

Focusing Attention: refinements

(Despite following the recommended strategy you will find that not everyone will be focused. You may need the following backup techniques.)

1. THE FROZEN ARM

Observe a group of friends discussing a point at table after a meal. Several want to put their views at once. The noise level soars and it's difficult to make yourself heard.

You may possibly have noticed one or two raising their arms horizontally while they speak while trying to intervene. This is a common strategy and naturally we call it the frozen arm. Teachers can use the same technique signalling that they want attention while they are talking. This gesture is particularly telling if you keep your hand still at the end of each sentence.



2. Incomplete sentences...

This technique consists of stopping in mid-sentence.

Examples:

- "As we were saying yesterday..."
- "Everyone knows that ..."
- "As I was explaining..."

The human brain is continually searching for patterns and a sense of completion. So the fact that the sentence is unfinished is a powerful interruption. The teacher reinforces this instinctive break by pausing which shows what she wants : pupils to stop and pay attention.

Once you have attracted attention in this way you have attained your goal so continue the class as if nothing had happened.

3. Break... and Breathe

To effect this stopping strategy just step to one side and take a breath. Then go back to your original position and continue. Side stepping has provoked a small parenthesis in the rhythm of your presentation and stopped the activities of the inattentive.

This strategy induces amnesia in the minds of your listeners so that when you step back you can begin afresh. This is useful if your attention gathering techniques have failed up to then because it gives you a new start.

4. Visual Instructions

We tend to believe that whatever we say is clear in the listeners' minds. For some pupils this may be true but we can't just suppose that the information has reached everyone. That's why students often ask us to repeat what has just been said.

To make instructions clear it is recommended to write them up. This gesture acts as a support for what has just been said : the information enters through two channels: visual and auditory.

This means that the next time a pupil asks for a repetition of instructions we just need to point to the visual instruction. This is a subtle but effective way of signalling that the pupil should be paying more attention. All done with a simple hand gesture.

5. Don't blink!

- Blinking can be done for **mechanical** reasons (moisture) or for **processing** purposes. Regarding blinking for the purpose of processing - think of NLP's contention that blinking is a change from one mental picture to another mental picture. Blinking is located on the 'Process' level and is intrinsically tied to the 'content' level; here is how: Diane Ackerman in her book "History of the Senses" says human blink 4 times a minute.

- Compare **non-actors vs. actors.**

Most people when speaking can only keep their eyes open if what they are saying is familiar. And even then they have to train themselves to keep their eye lids open. If you try the game "staring" with 6-10 years old... you will probably lose. Kids interpret the activity as fun and breathe low, so they can stop blinking for longer. Once you learn to breathe low you can keep your eye open longer.

Actors have memorized their lines and therefore don't have to blink for "processing purposes." In fact, when they have minor roles, they have to teach themselves to blink so they don't upstage the major roles.

- The effect of **non-blinking**

If the person is not blinking AND HAS LOW BREATHING others perceive the person as either insane or TOTALLY congruent. Another way of saying this is to reference the kinesthetic "frozen hand gesture." The Frozen Hand Gesture during a pause mesmerized the listeners. The effect is that what is said before the pause is connected to what is said after the pause - it is one whole chunk of information. The "open eyes" is the visual equivalent of the frozen hand gesture during a pause - everything that is said during long periods of non-blinking is delivered as one whole chunk of information.

6. Say a number : 45%, 25 out of 30 pupils

Its astonishing how a statistic focuses attention. In an argument the person who can quote the most statistics appears to be right, even though numbers are notoriously easy to manipulate. When you encounter attention lapses in class you can resort to quoting numbers:

- There are 10 pupils in this class who read books from our class library. They all got good marks in the term exams.

- The human brain continues to grow until about age 18.

7. Tell a story.

For an example look at the story in the introduction 'The power of Influence'.