

What Is That First-Day Feeling?



Built from *Back-to-School Anxiety Isn't What You Think* by Gawon Ryu, Psychology Editor

Grades 4–8 · About 45 minutes · ★ everyone · ★★ older readers

Name _____

Date _____

1. Before You Read

★ What is one thing you look forward to at the start of a new school year? What is one thing that feels new or different?

★ Think about a place you know really well, like your kitchen or your classroom. How do you know where everything is, and where you belong in it?

2. The Short Version

Read this first. Older readers: read the full article too.

Every August, many students feel a low hum of worry before school starts. Most people say they are nervous about the schoolwork. Psychology editor Gawon Ryu thinks that answer is mostly wrong.

Her clue is timing. The feeling is strongest before the first day, and it drops within a week or two of school starting. But schoolwork keeps growing all fall, so the feeling can't mainly be about work.

Gawon says what runs out each summer is your **map** of school. By June, you knew where you sat, who you sat with, and what each teacher meant. In September, you get a blank map and an old question: "Where do I fit here?" For a very long time, humans needed their group to survive, so the brain treats not knowing where you fit like a danger. The feeling does not mean something is broken. It is your mind asking for directions. Once you find your table, the map comes back.

That is why a neat binder doesn't help much. What helps is **anchor-building**: making one or two things certain ahead of time. You could talk to one classmate before the first day, walk through a new building once, get back to regular bedtimes and mealtimes, or plan something fun for the first weekend.

Gawon also sees good news. A new school year is a fresh start, a chance to try a new role or choose a new table.

3. Word Bank

Word	What it means
uncertainty	not knowing for sure what will happen or how things will turn out
anticipation	thinking about something ahead of time, while you wait for it to arrive
anchor	something steady you can count on; a ship's anchor keeps it from drifting away
cartography	the work of making maps
landmark	something that marks a place or a moment, like a tall tower you can steer by, or a special day like New Year's

★ Use **anchor** in a sentence of your own.

4. Check Your Understanding

★ 1. According to Gawon, when is the back-to-school feeling the strongest?

☐ before the first day ☐ during the first week ☐ right before big tests

★ 2. Why does Gawon think the feeling is NOT mainly about schoolwork? Answer in one sentence.

★ 3. Gawon says that by June, you have a "map" of your school. Name two things that are on that map.

★ 4. The article gives several ways to build anchors before school starts. Name two.

★★ 5. Gawon says a very organized binder "barely touches the dread," but small social steps help a lot. Why does she think that? Use the article in your answer.

5. Gawon's Mind Map

Gawon takes a big feeling, like the worry many people notice every August, and breaks it into its psychological parts. She also checks her idea against the evidence, like when the feeling starts and when it fades. Map the three big ideas from the article. In the last column, you can use an example from the article, or one from your own life if you want.

Idea from the article	What it means, in your own words	An example
The expired map		
Anchor-building		
A fresh start		

★ One thing in the article that surprised me:

6. Think Deeper

★ Gawon describes the back-to-school feeling as "a mind requesting coordinates." (Coordinates are directions that show exactly where something is on a map.) What do you think she means? If you want, add one idea that could help someone find their

coordinates in a new place.

★★ Gawon says a new school year is one of the last fresh starts that everyone gets, and that most adults stop getting blank maps. She thinks the nervous feeling and the chance to change are really the same signal. Do you agree that a feeling can be both nervous and exciting at once? Explain, using the article.

7. Write Your Report

Write a short report answering this question: **Is the back-to-school feeling mostly about schoolwork?**

- **My answer:**
- **Reason 1 (from the article):**
- **Reason 2 (from the article):**
- **One thing the other side would say:**
- **My conclusion:**

For Teachers and Parents: Answer Key

Note: the personal-reflection prompts on this sheet are optional. Students should not be asked to share their own worries in writing.

Word bank sentence: Answers vary; check that the student uses anchor to mean something steady you can count on (or the object that holds a ship in place).

1. Before the first day.
2. The feeling drops within a week or two of school starting, while the schoolwork keeps growing, so if it were about work it would get bigger, not smaller.
3. Any two: where you sat, who you sat with, what each teacher meant or expected, what your role was in each room, who you were at that school.
4. Any two: reaching out to one classmate before the first day, walking through a new building once, getting back to regular sleep and mealtimes in the last week of summer, planning something ordinary and good for the first weekend.
5. Gawon thinks the feeling comes from an expired social map, not from fear of the work. A binder prepares you for schoolwork, so it doesn't fix the real problem. Social anchors, like one familiar face on the first morning, make part of the new map certain before school begins.

Mind map (sample answers): The expired map: over the summer, your sense of where you fit at school runs out, and in September you have to work out where you belong again (e.g., not yet knowing where to sit at lunch). Anchor-building: making one or two things certain before school starts (e.g., planning to meet one friend at the door). A fresh start: a new school year is a chance to change your role or choose a new table, and people use special dates like new years and new semesters to make changes (e.g., deciding to join a new club). Surprise: answers vary; possible answers include that the feeling fades even though the work gets harder, that the brain treats not knowing where you fit like a danger, or that a single familiar face can make the first morning easier.

Think deeper: Open answers. For the ★ question, strong answers explain that the mind wants to know where it stands and where it fits, like someone looking for their spot on a map; helpful ideas can come from the article (one familiar classmate, walking the building). For the ★★ question, strong answers take a side and use the article: Gawon says the worry and the possibility are the same signal read at different volumes, because a blank map also means roles can change; a student who disagrees might say nervous and excited feelings are different and should be handled differently.

Report: Look for a clear answer, two reasons taken from the article (for example, the timing of the feeling and the idea of an expired map), a fair statement of the other side (for example, that people usually describe it as being nervous about schoolwork), and a conclusion that matches the answer.