

Transcript — Stop repeating yourself: The one-sentence strategy for better classroom behavior

[\[00:00\] When students don't follow directions](#)

[\[00:55\] What are when-then sentences?](#)

[\[01:23\] Step 1: Plan your expectations](#)

[\[01:46\] Step 2: Deliver the sentence](#)

[\[02:15\] Step 3: Follow through](#)

[\[02:50\] Why it works \(especially for ADHD students\)](#)

[\[03:28\] Dos and don'ts](#)

[\[04:24\] Recap and next steps](#)

[00:00] When students don't follow directions

Stephanie DeLussey: Have you ever asked your students to do something, like put away their supplies, and a few don't even start? And then you're left wondering, are they purposely ignoring me?

[Description: A person with long wavy brown hair wearing a green sweater sits at a wooden desk in a classroom. They speak directly to the camera. Behind them, educational posters are pinned to a wall. A globe and various school supplies sit on the desk in front of them.

Transition to various shots of students in classrooms. A hand places books into a backpack. Two students sit at desks with tablets, appearing bored or distracted. Close-up of a student working on a tablet, with other

students working on tablets in the background. Then back to the speaker.]

The truth may be that your students don't fully understand what you want or why it matters. That's where when-then sentences come in.

With just one sentence, you can give clear expectations and motivate students to meet those expectations.

So, by the end of this video, you'll learn how to use when-then sentences, why they work — especially for students with ADHD and other learning differences — and the key dos and don'ts, including one tiny wording slip that can completely change how your students hear your message.

[On-screen text and description: An animated graphic appears listing the three main learning points. A bell chimes each time one of the bullet points appears onscreen.

Today, you'll learn

- How to use when-then sentences
- Why they work
- Key dos and don'ts]

Hi, I'm Stephanie DeLussey, a dual-certified special education teacher with over 10 years of experience across multiple states and grade levels.

When-then sentences are a positive behavior strategy to help students stay on track during all parts of their day. From entering the classroom to participating in a STEM lab to packing up.

[Description: As Stephanie speaks, brief scenes show students walking into a classroom, a student wearing safety goggles and using a pipette to

move liquid from test tubes to petri dishes, and a student packing a book into a backpack.]

Let's jump in to how to use them.

[00:55] What are when-then sentences?

[Description: A title card appears on a cream background with the text: "What it is — and how to use it." A blue highlight moves over the text as Stephanie reads the title. Then back to Stephanie speaking directly to the camera.]

So, what exactly is a when-then sentence? A when-then sentence is a quick, positive way to nudge students toward the behavior that you want to see. It clearly explains what you expect and what positive outcome will happen afterward.

For example, you might say, "When you put away your supplies, then you can quietly talk with a friend." It's not a threat or a punishment. It's a choice and a motivator. It's phrased in a way that promotes a positive student mindset.

Here are three simple steps for making when-then sentences work in your classroom.

[Description: Stephanie holds up three fingers.]

[01:23] Step 1: Plan your expectations

[Description: Stephanie holds up one finger. An animated graphic shows the number 1 next to the text "Expectations and outcomes."]

Step one, think about your expectations and outcomes. Think about times

when behavior tends to slip in your classroom, like during transitions or group work, or at the end of the day.

Plan the clear behavior you want to see and the positive outcome that will follow. Write it down so that you can use it to craft when-then sentences. You can even use our when-then sentences chart, linked in the description below, to record your sentences.

[01:46] Step 2: Deliver the sentence

[Description: Stephanie holds up two fingers. An animated graphic shows the number 2 next to the text "Deliver the sentence and check for understanding."]

Step two, deliver the sentence and check for understanding. When you need to use a when-then sentence, say it in a clear, calm, confident tone. "When you put your materials away, then you can go to recess."

After delivering the sentence, pause and give that important wait time for students to process. Make sure to check for understanding, too.

You can ask questions like, "Can you tell me what you're supposed to be doing or working on?" Or, "Can you tell me what your job is first, and then what will happen afterward?" Rephrase the when-then sentence if necessary.

[02:15] Step 3: Follow through

[Description: Stephanie holds up three fingers. An animated graphic shows the number 3 next to the text "Follow through on the 'then'."]

Step three, follow through on the "then." When students meet the

expectation, follow through by letting them experience the positive outcome they worked for.

This is one of the most important aspects of when-then, because it's the follow-through that builds trust. Plus, it motivates students to keep meeting expectations.

If, for some reason, a student does not meet the expectation and their behavior escalates or significantly disrupts the class, you may need to switch to an if-then sentence.

An if-then sentence is teacher-directed and includes a non-negotiable outcome. But, remind the students that the choice is still up to them.

[02:50] Why it works (especially for ADHD students)

[Description: A title card appears on a cream background with the text: "Why this strategy works." A blue highlight moves over the text as Stephanie reads the title. Then back to Stephanie speaking directly to the camera.]

Why do when-then sentences work? Many students — especially those who have trouble with executive function, attention, or regulation — struggle when expectations feel unclear or overwhelming.

When-then sentences work because they break down expectations into manageable steps. They remove ambiguity and guesswork. They support kids who need predictable outcomes. Give students decision-making power. And encourage a more positive mindset about behavior.

And for students who have had negative school experiences, the "then" helps them believe the effort is worth it. An added bonus is that families

can use this strategy at home, too, which helps keep supports consistent across home and school environments.

[03:28] Dos and don'ts

[Description: A title card appears on a cream background with the text: "What to do — and what to avoid." A blue highlight moves over the text as Stephanie reads the title. Then back to Stephanie speaking directly to the camera.]

Before you get started with when-then sentences, here are a few key dos and don'ts.

[Description: As Stephanie speaks, each "do" point appears onscreen with a green checkmark.]

Do talk to your students about when-then sentences before using them for the first time. Explain how they work and how they can make a positive classroom environment.

Do use when-then sentences with individual students, too. Use them to address certain expectations, behaviors, or actions. And then co-create the sentences with the student.

Do pair the sentences with visual supports. Visuals are a powerful tool that can help all students better understand and remember the information.

[Description: As Stephanie speaks, each "don't" point appears onscreen with a red X.]

Don't use when-then sentences as a threat. They should only be used as a

support.

Don't phrase when-then sentences negatively. Instead of, "When you stop talking," you say, "When your voices are quiet."

Don't stack too many expectations at once. Each sentence should have one thing students are capable of doing.

And don't forget to consider what's behind student behavior. Behavior is communication. If students aren't able to complete the "when," what's getting in the way?

[04:24] Recap and next steps

When-then sentences create a win-win. You get the positive behavior students need to learn, and they get a clear path to success. Try using one during your next transition and see how your students respond.

Now, when-then sentences are just one tool. In the next episode, I'll show you how pre-correcting and prompting can stop problems before they happen.

Subscribe so you don't miss it and head to the positive behavior strategies playlist to watch the full series.

[On-screen text: As Stephanie speaks, links appear onscreen for "More videos:" [ADD/ADHD: What is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder?](#), and the ["Subscribe" button with the Understood logo](#).

Transition to the [Understood](#) logo and the [3M](#) logo side-by-side.]