

The Ultimate Guide to Champion Teacher Techniques

By Jim Matthews

“Champions do not become champions when they win the event, but in the hours, weeks, months and years they spend preparing for it. The victorious performance itself is merely the demonstration of their championship character.” This saying by author T. Alan Armstrong hits the nail on the head when it comes to the kind of attitude a teacher should strive to attain. A book I read called [*Teach Like a Champion*](#) by Norman Atkins describes teaching in a way that will help students prepare for a bright future. Every good teacher’s end goal should always emphasize the success of the student. This article, which contains some of the topics from the book as well as some from my personal experience, will give you many different techniques that will help you teach like a champion.

Understand that teaching is NOT about the teacher.

All teaching is about training students for success for their future—college, good and polite citizens, people with skills, corporate or professional jobs, military, etc. By teaching you are preparing students for greatness. Remember that teaching is NOT about the teacher! It is always about bringing out the best in each individual student. Don’t let the little things slip—focus on the details. When you pay close attention, it helps put students over the top.

Carefully build routines.

Before anything productive happens in the classroom, you need to have carefully built and practiced routines. Before the school year begins and before each week starts, you should take a good amount of time to build some routines. When you get some procedures that work, keep practicing them so that you remain consistent and get better at implementing those routines.

Don’t let students opt out.

If a student doesn’t know an answer to one of your questions, don’t let him opt out. Press a bit for an answer or call on another student and then come back to the student who passed and have him give the answer. By doing this, he is still giving the answer and still learning, but he isn’t going to opt out and not learn! **It’s not okay not to try.** Students will feel better about learning after answering a question (even if they are just repeating) what they didn’t know just moments earlier.

Break down objectives.

First, decide on the standards and materials you are going to teach over the next month. Then carefully plan and break them into objectives and decide on what activities will best accomplish that day's activities. The question the teacher needs to ask himself/herself is "What exactly do I want my students to be able to do by the end of the lesson?" Great teachers plan the objectives first, then the assessments, and then the activity.

Plan the lesson in segments and plan questions.

Plan your lessons into "minutes" segments (i.e. five minutes, ten minutes, etc.). This will help you stick with a nice pace that will flow with time instead of boring your students. Also, don't forget to plan questions for your lessons. Students learn much better when they have to think about answers to questions instead of you telling them. Be sure to anticipate the wrong answers so you have a response or direction of further questioning. Challenge students outside their experience.

Use correct vocabulary.

Try your best to use the correct vocabulary whenever possible. You can start with known vocabulary, but you should start to use real vocabulary as soon as possible. Remember, college is the goal for your students, so try to stimulate their minds with good terminology.

Stretch the answers.

Reward correct answers with even more questions. Keep your students thinking about the subject. Plan out questions on all topics and standards. Ask questions like "How?" "Why" "What happens if...?" "How can that apply to real life?" "How can you repeat that again and pass it on to others?" Ask your students for "another way" or "a better word." Ask them to "apply the same skill in a new setting."

Begin with the end in mind.

When it comes to planning and teaching, always begin with the end in mind. The success of an activity is not whether you did it or not, but whether you achieved an objective that can be assessed. What are your students going to get out of it? Why are we teaching what we are teaching? Is there an intentional progression and purpose to the lesson? It should be unit planning. Give students time to digest the materials and spread it out over a period of time. Plan objectives that lead to mastery. Plan short, periodic assessments. Decide on activities to support and experience. Conceptualize in your mind what steps to take in order to achieve mastery. Do different things each day to help students achieve this. Set achievable daily goals that can be measured.

Post goals in the classroom.

Post goals in the same place for everyone to see. Give your students a chart or graph of the class's progress in areas. They can reach these short and attainable goals by fun activities, rewards, postings, assessments, etc.

Make a dual lesson plan that will hook your students.

Creating a dual lesson plan means having a strategy of not just what the students will be doing, but also what the teacher will be saying (and what questions will be asked). When creating your lesson plan, it's very important to **hook** your students—introduce materials in an exciting and inspirational manner so they will want to learn it. A hook is a short introductory moment that captures interesting and engaging aspects about the material and puts it out front. Hooks can include a story, an analogy (something that connects it to their lives), props, a video or recording (make it short so you can get right back into teaching), or challenges (give them a task to do by the end of the week. Hooks should be energetic, optimistic, and engaging!

Circulate around the room.

While teaching, it's important to move strategically around the room. Not just proximity, but purposeful proximity. Break the plane—the invisible lines most teachers never cross. Do this within the first five minutes of each class. Let your students know that you own the room. It should be normal to them for you to go anywhere in the room at any time. Students should also know that it is not just about behavior, but about you teaching. When moving around, engage the students—make small corrections and encouragements. Move systematically, and keep your position for power—remain facing as much of the class as possible.

Use the cold call technique.

The cold call technique helps all students pay better attention. Cold call means you ask systematically or as necessary—not according to whether or not they have their hand raised. You ask a question and then call a student's name to answer it. Remember that you are not going to let students opt out of questions. This is not to trap students, but rather to check for understanding. Make it positive. Move to another student if necessary and then go back. It is an engagement strategy, not a discipline strategy. The cold call technique engages your students who would not normally raise their hands but who have an answer and would like to be valued and included in the conversations. You might want to let a certain student know ahead of time that you are going to call on him so that he is ready with an answer and it gives him a chance to figure it out (this is called a pre-call).

Practice the "Call and Response" strategy.

The Call and Response strategy is when you ask a question and the entire class calls out the answer together. This technique supports academic review

and reinforcement. It can be high energy fun—have the students call it out energetically. Ask a certain type of person or group—certain instruments, boys or girls, woodwinds or brass or percussion, etc. Use the Call and Response technique to review things like dynamics, fingerings for a scale, note names, positions, and clapping. Calling out should be crisp and clear, not long and drawn out. If they don't say it right, say "I like your answer, but it's not fast enough and not in time. Let's try that again." Try adding a little pepper to it—call out fast questions for review. This is a game type of atmosphere you want to create in order to keep your students' learning and reviewing fun and exciting.

Use a "head to head" technique.

This is where you have two students stand up and you ask them questions. The one that gets it right gets to take on another student, and the one who answered incorrectly would sit down. Reward them after winning.

Apply the "sit down" method.

With this method, the entire class stands up and each person answers your questions (like playing a scale or a line of music) and earns the right to sit down. If there are students remaining after not answering or playing properly, you can send them into your office with a student who has mastered it so they can review it. When they come back out, give them another chance for the reward of positive recognition.

Use discipline.

The ideal classroom is one where all students work hard, behave well, model strong character, and do their best. Part of teaching discipline is teaching students to do things the right and successful way. Teach them step-by-step what successful learning looks like. If they aren't doing what you asked, the most likely explanation is that you haven't taught them. Discipline is a front end investment—implementing it early will pay off later. Also, in order to have an environment with positive culture, you need to have good management. Management is the process of reinforcing behavior by consequences and rewards. Be sure to teach students how to do things right—don't just establish consequences for doing them wrong. Inspire and engage them in positive work. Point out all the great things they are doing. Care enough to know your students as individuals.

Teachers who have strong control over their classroom succeed because they understand the power of language and relationships. They ask respectfully, firmly, and confidently, but also with civility (and often kindness). They express their faith in their students. They also replace vague and judgmental commands like "calm down" with specific and useful ones like "please return to your seats and begin writing in your journal."

Set the tone at the threshold.

One of the most important moments to set expectations in the classroom is the minute when your students enter the room. This is the time to remind them of the expectations you have for them. This is when you should establish rapport, set the tone, and reinforce the first steps in a routine that makes excellence habitual. Threshold ensures that you make a habit of getting it right from the outset each day. Ideally you will find a way to greet your students by standing in the physical threshold of the classroom. Take the opportunity to remind your students where they are and that you will always expect their best. Remind them where they are going (college, etc.) and what you will demand of them (excellence and effort). Shake their hands, have them look you in the eye (this is a good trait for all people who want to be successful, and it offers you a civil and cordial greeting). You can use any type of informal greeting as well.

When greeting students as they walk in, remind them of expectations, engage them and build your bond with them. Say things like "I loved the way you played on Smart Music," "I really enjoyed watching you play basketball/run track yesterday," "Your hair looks really nice today," and "We have a quiz today so go play through it really quickly." You can also use this time to correct weak handshakes, untidy attire, or lack of eye contact. These are things that will help them become successful, so it is your duty as a teacher to help them become their best. If they get it wrong or have an attitude, this would be the time to have them go back outside and try it again. You control access to your room. "Hold their hand" if necessary and have them look you in the eye while you gently correct them. Your tone can be outgoing or quiet (whatever is necessary).

Try to use their name as they enter. If you cannot greet each student at the beginning of the class you can do something else that is formal and signifies the starting of your class—have them all stand and then greet them and have them greet you back (as a class) and then when you sit, class begins.

Make an entry routine.

The entry routine is about setting behavioral expectations—what you expect your students to do when they come to your classroom. Having students come directly in and pick up a packet is faster and more productive than handing out papers. A section leader can come up to a table and pick up the new music for the day instead of the director handing the music out. Having a set place on the board for a bell ringer or assignment for them to do is the most efficient way of getting students on track. These entry routines must be well thought out, taught and rehearsed in order for them to work well. Students should know what to do as soon as they hit your hallway. They should know exactly where they are going to sit each day. All of this saves wasted time and energy.

Students should have a place where they drop off any papers as well as a pickup pile. This saves the teacher from having to do this in class. The "Do Now" (a short activity that you have written on the board) should be in the same place on the board every day so students know exactly where to look and what to do when they enter the room. See our "[Do Now](#)" article for more information.

Make tight transitions.

When students are in transition they are not learning. A poor transition or interruption undercuts the lesson. Effective teachers can transition from one activity to the next in thirty seconds or less. This must be practiced so all parties involved are striving for the same level of production. Sometimes students might need to practice several times a day under your watchful eye. Hours and hours can be saved each year by taking five or ten minutes at the beginning of the school year learning how to transition quickly. The starting and stopping point should be rehearsed and timed for efficiency. Speed and orderliness are the goal.

Use the SET acronym to get back on track.

SET is a short acronym to get students back on track:

- **S**it up straight
- **E**yes on the teacher/speaker
- **T**alking stops

No matter how great the lesson, if students are not alert, sitting up, looking at the source and actively listening, it is like pouring water into a leaky bucket. This acronym should be rehearsed and reviewed so that students are brought into a state of concentration, focus and learning.

Use a standard of 100%.

There is one acceptable percentage of students following a direction: 100%. Any less and your authority is subject to interpretation, situation and motivation. Your goal is to get 100% compliance so you can teach. You want the intervention to be fast and invisible. The standard, not the goal, is 100% compliance. Champion teachers finesse their way to the standard with a warm and positive tone. They are crisp and orderly. Students do as they are asked without ever seeming to think about it, yet the culture of compliance is both positive and, most importantly, invisible. The first step to achieving this is for the teacher to notice whether they have 100% or not.

Hand signals can really change the atmosphere into a positive one and gain full compliance. When you first use hand signals, raise your hand and say "Hands" to train your students. (Once they understand what raising your hand means, you won't need to say it.) Don't begin teaching until 100% of the hands are raised and eyes are on you. Excellence is the habit you want

them to create, so have them do it well every time. This will help them achieve success, which is your goal as a teacher. Keep in mind that this is all done to achieve compliance—it's an exercise in purpose, not power!

Many times it will take a few interventions to refocus an individual; however, behavior that is deliberate must earn a consequence. The goal is to address behavior problems quickly. Make corrections the first time it occurs, while its manifestation is still minimal and the necessary response is still small. You can say things like "still waiting on one person...", "watch me," or "I need your eyes on me so you can learn." Remember that it's always about the students and their path to college. Command obedience because it serves the student. You might also say things like "that's not how we do it here" or "in this classroom we respond respectfully to peers." Scan the room with a calm smile. Narrate your scan—"Thank you Peter. Thank you Marissa. Eyes right on me front row."

Tell the students what to do rather than what not to do.

Begin class logically by telling your students what to do. Telling your students what to do rather than what not to do is not only much more efficient and effective, but it also refocuses the teacher on teaching. Remember that effective directions are always specific. They should be easy to remember, solution-oriented, and hard to misunderstand. If students fail to follow directions, determine whether it is a result of incompetence or defiance. If it's due to incompetence, it's your job to teach them. If it is defiance, your job is to provide a consequence. Act clearly and decisively in the face of a challenge to your authority. If you don't give a consequence, he knows that his classmates will now know that he, and arguably anyone else who is willing to, can successfully challenge you for the rest of the year. By doing so, you are surrendering your responsibility to protect the environment in which the rest of the students live and learn, and thus their right to a quality education.

Use a strong voice.

Use the following five techniques of a strong voice (taken from *Teach Like a Champion*) to put you in a position to establish control and command, as well as give you the benign authority that makes the use of excessive consequences unnecessary:

- **Economy of language**—fewer words are stronger than more. It shows that you are prepared and know your purpose in speaking. Use the words that best focus students on what is most important. Make just one point. Be clear and crisp and then stop talking.
- **Do not talk over**—your words are the most important in the room, so make a habit of showing that they matter. Wait until there is no

talking or rustling. Controlling who has the floor is the mark of your authority and a necessity to your teaching.

- **Do not engage**—once you have set the topic of conversation, avoid engaging in other topics until you have satisfactorily resolved the topic you initiated. This is especially important when the topic is behavior follow-through. Of all the situations in which a student is likely to try to change topics, the moment in which you ask him to take accountability for his actions is among the most likely. For example, “David, I asked you to take your foot off Margaret’s chair.” Or even, “Right now, I need you to follow my direction and take your foot off Margaret’s chair.” He might try to change topics and blame her for something; however, until he has obeyed the initial request, there is no other conversation.
- **Square up/stand still**—show with your body that you are committed to each request. Turn, with both feet and shoulders, to face the object of your words directly. Make sure your eye contact is direct. Stand up straight or lean in close, demonstrating that you are not shy or afraid. Move toward him if necessary. When giving directions that you want followed, stop moving and don’t engage in other tasks at the same time. Strike a formal pose, putting your arms behind your back to show that you take your own words seriously and therefore those words, like you, are formal and purposeful.
- **Quiet power**—when you get loud, you also make the room louder, and thus make it easier for students to successfully talk under their breath. When you want control, get slower and quieter. Drop your voice and make students strain to listen. Convey poise and calmness.

Conclusion

This article encompasses many techniques used by champion teachers, and you probably already apply some of them in your classroom. Remember that it takes time, thought, and effort to successfully implement all of them into your teaching. If you are trying out some of these techniques for the first time, go over them each day before school begins until it becomes natural.