



## 3 Simple Words That Improve Listening

By Michael Linsin on April 2, 2016

It's most noticeable when giving directions. And it's so, so frustrating. You can actually see it happening right in front of you.

As soon as your students *think* they understand what you're asking of them, they mentally check out.

They stop listening.

They turn to their tablemates. They fumble with materials. They begin moving toward whatever they've concluded you want them to do.

All while you still have critical details to give.

In response, it's common for teachers to increase the volume of their voice in an effort to cut through the fog.

*"You're going to be writing three paragraphs today, not two! That's three paragraphs. Also, be sure and include a connection to yesterday's reading. Oh, and remember, it's independent work time, so there is no talking!"*

But by then it's too late. The majority of students have already moved on.

Before long, confusion and uncertainty fill the room. Hands go up. The work suffers.

So, what's the solution?

Well, many teachers will stop talking as soon as they notice attention beginning to shift. They'll **pause and wait**. They'll sigh and tap their fingers.

They may even throw in a lecture about how important it is to listen to all the information first before getting down to work.

And while this approach is certainly better than soldiering through it, it's reactionary. It interrupts the flow of the lesson. It brings a negative vibe to the classroom and wastes learning time.

A better way to handle it is to utter three simple words *before* giving directions.

It's a phrase that keeps students from moving on until they hear everything you have to say. It notifies them – clearly and unmistakably – that more information is coming.

The phrase is: "In a moment." As in, "*In a moment, we're going to begin writing a response to the day's reading.*" Or, "*In a moment, we're going to line up for lunch.*"

At first glance, *In a moment* doesn't seem like it could make much of a difference. But when combined with four more words, which we'll cover next week, it's remarkably effective.

It keeps students from moving on mentally or physically until you've finished giving every last direction. It removes the urge to be first or fastest.

It avoids disruptions to your teaching and ensures smooth routines and focused independent work.

The most effective teachers use the phrase up to a dozen times a day. It becomes a message, and a mantra, that reminds every student to listen instead of guess and to *know* for themselves instead of relying on others. The beauty of the strategy is that it gets stronger with time, as students come to understand it more profoundly. Eventually, [active listening](#) will become Pavlovian in response.

Three simple words, with four more coming next week.

*"In a moment . . ."*

Try them, and you'll see the difference.

**PS** – *The Happy Teacher Habits: 11 Habits of the Happiest, Most Effective Teachers on Earth* finally has a release date. (Yes!) The book will be available on Tuesday, May 3rd.

### Strategy #1: Say it Once

Repeating ourselves in the classroom will produce lazy listening in our students. If kids are accustomed to hearing instructions twice, three times, and even four times, listening the first time around becomes unnecessary. Begin the year by establishing that you are a teacher who rarely repeats instructions and this will surely perk up ears.

Of course you don't want to leave distracted students in the dust so for those few who forgot to listen, you can advise them to, "ask three, then ask me."

### Strategy #2: Turn and Talk

One way to inspire active listening in your students is to give them a listening task. It might look like this, "I'm going to describe the process of \_\_\_\_\_. I will pause along the way and ask you to turn to a partner and explain to them what you heard." You can ask students to take turns talking each time you pause, and meanwhile, walk around observing their conversations (also allowing you to check for understanding).

### Strategy #3: Student Hand Signals

Asking students to pay full attention and indicating that they will follow this with a non-verbal signal is a wonderful tool for sharpening those listening skills. It can look like this: "I'm going to read a former president's statement about why he believes war is sometimes necessary. When I'm finished, you will share your opinion by holding up one finger if you agree, two fingers if you disagree, and three fingers if you are undecided or if you have a question." This strategy allows whole-class participation and response. It's also a favorite for kids who are more on the shy side, giving them a "voice."

[Watch how hand signals encourage active listening](#) in a fifth-grade classroom.

### Strategy #4: Pay Attention, Pause, Paraphrase

Children need structured opportunities to restrain themselves from speaking in order to keep their attention on listening, especially when working in groups. Try this strategy:

1. When students talk in pairs or small groups, assign one speaker at a time only (they can number off).
2. Ask all others to listen fully to whoever is speaking and to avoid formulating a response *while* the other person talks. Tell them to simply listen that is all. (This is a difficult task even for adults!)

3. When the person stops talking, the other takes a breath before she speaks and then paraphrases something her partner just said: "You believe that...." "You aren't sure if....".
4. After paraphrasing her partner, she can then follow that with an "I" statement: "I see what you mean...", "I'm not sure I agree...".

Discussion sentence starters are a helpful tool for students as they learn this new way of having a conversation. It's also incredibly helpful for students to see this in action. Ask a couple of students to model it for the whole class or have an adult visit to partner with you.

#### Strategy #5: Creating Questions

If your students are listening to a speech, watching a documentary clip, or hearing a story read aloud, break it up by stopping a few times and having students write a question or two about what they just heard. This way, students actively listen for any confusion or wonderings they may have -- this takes a high-level of concentration. It's important to provide models for this since we are typically trained in school to look for the answers and information rather than to focus on what is not understood or is still a mystery.

[Rebecca Alber's Profile](#)