CHAPTER ONE

SETTING HIGH ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS

One consistent finding of academic research is that high expectations are the most reliable driver of high student achievement, even in students who do not have a history of successful achievement. Much of this research has been conducted to test, confirm, or debunk the famous "Pygmalion" study in which teachers were told that randomly selected groups of students had been proven through testing to be on the brink of great academic gains. Those groups of randomly selected students in fact outperformed other randomly selected groups whose teachers had not been led to expect great things, presumably because of those expectations.

One of the problems with findings about high expectations is that they often include in the definition a wide array of actions, beliefs, and operational strategies. One study defined *high expectations* as including the decision to allocate and protect more time on task in academic subjects. That's certainly good policy, but from a research standpoint, it's hard to disaggregate the effect of more time on task from expectations. It's also hard to turn that into specific action in the classroom.

So what are the concrete actionable ways that teachers who get exceptional results demonstrate high expectations? This chapter looks at five, derived from

these teachers, that raise expectations and differentiate great classrooms from the merely good ones.

TECHNIQUE 1

NO OPT OUT

One consistency among champion teachers is their vigilance in maintaining the expectation that it's not okay not to try. Everybody learns in a high-performing classroom, and expectations are high even for students who don't yet have high expectations for themselves. So a method of eliminating the possibility of opting out—muttering, "I don't know," in response to a question or perhaps merely shrugging impassively in expectation that the teacher will soon leave you alone—quickly becomes a key component of the classroom culture. That's where **No Opt Out** started, though as with so many of the other techniques in this book, it soon found additional applications as a useful tool for helping earnest, striving students who are trying hard but genuinely don't know the answer. *No Opt Out* helps address both. At its core is the belief that a sequence beginning with a student unable (or unwilling) to answer a question should end with that student giving the right answer as often as possible, even if it is only to repeat the correct answer. Only then is the sequence complete.

KEY IDEA

NO OPT OUT

A sequence that begins with a student unable to answer a question should end with the student answering that question as often as possible.

In its simplest form, *No Opt Out* might look like this. It's the first day of school, and you're reviewing multiplication facts with your fifth or perhaps sixth graders. You ask Charlie what 3 times 8 is. Glancing briefly and impassively at you, Charlie mutters, "I dunno," under his breath, then sucks his teeth, and turns

his head slowly to look out the window. It's a critical moment. Students all too commonly use this approach to push back on teachers when their unwillingness to try, a lack of knowledge, or a combination of the two makes them unsure or resistant. And all too often it works. Reluctant students quickly come to recognize that "I don't know" is the Rosetta stone of work avoidance. Many teachers simply don't know how to respond. The result is a strong incentive for students to say, "I don't know" when asked a question. If you don't feel like working hard, those three words can save you a lot of effort. So if Charlie successfully shows you that you can't make him participate, it's going to be a long year of you gingerly (and weakly) stepping around him, of other students seeing that Charlie does what he wants, and of Charlie not learning—a lose-lose-lose situation.

Reluctant students quickly come to recognize that ''I don't know'' is the Rosetta stone of work avoidance.

If you used *No Opt Out* in this situation, you would turn to another student, Devon, and ask him that same question. Assuming he correctly answered 24, you'd now turn back to Charlie: "Now you tell me, Charlie, what's 3 times 8?" Charlie has just found—without your stopping for a time-consuming and possibly ineffective lecture—that he has to do the work anyway in your class. Later we'll look at more challenging contingencies that you may be wondering about: What if Charlie doesn't answer when you come back to him? What if Devon doesn't answer? For now, it's most important just to understand the power and necessity of coming back to a student who won't try. The moment when you circle back and ask the student to reanswer the original question is the *No Opt Out.*

No Opt Out proves to be just as powerful in situations where students are trying. Here's an example from Darryl Williams's classroom, in which a student, James, was unable to identify the subject of the sentence, "My mother was not happy." He first tried to guess: "*Happy*?" he asked. Williams persevered, repeating the question as many other teachers would do: "What's the subject?" However, as the student was still unable to answer, Williams now asked the class, "When I am asking you for the subject, what am I asking for?" The student he called on now replied, "You're asking for who or what the sentence is about." Returning to James, Williams repeated, "When I ask for the subject, I am asking for who or what the sentence is about. What's the subject?" James now answered correctly: "*Mother*." As in all other *No Opt Outs,* the sequence began with a student unable to answer and ended with him providing the answer. The second student's answer didn't replace the original student's; it supported

it. And James has seen himself succeed where just moments ago he was unable to. He has rehearsed success and practiced one of the fundamental processes of school: get it wrong; then get it right.

But let's return now to some thoughts about what you might do if things hadn't gone so well. What if James still couldn't answer, or worse, what if he had shrugged his shoulders and muttered, "I don't know," and with a bit of swagger. If James still couldn't answer, Williams might persist by asking another student, "Well, what does that mean the subject is?" The student having answered, "The subject is *mother,*" Williams might then return to the original student asking him, "Okay, James, now you tell me: What's the subject of the sentence?" With only an answer to repeat, it's all but impossible for James to opt out and maintain the useful illusion that he can't answer. But in all likelihood, with any plausible gray area removed (see the box), he will answer. If he doesn't, it's a case of defiance that you can address with a consequence and an explanation: "James, you don't have to get the answers right in my class, but you will be expected to try. I'll see you here at recess."

> Much of student behavior is opportunistic and undertaken in reaction to the gray area, *"I can get away with it, so I will."* A far smaller number of students will persist in a behavior once you've made it unambiguous what you expect. Fewer still will do so when you've shown you're persistent. This is discussed further in *What to Do.*

Even more effective might be a firmer iteration of *No Opt Out* before returning to James: "Tell him again, David. What's the subject?" And then, "Let's try it again, James. What's the subject of the sentence?" Or you could repeat the answer yourself: "James, the subject of this sentence is *mother.* Now you tell me, what's the subject?" Regardless of which approach you take, the sequence ends with the original student repeating the correct answer: "The subject is *mother*."

In the case of Charlie, if Devon didn't answer and tried to mimic Charlie's impassivity, you might give the answer yourself: "Class, 3 times 8 is 24. Devon, what is it? Good. Now you, Charlie." In a minute we'll look at some of the more academically rigorous variations on *No Opt Out.* But first I want to underscore

how the technique allows you to ensure that all students take responsibility for learning. It establishes a tone of student accountability, and it honors and validates students who do know the answer by allowing them to help their peers in a positive and public way.

I also want to underscore that the worst-case examples I've given above are fairly anomalous. The tone of *No Opt Out* in most classrooms is astoundingly positive and academic. Using it empowers you to cause all students to take the first step, no matter how small. It reminds them that you believe in their ability to answer. And it results in students' hearing themselves succeed and get answers right. This causes them to grow increasingly familiar with successful outcome. *No Opt Out* normalizes this process with the students who need it most.

NO OPT OUT: CLIP 1

In clip 1 on the DVD, Darryl Williams of Brighter Choice Charter School for Boys in Albany, New York, demonstrates *No Opt Out* twice. In the first instance, he calls on a student to read the word *acted.* When he isn't successful, Williams sticks with the boy, providing a cue himself until the student includes the suffix. As Williams notes, the objective for the day's lesson is to read and understand suffixes, so it's probably worth taking the time to cue the student as he does.

In the second instance, when the student is unable to read the word *performance,* Williams calls on another student and then returns to the original student: ''Read it, Jamel.'' In this case, it's not probably worth the time to break down the error as the decoding skill the student struggles with is less closely related to the day's objective. That said, Williams has still firmly established a strong accountability loop.

There are four basic formats of *No Opt Out.* I've provided examples below, with each presented as a variation of the James sequence in Williams's classroom. What's consistent across all four cases is that a sequence that begins with the student unable to answer ends with the student giving the right answer. This ensures that everyone comes along on the march to college.

- **Format 1:** You provide the answer; the student repeats the answer.

Teacher: What's the subject, James?

James: *Happy.*

Teacher: James, the subject is *mother.* Now you tell me. What's the subject?

James: The subject is *mother.*

Teacher: Good, James. The subject is *mother.*

- **Format 2:** Another student provides the answer; the initial student repeats the answer.

Teacher: What's the subject, James?

James: *Happy.*

Teacher: Who can tell James what the subject of the sentence is?

Student 2: *Mother.*

Teacher: Good. Now you, James. What's the subject?

James: The subject is *mother.*

Teacher: Yes, the subject is *mother.*

A variation on this method is to ask the whole class, rather than one individual student, to provide the correct answer (using *Call and Response,* technique 23 in Chapter Four) and then have the initial student repeat.

Teacher: What's the subject, James?

James: *Happy.*

Teacher: On the count of two, class, tell me what the subject of the sentence is. One, two . . .

Class: *Mother!*

Teacher: What is it?

Class: *Mother!*

Teacher: James. What's the subject?

James: *Mother.*

Teacher: Good, James.

- **Format 3:** You provide a cue; your student uses it to find the answer.

Teacher: What's the subject, James?

Student 1: *Happy.*

Teacher: James, when I ask you for the subject, I am asking for who or what the sentence is about. Now, James, see if that can help you find the subject.

James: *Mother.*

Teacher: Good, James. The subject is *mother.*

- **Format 4:** Another student provides a cue; the initial student uses it to find the answer.

Teacher: What's the subject, James?

James: *Happy.*

Teacher: Who can tell James what I am asking for when I ask for the subject?

Student 2: You're asking for who or what the sentence is about.

Teacher: Yes, I am asking for who or what the sentence is about. James, what's the subject.

James: *Mother.*

Teacher: Good, James. The subject is *mother.*

I use the word *cue* here to mean a hint that *offers additional useful information to the student in a way that pushes him or her to follow the correct thinking process.* A hint, by contrast, could offer any information. If I ask, "Can anyone give James a hint to help him find the subject?" a student might say, "It starts

with the letter *m*." This would surely help James guess the answer but doesn't teach him anything that will help him next time.

When you ask your students to provide a cue, be sure to provide guidance as to what kind of cue would be useful. Three cues are particularly useful:

- The place where the answer can be found:

  "Who can tell James where he could find the answer?"

- The step in the process that's required at the moment:

  "Who can tell James what the first thing he should do is?"

- Another name for the term that's a problem:

  "Who can tell James what *denominator* means?"

So how should you go about deciding which type of *No Opt Out* to use? As a rule of thumb, sequences in which students use cues to answer questions are more rigorous than those in which students merely repeat answers given by others, and sequences in which students do more of the narration and intellectual work are generally preferable. At the same time, there's no way to slow down enough to cue every student in the most rigorous way toward the answer to every question that stumps somebody. You'd never get anything else done. And if you do, you risk not only losing your momentum but you allow students to co-opt the lesson by constantly feigning ignorance and cleverly taking you off task. In seeking to balance between providing cues (slow but rigorous) and providing answers (fast but more superficial), you'll probably find it helpful to go back to your objective. The closer the question you asked is to your lesson objective, the worthier of a slower and more cognitively rigorous *No Opt Out* it probably is. If it's a peripheral topic, speed through it by taking the right answer quickly from a peer, asking for a repeat of it by the original student, and moving on.

No matter what balance you strike, students in your classroom should come to expect that when they say they can't answer or when they answer incorrectly, there is a strong likelihood that they will conclude their interaction by demonstrating their responsibility and ability to identify the right answer.

TECHNIQUE 2

RIGHT IS RIGHT

Right Is Right is about the difference between partially right and all-the-way right—between pretty good and 100 percent. The job of the teacher is to set a high standard for correctness: 100 percent. The likelihood is strong that students will stop striving when they hear the word *right* (or *yes* or some other proxy), so there's a real risk to naming as right that which is not truly and completely right. When you sign off and tell a student she is right, she must not be betrayed into thinking she can do something that she cannot.

KEY IDEA

RIGHT IS RIGHT

Set and defend a high standard of correctness in your classroom.

Many teachers respond to almost-correct answers their students give in class by rounding up. That is they'll affirm the student's answer and repeat it, adding some detail of their own to make it fully correct even though the student didn't provide (and may not recognize) the differentiating factor. Imagine a student who's asked at the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet* how the Capulets and Montagues get along. "They don't like each other," the student might say, in an answer that most teachers would, I hope, want some elaboration on before they called it fully correct. "Right," the teacher might reply. "They don't like each other, and they have been feuding for generations." But of course the student hadn't included the additional detail. That's the "rounding up." Sometimes the teacher will even give the student credit for the rounding up as if the student said what he did not and what she merely wished he'd said, as in, "Right, what Kiley said was that they don't like each other and have been feuding. Good work, Kiley." Either way, the teacher has set a low standard for correctness and explicitly told the class that they can be right even when they are not. Just as important, she has crowded out students' own thinking, doing cognitive work

that students could do themselves (e.g., "So, is this a recent thing? A temporary thing? Who can build on Kiley's answer?").

When answers are almost correct, it's important to tell students that they're almost there, that you like what they've done so far, that they're closing in on the right answer, that they've done some good work or made a great start. You can repeat a student's answer back to him so he can listen for what's missing and further correct—for example, "You said the Capulets and the Montagues didn't get along." Or you can wait or prod or encourage or cajole in other ways to tell students what still needs doing, ask who can help get the class all the way there until you get students all the way to a version of right that's rigorous enough to be college prep: "Kiley, you said the Capulets and the Montagues didn't get along. Does that really capture their relationship? Does that sound like what they'd say about each other?"

In holding out for right, you set the expectation that the questions you ask and their answers truly matter. You show that you believe your students are capable of getting answers as right as students anywhere else. You show the difference between the facile and the scholarly. This faith in the quality of a right answer sends a powerful message to your students that will guide them long after they have left your classroom.

SEE IT IN ACTION: CLIP 2

RIGHT IS RIGHT

In clip 2 on the DVD, Annette Riffle of North Star Academy demonstrates *Right Is Right.* She calls on a student to explain how the rules for ordered pairs on a coordinate grid work—that the *x* coordinate always come first. The student notes that the "*x*-axis has to come first and then the *y*-axis." Most teachers would call this answer correct, but Riffle insists on the student being all the way right and calling them the "*x* and *y* coordinates." She has the student integrate the correct terms into her answer by reanswering.

This clip also shows the power of technique 32, *SLANT* (introduced in Chapter Five), as the student tracks the speaker during her answer.

Over the years I've witnessed teachers struggle to defend right answers. In one visit to a fifth-grade classroom, a teacher asked her students to define *peninsula.* One student raised his hand and offered this definition: "It's like, where the water indents into the land." "Right," his teacher replied, trying to reinforce participation since so few hands had gone up. Then she added, "Well, except that a peninsula is where land indents into water, which is a little different." Her reward to the student for his effort was to provide him with misinformation. A peninsula, he heard, is pretty much "where the water indents into the land" but different on some arcane point he need not really recall. Meanwhile, it's a safe bet that the students with whom he will compete for a seat in college are not learning to conflate bays and peninsulas.

A better response might have been, "A bay is what you call it when water indents into land. But a peninsula is a land formation. Who can tell me what a peninsula is?" with the sequence ending with the kind of definition students get when their teachers believe they are going to college: "A peninsula is a formation where land is surrounded on three sides by water. Write that down in your notes, please. A peninsula is a formation where land is surrounded on three sides by water."

Though as teachers we are the defenders of right answers, of the standards of correctness, there are in fact four ways in which we are at risk of slipping in holding out for right and thus four categories within the *Right Is Right* technique:

1. **Hold out for all the way.** Great teachers praise students for their effort but never confuse effort with mastery. A right answer includes the negative sign if a negative sign is warranted. There no such thing as "Right! Except you need a negative sign." When you ask for the definition of a noun and get "a person, place, or thing," don't do students the disservice of overlooking the fact that the answer is incomplete: a noun is a person, place, thing, or idea.

Simple, positive language to express your appreciation for what a student has done *and* your expectation that he or she will now march the last few yards is often the best way to address such a situation and retain positive tone in your classroom. Here are some phrases to do that:

- "I like what you've done. Can you get us the rest of the way?"
- "We're almost there. Can you find the last piece?"
- "I like most of that. . ."

- "Can you develop that further?"
- "Okay, but, there's a bit more to it than that."
- "Kim just knocked a base hit. Who can bring her home?"

Another effective response is to repeat the student's words back to him or her, placing emphasis on incomplete parts if necessary:

- "A peninsula is *water* indenting into *land*?"
- "You just said that a noun is a person, place, or thing . . . "
- "You just said that a noun is a person, place, or thing, but *freedom* is a noun, and it's not exactly any of those three."
- "You just said that first you would solve the exponent and then you'd solve what's in parentheses."

2. **Answer the question.** Students learn quickly in school that when you don't know the right answer to a question, you can usually get by if you answer a different one, especially if you say something true and heartfelt about the wider world. Can't identify the setting in the story? Offer an observation about the theme of injustice in the novel instead: "This reminds me of something from my neighborhood." Most teachers can't pass up a student's taking on issues of justice and fairness, even if what they asked about was the setting. Over time, students come to recognize this.

If you're a Right Is Right *teacher, though, you know that the "right" answer to any question other than the one you asked is wrong.*

If you're a *Right Is Right* teacher, though, you know that the "right" answer to any question other than the one you asked is wrong and you'll insist that the student answer the question you asked, not the one she wished you asked or what she confused it for. You might respond with something like, "We'll talk about that in a few minutes, Daniella. Right now I want to know about the setting."

Another situation in which students answer a question other than the one you asked is when they conflate different types of information about a topic. For example, you ask for a definition ("Who can tell me what a compound word is?"), and a student replies with an example ("*Eyeball* is a compound word!"). Or alternatively, you ask them to describe a concept ("When

we refer to the area of a figure, what are we talking about? Who can tell me what area is?") and a student replies with a formula to solve for the concept ("Length times width"). In the thick of the action, it's easy to miss that these are right answers but to the wrong question. And as you begin to listen for them, you'll find these kinds of exchanges far more common than you might expect.

If you ask students for a definition and get an example, try saying, "Kim, that's an example. I want the definition." After all, knowing the difference between an example and a definition matters.

3. **Right answer, right time.** Students sometimes want to show you how smart they are by getting ahead of your questions, but it's risky to accept answers out of sequence. For example, when you are teaching students the series of steps needed to solve a problem and a student you call on to provide step 3 gives the whole answer, you have a problem. Accepting her answer before you've shown all the steps required deprives the rest of your students of a full understanding of the process. It's tempting to think that it's a good thing that the class is moving ahead quickly, but it's not. It's one student. And besides, teaching a replicable, repeatable process is more important than teaching the answer to this problem. So it cheats the class if you respond favorably to one student's desire to move to the end. Instead, consider responding with something like, "My question wasn't about the solution to the problem. It was about what we do next. What *do* we do next?"

Alternatively, if you are asking what motivates a character's actions at the beginning of a chapter, you might prepare to resist accepting or engaging an answer that discusses—even very insightfully—the more dramatic events that conclude the chapter, especially if the point of the discussion of the first part is to better understand the ending when you get there. If it was really possible to jump ahead to the end and still understand the topic of the lesson, you might ask yourself why you were teaching the first part anyway! The answer, of course, is probably that the first part is important. This argues for protecting the integrity of your lesson by not jumping ahead to engage an exciting "right" answer at the wrong time.

4. **Use technical vocabulary.** Good teachers get students to develop effective right answers using terms they are already comfortable with: "Volume is the amount space something takes up." Great teachers get them to use precise technical vocabulary: "Volume is the cubic units of space an object occupies." This response expands student vocabularies and builds comfort with the terms students will need when they compete in college.

SEE IT IN ACTION: CLIP 3

RIGHT IS RIGHT

In clip 3 on the DVD, Jason Armstrong, a math teacher at Boston's Roxbury Prep Charter School, models *Right Is Right.* In this lesson, he demonstrates three of the subtechniques in the first two minutes of his lesson with a group of sixth graders. It's hard not to notice how his use of the techniques ratchets up the level of academic expectation quickly and decisively:

Armstrong: We're going to do a couple of things with volume today. Then we're going to practice volume and then surface area. Can someone give me a definition for volume to get us started? Mark?

Mark: Volume is length times width times height.

Armstrong: You're telling me how we're going to solve for volume. If you say ''length times width times height,'' you're giving me a calculation. What I want to know—and you probably know this too, Mark—is what volume is [a perfect example of answer my question]. What is that amount? Yeritza?

Yeritza: Volume is the amount of square cubes that takes up something.

Armstrong: Okay, but I want to refine what you said—''the amount of cubes.'' What should we say? What's the technical definition instead of just cubes? What were you going to say, Wes?

Wes: The amount of cubic inches that a rectangular prism or a three-dimensional figure takes up.

Armstrong: Right, any three-dimensional figure. But I don't want to just say cubic inches because it's not necessarily inches. It could be feet; it could be centimeters; it could be yards . . . [Classic all the way right here. So many teachers would have accepted these answers.]

Wes: Cubic units.

Armstrong: [writing on the overhead] So the amount of cubic units that an object takes up . . . and, Donte, I know you know the other word. What's the other word for takes up?

Donte: Occupies.

Armstrong: Yes. *Occupies*. Volume is the amount of cubic units that an object occupies. [He caps it off by stressing the technical vocabulary, *occupies.* Is it any wonder Armstrong's students are among the top-scoring math students in the state of Massachusetts?]

TECHNIQUE 3

STRETCH IT

When students finally get an answer all the way right, there's a temptation, often justified, to respond by saying "good" or "yes" or by repeating the right answer, and that's that. Just as often, though, the learning can and should continue after a correct answer has been given. So it's great to remember to respond, as many of champion teachers do, to right answers by asking students to answer a different or tougher question or by using questioning to make sure that a right answer is repeatable, that is, the student knows how to get similar right answers again and again. The technique of rewarding right answers with more questions is called **Stretch It**.

KEY IDEA

STRETCH IT

The sequence of learning does not end with a right answer; reward right answers with follow-up questions that extend knowledge and test for reliability. This technique is especially important for differentiating instruction.

This technique yields two primary benefits. First, by using *Stretch It* to check for replicable understanding, you avoid falsely concluding that reliable

mastery of material has been achieved without eliminating the possibility that luck, coincidence, or partial mastery led to a right answer to the question asked. Second, when students have indeed mastered parts of an idea, using *Stretch It* lets you give them exciting ways to push ahead, applying their knowledge in new settings, thinking on their feet, and tackling harder questions. This keeps them engaged and sends the message that the reward for achievement is more knowledge.

Asking frequent, targeted, rigorous questions of students as they demonstrate mastery is a powerful and much simpler tool for differentiating.

Incidentally, this also helps you solve one of the thorniest classroom challenges: differentiating instruction to students of different skill levels. We're sometimes socialized to think we have to break students up into different instructional groups to differentiate, giving them different activities and simultaneously forcing ourselves to manage an overwhelming amount of complexity. Students are rewarded with a degree of freedom that's as likely to yield discussions of last night's episode of *American Idol* as it is higher-order discussions of content. Asking frequent, targeted, rigorous questions of students as they demonstrate mastery is a powerful and much simpler tool for differentiating. By tailoring questions to individual students, you can meet students where they are and push them in a way that's directly responsive to what they've shown they can already do.

There are several specific types of *Stretch It* questions that are especially effective:

- **Ask *how* or *why*.** The best test of whether students can get answers right consistently is whether they can explain how they got the answer. Increasingly, state assessments ask these questions explicitly—one more reason for you to ask students to practice narrating their thinking process.

Teacher: How far is it from Durango to Pueblo?

Student: Six hundred miles

Teacher: How'd you get that?

Student: By measuring three inches on the map and adding two hundred plus two hundred plus two hundred.

Teacher: How'd you know to use two hundred miles for each inch?

Student: I looked at the scale in the map key.

• **Ask for another way to answer.** Often there are multiple ways to answer a question. When a student solves it one way, it's a great opportunity to make sure they can use all available methods.

Teacher: How far is it from Durango to Pueblo?

Student: Six hundred miles

Teacher: How'd you get that?

Student: By measuring three inches on the map and adding two hundred plus two hundred plus two hundred.

Teacher: Is here a simpler way than adding three times?

Student: I could have multiplied 200 times 3.

Teacher: And when you do that you'd get what?

Student: Six hundred

Teacher: Very nice. That's a better way.

• **Ask for a better word.** Students often begin framing concepts in the simplest possible language. Offering them opportunities to use more specific words, as well as new words with which they are gaining familiarity, reinforces the crucial literacy goal of developing vocabulary.

Teacher: Why did Sophie gasp, Janice?

Student: She gasped because the water was cold when she jumped in.

Teacher: Can you answer with a word different from *cold,* one that shows how cold it was?

Student: Sophie gasped because the water was freezing.

Teacher: Okay, how about using one of our vocabulary words?

Student: Sophie gasped because the water was frigid.

Teacher: Very nice.

• **Ask for evidence.** As students mature, they are increasingly asked to build and defend their conclusions and support opinions from among multiple possible answers. This is especially the case in the humanities. Who's to say what the theme of the novel is, or what the author intended to show in a given scene? By asking students to describe evidence that supports their conclusion, you stress the process of building and supporting sound arguments in the larger world, where right answers are not so clear. You also give yourself grounds to avoid reinforcing poor but subjective interpretations, a task that is often challenging for teachers. You don't have to say you don't agree, just ask for the proof.

Teacher: How would you describe Dr. Jones's personality? What traits is he showing?

Student: He's spiteful.

Teacher: And *spiteful* means?

Student: *Spiteful* means that he's bitter and wants to make other people unhappy.

Teacher: Okay, so read me two sentences from the story that show us that Dr. Jones is spiteful.

• **Ask students to integrate a related skill.** In the real world, questions rarely isolate a skill precisely. To prepare students for that, try responding to mastery of one skill by asking students to integrate the skill with others recently mastered:

Teacher: Who can use the word *stride* in a sentence?

Student: "I stride down the street."

Teacher: Can you add some detail to show more about what *stride* means?

Student: "I stride down the street to buy some candy at the store."

Teacher: Can you add an adjective to modify *street*?

Student: "I stride down the wide street to buy some candy at the store."

Teacher: Good, now can you add a compound subject to your sentence?

Student: "My brother and I stride down the wide street to buy some candy at the store."

Teacher: And can you put that in the past tense?

Student: "My brother and I strode down the wide street to buy some candy at the store."

Teacher: Those were very challenging questions Charles, and look how well you handled them!

• **Ask students to apply the same skill in a new setting.** Once students have mastered a skill, consider asking them to apply it in a new or more challenging setting:

Teacher: So what's the setting of our story?

Student: The setting is in a town called Sangerville in the recent past.

Teacher: Good. I notice that you remembered both parts of setting. Can you remember the setting of *Fantastic Mr. Fox* then?

Student: It was on a farm in the recent past.

Teacher: How do you know it was the recent past?

Student: They had tractors.

Teacher: Good. But what about movies? Do movies have a setting?

Student: Yes.

Teacher: Great. I'll tell you a setting and you see if you can tell me the movie.

SEE IT IN ACTION: CLIP 4

RIGHT IS RIGHT AND STRETCH IT

In clip 4 on the DVD, Leah Bromley of North Star Academy demonstrates *Right Is Right* and *Stretch It.* Asked to draw a conclusion from a set of data comparing slope with stream depth, a student in Bromley's class replies: ''The different slope affects how deep the stream is.'' Bromley notes that the answer is pretty close to correct but still holds out for more: ''I need somebody who can make that more specific.'' To be right in her

class, students have to explain what the effect is: ''The steeper the slope, the deeper the stream is.''

Now that she's gotten her class to a fully ''right'' answer, Leah begins asking a series of questions to stretch her students. First, ''What's the opposite of that?'' a question she asks to ensure that students can apply the same relationship in reverse, and then, ''Now I want someone to take this one step further and use the word *erosion.*'' In this case, she asks students to upgrade with more rigorous vocabulary. Then after arguably another *Right Is Right* (in which the answer has to be more concise to be right), she asks students to *Stretch It* again and explain why.

All of this cognitive work—explaining the opposite of the phenomenon, using better vocabulary to describe it, and explaining why—all happen after she's gotten a correct answer from her students. The right answer is just the beginning.

Stretch It asks students to be on their toes: to explain their thinking or apply knowledge in new ways. Just asking a quantity of tough questions isn't necessarily sufficient. In one fifth-grade classroom, a student was asked by her teacher to use the vocabulary word *passion* in a sentence. "I have a passion for cooking," she replied. "Who else can use *passion* in a sentence?" the teacher asked. "I have a passion for basketball," answered a boy. The teacher accepted with a nod where she might have stretched. Here was an opportunity to test whether the student really understood how to use the word or was just making a rote copy of a previous example. The teacher might have asked the student to use the adjective form of *passion*. Instead, she simply asked, "Anyone else?" Four or five students methodically used the same sentence structure but replaced the object noun with some other—"I have a passion for dancing," "I have a passion for riding my bike"—making it an exercise in banal copying of a basal concept, and, ultimately, low expectations.

Think of all the ways the teacher could have used *Stretch It* with her students at an equal or lesser cost of time than the activity she chose:

- "Can you rewrite your sentence to have the same meaning but start with the word *cooking*?"
- "What's the adjective form of *passion*? Can you rewrite your sentence using *passion* in its adjective form?"

- "If Marie had a passion for cooking, what sorts of things would you expect to find in her house?"
- "What would be the difference between saying, 'I was passionate about cooking,' and saying 'I was fanatical about cooking?'"
- "What's the opposite of having a passion for something?"

TECHNIQUE 4
FORMAT MATTERS

The complete sentence is the battering ram that knocks down the door to college.

In school, the medium is the message: to succeed, students must take their knowledge and express it in a variety of clear and effective formats to fit the demands of the situation and of society. It's not just what students say that matters but how they communicate it. The complete sentence is the battering ram that knocks down the door to college. The essays required to enter college (and every paper written once there) demand fluent syntax. Conversations with potential employers require subject-verb agreement. Use **Format Matters** to prepare your students to succeed by requiring complete sentences and proficient grammar every chance you get.

Teachers who understand the importance of this technique rely on some basic format expectations:

- **Grammatical format.** Yes, you should correct slang, syntax, usage, and grammar in the classroom even if you believe the divergence from standard is acceptable, even normal, in some settings, or even if it falls within a student's dialect—or more accurately, even if you perceive it to be normal within what you perceive to be a student's dialect. In fact, you may not know how a student's family or community speaks or what it views as normal or acceptable. And there is some history of young people adopting dialects or choosing to speak in a way different from the way their parents do or wish them to.

To gloss the vast sociological discourse on what's standard, whether it's the only right form of language and even whether it is in fact correct, champion teachers accept a much more limited but practical premise: there is a language of opportunity—the code that signals preparedness and proficiency to the broadest possible audience. It's the code that shows facility with the forms of language

in which work, scholarship, and business are conducted. In it, subjects and verbs agree, usage is traditional, and rules are studied and followed. If students choose to switch and use the language of opportunity selectively and only in school settings, so be it. But no matter what you tell your students about how they talk elsewhere, making the determination to prepare them to compete for jobs and seats in college by asking them to self-correct in class is one of the fastest ways to help them. There may be a time and place in which to engage them in a broader sociological discourse on dialect—under what circumstances it can be acceptable to use dialect, who determines correctness, how much subjectivity there is in that determination, what the broader implications of code switching are, and so on. Given the frequency of very real errors by students and the potential cost to them of allowing those errors to persist, find simple and minimally disruptive techniques to identify and correct errors with minimum distraction. That way you can correct consistently and seamlessly. Two simple methods are especially helpful:

- *Identify the error.* When a student makes a grammatical error merely repeat the error in an interrogative tone: "We *was* walking down the street?" "There *gots to be* eight of them?" Then allow the student to self-correct. If the student fails to self-correct, use the next method or quickly provide the correct syntax and ask him or her to repeat.
- *Begin the correction.* When a student makes a grammatical error, begin to rephrase the answer as it would sound if grammatically correct and then allow the student to complete it. In the examples above, that would mean saying, "We *were*" or "It *has* to" and leaving the student to provide the full correct answer.

- **Complete sentence format.** Strive to give students the maximum amount of practice building complete sentences on the spur of the moment. To do this, you can use one of several methods when students answer you in a fragment or a single word.

You can provide the first words of a complete sentence to show students how to begin sentences:

Teacher: James, how many tickets are there?

James: Six.

Teacher: There are . . .

James: There are six tickets in the basket.

Another method is to remind students before they start to answer, as in:

Teacher: Who can tell me in a complete sentence what the setting of the story is?

Student: The setting is the city of Los Angeles in the year 2013.

And a third is to remind students afterward with a quick and simple prompt using the lowest possible disruption, as in:

Teacher: What was the year of Caesar's birth?

Student: 100 B.C.

Teacher: Complete sentence.

Student: Julius Caesar was born in 100 B.C.

Some teachers substitute a code such as "like a scholar" to remind students to use complete sentences. As in, "Who can tell me like a scholar?"

SEE IT IN ACTION: CLIP 5

FORMAT MATTERS

In clip 5 on the DVD, Darryl Williams of Brighter Choice Charter School for Boys demonstrates *Format Matters.* In both cases, he actively reinforces the language of opportunity by correcting the phrases "It gots to be" and "It got a '–ed'." Williams uses two strategies to do so. In the first case, he "punches the error," repeating, "It *gots* to be?" as a question and causing the student to self-correct. In the second case, he provides a sentence stem, "It has . . . ," which the student completes. In both cases, Williams is effective in keeping his transaction cost low and maintaining a neutral and nonjudgmental tone.

- **Audible format.** There's not much point of discussing answers with thirty people if only a few can hear you. If it matters enough to say in class, then it matters that everyone can hear it. Otherwise class discussion and student participation

appear as afterthoughts, incidental banter. Underscore that students should be listening to their peers by insisting that their peers make themselves audible. Accepting an inaudible answer suggests that what a student said didn't matter that much.

Perhaps the most effective way to reinforce this expectation is with a quick, crisp reminder that creates the minimum distraction from the business of class. Saying "voice" to students whose voice is inaudible, for example, is preferable to a five-second disruption such as, "Maria, we can't hear you in the back of the room. Would you speak up, please?" in three ways. First, it is more efficient. In the language of business, it has a low transaction cost. It costs almost nothing in terms of a classroom's most precious commodity: time. In fact, a champion teacher can offer three or four reminders about "voice" in the time a less proficient teacher can remind one student in the style used with Maria previously.

> *Transaction cost* refers to the amount of resources it takes to execute an exchange—be it economic, verbal, or something else. Your goal is to make each necessary intervention with the least distraction from the task at hand and the least time away from what you were doing, and thus with the absolute minimum of words.

Second, merely stating "voice" as opposed to offering a long-winded expectation suggests that you don't need an explanation for why you should speak up in class. The reason is self-evident, and the reminder makes it clear that speaking up is an expectation, not a favor. Third, by telling the student what to do as opposed to what she did wrong, the teacher avoids nagging, thus preserving her relationship with students and allowing her, if necessary, to remind often enough to make the expectation predictable and thus most effective in changing behavior.

This last point deserves some amplification. Once several colleagues and I watched a teacher's lesson. Four or five times during that lesson, the teacher reminded students to speak audibly but used the term *louder* as a reminder rather than the word *voice*. Her use of *louder* seemed to emphasize a lack of something; it constantly emphasized that expectations were not being met and thus "narrated the negative," an idea you will read about in *Positive Framing* (technique 43 in Chapter Seven). "Voice," by contrast, reinforces an expectation in a quick

reminder that tells students what to try to achieve. My colleagues also noted that some teachers used the term *voice* with a finesse that was not achievable with the term *louder,* for example, "Jayshon, can you use your voice to tell me how I'd find the least common multiple?" or "I need someone with voice to tell me what I need to do next!"

My colleagues and I concluded that *voice* is the gold standard when working on audible format.

- **Unit format.** In math and science class, replace "naked numbers" (those without units) with ones that are "dressed." If you ask for the area of a rectangle and a student tells you it's twelve, ask for the units, or merely note that her numbers "need some dressing up" or "look a bit underdressed."

KEY IDEA

FORMAT MATTERS

It's not just what students say that matters but how they communicate it. To succeed, students must take their knowledge and express it in the language of opportunity.

TECHNIQUE 5

WITHOUT APOLOGY

Sometimes the way we talk about expectations inadvertently lowers them. If we're not on guard, we can unwittingly apologize for teaching worthy content and even for the students themselves. You won't do this when you use **Without Apology.**

APOLOGIES FOR CONTENT

When I returned to campus my junior year after studying abroad, I got last pick of the English electives and found myself in Professor Patricia O'Neill's class on British romantic poets. I couldn't imagine anything less interesting and

considered various forms of drastic action: Change majors? Find a very powerful dean somewhere and plead pathetically in various ways? Alas, I was too busy with the other pursuits of a distracted college student to follow through. I thus backed in to the single most interesting and engaging class I took in college. Professor O'Neill somehow convinced me that the well-being of the world urgently required me to stay up late reading William Wordsworth. She permanently changed the way I think and read. And imagine: if I'd been even vaguely organized, I'd never have taken her class. I suspect most readers have had a similar experience, finding the thing that seemed least interesting became life-changing in the hands of a gifted teacher.

The lesson? There is no such thing as boring content. In the hands of a great teacher who can find the way in, the material students need to master to succeed and grow is exciting, interesting, and inspiring, even if as teachers we sometimes doubt that we can make it so. And even if this doubt puts us at risk of undercutting it: watering it down or apologizing for teaching it. There are four primary ways we are at risk of apologizing for what we teach:

A belief that content is boring is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

• **Assuming something will be boring.** Saying something like, "Guys, I know this is kind of dull. Let's just try to get through it," or even, "You may not find this all that interesting," is apologizing. Think for a minute about the presumption that your students will find something boring, even if it is genuinely uninteresting to you. Thousands of accountants love their job and find it fascinating, whether or not anyone else thinks they'd like the work. Someone has awakened them to its rarified joys. Every year thousands of students take pride and joy in diagramming sentences. A belief that content is boring is a self-fulfilling prophecy. There are teachers who make great and exciting and inspiring lessons out of every topic that some other teacher may consider a grind. Our job is to find a way to make what we teach engaging and never to assume that students can't appreciate what's not instantly familiar to them or what does not egregiously pander to them. Doing so suggests only a small faith in the power of education.

• **Blaming it.** A teacher who assigns the responsibility for the appearance of content in her class to some outside entity—the administration, state officials, or some abstract "they"—is blaming it. It sounds like this: "This material is on the test so we'll have to learn it." "They say we have to read this so . . ." If it's "on the test" it's also probably "part of the curriculum" (though the later is a less emotionally charged way of thinking about it). And a better way to address

it is to assume it's part of the curriculum for a reason and start by reflecting on that rationale.

• **Making it "accessible."** Making material accessible is acceptable—preferable, even—when it means finding a way in, that is, finding a way to connect kids to rigorous college prep content; it's not so great when it dilutes the content or standards. It's okay to use a contemporary song to introduce the idea of the sonnet. It's not okay to replace sonnets with contemporary songs in your study of poetry. Here are some alternatives to apology:

- "This material is great because it's really challenging!"
- "Lots of people don't understand this until they get to college, but you'll know it now. Cool."
- "This can really help you succeed" [for example, "by helping you understand how sentences work"].
- "This gets more and more exciting as you come to understand it better."
- "We're going to have some fun as we do it."
- "A lot of people are afraid of this stuff, so after you've mastered it, you'll know more than most adults."
- "There's a great story behind this!"

Content is one of the places that teaching is most vulnerable to assumptions and stereotypes. What does it say, for example, if we assume that students won't be inspired by books written by authors of other races? Or by protagonists of different backgrounds than their own? More specifically what does it say if we are more likely to assume those things about minority students? Do we think that great novels transcend boundaries only for some kids? Consider the novelist Earnest Gaines's description of the authors who inspired him to write. Gaines, who wrote several of the most highly acclaimed novels of the twentieth century, including *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, A Lesson Before Dying,* and *A Gathering of Old Men,* grew up poor in rural Louisiana on the same land his family had share-cropped for generations, He was the eldest of twelve children and was raised by his aunt—the kind of kid to whom some might ascribe a limited worldview, probably without asking, and to whom few would assign a diet of nineteenth-century Russian novelists. Yet Gaines recalls: "My early influences were . . . the Russian writers such as Tolstoy, Turgenev and Chekhov. I think I've also been influenced by Greek tragedy, but not by Ellison and any black writers. I knew very early what it was I wanted to write. I just had to find out a way to do it and the . . . writers whom I've mentioned showed me this way."

Let me say that I love Ellison, just as I love Gaines, and am not suggesting we not teach his work (to all students incidentally). But imagine the loss not just to Gaines but to all of us if the teacher who first put Turgenev in his hands and inspired the spark of genius to grow into a flame had looked at the color of his skin, assumed that Gaines wouldn't find interest in anything so foreign, and thought better of Turgenev.

APOLOGIES FOR STUDENTS

Assuming something is too hard or technical for some students is a dangerous trap. At the first school I founded, the inner-city students we enrolled learned Mandarin Chinese as their foreign language. Not only did outsiders react with shock ("You're going to teach *those kids* Chinese???"), but sometimes so did their parents ("She's not gonna sit through that"). But millions of people, most of them far poorer than our poorest student, learn Chinese every year. And in the end every student did learn Chinese, much to their and their parents' enjoyment. There's a special pleasure in exploding expectations, and many of the black and Hispanic students in the school took special pleasure in using their Chinese exactly when people around them least expected it. This offers a reminder not to assume there's a "they" who won't really "get" something, say sonnets and other traditional forms of poetry, and that it's therefore better to teach them poetry through hip-hop lyrics instead. What happens when they take Introduction to Literature in their freshman year in college and have never read a poem written before 1900? Kids respond to challenges; they require pandering only if people pander to them.

The skill of not apologizing for students is critical not only in the introduction and framing of material but in reacting to responses to it. Sticking with kids, telling *them* you're sticking with them, and constantly delivering the message, "But I know you can," raises a student's self-perception. Here are some alternatives to apologizing:

- "This is one of the things you're going to take real pride in knowing."
- "When you're in college, you can show off how much you know about . . . "
- "Don't be rattled by this. There are a few fancy words, but once you know them, you'll have this down."
- "This *is* really tricky. But I haven't seen much you couldn't do if you put your minds to it."

- "I know you can do this. So I'm going to stick with you on this question."
- "It's okay to be confused the first time through this but we're going to get it, so let's take another try."

REFLECTION AND PRACTICE

1. The chapter presented five techniques for raising academic expectations in your classroom: *No Opt Out, Right Is Right, Stretch It, Format Matters,* and *Without Apology.* Which of these will be the most intuitive for you to implement in your classroom? Which will be the toughest, and what will make it difficult?
2. There are variety of reasons that a student might opt out of answering a question you asked—for example:
   - A student is actively testing or defying you.
   - A student is trying not to stand out in the classroom.
   - A student genuinely does not know the answer.
   - A student is embarrassed to not know the answer.
   - A student didn't hear you when you asked.
   - A student didn't understand what you asked.

   See how many possible reasons for a *No Opt Out* you can add to this list. How should the breadth of possible reasons listed cause you to consider or adapt the tone with which you engage students when you use *No Opt Out?*
3. One of the keys to responding effectively to ''almost right'' answers—reinforcing effort but holding out for top-quality answers—is having a list of phrases you think of in advance. After reflecting on which of the following phrases most match your style as a teacher, try to write four or five of your own.
   - ''I like what you've done. Can you get us the rest of the way?''
   - ''We're almost there. Can you find the last piece?''
   - ''I like most of that.''

- ''Can you develop that further?''
- ''Okay, but there's a bit more to it than that.''
- ''Satish just knocked a base hit. Who can bring him home?''

4. Here's a list of questions you might hear asked in a classroom and the objective for the lesson in which they were asked:
   - 6 + 5 = ? *Objective:* Students will be able to master simple computations: addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division.
   - Who can use the word *achieve* in a sentence? *Objective:* Students will be able to increase their vocabulary through drills that explore the use of synonyms, antonyms, and different parts of speech.
   - What do you think is the lesson of ''The Three Little Pigs''? *Objective:* Students will be able to explore the moral of the story and the genre of fables in general.
   - What is one branch of the U.S. government? *Objective:* Students will be able to understand the three branches of the U.S. government and how they relate to each other and current events.

   Try to think of ten *Stretch It* questions you might ask for the one that's closest to what you teach. (This is a great activity to do with other teachers.)

5. *Format Matters:* Next time you're observing a peer's class, guess how many times you will hear answers that are given:
   - In a single word or with a sentence fragment
   - In ungrammatical syntax
   - Inaudibly

   Then count how many times they actually occur during your observation. Was the number more or less than you expected? Why?

6. *Without Apology:* Try to imagine the most ''boring'' content (to you) that you could teach. Now script the first five minutes of your class in which you find a way to make it exciting and engaging to students.