

# *How to Get Focused Academic Talk*

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Getting focused academic conversations from students can be a challenge. Time and time again, I hear complaints that students, “Just won’t stop talking”. OK, if we are being totally honest here, I often hear, “They just won’t *shut up!*”

We know that having a conversation, any conversation, is a learned skill. Therefore, we need to utilize structures, strategies, and procedures that teach students this essential life-long skill. Before utilizing the strategies listed below, I suggest reading the tips and ideas from the November 2012 blog post *They Just Talk Too Much*.

A great first step to helping students master the skill of academic talk is to introduce the idea of the Gradual Release of Responsibility, sometimes referred to as *I Do, We Do, You Do*. To read more about this approach, I suggest the work on Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey. In this model, the teacher is overt about the different phases, and different student and teacher roles, of a lesson. During the *I Do* portion of a lesson, the teacher models, directs, shows, and explicitly teaches a concept or idea. This is typically done with the whole class. During this time, **tell students how much time they will need to focus** on the teacher without talking. For example, you may say, “*Students, I need your attention. For the next 6 minutes I will show you 3 very important characteristics of an effective transition statement for your research papers. During this time, I need you to watch me and keep your questions or comments until I am done showing you these ideas. So, for the next 6 minutes, the only voice should be mine.*” Of course, this is done in a kind, firm way without yelling, sarcasm, or threats. This is powerful because it provides students with an idea of how long they need to focus. Many times, students interrupt or side talk because they have no idea how long the teacher will be talking. This strategy also reminds us to limit our talk. The longer we talk, especially when students have no idea how long we will drone on, the more likely they will tune out or turn to off-task behavior. Consider providing similar information during each phase of I Do, You Do, We Do. Some teachers elect to utilize a **timer** or they write the number of minutes on the board for a visual reminder.

During times when students are tasked with conversing with each other, utilize **Sentence Starters** to help focus their conversations. Sentence Starters can be as simple as, “I think...” to as directed as, “The teacher mentioned 3 characteristics of an effective transition statement. The first one was...” This simple strategy serves as a jump start and helps to focus

their conversations. These can be written on the board, differentiated on 3x5 cards for groups of students, or combined with a writing activity.

At various times during a lesson, remember to provide **Think Time** prior to asking students to talk, share ideas, or answer questions. Think Time, or Wait Time, is well-researched and has shown to benefit both students and teachers in many ways. In practice, we sometimes avoid Think Time because we feel there is too much content to cover in a short class period. Or, we realize that as soon as we stop talking, some student will fill that silence with inappropriate comments. Some students, when they experience silence in the classroom, have a tendency to blurt out comments, side talk, or participate in off-task or disruptive behavior. As a result, some teachers shy away from the use of Think Time. One alternative is to use **Narrated Think Time**. This strategy involves the teacher narrating or overtly stating the purpose, length, and expected outcome of the wait time. For example, the teacher might say, *“Students, I’m going to remain silent for about 15 seconds while I let you think about your response to a question. During that silence, think about your response and be ready to share an idea.”* For particularly challenging classes, consider prompting students to close their eyes, place a finger over their mouth, or ask them to look at something specific such as a book, poster, or key word list. In essence, Narrated Think Time involves the teacher telling / narrating the process so students are aware of the purpose and ultimate outcome of the Think Time.

Another way to help students focus their conversations on academic topics is to utilize **Focal Points**. Focal Points are literally the place where students are to focus their vision, attention, and ultimately their discussion. A big problem with most student conversations is that they are asked to talk about topics or ideas primarily from memory. That is, they are asked to summarize, talk, or share based on what they remember about the lesson. Relying primarily in student memory (literally, what is floating around in their minds at any given time) has obvious limitations. Instead, consider providing something for students to look at and study prior to and during their discussion. Focal Points can be written summaries, an image on a screen, a passage in a book, or a question from a worksheet. This approach sets students up for success and, when combined with some of the other strategies described above will increase the likelihood that your students remain focused during their discussions.

For questions or to report a success story, contact me at [bryan@bryan-harris.com](mailto:bryan@bryan-harris.com)