

Four Brain-Friendly Guidelines for Getting and Keeping Students' Attention

Guideline 1: Pay attention to the classroom environment.



The classroom environment has a powerful effect on students and their learning. Even simple changes can make a big difference.

- Use *color* in the classroom (walls, bulletin boards, posters, etc.).
- Use *scent* (lemon, peppermint, rosemary, cinnamon) to wake up students' brains.
- Request *full-spectrum lights* (which simulate natural daylight, and this reduces stress).
- Keep the *temperature* between 67-70 degrees.
- Include some *plants* (try a dracaena or ficus).
- Other things to consider . . .

Place at eye-level for things you want students to discuss; above eye-level for affirmations or encouraging statements so they register at a subconscious level.

Let students bring *bottled water* to class: most Americans are chronically dehydrated.

Bring *peppermint hard candies* or *lemon drops* to class and teach students how to use them as aromatic memory cues.

Change where you stand in the room, especially if you have to call a student down.

Periodically *have students change where they sit* in the room.

For global learners, display Reruns, Now Playing, and Coming Attractions—past, current, and upcoming topics—so students can see the big picture of how the topics fit together.

Guideline 2: Incorporate music.



Music is the easiest, fastest way to put students in the right frame of mind for learning. It positively influences brain function, mood, pulse rate, respiration, blood pressure and stress level. Choose the right beats per minute for what you want to accomplish: 35-50 is calming; 50-70 is good for background music; 100-160 gets students moving! Use music only a small percentage (10-15%) of instructional time: Don't overdo it.

1. When students are coming into the classroom, the music . . .

- Should always be upbeat (a march or movie theme, for example)
- May pertain to what students are going to read about or do that day
- May be a comment on the weather or a welcome back

2. During class, use music . . .

- For transitions (moving from one activity to another, moving into groups)
- As a timer or to create positive stress
- As background for individual or small group work (Baroque, major key)
- To energize or calm students
- For standing up and stretching
- To teach procedures or information they need to remember (set them to a familiar tune)
- To celebrate their successes
- To introduce or provide reinforcement for certain concepts and skills (in reading and writing, for example, to introduce inferences, tone, or figurative language)

3. When students are leaving class, the music . . .

- Should be upbeat, fun, or funny
- May have to do with leaving or farewells

4. Use sound in other ways, as well . . .

- Vary the pitch, tone, and volume of your voice.
- Use a sound (chimes, train whistle) to signal they have two minutes to finish up an activity.
- Use oral repetition to teach definitions, concepts, etc. (Cadences and rap work well.)

Guideline 3: Incorporate humor.



Stress triggers the release of a neuromodulator called *cortisol*. Too much cortisol impairs learning and memory. Laughter is hardwired in the brain. Although its primary purpose is bonding, it has a multitude of other benefits: It reduces stress. It triggers the release of a neurotransmitter called *serotonin*, a “feel good” brain chemical that has positive effects on learning, recall, and behavior. Humor also appeals to the novelty that the human brain craves.

- Have a transparency of the “cartoon of the day.”
- Open class with a quick joke.
- Have a joke share.
- Use cartoons instructionally. (Examples: to teach inference; to practice figurative language)
- Insert a small cartoon or short joke at the top of a test or build something funny into a test item.
- Use unusual pointing devices (on transparencies, too).
- Use cartoons or obvious “magic tricks” to introduce inference.
- Use music that has a fun, funny, or unexpected element.
- Use props.

Guideline 4: Incorporate movement.



Students need to move—preferably while standing up—at least once every 20 minutes. Movement releases tension. It sends oxygen to the brain. (Have them also take a couple of deep breaths.) Simply standing up increases the heart rate and oxygen to the brain by about 10%.

- Have students *change tables or seats*, or move tablet chairs into pods, to work in groups
- Have students *stand and stretch* (ideally, to music).
Incorporate *cross-lateral movements*.
Although less effective, you can have them *remain seated and stretch* (include cross-laterals).
Use “*walkabouts*” (students move or rotate in small groups to various tables or parts of the room).
- Have students “*vote with their feet*” by moving to a particular place to indicate their position on an issue or answer to a question—even A-B-C-D answers.
- Have students hold up *A-B-C-D multiple-choice response cards*.
- Have students use *movement to give you feedback* on their degree of understanding (for example, thumbs up, sideways, or down).
- Simply have them *stand and listen* (while you do a quick review, give the homework assignment, etc.). They can even *march in place while they’re standing*.