



## The Thinking Cap? by Douglas Evans

How come teachers say, “Put on your thinking caps,” when wearing hats isn’t allowed in the classroom?

The term *Thinking Cap* dates back centuries. That was a time when students had to walk many miles to school and had no backpacks to wear. Instead, they carried their book, binders, folders, and lunchboxes stacked on their heads. To cushion the loads, they wore colorful felt beanies. This whole wobbly pile became known as a *Thinking Cap*.

Every day, at the end of school, teachers would call out, “Put on your

Thinking Caps.” That was the signal for students to slap on their beanies and start stacking their homework load.

Of course, older students, with more books and years of practice, carried the tallest Thinking Caps. Some could walk the school halls balancing stacks three feet high. They ducked through doorways without missing a step. The best of them could even bend down for a sip at the water fountain without dropping a single book.

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Students might still be carrying Thinking Caps today if not for a short, skinny boy named Mortar. Mortar was about to begin first grade. Ever since he was little, he had longed to start school. Each morning, he watched the older kids march past his house, balancing tall stacks of books on their heads. At last, it was his turn.

On the first day of school, Mortar sat at his desk with a blue beanie scrunched in his back pocket.

“Welcome, class,” said Miss Hearsay, his teacher. “The first thing we’ll learn today, before we even say our ABCs, is the proper way to carry a book.”

Mortar squirmed with excitement. He pulled out his beanie.

“So now, class,” said the teacher. “For the very first time, let’s put on our Thinking Caps.”

Mortar placed the beanie on his head. “Give me a ton of books,” he said. “I’m gonna balance a Thinking Cap that’s ten feet high.”

Miss Hearsay smiled. She passed out a thin spelling workbook to each first

grader.

“We’ll begin with this,” she said. “Now, everyone, remember to keep your chins up and shoulders back. Good posture is the key to carrying a Thinking Cap properly. All right, stand up and give it a try.”

Mortar rose from his desk. He placed the workbook on his blue beanie. At once, it slid off and smacked him on the nose.

“Place the book farther back, Mortar,” Miss Hearsay said. “Eyes forward. Don’t slouch. Keep your head straight.”

Mortar tried again. This time, the workbook slid backward and hit his bottom.

“Class, look at Flo,” the teacher called. “Excellent balancing, Flo. Let’s see if you can take a few steps.”

With her arms out, Flo, tall and slender, glided across the classroom like a ballet dancer.

Mortar scowled and slapped the workbook back onto his head. “That’s nothing,” he muttered. “Soon I’ll be carrying the tallest Thinking Cap in the school. Just watch me.”

But as he spoke, the book slid off his beanie once again and scraped his ear on the way down.

All day long—in the classroom, on the playground, and in the lunchroom—Mortar tried balancing the spelling book on his head. And all day long, it kept falling to the ground.

When the afternoon bell rang, Miss Hearsay said, “All right, class, time to

put on your Thinking Caps. For homework tonight, do page one in your math workbook.”

The first-graders stood. They placed their slim math books on their beanies and marched proudly out the door. Everyone except Mortar. Try as he might—*plop!*—the book kept slipping off again and again.

“You’ll have to carry your book in your hand, Mortar,” Miss Hearsay said. “Let’s hope for better luck tomorrow.”

Mortar shivered with embarrassment. He left the classroom with the workbook clutched tightly in the crook of his arm.

Out in the hallway, a fifth-grader with a thick English book, a social studies book, and a science book stacked on her green beanie spotted Mortar.

“First-grade rookie!” she called. “Hold that book tightly, Mortar!”

“Mortar couldn’t balance a flashcard on his head,” said a fourth-grader, wobbling beneath a two-foot-tall Thinking Cap.

Mortar lowered his head and hurried down the hall. “Tomorrow I’ll show them,” he told himself. “Tomorrow, my Thinking Cap will top them all.”

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The next morning, Mortar waited for the bell to ring, when the hallway was most crowded, before entering the school. Shoulders back, chin up, he walked toward his classroom.

Outside the office, a third-grader stopped and pointed. “Look at that!” he called. “Look at Mortar!”

“He’s only a first-grader,” said a second-grade girl. “How can he do that?”

Mortar grinned. Balanced on his blue beanie was a towering stack--ten picture books, two folders, a binder, a lunchbox, and a box of crayons. His Thinking Cap stood over a foot tall!

The school principal, Mr. Knapp, poked his head out of the office. "Now that boy has talent," he said. "We need more students like Mortar."

"This is nothing," Mortar replied. "Once my teacher hands out more books, my Thinking Cap will be taller than I am!"

When Mortar entered his classroom, the first-graders fell silent and stared.

"Goodness, Mortar," said Mrs. Hearsay. "You must have practiced all evening."

"Mortar, your Thinking Cap is so tall," Flo called out.

Still grinning, Mortar stepped into the coat closet. He came out with his head bare.

"Let's get to work," he said, taking his seat. "I need more books to stack on top of me."

At recess time, Mortar returned to the closet. He carried his new reading book, a fat dictionary, and five chapter books from the reading corner. When he stepped out, his Thinking Cap towered twice as high as it had that morning.

"Mortar, how do you do it?" Miss Hearsay said. "I've never seen a first-grader balance a stack that tall."

Mortar swayed side to side. "Good posture," he said. "And after I go to the library, my Thinking Cap will be even taller."

Then, just to show off, he knelt and tied his sneaker.

At noon, Mortar strutted into the lunchroom, balancing a Thinking Cap taller than the lunch server's chef hat. His stack of books, binders, folders, and a lunch box swayed right and left as he tottered toward the first-grade table. A stringy gold tassel now dangled from the bottom of the pile.

“What’s the tassel for, Mighty Mortar?” a fifth-grader called.

Mortar batted the strings from his face. “Watch this.”

Mortar gave the tassel a gentle tug. The tower tilted forward just enough so it didn’t topple over. His lunchbox on top slid off, and he caught it on the way down.

The entire lunchroom erupted into cheers.

“You’ve outdone us all, Mortar,” said a fourth-grader.

“That’s a top-notch Thinking Hat,” a third-grader chimed in.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” Mortar said. Then, staggering under the weight, he sat down to eat.

After lunch, every student in the school copied Mortar’s tassel idea. The buzz about his Thinking Cap grew and grew. How high could he stack it? Two feet? Three? Older students started placing bets.

By the time the afternoon bell rang, Mortar was a legend

"All right, class," said Miss Hearsay. Put on your Thinking Caps!"

But instead of gathering their books, the first-graders turned to watch Mortar.

Slowly, he rose from his seat. He rubbed his neck and cracked his knuckles.

“My Thinking Cap?” he said casually. “Why yes, I think I’ll go put on my Thinking Cap.”

With his classmates still staring, the boy stepped into the coat closet. Minutes later, he came out with a towering stack of books, binders, and folders teetering atop his blue beanie so tall it nearly brushed the overhead lights.

The class gasped.

“It can’t be!” shouted a boy.

“Mortar’s Thinking Cap is as tall as two Mortars,” called a girl.

“Mortar, you’re so strong,” said Flo.

With legs wobbling like noodles, Mortar plodded toward the classroom door.

“I’ve got more books at home,” he said. “I’ll bring them tomorrow.”

“Careful, Mortar,” said Mrs. Hearsay. “Don’t trip.”

To squeeze through the doorway, Mortar bent his knees and pulled the gold tassel of his Thinking Cap. The towering stack tilted just enough. Sliding his feet, he shuffled into the hallway.

“Here he comes!”

“There he is! Mighty Mortar!”

Students from other classes lined the hall to watch the first-grader pass by.

“Go, Mortar, go!” they chanted.

Slow step by slow step, Mortar moved down the hall toward the school exit. The gold tassel swished across his face. The book stack swayed side to side. His knees trembled.

A fourth-grader climbed onto a chair. She held a measuring tape up to Mortar’s Thinking Cap.

“Five feet seven inches,” she announced. “A new record! The tallest

Thinking Cap in the world!”

“Go, Mortar, go!”

Mortar smiled and gave a little wave. But oh, how his neck throbbed. His legs ached. The weight of the books was tremendous. He stumbled to the right and wobbled to the left. Still, he staggered on. He had to make it out of the school door.

“Go Mortar, go!”

When Mortar reached the office, he stopped. Flo, from his class, stood there. A slim spiral notebook rested on her pink beanie.

Giggling, she asked, “Mortar, can I walk home with you?”

Mortar blushed. “Sure. Do you want me to carry your book for you?”

Flo giggled some more. “Oh, Mortar, my notebook on top of the world’s tallest Thinking Cap? That would be so flattering.”

The girl lifted the notebook from her head and handed it to him.

Mortar steadied himself and gave the tassel a gentle tug. With careful aim, he flipped the notebook upward. It landed squarely on top of his Thinking Cap.

But at that moment, his knees buckled.

His head dipped.

The weight was too much.

Mortar toppled forward, and his great tower came crashing down. Books, binders, folders, crayons, and his lunchbox scattered across the hallway floor.

A hush fell through the hall. Every student stared at Mortar. He still wore the blue beanie. But now everyone could see what had been hidden beneath the stack. A square piece of wood was strapped to the top of his blue cap. The gold tassel

dangled from one corner.

Now it was clear. All day long, Mortar had been balancing his Thinking Cap upon this firm, flat platform.

A fifth-grader broke the silence. "Cheater!"

"So *that's* how he did it!" someone else shouted.

"Liar! Phony! Faker!" cried others.

Mortar scrambled to his feet.

Beside him, Flo burst into tears. "You tricked me, Mortar," she sniffled. "I thought you were a hero."

At that moment, Mr. Knapp, the principal, stormed out of the office. He stared at the mess of books across the floor and shook his head.

"That does it," he said. "One of these days, someone's going to get hurt carrying these sky-high stacks. I'm banning Thinking Caps from this school. Starting right now."

The principal marched back into the office. He returned holding an odd-looking canvas sack. Two straps hung from the back.

"From now on, students will carry their books and school supplies in one of these," he said. "You wear it on your back. I invented it myself. It's called...a *knapsack*."

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And that was the end of Thinking Caps. From that day on, students packed their books, binders, folders, and lunchboxes into knapsacks instead.

Of course, teachers still say, "Put on your thinking caps." But now it simply

means: *start loading your head with ideas.*

As for Mortar, his classmates always remembered him as a bit of a cheater. But here's the funny part: years later, his invention, a square board attached to a beanie, became a symbol of achievement. It was even named after him: *a mortarboard*. And it's still worn today.

Visit any high school graduation, and you'll see students in gowns and mortarboards, tassels dangling from one side.

Graduates wear this odd hat with pride. It shows that after twelve years of school, they learned many things, read countless books, and passed tons of tests. Most of all, it proves that ever since first grade, they've been wearing their imaginary *Thinking Caps*.