

## “Teaching Work Habits” by Angela Powell

Excerpted and adapted from [“The Cornerstone: Classroom Management That Makes Teaching More Effective, Efficient, and Enjoyable”](#).

Work habits are probably the most important procedure you’ll need to teach. You will have to be very clear about what you want from students during instruction, independent work, and in cooperative groups. If you do not teach procedures for working, you will be constantly repeating yourself and nagging students to sit down, get to work, and pay attention. This page and corresponding chapter in *The Cornerstone* book will teach you how to make abstract concepts concrete and explain your expectations so that students can practice them as regular routines.

### Teaching Students What to Do During Instruction

#### What Does ‘Follow Along’ Mean?

Students must be told precisely what you expect them to do while you’re teaching. Your expectations should be introduced, practiced, and reinforced like any other procedure. You can use the term ‘following along’ to describe the behaviors that you expect from your students while you are teaching, and then define the term in a way that fits your expectations.

My definition of following along during instruction is written on a poster that is displayed prominently in the front of the classroom. ‘Following along’ means students should:

- 1) Have all of and ONLY the specified materials on your desk
- 2) Look at and listen to the person who is speaking
- 3) Stay at the right place in any text we’re using
- 4) Touch your materials only when directed
- 5) Talk to your neighbor only when directed
- 6) Use whispering for the 3 Before Me rule [see Chapter 15 of *The Cornerstone* book]
- 7) Participate whenever you have something helpful to say
- 8) Be respectful and supportive of other people

This is a rather lengthy list, but it’s better to be precise in your criteria and reinforce it every time than to give students the freedom to interpret your routines any way they want. The expectations for following along are taught during the first week of school with all other procedures. I explain my expectations and the reasons for them, model what I want, have students practice, and use reinforcement narration and performance feedback (as described in Chapter 9, [How To Teach Any Procedure](#)) to help students develop the skill of following along. After we’ve practiced, I say at the start of most my lessons during the first weeks of school, “We’re going to begin our writing lesson now. You will need to follow along. Someone please remind the class what it means to follow along—what exactly should you be doing now?”

At the start of every lesson throughout the school year, I convey to students that I expect them to follow along by saying, “We’re going to start on page 104. Please follow along” or “Today we’re going to be doing some timeline activities. You will need to follow along as I show you what to do.” When students deviate from the procedure, I may just point silently to the poster that specifies what following along means. I may also prompt the student with, “What should you be doing right now?” or “Which part of following along do you need to do?”



Almost every misbehavior during instruction can be addressed by referring to the procedure for following along. You can make comments and pose questions such as:

- "In order to follow along, what should be on your desk right now?"
- "Following along means looking at the person who's talking. Who should you be looking at right now?"
- "What page of the book should you be looking on to follow along?"
- "Where should your hands be if you're following along?"
- "If you are following along, you are not talking to anyone near you."
- "Those who are following along have their hands up to share ideas."
- "We have three people participating right now. If you're following along, please raise your hand and contribute to our discussion."

These questions and comments refer students back to your expectations during instruction. There is no need for repeated commands or nagging when students understand the procedure for following along. If multiple students are not meeting your expectations despite performance feedback, you should stop the process just like in any other routine. "We have too many students not following along, and I won't continue until everyone's ready. If you can tell us one of the eight things everyone should be doing right now, please raise your hand... Now that we all remember what following along means, let's try that again."

## **Teaching Students How to Work Independently**

### **What Does 'On-Task' Look Like?**

'On-task' is the term I use to describe what students should be doing during independent work. I created a poster with my expectations for this procedure and display it alongside the 'following along' poster:

- 1) Have all of and **ONLY** the specified materials on your desk
- 2) Complete your work doing your very best job
- 3) Talk to your neighbor only when directed
- 4) Use whispering for the 3 Before Me rule

This expectation is also explicitly taught. In the beginning, I model examples and non-examples of on-task work, pretending to be a student who displays typical behaviors and having the class discuss which part of on-task I'm not showing. Students learn that playing with a shoelace, flicking a pencil eraser, and staring into space are all quiet and probably non-disruptive behaviors, but are not acceptable because they're not part of the 'on-task' list.

#2 is the critical expectation, because any playing around means you are not completing your work. 'Doing your very best job' is really a qualifier that respects children as individuals, because for some kids, a small amount of playing around IS their best and requires a tremendous amount of self-control. I try to praise all effort towards improving one's own best job.

When students understand the definition of on-task, they can easily recognize behaviors that are off-task. Talking to someone when you're not asking a 3 Before Me question is off-task. Following the teacher around the room is off-task. Digging through your backpack is off-task.



## **Teaching Students How to Work Cooperatively**

## What Does 'Work Together' Mean?

After students have successfully practiced staying on-task during independent work for increasing periods of time, I begin teaching them how to complete partner and group activities. The term for this is 'working together' and the corresponding poster lists these criteria:

- 1) Have all of and ONLY the specified materials in your work area
- 2) Look at and listen to the person who is speaking
- 3) Be respectful and supportive of other people
- 4) Complete your work doing your very best job



These expectations are a hodge-podge of those for following along and staying on-task. When I first present the poster, I ask students for their observations and guide them to the understanding that cooperative work is partially about following along with a partner or group, and partially about staying on-task with the work you are responsible for. More details about teaching kids to work cooperatively can be found in *The Cornerstone's* Chapter 27, Hands-On and Cooperative Learning.

### There's more! Learn:

**\*The little-known secret to getting kids to stop talking the second you open your mouth**

**\*Strategies for respectfully and firmly handle interruptions**

**\*How to establish your expectations for sitting at desks and on the rug (and how to handle kids who complain constantly about others touching them)**

**\*Explicit instructions for teaching QUIET and SILENCE: define your expectations for the two terms and teach kids to differentiate between them**

**\*How to have kids practice getting and STAYING quiet, and train them how to whisper in a way that's developmentally appropriate**

**It's all in Chapter 13 of [The Cornerstone](#), "Teaching Work Habits: Clear Expectations for Following Along, Staying On-Task, and More"!**