

# 30 Techniques to Quiet a Noisy Class

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One day, in front of 36 riotous sophomores, I clutched my chest and dropped to my knees like Sergeant Elias at the end of *Platoon*. Instantly, dead silence and open mouths replaced classroom Armageddon. Standing up like nothing had happened, I said, "Thanks for your attention -- let's talk about love poems."

I never used that stunt again. After all, should a real emergency occur, it would be better if students call 911 rather than post my motionless body on YouTube. I've thought this through.

Most teachers use silencing methods, such as flicking the lights, ringing a call bell (see Teacher Tipster's charming video<sup>[1]</sup> on the subject), raising two fingers, saying "Attention, class," or using Harry Wong's Give Me 5<sup>[2]</sup> -- a command for students to:

1. Focus their eyes on the speaker

2. Be quiet
3. Be still
4. Empty their hands
5. Listen.

There is also the "three fingers" version, which stands for stop, look, and listen. Fortunately, none of these involve medical hoaxes.

Lesser known techniques are described below and categorized by grade bands:

## How to Quiet Kindergarten and Early Elementary School Children

Novelty successfully captures young students' attention, such as the sound of a wind chime or rain stick<sup>[3]</sup>. Beth O., in *Cornerstone for Teachers*<sup>[4]</sup>, tells her students, "Pop a marshmallow in." Next she puffs up her cheeks, and the kids follow suit. It's hard to speak with an imaginary marshmallow filling your mouth.

An equally imaginative approach involves filling an empty Windex bottle with lavender mineral oil, then relabeling the bottle "Quiet Spray"<sup>[5]</sup>. Or you can blow magic "hush-bubbles" for a similar impact.

If you want to go electronic, check out *Traffic Light*<sup>[6]</sup> by ICT Magic, which is simply a stoplight for talkers. Other digital methods include the *Super Sound Box*<sup>[7]</sup>, *Class Dojo*<sup>[8]</sup>, or the *Too Noisy App*<sup>[9]</sup> -- an Apple and Android tool that determines noise level and produces an auditory signal when voices become too loud.

## Late Elementary and Middle Grade Attention Getters

Back when I taught middle school students, I would announce, "Silent 20," as a way to conclude an activity. If students returned to their seats and were completely quiet in 20 seconds, I advanced them one space on a giant facsimile of *Game of Life*<sup>[10]</sup>. When they reached the last square (which took approximately one month), we held a popcorn party.

One of the best ways to maintain a quiet classroom is to catch students at the door before they enter. During these encounters, behavior management expert Rob Plevin recommends using "non-confrontational statements" and "informal chit-chat" to

socialize kids into productive behaviors, as modeled in Plevin's video<sup>[11]</sup>.

Two approaches for securing "100 percent attention" are modeled in a short video narrated by *Teach Like a Champion* author Doug Lemov<sup>[12]</sup> -- a minimally invasive hand gesture and countdown technique ("I need two people. You know who you are. I need one person . . .").

Another idea is to use a content "word of the week" to signal that it's time for silence. Examples: integer, renaissance, or circuit.

## Quieting High School Students

Sometimes, rambunctious high school classrooms need a little longer to comply. In An ELT Notebook<sup>[13]</sup> article, Rob Johnson recommends that teachers write the following instructions in bold letters on the chalkboard:

*If you wish to continue talking during my lesson, I will have to take time off you at break. By the time I've written the title on the board you need to be sitting in silence. Anyone who is still talking after that will be kept behind for five minutes.*

The strategy always, always works, says Johnson, because it gives students adequate warning.

Another technique, playing classical music (Bach, not Mahler) on low volume when learners enter the room, sets a professional tone. I played music with positive subliminal messages to ninth graders until they complained that it gave them headaches.

## Call and Response

Below is a collection of catchy sayings that work as cues to be quiet, the first ones appropriate for early and middle grade students, and the later ones field tested to work with high school kids.

**Teacher says . . .**

Holy . . .

**Students Respond with . . .**

. . . macaroni.

1, 2, 3, eyes on me . . .	. . . 1, 2, eyes on you.
I'm incredible . . .	. . . like the Hulk. Grrrrrr. (Kids flex during the last sound)
Ayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy . . .	. . . macarena.
I get knocked down . . .	. . . but I get up again, you're never going to keep me down.
Oh Mickey, you're so fine . .	. . . you're so fine, you blow my mind -- hey Mickey.
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The only easy day . . .	. . . was yesterday. (A Navy Seals slogan)

## Implementation Suggestions

For maximum effect, teach your quiet signal and procedure, as demonstrated in these elementary<sup>[14]</sup> and high school classroom videos. Next, have kids rehearse being noisy until you give the signal for silence. Don't accept anything less than 100 percent compliance. Then describe appropriate levels of noise for different contexts, such as when you're talking (zero noise) or during a writing workshop (quiet voices), etc.

If a rough class intimidates you (we've all been there), privately practice stating the following in an authoritative voice: "My words are important. Students will listen to me." Say it until you believe it. Finally, take comfort in the knowledge that, out of three million U.S. educators who taught today, two or three might have struggled to silence a rowdy class.

How do you get your students' attention?

### Links

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvo2BbQDsqq>
2. [http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_issues/chat/chat008.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_issues/chat/chat008.shtml)
3. [http://www.exploratorium.edu/frogs/rain\\_stick/](http://www.exploratorium.edu/frogs/rain_stick/)
4. <http://thecornerstoneforteachers.com/2013/10/15-creative-respectful-ways-to-quiet-a-class.html>

5. <http://www.pinterest.com/explore/quiet-spray/>
6. <http://ictmagic.sharedby.co/share/n7pBY1>
7. <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/super-sound-box-100-free-sound/id394858530?mt=8>
8. <https://www.classdojo.com/>
9. <http://toonoisyapp.com/>
10. <http://thebiggamehunter.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Life-The-Game-of-board-1960-Milton-Bradley.jpg>
11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u086rr7SRso>
12. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EC0ltKOWF\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EC0ltKOWF_A)
13. <http://eltnotebook.blogspot.com/2007/03/5-classroom-management-tips-to-silence.html>
14. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoJZQ1haRBw>