The Thinking Cap

How come teachers say, "Put on your Thinking Caps," especially when wearing a hat in a classroom is not allowed?

The term *Thinking Cap* goes back several centuries. This was a time before students wore backpacks to school. Instead, they carried their binders, folders, and textbooks upon their heads. These stacks of school gear, carefully balanced, became known as *Thinking Caps*.

Older students, with the most books and years of practice, carried the tallest *Thinking Caps*. Sometimes they would walk the hall, balancing book piles as high as three

feet. To cushion the towering loads, they often wore brightly colored felt beanies.

When the teacher said, "Put on your *Thinking Caps,"* students knew it was time to get out their books and start loading their heads. Students might still be "putting on *Thinking Caps"* today if not for a young boy named Mortar.

Mortar was about to begin first grade. Ever since he was little, Mortar had longed to start school. Each afternoon he would watch students walk past his house, balancing the tall and straight *Thinking Caps* upon their heads. Now it was his turn.

When the morning bell rang on the first day, 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, even before saying our ABC's, is how to carry a book."

Mortar squirmed with excitement. He put on his beanie. "Give me a ton of books," he said. "I'm gonna to 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 proper *Thinking Cap*. OK, stand up and give it a try."

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

"Lay the book farther back, Mortar," Miss Hearsay said. "Eyes forward. Don't slouch. Keep your head straight."

Mortar put the workbook on his head again. This time it fell backward and struck his bottom.

"Why, look at Flo, class," Miss Hearsay called out. "Good balancing, Flo. Let's see if you can take a few steps."

With arms held out like a ballet dancer, Flo, who stood in front of Mortar, stepped lightly across the classroom.

Mortar fumed and slapped the workbook on his head a third time. "That's nothing," he grumbled. "I'm going to carry the highest *Thinking Cap* in the history of the school. Just watch me." But as he spoke, the book slid off his beanie and scraped his ear.

All day long--in the classroom, on the playground, and in the lunchroom--Mortar tried balancing the book. All day long, it kept dropping to the floor.

When the afternoon bell rang, Miss Hearsay said, "OK, class, time to put on your Thinking Caps. For homework tonight do page one in your math books."

The first-graders stood. They placed a slim math book on their heads, and marched proudly out the door. Everyone but Mortar. Try as he might—*plop!*--the book slipped off his beanie again and again.

"You'll have to carry your book in your hand, Mortar," said Miss Hearsay. "We'll hope for the best tomorrow."

Mortar shivered with embarrassment. He walked from the classroom with the spelling book buried in the crook of his arm.

Out in the hallway, a fifth-grader with an English book, a social studies book, and a science book balanced on her green beanie spotted Mortar. "First-grade rookie!" she called out. "Hold that book tightly, Mortar!"

"Mortar couldn't carry a flashcard on his head," said a fourth-grader, whose *Thinking Cap* included six volumes of his favorite fantasy series.

Mortar hurried down the hall. "Tomorrow I'll show them," he told himself. "Tomorrow my *Thinking Cap* will top all others. Just wait and see."

The next morning, Mortar arrived late to school. He waited until after the bell rang, when the hallway was most crowded, to enter the hallway. Shoulders back, chin up, he walked toward his classroom.

Outside the office, a third-grader halted and pointed. "Look at that!" he called out. "Look at Mortar!"

"But it's impossible," said a second-grade girl. "Mortar's only a first-grader. How'd you do that, Mortar?"

Mortar shrugged. On his blue beanie stood a stack of books that included three math books, ten comic books, a telephone book, and volumes A-E of the World Book Encyclopedia. His *Thinking Cap* was over a foot tall!

The school principal, Mr. Knaprucker, stood in the office doorway. "Now *that* boy has talent," he said. "We need more student like Mortar at this school."

"This is nothing," Mortar replied. "As soon as my teacher passes out more books, my *Thinking Cap* will be much taller."

When Mortar entered his classroom, the first-graders grew quiet and stared.

"Good for you, Mortar," said Mrs. Hearsay. "You must have been practicing all evening."

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

Blushing, Mortar stepped into coat closet. He came out with only the blue beanie on his head. "Let's get to work," he said, taking his seat. "I need more books to stack on top of me."

At recess time, Mortar reentered the coat closet. He carried a new reading book, two fat dictionaries, an English workbook, and five chapter books from the reading corner.

He left the closet wearing a *Thinking Cap* double the height of the one that morning.

"Mortar, how does a boy your size manage a *Thinking Cap* like that?" asked Miss Hearsay.

Mortar swayed side to side. "Good posture," he replied. "And when we get more books it'll be even taller."

At noon, Mortar entered the lunchroom balancing a *Thinking Cap* that was over four-feet tall. The notebooks, writing journals, picture books, three math books, and two dictionaries swayed right and left as he tottered toward the first-grade table. Now a stringy tassel dangled from the corner of the bottom book.

"What's the tassel for, Mighty Mortar," a fifth-grader called out.

Mortar batted the strings from his face. "My *Thinking Cap* was so high I couldn't add more books," he explained. "Watch this."

Mortar tugged the tassel just hard enough so that the tower of books on top of him leaned forward without toppling over. With his other hand, he reached up and pulled his lunchbox off the top of the stack.

The entire lunchroom broke out in cheers.

"You've out done us all, Mortar," said a fourth-grader.

"That's a *Thinking Top Hat*," a fifth-grader chimed in.

"You're *so* amazing, Mortar," said Flo, from the first-grade table.

"Yes, but when I leave school today my *Thinking Cap* will be break all school records," Mortar said, and staggering under the colossal weight, he sat down to eat.

As the afternoon hours passed, the excitement in the school grew. How high would Mortar's *Thinking Cap* be when he left for home?

After the bell rang, Mrs. Hearsay called out, "OK, class, put on your *Thinking Caps*." But instead of gathering their books, the first-graders turned toward Mortar.

Mortar 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*."

Under his classmates' eager stares, Mortar stepped into the coat closet. Minutes later, he emerged with a stack of books on his blue beanie that almost reached the classroom ceiling.

The class gasped.

"It can't be!" shouted a boy.

"Mortar's *Thinking Cap* is as tall as Mortar," called a girl.

"Mortar, you're *so* strong," said Flo.

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

"And I have more books at home that I'll carry to school tomorrow," he said.

"Careful, Mortar," said Mrs. Hearsay. "Don't trip."

Mortar had to pull on the tassel for his *Thinking Cap* to fit through the doorway. Sliding his feet forward, he shuffled into the hallway.

"Here he comes! There he is! Mighty Mortar!"

Students from other classes had lined the hall to wait for the first-grader. "Go, Mortar, go!" they chanted.

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

"You're the champ, Mortar!" said a fifth-grader, scratching his brown beanie.

A fourth-grader stood on a chair. She held a measuring tape up to the stack of books on Mortar's head.

"Five feet seven inches," she announced. "It's a new record! The tallest *Thinking Cap* in the world!"

"Go, Mortar, go!"

Mortar smiled and waved, but oh, how his necks and legs ached. The weight of the books was terrific. He

stumbled to the right and rocked to the left. Despite the pain, he had to make it out of the school.

"Mortar! Mortar! Mortar!"

Mortar reached the office and halted. Flo, from his class, stood there. A thin spiral notebook lay on her head. Giggling, she asked, "Mortar, can I walk home with you."

Mortar blushed. "Sh-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* cool."

The girl removed the notebook from her head and handed it to Mortar.

Mortar steadied himself and pulled the tassel. Taking careful aim, he flipped the notebook upward. It landed squarely on top of his *Thinking Cap*. But as it did, Mortar's knees buckled. The weight was too much. Mortar tipped forward, and the great tower on top of him tipped forward as well. The entire load crashed to the hallway floor.

A hush fell through the hall. The crowd of students stared at Mortar. He still wore the blue beanie. But attached to the beanie's crown was a square piece of wood. The tassel hung from the front corner of the square board. At once, it became clear. All day long, the first-grader had been balancing his books on this firm, flat platform.

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

"Liar! Fraud!" others shouted.

"What a silly looking hat," said Flo.

At that moment, Mr. Knaprucker, the principal, stormed out of his office. He took one look at the books sprawled on the hallway floor and said, "That does it. One of these days, someone will get hurt by a falling *Thinking Cap*. I'm banning them from this school."

The principal returned to the office. He came out holding an odd-looking canvas bag with two straps attached to the back.

"From now on, all students will carry their books and school gear in one of these sacks I've invented," he said. "You strap it on your back. I'm naming it a *knapsack*."

So, that spelled the end of *Thinking Caps.* Although teachers still said, "Put on your *Thinking Caps*," it came to mean start loading your head with ideas. Students loaded their books in knapsacks instead.

As for Mortar, although his classmates forever thought of him as a cheater, his creation of attaching a square board to a beanie became a symbol of achievement. It was named a *mortarboard* and is still worn today. Visit any high school graduation and you'll see the graduates wearing mortarboards, complete with a tassel hanging to one side.

Graduates are proud to wear this funny-looking hat. It shows that for the past twelve years of school, they learned many things, read many books, and passed many tests. It shows that ever since first grade, they have been wearing their imaginary *Thinking Caps*.