produce something you can use in class next week. The whole process takes about 15 minutes.

Pick Your Skill

Head to SmartChalk.AI and browse the skills directory. For your first run, I'd recommend one of these:

- **Lesson Plan Architect** — if you have a lesson to plan for next week
- **Smart Rubric Builder** — if you need a rubric for an upcoming assignment

Both produce immediately useful output that shows the difference between "generic AI" and "AI that knows your classroom."

For this walkthrough, we'll use the Lesson Plan Architect with a specific example.

The Setup (2 Minutes)

1. Open your AI tool (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini — any of them work)
2. Start a new conversation
3. Paste your Teaching Context document first. This tells the AI who you are, what you teach, and how you work.
4. Hit Enter and wait for the AI to acknowledge it.

The response will be something like "Got it — you teach 7th grade life science at a Title I school with a large ELL population. How can I help?" That's the Teaching Context at work. The AI

now knows your constraints before you ask for anything.

Paste the Skill (1 Minute)

5. Go to the Lesson Plan Architect page on SmartChalk.AI
6. Click **Copy** to copy the skill
7. Paste it into the same conversation
8. Hit Enter

The skill comes alive. It displays the SmartChalk banner, introduces itself, and asks what you need. Because it already has your Teaching Context, it may reference details about your classes in its greeting.

Tell It What You Need (2 Minutes)

The skill will ask about your topic, grade level, time block, and any specific standards. Since your Teaching Context already includes your grade and subject, you might only need to provide:

"I'm teaching photosynthesis next Tuesday. 50-minute period. I want hands-on activities since we have access to the science lab. A few of my ELL students need vocabulary scaffolding."

That's it. Four sentences. The skill has everything it needs.

Review the Output (5 Minutes)

The Lesson Plan Architect generates a complete lesson plan: learning objectives aligned to NGSS, a materials list, a timed lesson sequence, differentiation strategies for your specific student population, and an assessment approach.

Here's what makes this different from asking a bare AI "write me a lesson plan about photosynthesis":

- **The objectives reference your actual standards.** Not generic objectives — standards your state uses, at the grade level you teach.
- **The differentiation is specific.** Instead of "provide extra support for struggling learners," you see vocabulary scaffolds designed for ELL students because your Teaching Context mentioned your student population.
- **The timing fits your block.** 50 minutes, not a vague "one class period."
- **The activities match your setup.** Lab-based, because you said you have lab access.

The skill also narrates its decisions: "I chose a 5E model here since you mentioned hands-on science" or "I included sentence frames for the lab report because of your ELL population." This transparency helps you learn what prompts work and adjust in future sessions.

Save It to the Right Place (2 Minutes)

9. Copy the lesson plan output

10. Save it to **01 Projects/** in a folder for your current unit (create one if needed — something like "Projects/Photosynthesis Unit")

11. If you asked for a rubric too, save that to **02 Areas/Assessment/**

You've now completed the full loop: capture your teaching context, use an AI skill with that context, and save the output to the right folder in your system. Next time you teach photosynthesis — next year, or in a different class — your plan and your notes about how it went are right there.

Try It Again

The first time proves the concept. The second time builds the habit. Before the end of this week, try one more skill with your Teaching Context:

- Use the **Smart Rubric Builder** for that essay assignment you're grading next week
- Use the **Quiz and Assessment Generator** for an upcoming quiz
- Use the **Reading Level Adapter** to differentiate a text passage for your mixed-level class

Each time, paste your Teaching Context first, then the skill. Save the output. In two weeks, your Projects folder will have a handful of AI-generated, context-aware materials you actually used in class. That's your second brain starting to compound.

What Comes Next

You now have the foundation:

1. **Five folders** organizing your teaching life
2. **A Teaching Context document** that makes AI work for your classroom specifically
3. **A daily capture habit** building your knowledge base
4. **SmartChalk skills** producing classroom-ready materials with your context

The next tier of TeacherOS digs deeper: customizing your Teaching Context for richer AI output, building templates that reduce friction, establishing a weekly rhythm that compounds your knowledge, and chaining multiple skills into complete teaching workflows. But that's only worth pursuing after you've lived with the basics for a few weeks.

Your one action today: Open your AI tool, paste your Teaching Context, then paste the Lesson Plan Architect skill. Build one lesson plan for next week. Save it to the right folder.

APPENDIX A

Vault Folder Structure

This is the complete TeacherOS folder structure. Create these folders in your chosen tool (Obsidian, Notion, Google Drive, or any file system). The numbered prefixes keep folders in a consistent order.

```
TeacherOS/  
  My Teaching Context.md  
  00 Inbox/  
    _start_here.md  
  01 Projects/  
    _examples.md  
  02 Areas/  
    Curriculum/  
    Classroom Management/  
    Professional Development/  
    Parent Communication/  
    Assessment/  
  03 Resources/  
    Pedagogy/  
    Ed Tech/  
    Standards/  
    Lesson Ideas/  
    Student Strategies/  
  04 Archive/  
  Journal/  
    Daily/  
    Weekly/  
  Templates/  
    Lesson Plan.md  
    Unit Plan.md  
    Weekly Reflection.md  
    Unit Retrospective.md  
    Resource Note.md  
    Student Strategy Note.md  
    Parent Communication Log.md
```

Download a pre-built vault template at smarthalk.ai/teacheros/start

APPENDIX B

"My Teaching Context" Template

Copy this template into a document called "My Teaching Context" at the root of your vault. Fill in the bracketed sections with your own details. Paste this document at the start of any AI conversation to get personalized, context-aware output.

```
# My Teaching Context

## About Me
[Your name], [subjects you teach], [grade levels] at [school name].
[Years of experience]. [One sentence about your school context.]

## My Teaching Philosophy
[2-3 sentences about how you believe students learn best.
What does your classroom look like when it's working well?
What instructional approaches do you default to?]

## My Students
- Class sizes: [number]
- Reading levels: [range or description]
- ELL population: [percentage or description]
- Common IEP accommodations: [list the ones you implement regularly]
- Technology access: [1:1 devices? shared? BYOD?]

## How AI Should Help Me
- Check my existing notes before creating something new
- Keep suggestions classroom-ready – I don't have time for heavy modification
- Suggest connections to things I've already captured
- Respect my teaching philosophy when making recommendations
- Default to [your preferred instructional model] unless I specify otherwise

## My SmartChalk Skills
- [Skill name]: [When I use it – e.g., "weekly planning sessions"]
- [Skill name]: [When I use it]
- [Skill name]: [When I use it]

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Tool-specific loading instructions:
- Claude: Paste into project instructions or conversation start
- ChatGPT: Add to Custom Instructions or paste at conversation start
```

- Gemini: Paste as context or configure as a Gem
- Copilot: Use as notebook context

TeacherOS Setup Guide — smartchalk.ai/teacheros
Free for teachers. No account required.