



## Praise

**Description.** Teacher praise is performance feedback that includes verbal or non-verbal communication of teacher approval of student behavior. Praise is easy to implement and fits into the natural pattern of classroom communication (Hawkins & Heflin, 2011).

**Procedure:** Effective teacher praise consists of two elements: (1) a description of noteworthy student academic performance or general behavior, and (2) a signal of teacher approval (Brophy, 1981; Burnett, 2001). The power of praise in changing student behavior is that it both indicates teacher approval and informs the student about how the praised academic performance or behavior conforms to teacher expectations (Burnett, 2001). As with any potential classroom reinforcer, praise has the ability to improve student academic or behavioral performance—but only if the *student* finds it reinforcing (Akin-Little et al., 2004). Here are several suggestions for shaping praise to increase its effectiveness:

- **Describe Noteworthy Student Behavior.** Praise statements that lack a specific account of student behavior in observable terms are compromised—as they fail to give students performance feedback to guide their learning. For example, a praise statement such as *'Good job!'* is inadequate in itself because it lacks a behavioral description (Hawkins & Heflin, 2011). However, such a statement becomes acceptable when expanded to include a behavioral element: *"You located eight strong source documents for your essay. Good job!"*
- **Praise Effort and Accomplishment, Not Ability.** There is some evidence that praise statements about general ability can actually reduce student appetite for risk-taking (Burnett, 2001). Therefore, teachers should generally steer clear of praise that includes assumptions about global student ability (e.g., *"You are a really good math student!"*; *"I can tell from this essay that writing is no problem for you."*). Praise should instead focus on specific examples of student effort or accomplishment (e.g., *"It's obvious from your grade that you worked hard to prepare for this math quiz. Great work!"*). When praise singles out exertion and work-products, it can help students to see a direct link between the effort that they invest in a task and improved academic or behavioral performance.
- **Match the Method of Praise Delivery to Student Preferences.** Teachers can deliver praise in a variety of ways and contexts. For example, an instructor may choose to praise a student in front of a class or work group or may instead deliver that praise in a private conversation or as written feedback on the student's assignment. When possible, the teacher should determine and abide by a student's preferences for receiving individual praise. It is worth noting that, while most students in elementary grades may easily accept public praise, evidence suggests that middle and high-school students actually prefer private praise (Burnett, 2001). So, when in doubt with older students, deliver praise in private rather than in public.

**Tips for Use.** Praise is a powerful motivating tool because it allows the teacher to selectively encourage different aspects of behavior or work production based on the individual student's needs. For example, the teacher may seek to boost a student's academic performance by praising effort, accuracy, or speed on an assignment. Or the teacher may focus on increasing student responsibility by praising that student for attaining self-selected academic goals. The table below presents examples of praise-statements, with each linked to a different student outcome goal:

Praise: Goal	Example
<b>Academic effort.</b> Praise can motivate students in the beginning	• <i>"Today in class, you wrote non-stop"</i>



stages of learning, by focusing on indicators of student effort (e.g., 'seat-time') rather than on product (Daly et al., 2007).	<i>through the entire writing period. I appreciate your hard work."</i>
<b>Academic accuracy.</b> Praise can encourage students in the acquisition stage of learning by praising improvements in <i>accuracy</i> of responding (Haring et al., 1978).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"This week you were able to correctly define 15 of 20 biology terms. That is up from 8 last week. Terrific progress!"</i></li> </ul>
<b>Academic fluency.</b> When the student has progressed beyond the acquisition stage, an appropriate next goal may be fluency--the speed of accurate responding (Haring et al., 1978).  Teacher praise can motivate the student to become more efficient on the academic task by targeting gains in fluency (a combination of accuracy and speed of responding).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"You were able to compute 36 correct digits in two minutes on today's math time drill worksheet. That's 4 digits more than earlier this week--impressive!"</i></li> </ul>
<b>Academic quality.</b> When the student's completed assignment clearly meets or exceeds quality standards (e.g., writing rubric), praise focuses on the excellence of the work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"This essay is well-written. I can see that you defined a specific audience for the piece and had a clear purpose in mind as you were writing."</i></li> </ul>
<b>Goal-setting.</b> A motivating strategy that promotes student responsibility is to have a reluctant learner set a performance goal before undertaking an academic task and then to report out at the conclusion of the task about whether the goal was reached. The student is praised for successfully attaining the goal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"At the start of class, you set the goal of writing an outline for your paper. And I can see that you actually completed the outline. Good job!"</i></li> </ul>
<b>Risk-taking.</b> Students may be reluctant to show ignorance or make mistakes in class. To counter this natural reluctance, praise for risk-taking celebrates students' good-faith attempts to answer teacher questions or participate in discussion--even when the response is incorrect or otherwise falls short of the mark.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"Thanks for your response, Mark. Even though your initial answer was incorrect, it forced us to think through several ways to solve this math problem. Mistakes are a powerful way to learn!"</i></li> </ul>

## References

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