

Enjoy this sneak peak of Chapter 1
on “Attention” from our book, *The
Rules of Engagement*.

The Rules of Engagement

**How to Capture Student Attention
& Ignite Active Learning**



Grace Dearborn & Katie Anderson

The Rules of Engagement

How to Capture Student Attention & Ignite Active Learning

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The Rules of Engagement

*How to Capture Student Attention
& Ignite Active Learning*

GRACE DEARBORN

KATIE ANDERSON



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From Grace

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mother has always been my favorite thing about being human. You've been my inspiration for every good thing in my adult life. This book is just one among many. And finally, to my co-author, Katie Anderson: you are one of the most passionate, integrity-filled, creative, and truly decent people I know. Without you, this book never would have happened. Katie, you make me want to be better than I am. Thank you.

From Katie

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INTRODUCTION

*“One child, one teacher, one book
and one pen can change the world.”*

— MALALA YOUSAFZAI,
ACTIVIST & NOBEL PEACE PRIZE LAUREATE

WELCOME, EDUCATORS, to a book written with your challenges, victories, and aspirations at heart. Our hope is simple yet ambitious. Whether you're a first-year teacher brimming with excitement and uncertainty or a veteran educator looking for ways to rekindle your passion, we aim to provide you with ideas, tools, and strategies that work. Our goal is to meet you wherever you are, offering solutions that lead to real, measurable improvement for both you and your students.



A Closer Look

Our goal is to meet you wherever you are, offering solutions that lead to real, measurable improvement.

Why We Wrote This Book

It's no secret that today's classrooms present challenges unlike any we've faced before. Across the country, educators are grappling with plummeting levels of engagement, participation, attention, and achievement. It's tempting to feel defeated by these obstacles, especially when the complexities of an increasingly digital world seem beyond our control.

But here's what keeps us hopeful, and what we want to share with you. We've seen countless teachers rise to the occasion with bravery and ingenuity, rethinking their approaches and meeting the needs of today's students with creativity and care. This book is an extension of that hope. It's a collection of best practices—based in research and brain science—paired with practical examples, inspirational stories, and actionable ideas to help you tackle some of the toughest challenges facing educators today, all without losing sight of the joy that brought you into teaching in the first place. If you're new to teaching, we hope this book helps you start off on the right foot and fall in love with this amazing career. If you're a seasoned teacher, we hope it gives you fresh ideas, helps you tackle a tricky problem, or supports you in mentoring the next generation of educators.

Who We Are

From Grace

I spent more than fifteen years in the classroom and nearly another fifteen visiting other people's classrooms, watching, learning, teaching, and growing. I've had the privilege of traveling across the country, visiting schools in forty-six states, and working with K-12 teachers, mentors, instructional coaches, aides, and administrators. Along the way, I've observed thousands of teachers in action and have been blown away by the heart and dedication of so many educators who give their all to support students, even in the toughest circumstances.

I've seen incredible, inspiring things... and some heartbreaking ones too. These experiences have given me a unique perspective. No matter where I go, kids are kids, and teachers are teachers. The challenges are often the same, as are the solutions. I've seen what works (and what doesn't) to tackle almost every imaginable classroom engagement issue. The ideas, strategies, and lessons that have made the most immediate and practical positive impact on student attention, participation, and academic learning are the ones that my co-author, Katie, and I have shared in this book. We hope you find it as rewarding to read as we did to research and write.



From Katie

I started teaching fresh out of college. Over the years that followed, I became a mentor teacher and earned both my master's degree and my National Board Certification. No matter what or whom I was teaching, my love for students was always at the heart of it. Along the way, I developed a love of cognitive and educational neuroscience, which helped refine my approach to teaching and coaching. Rather than simply teach objectives or standards in isolation, I wanted to help students develop the curiosity and skills to come up with their own questions and chase down the answers. I firmly believe that teaching students to engage in wonder awakens their enjoyment of learning, reduces behavioral issues, and increases enjoyment of instructional time, for both teachers and students! While I'm no longer in the classroom, "my kids" are still my kids. I've been to their weddings and baby showers, and in some cases, even helped them stock their dress-up centers or classroom libraries when they became teachers themselves.

When I started working for Conscious Teaching in 2015, I joined as a teacher who had been profoundly impacted by some of the strategies and techniques you'll find right here in this book. I was so moved by the improvements I saw for myself and my students that I knew I had to be a part of it. Since then, I have had the honor of working with amazing teachers across the U.S. and internationally—teachers who have shared their struggles, their successes, their vulnerability, their laughter, and their tears with me. This book is for them, for their students, for you, and for your students. My co-author, Grace, and I are delighted to bring you ideas to add to the wonderful things you're already doing in your classrooms and schools. We hope to help you ignite (or reignite) your delight in the important work you do.



How to Use This Book

This book is divided into two parts, each focusing on key aspects of effective teaching.

- ▲ **Part 1** explores *Direct and Guided Instruction*
- ▲ **Part 2** delves into *Collaborative and Independent Work*

You don't need to read the book in order. Feel free to jump directly to chapters or sections that address your interests or challenges.

Part 1: Direct & Guided Instruction	Part 2: Collaborative & Independent Work
<p>Chapter 1: Attention Strategies to capture, maintain, and maximize student attention.</p> <p>Chapter 2: Giving Instructions Techniques for creating clarity and ensuring understanding.</p> <p>Chapter 3: Direct Instruction The science and practice behind exceptional teaching.</p> <p>Chapter 4: Class Discussion Methods to increase student participation and engagement.</p>	<p>Chapter 5: Partner Work Promoting equitable effort and meaningful, content-based discussions in pairs.</p> <p>Chapter 6: Group Work Encouraging balanced contributions and productive, content-focused collaboration in groups, centers, or rotations.</p> <p>Chapter 7: Independent Work Fostering productive struggle and enhancing memory retention through independent tasks.</p>

Think of this book as a buffet. Every chapter is packed with ideas, strategies, and insights, but not every option will fit your particular needs or taste, and that's okay. You get to choose what feels most appetizing or useful, adapt it to your classroom, and leave the rest for another day.

While grazing the buffet, remember that a great idea doesn't have to be super complicated to lead to success. Some ideas might work wonders straight out of the gate. Others might require a little more trial and error. Give things a fair chance. Try a strategy for eight to ten days. If it doesn't work, then move on. Teaching is an ongoing experiment. Mistakes, failures, and dead ends are a natural and

important part of professional growth. By focusing on steady progress rather than perfect results, you'll not only see meaningful improvement in your students, but you'll also rediscover the joy and fulfillment that make teaching such a rewarding career.



Food for Thought

Mistakes, failures, and dead ends are a natural and important part of professional growth.

The Role of Neuroscience in This Book

Understanding how the brain learns, processes information, and retains knowledge is at the heart of effective teaching. Neuroscience offers powerful insights that can transform the way we approach everything from lesson planning to classroom management. That's why we've sprinkled "neuroscience nuggets" into every chapter, grounding our strategies in research about attention, memory, motivation, and cognitive development.

For example, you'll learn how to harness the brain's natural curiosity to increase engagement, how to structure lessons that align with the brain's capacity for focused attention, and how to create learning experiences that stick. By understanding the "why" behind the strategies, we hope you'll feel more confident in implementing them and also better equipped to adapt them to meet the unique needs of your students.



Straight Talk

If we want our students to be more engaged, then we must be willing to examine and adjust our own practices first.

A Final Word of Encouragement

If there's one message we hope you take away from this book, it's this: Change starts with us. If we want our students to be more engaged, more motivated, and more open to learning, then we must be willing to examine and adjust our own practices first.

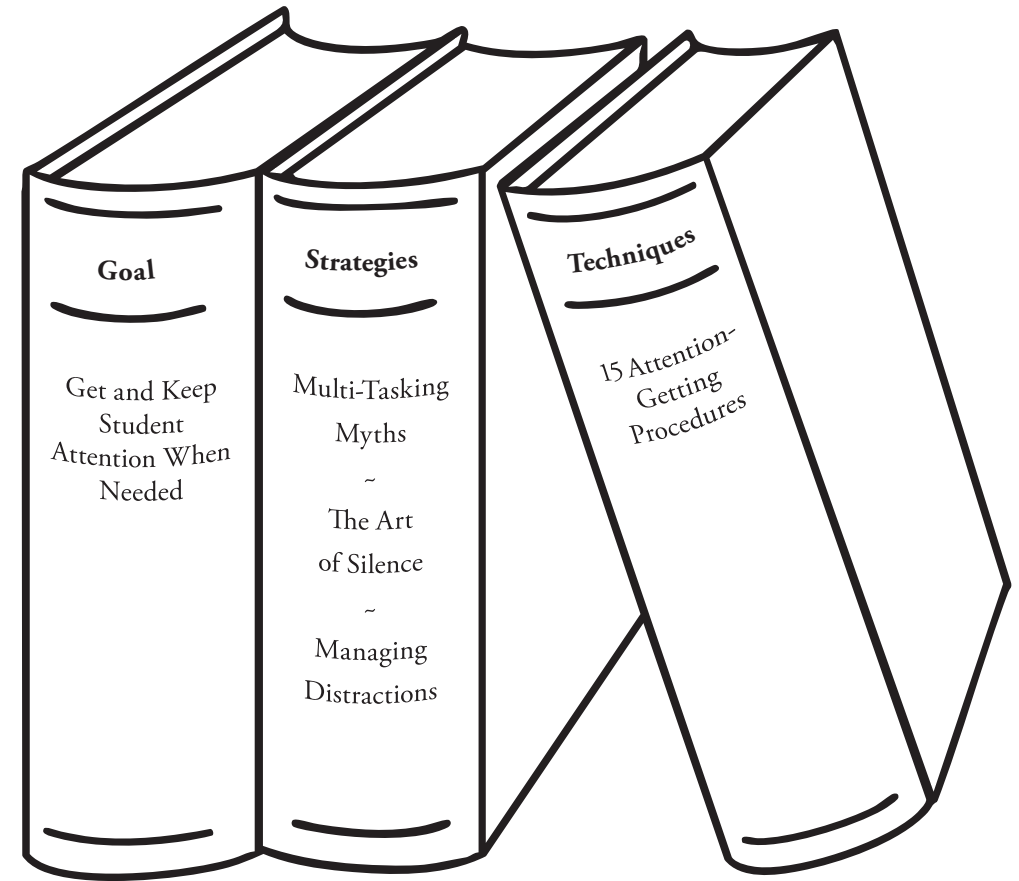
This work isn't easy, but it is profoundly important, and you are not alone in it. By opening this book, you've already taken the first step toward positive change in your classroom. We're here to cheer you on, support you, and celebrate every success along the way.

1

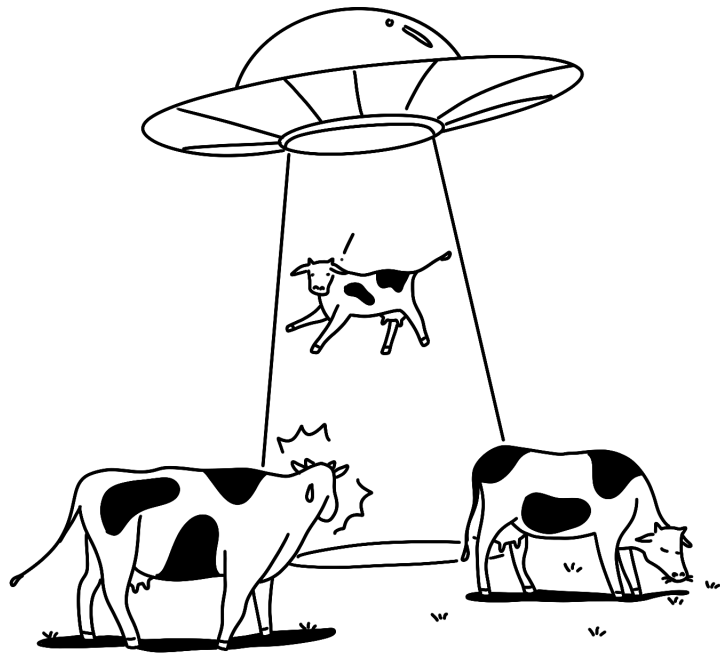
ATTENTION

*“I am not a teacher,
but an awakener.”*

— ROBERT FROST,
AMERICAN POET



CAPTURING AND HOLDING STUDENTS' ATTENTION can feel like trying to catch a shooting star with your bare hands—fleeting and elusive. But here's the good news: the brain is always paying attention to something. The challenge is making sure that the "something" is you. Think of attention like a spaceship's tractor beam. In science fiction, these beams lock onto an object and pull it in for closer inspection. Similarly, a student's attention latches onto a single concept or activity and draws it into the brain for processing. The catch? The brain's tractor beam is limited. It can focus on only one thing at a time.



In this chapter, we'll explore how to harness this beam to draw student focus toward your lessons. From sparking curiosity to sustaining engagement, you'll learn strategies to ensure their attention doesn't drift to the nearest distraction. By the end, you'll have the tools to make your classroom the gravitational center of their learning universe.

The Cocktail Party Effect

The brain's inability to pay attention to more than one thing at a time is sometimes referred to as The Cocktail Party Effect. Imagine you're at a lively social gathering, cocktail (or mocktail) in hand, huddled in a cozy group. You're listening to a person who is telling a story that's... well, not exactly scintillating. Out of courtesy, you nod, adopt a look of interest, and hum affirmatives to support the illusion of your attentiveness.

Meanwhile, in a group behind you, an entirely different tale is unfolding, one that's absolutely riveting. In an astonishing display of mental acrobatics, your attention does a 180-degree back-flip and lands squarely on this new narrative. So there you are, acting like the perfect audience in front, while your single-focused tractor beam of attention is hypnotically drawn to the story at the back. All seems well until the storyteller in front of you asks you a question. Boom! You're busted. You have no clue what they were talking about.

The Myth of Multitasking

You might be skeptical about this one-track attention span business, especially if you are a skilled multitasker. Perhaps you can recall an evening spent grading papers, keeping an eye on the kids, conversing with your partner, and whipping up dinner all at once. Weren't you successfully focusing your attention simultaneously on multiple tasks? Surprisingly, no. That's not how multitasking works.

Multitasking is the ability to switch one's single focus of attention between or among multiple things so quickly that it creates the illusion of paying seamless attention to all those things at once. This can be a useful skill to possess, but it's also an incredibly sophisticated skill that most of our students don't have.



A Closer Look

When we switch our attention between more than one task or point of focus, we become less accurate at all of them.

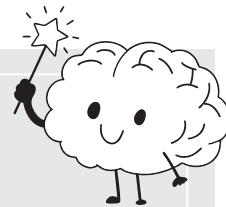
In addition, while multitasking often makes us feel exceptionally industrious, the effect is usually more smoke and mirrors than genuine productivity. Research clearly shows that when we switch our attention between more than one task or point of focus, we become less efficient and less accurate at all of them.¹ That's why, when your child shouts from the next room, "What's 7 x 5?" you might reply, "Oregano!" So, while multitasking is an admirable skill, it's also best used sparingly.

Neuroscience Nugget

Multitasking & Learning

Research shows that multitasking can reduce productivity by up to forty percent.² Why? Because the brain isn't actually doing multiple things at once; it's rapidly switching between tasks. Each time it switches, the brain burns energy and loses efficiency. This constant mental "juggling" depletes oxygenated glucose, the brain's primary fuel for focus, leaving you mentally drained and less effective.³

For students, multitasking leads to shallow learning, poor retention, and higher stress levels. When the brain is forced to divide its attention, it struggles to process information deeply, making it harder to retain and apply knowledge later. When teachers structure their lessons such that students can give their full attention to a single task at a time, students can work more efficiently, retain more information, and feel less overwhelmed.



From Katie

Learning about the Cocktail Party Effect was a revelation to me as a teacher. There were so many things I was doing in my classroom in the name of efficiency that I didn't realize were actually making it harder for my students to learn. For example, when my students walked in, I would be writing notes on the board, asking them to copy them down, and explaining what the notes meant—all at once. I thought I was saving all this time, but I lost a lot of time to reteaching and answering the same questions over and over again.

After learning about the Cocktail Party Effect, I realized I was seeing it play out in my classroom. I started putting the notes up for my students at the beginning of class, then telling them to copy it all down, even if they didn't know what the words meant. While the students copied, I had the chance to circulate and help my students who were slower writers or had challenges with fine motor skills. Once everyone had the notes on the page, we put our pencils down and talked about what the material meant. I was nervous at first that this process would eat into my instructional time, but soon discovered that this new method allowed my students to understand the content more clearly and efficiently. The time I saved in not having to reteach or answer repetitive questions resulted in my having more instructional time. Not only did this reduce my personal frustration with so much reteaching, but I also noticed a significant decrease in my students' off-task behaviors.

Scenarios & Solutions

Let's review:

1. A student's ability to pay attention is limited to one thing at a time.
2. Some, most, or all of our students currently lack the ability to multitask effectively.

How do these deceptively simple ideas allow us to make game-changing tweaks to our teaching methods? Below, we explore six common teaching scenarios where the Cocktail Party Effect was overlooked, the subsequent frustrating outcomes that resulted, and some suggested solutions.

Common Scenario	Frustrating Outcome	Suggested Solutions
<p>TAKING NOTES</p> <p>Teacher draws a diagram on the board and asks students to copy it. While students are busy copying, teacher begins describing what they are seeing and why it's important. Then, teacher adds labels and graphics to the diagram.</p>	<p>Students copy as teacher writes and talks, but students aren't listening because their attention is on writing/copying. At the end of the teacher's explanation, students have the diagram on the page but no real knowledge to go with it. Teacher is frustrated when very few students appear to have retained important content.</p>	<p>Teacher asks students to copy diagram from board or hands out a copy of the diagram. Teacher waits silently while copying or passing around is done. Teacher uses a signal to get student attention and then describes what is happening in the diagram. Teacher remains quiet or circulates while students take notes on content or prepare for questions.</p>
<p>LESSON PREP</p> <p>In preparation for a lesson, teacher drops stacks of papers in the middle of each group (or on the first desk in each row), then asks students to (1) distribute papers to group or row members, (2) keep a copy, and (3) write their name and the date at the top.</p>	<p>Students can't process what teacher is saying because their attention is on managing materials. Teacher is frustrated when many students seem confused about what to do. Teacher has to repeat instructions to multiple students individually and eventually to the entire class.</p>	<p>Teacher asks students to manage materials as needed to prepare for a lesson. Teacher waits silently until students are done, then uses an attention-getting signal. Having gained all students' attention, teacher explains what to do with materials.</p>

Common Scenario	Frustrating Outcome	Suggested Solutions
<p>VIDEO LESSON</p> <p>Teacher passes out a list of questions and then begins showing an educational video. Teacher tells students to answer questions while the video is playing.</p>	<p>At the end of the video, many students have several missing answers because as they put their focused attention into answering one question, the answer to the next question went by. Teacher is frustrated with the perceived lack of effort and poor task completion by students.</p>	<p>Teacher gives students a list of questions to answer and has them silently read the questions before starting the video. Teacher shows three to five minutes of video and asks students to watch and listen carefully, but to not begin writing. Teacher pauses video and asks students to answer what they can. Teacher repeats the process, pausing every few minutes until video is done.</p>
<p>TWO-MINUTE WARNING</p> <p>Students are working in pairs, groups, or independently on an assigned task. As the time for the task is nearing its end, teacher stands up, gives a two-minute warning, and makes an announcement to the class about what to do when they are done.</p>	<p>Most students do not hear teacher's instructions as their attention remains on the task in front of them. Teacher is frustrated when students begin raising hands and asking what to do with their completed work. Teacher has to repeat instructions to multiple students individually and eventually to the entire class.</p>	<p>As the time for an individual, pair, or group task is nearing its end, teacher stands up and uses a signal to get student attention. Teacher announces a two-minute warning and tells the class what to do when the time is up, as well as what to do if they finish early. Teacher checks for understanding of given directions. Teacher has class resume work.</p>

Common Scenario	Frustrating Outcome	Suggested Solutions
<p>TRANSITIONS</p> <p>As students are working quietly in pairs or groups on a task, teacher quietly asks a few volunteers to pass back completed, graded work from a previous day.</p>	<p>Class quickly becomes louder and less focused as their attention is drawn away from the task and toward either the people passing out work or the work/grades being returned. Teacher is frustrated when the now loud and distracted students won't get back on task.</p>	<p>Teacher circulates and silently uses a combination of physical presence and nonverbal cues to keep pairs/groups quietly focused on the task. When the task is completed or time is up, teacher allows for a short brain-break while several volunteers pass out previously completed/graded work.</p>
<p>SILENT SUPPORT</p> <p>Students are working silently and independently. Teacher is circulating and tries using a quiet voice to redirect individual off-task behaviors or help struggling students.</p>	<p>While teacher helps or redirects individual students, other students get off task and start talking because the teacher's voice distracts them away from the task. Teacher is frustrated as the noise level escalates, requiring constant effort to get class back to silent focus.</p>	<p>When students are working silently, teacher is silent too. Teacher circulates and nonverbally redirects off-task behavior by using hand signals or small, visual directive cards. Nonverbal help is given to struggling students as well, using gestures and/or modeling. When help must be given verbally, a handful of words are whispered to a student. If more than a handful of words are necessary, teacher brings student to the corner of the room or to teacher's desk and whisper-helps them there.</p>

From Grace

Once I was aware of the brain's limited attention, I began noticing how frequently I was disregarding it. For example, after I distributed a quiz to my class one day, one of my students approached me to ask a question. The student was concerned because she couldn't solve the third problem.

Upon looking at it, I realized I'd made a typo that rendered the problem unsolvable. I stood up and announced to my class, "Hey everyone, there's a problem with the quiz. There's a typo in number three. Where it says 46, it should say 48. Please change it."

That night, while grading those quizzes, I noticed that less than half the class had made the change to question number three. At first, I was frustrated, asking myself, "Why don't they listen?" But ultimately I realized it wasn't them, it was me. I hadn't effectively gained their attention. Well, I had attracted the attention of a few. But those were the ones with the magical "teacher voice chip" in their brains. (You know the ones.) They're like human radars, latching onto every word I say. But the rest of my class? Their attention remained firmly on the quiz. In retrospect, what I should have said was something like this:

"Class, pencils down. Everyone, please pause and look at me. Now that I have your attention, please notice on the board that question number three has been changed. Please make a note of it. I now return you to your regularly scheduled quiz." Would more students have gotten number three right? Who knows. But at least more kids would have had the opportunity.

Straight Talk

Once I was aware of the brain's limited attention, I began noticing how frequently I was disregarding it.

Attention Signals

Have you ever struggled to get a class's attention and ultimately ended up begging or yelling? Or perhaps you have resorted to wackier behaviors, like off-key singing, whimsical dances, melodramatic speeches, or throwing paper balls? While outrageous strategies can occasionally be successful in the short term, they generally become draining and unmanageable in the long term. They even can lead to rising tension for both teachers and students.

The challenge of attracting the tractor-beam focus of one person is hard enough. Multiplying that by thirty kids—and then sustaining it—can sometimes feel insurmountable, yet teaching can't occur without this skill. Having a pocketful of helpful techniques can be a game-changer. So, let's fill those pockets!

Here are our six favorite attention-getting strategies, with multiple variations of each type. See what you like, what you can add to your back pocket, or what new ideas they spark!

1. Call and Response: Verbal

With verbal call and response techniques, students must pause in their conversations to respond. You might need to repeat the signal twice to get 100 percent cooperation, and that's perfectly fine. Some students won't hear you the first time, but by the second round, everyone will be with you.

Elementary Example:

Teacher: 1, 2, 3, eyes on me.
Students: 1 and 2, eyes on you.

Secondary Example:

Teacher: Class, class.
Students: Yes, yes.

Straight Talk

While outrageous strategies can occasionally be successful in the short term, they generally become draining and unmanageable in the long term.

In the secondary example, the “yes, yes” mirrors the tone of the “class, class.” For example, if the teacher says, “class-ity class,” then students respond, “yes-ity yes.” If the teacher extends the words “classssss, classssss,” then students respond “yessssss, yessssss.”

K-12 Examples:

Teacher: A hush fell over the crowd.
Students: Hush. (*They elongate the “sh” sound for a few seconds until everyone is silent.*)

Teacher: Waterfall, Waterfall!
Students: Shhhh. (*Their response sounds like a waterfall.*)

Teacher: Agoo?
Students: Amee!

This last call and response originated in Ghana and is commonly used by African storytellers to ensure the audience is still with them. The teacher says, “Agoo!” (pronounced ah-GO), which translates to “Pay attention” or “Listen up!” Students respond, “Amee!” (pronounced ah-MAY), which means “You have my attention!”

Pro Tip



Mix It Up. Once your students have mastered one call-and-response idea, spice things up by introducing another. When they're comfortable with two or three options, mix and match to keep it fun and to prevent any one routine from becoming stale, or just background noise.

2. Call and Response: Physical

Physical call and response signals, like clapping rhythms, are fun and require students to put down their pencils and other materials in order to respond. In addition, physical movement increases circulation, which increases alertness.

K-12 Example:

Teacher claps, bangs, snaps, or stomps out a simple rhythm. Students who hear it mimic the rhythm in response. Teacher repeats the same rhythm a second time. Students mimic it again. Teacher chooses a slightly more complex rhythm. Students mimic it. Teacher repeats the second rhythm. Students mimic it again.

3. Call and Response: Combination

In these combinations, the teacher gives a verbal cue and the students respond with either a nonverbal, physical movement or a phrase combined with movement. Combination call and response strategies cater to several different learning styles, thereby increasing effectiveness with a wider range of students.

K-12 Examples:

Example 1:

Teacher states, “If you can hear my voice, clap once.” Students clap once. Teacher states, “If you can hear my voice, clap twice.” Students clap twice. Teacher states, “If you can hear my voice clap three times.” Students clap three times.

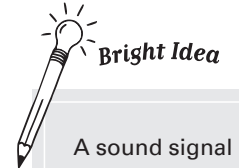
Example 2:

Teacher says, “Eyes.” Students clap once. Teacher says, “Ears.” Students clap twice. Teacher says, “Mouths.” Students clap three times.

Example 3:

Teacher quietly says, “If you can hear my voice, put your hands on your head.” Students who hear the teacher comply. Teacher quietly

says, “If you can hear my voice, give me two thumbs up.” Students give two thumbs up. Teacher quietly says, “If you can hear my voice, snap your fingers four times.” Students snap. The snapping sounds in the room will cue students who are still not aware that the teacher is trying to get their attention. Now the teacher has everyone’s attention. Teacher says, “Class, hands together, eyes up.” Students are now all at attention.



Bright Idea

A sound signal can be quieter, gentler, and much more effective than trying to get student attention verbally.

Example 4:

Teacher states, “All Stop!” Students respond, “Hands on Top!” and place both their hands on top of their heads.



4. Sound Signals

Sound signals “speak” to a different part of the brain than our voices do. Therefore, using a sound signal can be quieter, gentler, and much more effective than trying to get student attention verbally. Using a sound signal also gives your voice (and frustration level) a break! Some common sounds you can try include:

- ▲ Chimes: 1-bar chime or 3-bar octave chime
- ▲ Drums: Steel tongue drum, bongo drum, tambourine drum
- ▲ Bells, Buttons, Buzzers: hotel bell, doorbell, game buzzer, multi-noise buttons
- ▲ Whistles: Train whistle, slide whistle

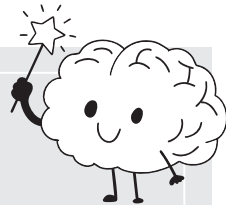
To achieve complete cooperation, be ready to repeat a sound signal three times over six to twelve seconds. Not everyone will process or have time to respond to it the first time you play it. For instance, ringing a chime once might only register with a few students. However, playing it three times, with brief pauses in between, allows every student's brain enough time to process and respond.

Neuroscience Nugget

Sound Signals & Attention

Different parts of the brain process different types of information. The left hemisphere is primarily responsible for language, logic, and analytical thinking, while the right hemisphere focuses on the overall sound spectrum—emotion, tone, and musicality.^{4,5,6} When students are engaged in academic tasks, their left hemisphere is hard at work, processing complex information and requiring significant cognitive effort.

Interestingly, human voices are also processed by the left hemisphere, which can make it challenging for a teacher's voice to break through and grab attention when students are deeply focused. However, sound signals—like a chime, bell, or even a subtle tone—are processed by the right hemisphere of the brain. This hemisphere is better equipped to detect and respond to auditory cues, cutting through the noise and capturing attention, even during intense left-brain activity.⁷



Some Sound Advice

There are a few important factors to consider when choosing a sound signal. If you have students on the autism spectrum or students coming from challenging home environments, consider avoiding loud, sharp sounds, which can trigger emotional distress. Above all, make sure the sound signal produces a sound you can tolerate hearing multiple times a day. A dog's squeaky toy might seem like a cute and readily available sound signal, but we know more than one teacher who has sent an annoying sound signal to the doghouse before a single day was out. Remember, a strategy can be successful only if you actually want to use it!

Straight Talk

A strategy can be successful only if you actually want to use it!

5. Songs & Music

Using music as an attention-getter is most effective when a physical transition precedes the need for student attention, or when getting attention might take a little longer. For example, you might use a song when students need to find their seats and then become quiet, or when students are working in groups and need a little longer to finish their activity and clean up before their tractor beams shift to you.

When you require the attention of your class, play a short piece of music from an engaging or amusing song. Teach students that they have until the end of that song to complete their task and be seated silently with their eyes on you.

Here are some suggestions you could experiment with:

- ▲ TV commercial jingles from the 60s, 70s, & 80s
- ▲ Theme songs from old TV shows from the 50s, 60s & 70s
- ▲ Theme songs from modern children's shows, cartoons, anime, or video games
- ▲ Instrumental theme songs from famous movies (Star Wars, Indiana Jones, Jaws, etc.)

- ▲ Popular music from the 50s (this era's music is typically free of explicit content)
- ▲ Current popular music (preview the content for appropriateness!)
- ▲ Play a musical theme yourself on a flute, guitar, keyboard, or other instrument

Pro Tip

Shorten Songs. If you've chosen a song or jingle that is too long, you can create a clip of the song that is the exact length you want. If you're unsure how to shorten or create a clip, ask one of your teenage students or a tech-savvy teacher on your campus to help you.

6. Visuals and Gestures

Visuals and gestures allow teachers to communicate without speaking. Students are already hearing our voices too much, which is why they so frequently tune us out. More generally, the fewer words we speak, the more power each word has. When we can communicate our need for attention without using our voices, it's a win-win.

- ▲ Create a visual for silence that can be held up or projected when you need quiet. Direct students to look at the visual. Wait eight to twelve seconds while students match it.
- ▲ Use gestures, such as counting down from five, by holding fingers in the air.
- ▲ Use hand signals that students must replicate, like covering your mouth with one hand while raising the other.
- ▲ Dim, flicker, or turn off the lights in the room.

The effectiveness of visual and gesture-based cues is often enhanced when paired with a sound signal or verbal cue. For instance, ring a hotel

bell before announcing, "I need quiet in five seconds," then count down silently with your fingers. Alternatively, you could flicker the lights and then hold up a sign or use a predetermined "quiet" hand signal that students need to match. Combined cues like these also better accommodate students with diverse needs.

**Food for Thought**

The fewer words we speak, the more power each word has.

Ensuring Success

The success or failure of any attention-getting strategy hinges less on the particular technique being employed and more on how strategically it is selected, how effectively it is taught, and how consistently it is reinforced.

Several of the attention-getting strategies offered on the previous pages might be appropriate for your group of students. When selecting one to try, teach it in the same way you would introduce new academic content. Our model for successful procedural teaching is called The 8 x 8. It includes eight steps followed by eight days of reinforcement.

**A Closer Look**

The success or failure of any strategy hinges less on the particular technique being employed and more on how consistently it is reinforced.

The 8x8 Model for Teaching Procedures

1. Introduce, explain, and model the procedure
2. Check for student understanding
3. Practice the procedure with students (practice for the sake of practice)
4. Debrief the practice with the class; modify and reteach as necessary
5. Explain the consequences for individuals who do not cooperate during the next practice
6. Practice a second time
7. Follow through with consequences for individuals who need them
8. Use and reinforce the procedure consistently for eight school days

When selecting attention-getting signals, remember to consider any students with special needs. For example, if you have students in the class who are deaf or hard of hearing, require multiple opportunities to respond because of neurodivergence, or whose trauma responses are activated by flashing lights or high-pitched noises, be sure to choose a signal that is inclusive for all.

Overcoming Resistance

When you find yourself encountering wide-spread student resistance to new classroom procedures, it can be tempting to abandon the new strategy because “it isn’t working.” But don’t throw in the towel too soon! Take a deep breath and remind yourself that if it feels like your students “exist to resist,” it is not personal. In fact, it’s often a crucial part of their learning process. It is perfectly normal and developmentally appropriate for students to test our resilience. Students test our boundaries to see where they are, whether we’ll hold them firm, and whether we can do it while continuing to provide a safe and structured learning environment. We can pass these tests using a combination of care, consistency, and accountability. However, not all accountability measures are created equal.

The Art of “Waiting for Silence”

Imagine you are a new teacher, struggling to get your students to respond to your attention signal. A seasoned colleague whom you admire advises you to stand your ground, maintain consistency, and

wait patiently for as long as it takes until all students are silent. As you reflect on this advice, you wonder, “How long is too long to wait?” Or, “What if my students never quiet down?” These are valid concerns, as “waiting for silence” does not work equally well for all educators in all situations. Some students might chat or flutter or rustle or turn cartwheels as long as you let them.

Straight Talk

“Waiting for silence” does not work equally well for all educators in all situations.

Waiting for silence works when the teacher’s silence generates some discomfort among students. Teachers who recommend this technique have success with it because they have previously established their authority as the person-in-charge in the classroom in numerous visible and invisible ways. Their students already trust and feel some level of respect for them. When these teachers stand silently waiting, their students are motivated to become quiet to maintain personal and social harmony within the group. However, when a different teacher attempts this same strategy, they could end up waiting all day.

Mastering Student Accountability

Below are an elementary and a secondary example of how teachers can lay the necessary groundwork to become respected and assertive classroom leaders, able to successfully employ an accountability strategy such as “waiting for silence.” If you’re already an amazing, confident, assertive, and effective classroom leader, then see how our examples compare with your methods, and maybe consider how you can use these ideas to support other teachers who are still finding their way.

Elementary Example

Teacher plays a sound signal for silence at the carpet. Only half the class becomes attentive. Teacher plays the sound signal again. Several students are still talking, wandering, or generally ignoring the teacher.

Teacher: Those of you who are silent and listening, thank you for following the chime procedure. Well done. You may go back to your desks, take out your Play-Doh kits, and play quietly at your desks. The eight of you (*teacher points to or calls the names of the eight students who were not quiet or attentive*) stay here, please.

The majority of the class transitions back to their desks. The eight non-cooperative students remain at the carpet.

Students: Can we go play with Play-Doh too?

Teacher: Your classmates get to play with Play-Doh because they were making good choices. They became quiet when I played the quiet chime. You all did not make that good choice, but I know you can. So, we are going to stay at the carpet and practice. I'm going to ask you to talk with the person next to you. When you hear my quiet chime, I want you to stop talking, put your hands in your laps, and put your eyes on me, like this (*teacher demonstrates*). Let's try.

The teacher does a few rounds of this game with the students at the carpet, perhaps making it more challenging for them to comply by giving more entertaining topics to discuss each time and/or having students move or stand while they talk. This can be a fun challenge that keeps getting more engaging.

After ten minutes, the teacher announces a two-minute warning to the students at their desks, asking them to clean up their Play-Doh and put everything away. During these two minutes, the teacher wraps up with the students at the carpet.

Students: Do we get to play with Play-Doh now?

Teacher: You did well practicing today. I'm proud of you. The next time we are at a carpet lesson, we will see if you have trained your ears and bodies to respond to the quiet chime and earn some Play-Doh time. For right now, though, Play-Doh time is over.

The teacher transitions everyone to their desks for the next activity.

At every carpet lesson for the next day or two, the teacher repeats this process if needed until no more than two students are still being kept at the carpet for practice. Now the teacher has established both the

necessary authority with the class and the importance of following directions and procedures. Traditional carpet lessons are resumed.

The one or two students who are still struggling to follow the chime procedure are worked with individually behind the scenes to help them become successful.

Secondary Example

Teacher plays a sound signal for silence at the beginning of the period. Only half the class becomes attentive.

Teacher plays the sound signal again. A few more students come to attention, but eight or more students are still talking, wandering, or generally ignoring the signals. Teacher verbally redirects several of the inattentive students in a calm but firm voice, "Casey, I need your attention," "Jess, sit down and stop talking," "Chris, turn around and come to quiet."

Teacher: I'm going to play my quiet, three-bar chime one more time. Everyone who is silent and seated with their hands still and eyes on me will get ten minutes of free time at the end of the period. Anyone who is still talking will have to meet with me during that time to practice following the chime procedure. Here we go.

Teacher plays chime. Teacher privately writes down the names of everyone who is not quiet and then moves on with the lesson. For the rest of the period, teacher repeats this process whenever the chime is used, adding and removing names from the list as needed, until there are only ten to fifteen minutes left in class.

Teacher: There are twelve minutes left in the period. I need to see the following people at my desk (*teacher reads names from list*). Everyone else, please pack up and then you may quietly do anything appropriate as long as you are seated, using quiet voices, and not using cell phones.

The teacher brings non-cooperative students to a small group and facilitates a twelve-minute small group lesson on following the chime procedure.

Teacher: You all struggled to get quiet when I played my quiet signal chime today, so we are going to practice for a few minutes right now. When I see that you can do it three times correctly, you can rejoin the class for free time. Okay, here we go: I'm going to ask you to talk with the person/people next to you. When you hear my quiet chime, I want you to become quiet immediately, with your hands still and eyes on me. Let's try.

The teacher does a few rounds of practice with the students, making it more challenging for them to comply each round by giving more engaging topics to discuss and/or by having students move or stand while they talk. The teacher calmly deflects all resistance.

Student A: This is stupid.

Teacher: It's okay that you think so. But it's also great for teaching and learning and will make it easier for us to work together this year.

Student B: I'm not doing this.

Teacher: That's your choice. But then you will miss out on free time today and tomorrow, and you will have to come in to practice this with me one-on-one at lunch or after school instead. It's up to you.

When most students in the small group lesson have successfully come to quiet three times upon hearing the chime, the teacher wraps up.

Teacher: Excellent. That's a great improvement. Now I see that most of you can do it. Tomorrow in class, when I play my chime, I expect all of you to become quiet immediately. If you don't, I will

write your name down, and you will come in at lunch or after school to practice with me one-on-one, until I'm sure you can do it on your own. Those whose names I read out may now join your classmates for the remainder of free time.

The teacher releases students who cooperated in the small group lesson but holds back those who have yet to cooperate three times. The teacher continues to practice with them or has a personal conversation to try to uncover the source of their reluctance and/or make a personal, positive connection with them.

Pro Tip



Change the Name. If you are intrigued by these types of interventions, but feel uncomfortable offering "free time," then call the time something else, i.e. "preferred-activity time" or "autonomous-educational time" or "learning-intervention time."

Pulling It All Together

As you reflect on the scenarios, you might have some concerns about loss of instructional time, which is a necessary compromise when initially implementing these strategies. However, any academic time you "lose" to reinforcing effective procedures will be more than made up for by how immediately you can obtain your entire class's attention throughout the rest of the year. Continually intervening with uncooperative students all year long would consume huge swaths of class time, not to mention your energy. Ultimately, it is much more efficient, effective, and enjoyable to clarify your expectations up front and demonstrate your willingness to hold students accountable, firmly but respectfully.

Straight Talk

Any academic time you "lose" to reinforcing effective procedures will be more than made up for by how immediately you can obtain attention in the future.

After a teacher has consistently applied appropriate interventions as described in the two examples shared on the previous pages, it's time to add in a technique like "silent wait time." Imagine this scenario: A teacher from one of the intervention scenarios plays their chime. Most students immediately settle down, but not all. A small handful are still chatting.

The teacher gently says, "I played my silent chime. I need everyone to be silent. I will wait." The memory of the consequence for ignoring the chime prompts the stragglers to quickly quiet down. The teacher then reinforces the chime procedure by kindly stating, "I really appreciate how most of you came to silence when I played the chime, and how the rest of you came to silence when I asked you to and waited. Just a reminder, though, I should not have to ask or wait. When you hear the chime, your silence should be automatic and immediate." Then the teacher resumes the lesson.

Managing Disruptions & Distractions

Have you ever known a teacher whose class was so tightly controlled that nothing could impede their students' learning? When a bee came buzzing in, snow began falling gently outside, or the principal walked into the room unannounced, not a single head turned, eye blinked, or brain short-circuited? Have you ever seen that level of focus? Nope, neither have we.

When unavoidable and unforeseen distractions mercilessly steal away our students' attention, how do we get that attention back? The answer lies within the Runaway Stagecoach Principle.

The Runaway Stagecoach Principle

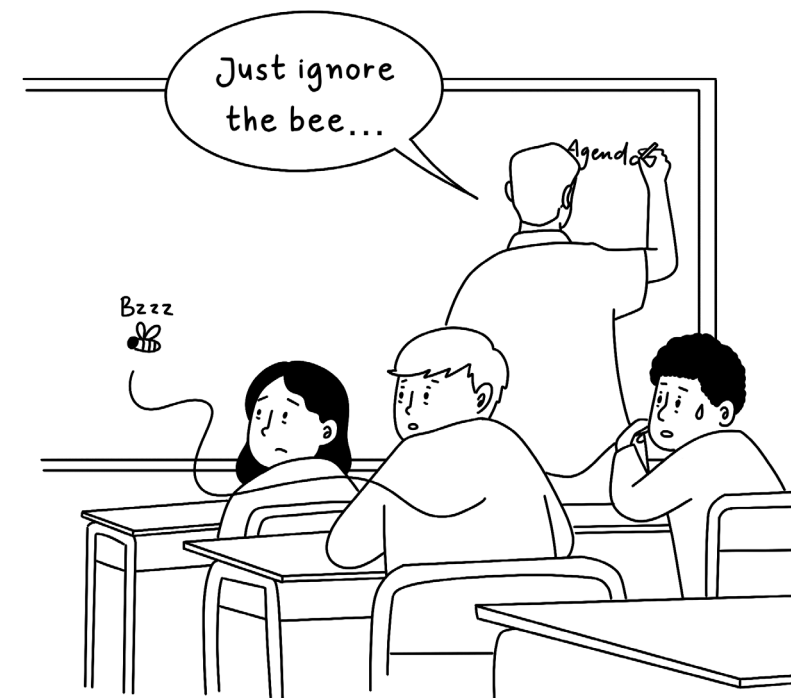
Visualize yourself as the driver of an Old West stagecoach whose horses are suddenly spooked and start charging wildly away. Your first impulse might be to sharply pull back on the reins to regain control,

but that could cause the horses to topple over, dragging the coach with them, and endangering everyone inside. As the driver, if you want to regain control, you essentially have to bravely jump onto the lead horse, ride out its initial shock, wait until it slows just a little bit on its own, and then steer it back in the direction you want it to go.

Similarly, when a distraction strikes in the classroom, we need to give students a little rein before redirecting their attention to where we want it to be. Let's look at how to do that:

The Bee

When a bee (or any other insect, rodent, or animal that students generally fear) enters the room, you might say to your class, "Just ignore the bee, and the bee will ignore you." While it's a good message that might subdue anxiety in a few students, everyone else will still be distracted, their minds buzzing with questions: "Where is it? What if it stings me? Is it near me? What if it crawls up my pant leg? What if it lands in my hair?"



If we apply the Runaway Stagecoach Principle to this situation, we will conclude that the bee must leave the room—and no one is going to read or write or do math equations until it does. Allow the horses to lope a little while you use that time to capture or remove the bee. Once the drama is over, gently pull up the reins, ring a chime, or otherwise redirect student focus.

The Snow

If you've ever taught in a place where it snows, you will know that seeing the first snowfall of the season outside a classroom window instantly thwarts all learning.

Straight Talk

Taking three minutes to address a distraction is ultimately a better use of time than spending the next twenty minutes trying to prevent students from being distracted.

To manage this distraction, acknowledge and address it head-on, making it a part of the learning instead of an obstacle. Use an attention-getting signal to bring everyone's attention to you. "Class, it's snowing, and it's glorious. When I say 'go,' we are all going to turn in our chairs (or go to the windows), and we're just going to admire the snowfall for forty-eight seconds. When those forty-eight seconds are up, I'll signal again, and we'll come back together to talk about the snow for a few moments before we continue with our lesson." Taking three minutes to feed the class's need to be mesmerized by the snow is ultimately a better use of time than spending the next twenty minutes trying to prevent them from watching or talking about it.

From Grace

Years ago, I was teaching at a high school in Northern California. Roughly every three weeks, my fifth-period class was interrupted by the noise of a maintenance worker who mowed the lawn right outside our classroom windows. It was so loud

that all conversation and learning had to stop. I complained to the administration, but my frustrated pleas fell on deaf ears. Out of desperation, I decided to embrace the situation.

The next time the mower's roar invaded our class, I had all my students get up, go to the windows, and wave to or thumbs-up the maintenance person as he went by. For eight minutes we watched the lawn-mowing process, waved, and did absolutely zero work. This became our routine. Eventually, my class looked forward to this interruption so much they would burst into spontaneous applause and rush to the windows any time they heard the mower approaching.

In December, in the spirit of the holiday season, I encouraged my students to show appreciation to the maintenance worker by going to the windows to hold up signs of encouragement as he rode by on the mower. They said things like: "Good Job," "Thanks for the break," "The lawn looks nice," and "Happy Holidays." To my surprise, right before winter break, the maintenance worker reciprocated our goodwill with a tin of homemade cookies. The note that accompanied this delicious gift read: "From my wife. She told me to say thank you because I always return home in a good mood on the days I mow by your windows."

While some might question the loss of eight minutes of class time every three weeks, I maintain that the sense of community and camaraderie borne out of this routine more than compensated for the lost instructional time. Also, attempting to force learning in an environment where it's impossible would have yielded no academic returns anyway. We transformed mowing from a recurring source of frustration into a recurring source of joy.

Bright Idea

A recurring source of frustration can be transformed into a recurring source of joy.

From Katie

I was leading a professional development workshop with some fabulous educators in Virginia when I encountered an unexpected opportunity to model the Runaway Stagecoach Principle. I was presenting in the cafeteria, facing a large wall of windows that everyone else in the room had their backs to. In the middle of my workshop, a beautiful mother deer and her fawn wandered out of the woods behind the cafeteria and began to eat the grass on the lawn. I was so distracted and charmed that I had trouble focusing on what I was supposed to say next and honestly felt bad that everyone else was missing out! I made a split-second decision to solve my distraction and teach an extra strategy to boot.

I told my group, “Friends, I have to stop right here for a moment. I’m very distracted, so I want to let you in on it, and then we’re going to turn it into a strategy you can take back to your classes. When I say ‘go,’ I want everyone to turn around and look out the windows. There is a mother deer and her fawn; they are absolutely wonderful, and I can’t keep teaching knowing that you might miss out on seeing them. When you hear my chime, please turn back toward me. Ready? Go.”

Everyone turned, and there were smiles and gasps of appreciation all around. When I rang my chime twenty-three seconds later, everyone turned their attention back to the front of the room, and I launched into an explanation of the Runaway Stagecoach Principle. It was a great reminder that these strategies aren’t just for our students; we can use them to support ourselves and our colleagues as well. Thanks, deer!

A Closer Look

Effective engagement strategies aren’t just for our students. We can use them, too.

The Loudspeaker

“Please excuse this interruption” are four words all teachers dread. Loudspeaker interruptions are so common that many teachers choose to dismiss them. Some try to continue teaching or instruct students to carry on with their work. However, thanks to those singularly focused tractor beams of attention, a more effective approach might be to use the loudspeaker as a spontaneous brain break.

**Bright Idea**

Encourage students to pause their work and just listen when the loudspeaker interrupts a lesson.

For example, you can encourage students to pause their work, fold their hands, close their eyes, and listen to the announcement. Once it’s over, ask students to take a quiet moment, breathe deeply, contemplate the announcement, or peacefully engage with their thoughts. Afterward, invite them to ask any questions they have about the announcement, address anything that comes up, and then return students to their work.

The Principal

When an administrator walks into the room unannounced, all eyes will swing to the door. Even if you can get students to put their eyes back on you, they will still be thinking about the administrator: “Why is the principal in the room? Is my teacher in trouble? Am I in trouble? What’s happening!?” Talk about a Runaway Stagecoach moment; it’s as if the sheriff has walked in, spurs jangling!

Rather than fighting this distraction, go with it: “Class, you might have noticed that the principal is here and will be observing for a few minutes. Everyone please turn and say, ‘Good day to you, Principal.’ Excellent, now back to me, please. When I say ‘go,’ turn to a partner and share two things we were learning right before the principal walked into the room.” After students engage in a quick forty-five-second conversation, allow a few to share out and then proceed with the lesson.

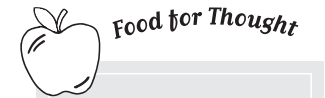
From Grace

I had a colleague years ago who taught his classes a great distraction-recovery technique. Students applauded whenever anyone unexpectedly walked into the room, but then got right back to what they were doing, as if nothing had happened. When a new principal came into the school—and first visited that classroom—the applause was startling. Over the next several weeks, though, the principal made several more unannounced drop-in observations. My colleague got a little nervous, since the former principal had not visited as often. He eventually asked the principal if there was something wrong. The principal replied, “No. Why?” My colleague responded, “Well, you’ve been dropping into my room at least once a week for the last three weeks.” The principal broke into a huge grin and said, “Oh! No. I’m sorry to have worried you. When I’m having a particularly bad moment, I walk into your room for the applause.”

Emotional Distractions

The Runaway Stagecoach Principle can be applied to emotional disruptions as well. Picture this: Right before your class begins, a fight breaks out in the hallway. Many of your students witness it, leading to feelings of unease or distress. In situations like these, it’s tempting to ask students to “let it go” or “focus on the task at hand,” but let’s be real. A fight is dramatic, and everyone’s adrenaline is up, up, up. Instead of asking for the impossible, we can allow the horses to keep trotting for a bit. Acknowledge people’s emotions, allow some brief processing time, and even answer a few questions, if appropriate. Then gently guide their attention back. “Class, I understand that witnessing the fight in the hallway might have upset you. We are going to take ninety quiet seconds to just be still and thoughtful. You can take some deep breaths, draw, or jot

some things down to discuss with a friend later. I’m also here if you need to talk right now. After our calm moment, we’ll delve into today’s lesson.” This method validates the students’ feelings while still allowing the business of class to move forward.

**Food for Thought**

Creating positive, lasting change with our students requires a holistic and thorough approach.

In a Nutshell

Teaching an attention-getting procedure (or any other procedure) requires more than just telling students what we want and how we want it. Creating positive, lasting change with our students requires a holistic and thorough approach. We explain, model, practice, debrief, modify, assess, and reinforce. This maximizes the possibility that our “stagecoach” and all its occupants arrive safely and surely on the path to consistency and accountability, where all things are possible.

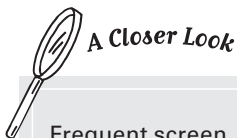
Technology & Attention

No conversation about student attention in education today is complete without acknowledging the role of technology. Gone are the days of the rolling TV cart that thrilled Gen-X students. Today’s classrooms are highly tech-driven, but is more always better? While technology’s potential is undeniable, mounting research calls attention to its significant role in diminishing students’ attention spans and cognitive development. Here’s a closer look at some common challenges and some practical ways to address them.

Screen Time

Children today are increasingly reliant on screens, often engaging with devices before they can even talk or walk. This frequent screen use has been linked to shorter attention spans and greater challenges with emotional self-regulation compared to previous generations.⁸ While screen-based learning programs

can offer value, their widespread adoption as classroom learning tools has inadvertently fueled deeper screen dependence and its associated negative side effects. For many children, transitioning off tablets and laptops during classroom lessons now triggers withdrawal-like behaviors, such as impatience and irritability, which further disrupt classroom harmony and lead to more frequent behavioral issues. What can be done? Plenty!



A Closer Look

Frequent screen use has been linked to shorter attention spans and greater challenges with emotional self-regulation.

First, consider dialing back technology use, just a little. When possible, trade tablets for printed books. Swap digital games for physical manipulatives. Try a handwritten group project in place of online collaboration.

Start small and take it slow. Implement one change for two weeks and observe the results. You might be surprised by how quickly attention, patience, creativity, and resilience increase when tech is scaled back.

Second, optimize screen-based learning. Here are five ideas to consider:

- ▲ **Align Tech with Goals:** Use technology purposefully and only when it clearly supports an established learning objective that other tools can't match. If there is a screen-free alternative available, use it!
- ▲ **Set Limits:** Create and follow best practice guidelines for one-on-one device use in class.⁹ For example, consider limitations like a maximum of two twenty-minute device sessions daily for elementary students and one twenty-minute session per period for secondary learners.
- ▲ **Blend Modalities:** Pair digital lessons with analog activities. For instance, have students show their work using paper and pen while interacting with online programs to maintain attention, deepen learning, and lessen digital fatigue. While this may seem counterintuitive, recent research shows that handwriting is more effective when it comes to improving memory and absorbing new learning.¹⁰

▲ **Evaluate Often:** Assess the effectiveness of the tech tools and programs you use by regularly reviewing student learning outcomes. Use this data to make any necessary adjustments that fall within your locus of control. For instance, you might:

- Refine how you supervise the use of specific online programs
- Modify the amount of time students spend with certain tech tools
- Enhance digital learning experiences by incorporating physical resources, like checklists, timers, or personal learning logs/reflections
- Integrate strategic brain breaks, movement, or other engagement strategies into tech-heavy learning blocks

Cell Phones

Ah, the cell phone, a tiny but potent distraction. Even when powered down, the mere presence of a phone can sap focus and impede memory formation. Why? Because part of our brain is constantly reminding us that our magical dopamine machines are just within reach.¹¹



A Closer Look

Even when powered down, the mere presence of a phone can sap focus and impede memory.

Cell-phone policies for students can be a hot-button topic, and one that is often out of the hands of building-level educators and administrators. Even so, here are some suggestions to help ease the struggle and reduce digital distraction.

- ▲ **Educate Students:** Share with students the research connecting phone-free environments with improved focus. When students understand the “why,” they’re more likely to embrace the “how.”
- ▲ **Offer Structure:** Use a wall caddy for phones, making participation optional but incentivized. For example, students earn stars for each day their phone is “caddied.” When 10 stars are collected, a student receives a high-value reward, such as a homework pass.

- ▲ **Involve Students:** Conduct action research by testing out a different phone policy every six weeks. Collect student feedback to evaluate the impact of each one on their focus, attitude, and achievement. When students feel invested in the outcome, they're more likely to buy into the process.

The Bottom Line

Technology in the classroom is neither a villain nor a savior—it's a tool. How it's used determines its impact. Thoughtful, intentional integration can inspire and motivate, while overuse can undermine focus and the development of critical academic habits like patience and grit. Making even small, strategic adjustments to reduce or refine your classroom technology use can lead to significant improvements in student attention, engagement, and cognition.

What Ifs & Burning Questions

What if students claim that listening to music helps them focus? Should I allow it, or is that considered multitasking?

This is a tricky one. While studies have shown that music can enhance attention and learning, especially for students with ADHD,¹² allowing earbud usage in the classroom comes with many challenges. For instance, the teacher has no control over the content of the music (or even if it's actually music that's playing), its appropriateness, or its volume level. Moreover, listening to music requires the presence of cell phones to select and change songs and playlists, which introduces another set of management and fair-play issues. So, while music has many benefits, allowing students to use earbuds is simply too difficult

to effectively monitor or manage in a classroom of twenty-five or more kids. Consequently, we recommend a simple “no earbuds” policy.

Even so, there are ways to benefit from music in the classroom without the potential pitfalls that earbuds introduce. For example, the teacher can play music for the entire class during independent or group work. This allows the teacher to control when, what, and how loudly music is being played; no personal monitoring, confrontations, or behavior management are required.

Pro Tip



Be Strategic. Make sure your music choice matches what you want students to do. Choose quiet, instrumental music when students are working on their own, since lyrics send a conflicting verbal message to the brain and can decrease concentration. Keep the volume low, and stick with something with a slow tempo. Classical, jazz, lo-fi, or video-game background music all work well. On the other hand, if your students are collaborating or moving around the classroom, you might choose catchy, upbeat tunes from the 50s or 60s to encourage energy and conversation.

What if not every announcement I make needs to be heard by everyone, especially when they are engaged in group or pair activities?

If the announcement isn't crucial for everyone, then it might not need to be voiced at all. Remember that students experience verbal fatigue when they hear our voices too much, so be thoughtful when deciding what students really need to hear. When communication is essential, take the time to get everyone's tractor beams of attention on you. For less important updates, a nonverbal routine can be implemented, like a dedicated corner on your whiteboard where announcements are written or posted. Students can be directed to look there for current information and updates.

What if there are ongoing distractions like a phone ringing, door knocking, or specialists coming in for pull-outs?

If certain distractions are inevitable and predictable, then devise procedures to minimize their impact. Assign a student to answer the classroom phone when it rings; teach proper answering protocol and message-taking. Likewise, assign a single student to “Door Duty.” When people knock, it is always this student’s job to open the door. If you have students being pulled out regularly for interventions or sports, set up a nonverbal routine that everyone can follow. Perhaps the speech therapist can come in, give a student a nonverbal hand signal, and the student can pack up and leave without any disruption to others. Perhaps students on the soccer team can have a nonverbal procedure they follow to sign out of class, pack up, and leave when they are on early release for away games.

What if a student is intentionally causing frequent disruptions?

Constant disruptions from a student are an entirely different issue than unexpected disruptions. Outside distractions are things we can’t predict and have no control over, whereas student misbehavior is something we often can predict, and we do have some control over. Unfortunately, it takes much more than a few sentences to tackle this topic. That’s why we wrote two entire books about it! To learn more about managing distracting student behavior see our books, *Conscious Classroom Management* and *Yeah, But What About this Kid?*

What if my high school students need to practice multitasking for their college preparation?

While our students (college-bound or not) can potentially benefit from the multitasking practice of taking lecture notes, our primary focus should be to nurture critical-thinking skills, love for learning, curiosity about the world, and independent learning abilities. Note-taking can be part of the plan, but not the entire plan.

As we discussed previously in this chapter, multitasking is a sophisticated and difficult skill to acquire. Consider starting from square one. Assume your students have never taken lecture notes before (probably some of them never have!) and teach it from the ground up like you would with any other new academic skill. Your high-achieving students will benefit just as much as everyone else from this exercise in skill-building, as it will deepen their understanding and improve their ability to take effective lecture notes.

Pro Tip



Differentiate. As the year progresses and lecture notes become more routine, consider differentiating for your struggling or lower-performing students by giving them partially pre-prepared notes or a written outline to add to, while higher-performing students take notes without this scaffold.

What if my older students find sound signals or other attention-getting strategies childish?

Every teacher needs a reliable way to grab their students’ attention. If the strategies in this chapter don’t feel like the right fit for you, that’s okay. What matters most is using a method that works. The take-away: If keeping your students focused has been tricky, it might be time to try something new, even if it feels a bit uncomfortable at first. Sometimes, stepping out of our comfort zone (and encouraging our students to do the same) can lead to better results for everyone.



Summary & Applications



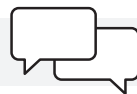
Download a printable “Quick Reference Guide” PDF of every strategy in this chapter using the QR code or go to: consciousteaching.com/book-toolbox-engagement

Remember



- ▲ **Cocktail Party Effect:** The brain can only focus on one thing at a time.
- ▲ **Multitasking:** Multitasking requires the brain to rapidly switch focus between or among multiple tasks, reducing efficiency, quality, and retention for all tasks.
- ▲ **Runaway Stagecoach Principle:** Acknowledge distractions instead of fighting them, then gently redirect focus.
- ▲ **Attention Signals:** Use a variety of strategies to get student attention. Try sounds, visuals, music, or call-and-response techniques to capture attention.
- ▲ **Waiting for Silence:** Consistently reinforce clear expectations around getting attention before applying a technique like “waiting for silence.”
- ▲ **Technology & Attention:** Use technology thoughtfully, strategically, and sparingly. Excessive screen use can shorten attention spans and disrupt focus.

Discuss



- ▲ **Multitasking:** Reflect on a time when you tried to multitask in your teaching. What were the outcomes for you and your students?
- ▲ **Attention Signals:** How do you currently get your students’ attention? Which strategies work well, and which could be improved?

- ▲ **Distractions:** Think about a recent unexpected classroom distraction (e.g., a loud noise, a visitor, or an insect). How did you handle it? How might you apply the Runaway Stagecoach Principle to a similar situation in the future?
- ▲ **Technology:** What individual online learning programs do students interact with in your classes? What one-on-one digital devices do you use to support learning? When and for how long do students use these tools in an average day/week? What impact do you observe on student focus, learning, and behavior? Are there ways you could adjust your technology use to better support learning?

Apply



- ▲ **Multitasking:** For one week, focus on doing one thing at a time (e.g., giving instructions without managing materials simultaneously) and note any changes in student behavior or understanding.
- ▲ **Attention Signals:** Choose one attention-getting strategy (e.g., call-and-response, sound signals, or visuals) and teach it to your class using the 8x8 Model. Practice it consistently for eight days.
- ▲ **Distractions:** Role-play with a colleague how you might address a classroom distraction using the Runaway Stagecoach Principle. Practice acknowledging the distraction, giving students time to process, and then redirecting their attention.
- ▲ **Technology:** Experiment with reducing technology use in one lesson or activity. Replace a digital tool with an analog alternative, or add an analog element to a digital lesson, and observe how it affects student focus and engagement.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Grace Dearborn

Grace Dearborn is kinda cool and sometimes funny. You'd probably like her. She's never seen a "Do Not Enter" sign that did not immediately make her want to enter. She's been an educator for more than 30 years, but she's been a human for even longer. This is Grace's 4th book on effective teaching. She

thinks they are all worth reading, but especially this one. Grace was a classroom teacher for a long time but currently she is the Director and Lead Consultant for Conscious Teaching, LLC. In this role she spends most of her time running herself ragged facilitating professional development workshops for teachers across the United States and internationally. This sounds way more impressive than it is. In her free time, Grace volunteers at local schools, reads voraciously, bakes emotionally, plays tennis and poker competently (or so she likes to believe), and gets up to as much nonsense and shenanigans as possible with her coven of friends. Grace has two sons masquerading as adults who have taught her more about teaching and learning than she ever wanted to know. She also has a dog. He is pure joy.



Katie Anderson

Katie Anderson is an award-winning National Board Certified Teacher, educational consultant, mentor teacher, and curriculum designer. She has worked in education for over 20 years as a classroom teacher and mentor in Wake County Public Schools, a researcher for the North Carolina

Governor's Teacher Network, a course creator and instructor for Duke University's Talent Identification Program, and a teacher-trainer in the US and abroad with Conscious Teaching, LLC. Her areas of expertise include neuroscience-based lesson design, differentiated instruction, social and emotional learning, supporting neurodivergent learners in the classroom, and inspiring teachers and students to find joy and enjoyment in their teaching and learning. When she's not flying around the country to work with fabulous educators, you will most likely find Katie at a Renaissance Festival, traveling the globe in search of new adventures and new tattoos, spending time with her family, or trying to adopt every stray cat she sees.

Professional Development

Grace and Katie facilitate nine world-class, professional development workshops on student engagement, classroom management, behavior intervention, and leadership.

- ▲ Conscious Classroom Management
- ▲ Teaching with Trauma in Mind
- ▲ Teaching 101 (for new teachers)
- ▲ The Engaged Brain
- ▲ Participation by Design
- ▲ Do I Have Your Attention?
- ▲ Great Group Work
- ▲ Support That Sticks
- ▲ The Leading Edge

Find out more about these trainings at:
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