



How To Give A Quick Direction Your Students Will Eagerly Follow

One of the great frustrations many teachers share is that they can't seem to get their students to follow simple, procedural directions – at least not without considerable effort.

In other words, they can't just say what they want and step back and watch it happen. Invariably, they find themselves refocusing off-task behavior, **offering reminders** and warnings, and guiding and cajoling students through something they should easily be able to do on their own.

And you can't model everything. You can't write a list of steps on an easel or open the floor for questions every time you give a direction. You don't always have an extra five minutes, much less one, to get your students lined up, split into pairs, or pulling materials out for a lesson.

There just isn't enough hours in the day.

To be most effective, and to avoid ending each week wrung out and pondering a career change, you need to be able to give a quick direction, whether a previously practiced routine or not, and *know* it will be followed to a tee.

What follows is a simple, four-step method of giving directions that will empower your students to follow them without hassle or wasted time.

Step #1 - Take advantage of the awkward pause.

After asking for and receiving quiet attention, most teachers pause a single beat before providing directions. It's a natural rhythm of speaking that students have grown accustomed to. So much so that they often use the moment as an opportunity to turn their attention elsewhere.

This near-Pavlovian response can be a major reason students appear lost and in need of your help. To combat this phenomenon, simply pause an extra beat or two – or until it begins to feel awkward. This catches students off-guard, breaks up the learned response, and causes them to keep their focus and attention on you and your message.

Step #2 - Know what you want.

It can't be stressed enough how important it is to have a vision, or moving picture in your mind, of precisely what you want your students *to do*. Too many teachers begin speaking with merely an idea or impression of what they want, which causes them to hem and haw and muddle their message with digressions, qualifiers, and other extraneous information.

When it comes to giving directions, brevity is king. Pare your words down to the barest but critical minimum. Offer a direct path from their seats, or wherever they happen to be, to the fulfillment of your vision. This doesn't mean, however, that you'll skimp on details. It means that you'll provide just enough input for success, but no more.

Step #3 - Use the 'go' strategy.

The 'go' strategy has been covered previously on this site, so we'll keep it brief, but its usefulness is worth its weight in cashmere. To set it up, start your directions with the words, "*When I say go, you're going to . . .*" What this does is prevent your students from jumping ahead and falsely believing that they already know what you want from them.

In other words, it keeps them from moving on mentally or otherwise before hearing and downloading everything you have to say. Knowing that they can't proceed until receiving your 'go' signal frees them to really listen and form their own visualizations.

Note: Be sure and take advantage of another off-rhythm, awkward pause before giving your 'go' signal.

Step #4 - Watch like a hawk.

A common mistake is to give a direction and then toggle your attention to other things. It's rare *not* to see a teacher do this. For example, they'll ask students to line up for a walk to the library, but then while trying to keep a blurry eye on things, turn to grab their keys, collect grading materials, etc.

What this does is remove two powerful modes of influence: your eyes and your presence – both of which have a direct effect on how well students follow directions. To that end, whenever you give a direction, stay in one place until it's completed – watching, observing, taking it in with an attitude that says, "*Show me.*"

A Habit

Like all good learning behavior, following quick, procedural directions is a habit. It's a habit grooved through the clarity of your vision, the economy of your words, the rhythm of your voice, the attitude of your observing posture, and the expectation of excellence that flows unremitting from your every pore.

Your students are largely a product of what they've been exposed to before arriving in your classroom. Whether you size them up as being good or poor listeners is beside the point and has no relevancy to the future. Teachers often say things like, "My class this year just doesn't listen well," as if such a thing were set in stone.

The truth is, all students react predictably to certain teacher behaviors, and with the right strategies you can have the class of active, nimble listeners and doers that you really want – regardless of who is on your roster.

But you have to commit yourself to what *really* works in the classroom. You have to build for yourself **a comprehensive picture of what exceptional classroom management looks like**, from the way you carry yourself to how you respond to misbehavior to how you provide quick-fire directions.

It's doable and within your grasp.

You just have to take it.