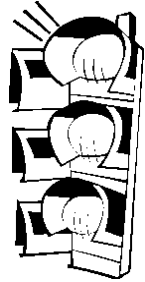


Effective Teacher Commands: Establishing Classroom Control



As classroom managers, teachers regularly use commands to direct students to start and stop activities. Instructors find commands to be a crucial tool for classroom management, serving as instructional signals that help students to conform to the teacher's expectations for appropriate behaviors.



Teachers frequently dilute the power of their classroom commands, however, by:



- presenting commands as questions or polite requests.** Commands have less impact when stated as questions or requests, because the student may believe that he or she has the option to decline. The teacher who attempts, for example, to quiet a talkative student by saying, "*Tanya, could you mind keeping your voice down so that other students can study?*" should not be surprised if the student replies, "*No, thank you. I would prefer to talk!*"
- stating commands in vague terms.** A student may ignore a command such as "*Get your work done!*" because it does not state specifically what behaviors the teacher expects of the student.
- following up commands with excessive justifications or explanations.** Because teachers want to be viewed as fair, they may offer long, drawn-out explanations for why they are requiring the class or an individual student to undertake or to stop a behavior. Unfortunately, students can quickly lose the thread the explanation and even forget the command that preceded it!

Effective Teacher Commands...

- Are brief
- Are delivered one at a time
- Use specific language so that the student clearly understands the request
- Avoid an authoritative, "Do it my way or else!" tone of voice
- Avoid strong negative emotion or sarcasm
- Are stated as directives rather than as questions
- Avoid long explanations or justifications (and present any explanation *before* the command rather than *after* it).
- Allow the student a short but reasonable amount of time to comply without additional teacher comments or directives

Using Effective Commands

Teachers can reduce problems with student compliance and make their commands more forceful by following research-based guidelines (Walker & Walker, 1992):

Effective commands:

- **are brief.** Students can process only so much information. Students tend to comply best with brief commands because they are easy to understand and hard to misinterpret.
- **are delivered one task or objective at a time.** When a command contains multi-step directions, students can mishear, misinterpret, or forget key steps. A student who appears to be noncompliant may simply be confused about which step in a multi-step directive to do first!
- **are delivered in a matter-of-fact, businesslike tone.** Students may feel coerced when given a command in an authoritarian, sarcastic, or angry tone of voice. For that reason alone, they may resist the teacher's directive. Teachers will often see greater student compliance simply by giving commands in a neutral or positive manner.
- **are stated as directives rather than questions.** Perhaps to be polite, teachers may phrase commands as questions (e.g., "Could we all take out our math books now?"). A danger in using 'question-commands' is that the student may believe that he or she has the option to decline! Teachers should state commands as directives, saving questions for those situations in which the student exercises true choice.
- **avoid long explanations or justifications.** When teachers deliver commands and then tack lengthy explanations onto them, they diminish the force of the directive. If the instructor believes that students should know why they are being told to do something, the teacher should deliver a brief explanation *prior* to the command.
- **give the student a reasonable amount of time to comply.** Once the teacher has given a command, he or she should give the student a reasonable timespan (e.g., 5-15 seconds) to comply. During that waiting period, the instructor should resist the temptation to nag the student, elaborate on the request, or other wise distract the student.

References:

Walker, H.M. & Walker, J.E. (1991). *Coping with noncompliance in the classroom: A positive approach for teachers*. Austin, TX:: Pro-Ed, Inc.

Effective Teacher Commands: Establishing Classroom Control Workshop Activity



Directions: A series of 6 teacher commands and requests appears below. For each example, note any flaws in the teacher response. (Use the table on the right to review the elements of effective teacher commands.) Then rewrite the teacher verbal response (or describe an alternative way the teacher could have acted to head off or handle the situation more effectively).

1. *Thaddeus, I know that you finished the quiz early, but it is important that you not distract the other students while they are trying to work. You wouldn't want them to do poorly on the quiz, would you?*
2. *Maria, how many times do I have to tell you to stop being so disruptive! Every time that I have to talk to you, you take my attention away from the other students! Please try to be more considerate!*
3. *OK, class. Pull out the writing assignment that you had for homework last night. Pair off with a neighbor. Each one of you should read the others' assignment. Then you should edit your partner's work, using our peer-editing worksheet. Finally, review your editing comments with your partner. You have 20 minutes. Begin!*
4. *Jason, could you please put away that comic book and get started on your homework assignment?*
5. *Anna, I want you to be sure to go straight home from school today! Yesterday afternoon after school dismissal, I was in my car and noticed that you and your friends were utilizing the snowbanks along Henry Street, where there is a lot of traffic. I want you to go straight home today and not dawdle!*
6. *Carl, why don't you speak up so that you can distract the entire class with your talking?*

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Teacher Commands: Self-Monitoring Sheet

Teacher: _____ Date: _____

Room/Subject: _____ Activity: _____

Start Time: _____ End Time: _____ Number/Mins: _____

Teacher Directions: Select a time period when you think that you typically give a significant number of commands and/or requests to your students. Record (a) the number of commands/requests that you give, whether to your whole class or to specific students, and (b) the number of those requests that students *fail* to follow (according to the definition for compliance below). As soon as possible after your self-monitoring, complete the items on the front and back of this sheet:

Definition for student compliance:
 The student(s) complied with a teacher directive to the instructor's satisfaction within _____ seconds of the command or request being given.

1. How many commands and requests did you deliver to the entire class and/or individual students during the observation period?	
2. How many minutes long was your observation period?	Mins
3. On average, how many commands and requests did you deliver per <i>minute</i> during the observation period? (Item 1/Item 2)	Per Min
4. Of your commands and requests, what <i>number</i> did the class or individual students <i>not</i> comply with to your satisfaction?	
5. Of your commands and requests, what <i>percentage</i> did the class or individual students <i>not</i> comply with to your satisfaction? (Item 4/Item 3)...	%

During the monitoring period, did I...

- ensure that I have students' full attention (e.g., establishing eye contact with the class) before delivering a command?

Never/Seldom	Occasionally	Frequently	Most/All of the Time
0-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%

- deliver only one command at a time and wait for students to comply before delivering another?

Never/Seldom	Occasionally	Frequently	Most/All of the Time
0-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%

During the monitoring period, did I...

- present the command in a matter-of-fact, businesslike way rather than as a 'bossy teacher'?

Never/Seldom	Occasionally	Frequently	Most/All of the Time
0-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%

- state the command in clear, precise, specific terms that are easy to understand?

Never/Seldom	Occasionally	Frequently	Most/All of the Time
0-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%

- avoid stating my commands as questions or requests that students have the right to refuse?

Never/Seldom	Occasionally	Frequently	Most/All of the Time
0-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%

- avoid confusing the student with long verbalizations, justifications, or explanations of why I am giving the command?

Never/Seldom	Occasionally	Frequently	Most/All of the Time
0-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%

- wait a consistent amount of time after the command (e.g., five to fifteen seconds) without giving further directions to permit the student(s) to comply?

Never/Seldom	Occasionally	Frequently	Most/All of the Time
0-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%

- repeat the command to those students who initially failed to comply, firmly restating the command as "I need you to... "?

Never/Seldom	Occasionally	Frequently	Most/All of the Time
0-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%

- provide consistent and appropriate follow-up consequences for those students who continued to fail to comply with my commands?

Never/Seldom	Occasionally	Frequently	Most/All of the Time
0-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%