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# 34 Ways to Quiet a Rambunctious Class

*Daniel Leonard*

12–15 minutes

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Anyone who’s taught a class knows how quickly it can all devolve. A laugh in one corner of the room, rising suddenly from the midst of 20 minutes of focus, can race down a row of students and catch fire in the other corner. Before you’ve had a chance to react, the whole class is caught up in the fun.

Sometimes you should just give in. Providing students with the time and space to be kids—to laugh, chat, and make friends—can be a release valve that prevents disruptive behavior down the line. But bringing the class back to attention when it’s gone off the rails remains a critical classroom management technique, and so we compiled a list of teacher-tested calm-down strategies as the school year gets started.

You’ll notice that some of the more traditional forms of attention-getting—like yelling, bullhorns, or rapidly flickering the lights—have been omitted from the list. In several Facebook threads, teachers cautioned that these approaches can be disruptive and anxiety producing—especially for students with sensory issues. “Kids on the spectrum and kids with trauma can be very triggered by lights being flickered,” [notes educator Morgan Fay-martin](#). Plus, loud

sounds aren't pleasing to fellow teachers either: "Believe me when I say the teacher next door does not want to hear an air horn, thank you very much," [interjects Michelle At Alohamimi](#), wryly, in a response to a proposed tactic.

[A pro tip](#) from professor of education and former classroom teacher Todd Finley: It's best to model shushing practices for your students in the very first week of school. Ask students to practice being noisy until they see your signal—then watch to ensure that they all become quiet and attentive, as in this [elementary school example](#). Expect—and wait for—100 percent compliance in those first few trial runs to set a positive standard for the rest of the year.

## TECH SOLUTIONS

Noise meter apps are a great way to alert your students that their sound has surpassed an acceptable level. [Too Noisy](#), which comes with a [free online version](#) for teachers, detects the decibel level of the room and adjusts the onscreen graphics accordingly—like showing an unfortunate penguin's habitat getting progressively colder as the volume rises—so consider connecting the output to a classroom projector, especially during group work. Too Noisy can also play an auditory signal when the noise passes a certain threshold. For other free options, check out the similarly named [Too Loud](#) or the [Shush—Sound & Noise Meter](#), both in the App Store.

[Educator Kati Begen](#) uses [bouncyballs.org](#)—a website where animated bouncy balls respond to the room's noise level. Teachers can change the design of the balls—there are "bubbles" and "eyeballs" options—and set a "beep" or "shush" alert when there's excessive noise.

## QUIETING STUDENTS IN EARLY ELEMENTARY

Here are some silly, fun, and imaginative options for the youngest learners.

**A handful of quiet:** [Teacher trainer Marieke van Woerkom](#) [learned this one from](#) a pre-K teacher named Mr. Holifield: “He would cup his hands and announce in a quiet whisper that he had the quiet. He’d look into his hands and nod excitedly. Students would perk up and lean in to see what was happening.” Holifield would then ask his students to “pass the quiet” around the class in a circle, and watch as their rowdiness died down.

**Magic sprays and bubbles:** Teachers can fill an empty Windex bottle with water or a calming scented oil, and label the bottle [Quiet Spray](#). Don’t spray it directly at rowdy students, of course; instead, spray it into the air when the classroom is starting to melt down, and tell students that its powers are spreading across the room. If you don’t want airborne particles wafting around the room, “you can blow magic ‘hush-bubbles’ for a similar impact,” [suggests educator Todd Finley](#).

### **The fake-marshmallow trick:**

In an [article for Truth for Teachers](#), Beth O. recommends telling students to “pop a marshmallow in.” She then puffs up her cheeks as if they were filled with marshmallows, and the kids do the same. It’s a fun attention-getter, so kids are happy to oblige—losing the ability to talk once they’ve put imaginary marshmallows in their mouths.

**Chimes and Tibetan singing bowls:** “Everyone at my school uses the same chime to quiet the kids; consistency across the

board helps,” [writes Susan Gottlieb Finks](#). Meanwhile, many teachers in our audience profess their love for [Tibetan singing bowls](#), which emit calming tones when you strike or rub them with a wooden stick. Be it chimes, bowls, or bells, [Cindy Schwartz](#) asks students “to listen carefully and raise their hand when they NO LONGER hear the ring anymore! The room gets quiet, as they are focused on listening to hear when it stops.”

**The child whisperer:** When the class goes loud, you go quiet. Begin whispering, and hopefully students will follow your lead—or simply quiet themselves down to hear what you’re saying.

## CALMING KIDS IN LATER ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL

Taking it up a notch with strategies to settle the most rambunctious grade levels.

**Count down from five:** Don’t ignore the classic countdown. “5... 4... 3... 2... 1. Works every time!” [writes Diana Occhipinti](#), and dozens of teachers in our audience agree—though you can also opt for counts of three or 10, depending on your patience level. Educator and author [Harry Wong tweaks this a bit](#), asking students to participate in a five-step quiet-down ritual; over the course of five seconds, students progress through the steps to full attention:

1. Focus their eyes on the speaker
2. Be quiet
3. Be still
4. Empty their hands
5. Listen

**The big book of call-and-response:** It's wise to have a solid call-and-response in your back pocket. Here are some options:

- A classic: Teacher says “1, 2, 3, eyes on me.” Students respond “1, 2, eyes on you.”
- “I say ‘Hocus pocus,’ and they say back, ‘Everybody focus.’”  
—[Elizabeth Rich](#)
- “Say ‘Flat tire!’ Students respond with ‘Shhhhhh!’ 🤫❤️🌸” —  
[psblooms](#)
- “When I say \_\_\_\_\_, you say \_\_\_\_\_! With the school motto!” —[Miss Rickers](#)
- “To get my students’ attention, I shout ‘cloud’ and the students clap and say ‘boom’ with the sound of thunder.” —[Nurjahan Naik](#)
- Or, leave it up to the students: “Let each class decide at the beginning of the year what is the quiet word to which they'll respond with their word. E.g.: ‘Taco—Bueno’ or ‘Peter—Parker.’”  
—[Debbie Bryant](#)

**If you can hear me, breathe:** Asking students to take a deep breath if they can hear you combines your request for silence with the brain benefits of mindful breathing, said several members of our audience. “I say ‘Take a big deep breath in if you can hear me,’” [writes Kristen Alexander](#). “The most I’ve ever had to say it was three times, but once students are trained, it usually works the first time.”

**Simon Says:** Try a version of Simon Says: “‘If you hear me, touch your nose.... If you hear me, touch your elbow.... If you hear me, touch your ear....’ Each time getting progressively quieter until I’m whispering so soft, I can barely hear myself,” [writes educator](#)

## [Tasha Prugar](#).

**The clap-back:** “Clap and snap a pattern,” [writes Tina Naber](#). “Example: Clap, clap, snap, clap, clap, snap—until they are all doing it. Within seconds they are concentrating on the pattern and the classroom becomes quiet. ✨” You can conclude the quiet-down ritual with a calming “waterfall” motion: “Start in the air and wiggle your fingers as you bring them down, while making the ‘wshhhhhh’ sound,” [suggests Kat Olsen](#).

**Hand signals:** Hand signals can be a great way to solicit attention without adding to the room’s volume. “Slowly, I close my hand, one finger at a time,” [writes Lourdes Perez](#). “By the time I get to only having my pinky finger up, they have quieted down.” There are plenty of other options: [Natasja van Heusden uses](#) the time-out signal from baseball (which is two hands in the air—though a chest-level *T* shape is perhaps more recognizable), while [Jennie Recourt uses](#) the traditional finger-on-lips.

**Noise-level charts:** “I have appropriate noise levels for activities on the wall and teach the continuum first days of the school year,” [writes Kari Stewart](#). “Starts at ‘mime school,’ then ‘movie theater voice,’ ‘library voice,’ ‘fancy restaurant with violinist in the corner,’ ‘restaurant voice,’ and ends with ‘rock concert voice’—with a fine-print disclaimer that it’s not allowed in the classroom.” When things start to get out of hand, [point to the chart](#).

**The “Silent 20”:** As a middle school teacher, Edutopia contributor Todd Finley would wrap up activities by announcing a game called [Silent 20](#). If every student returned to their seat and was completely silent within 20 seconds, Finley would advance the class one square on a giant remake of the [Game of Life](#). Reaching


the end of the board—which took about a month—meant a whole-class popcorn party.

**Word of the week:** If you're periodically introducing new vocabulary words to your students, use a "word of the week" or "word of the day" as your signal for silence in the classroom—like *integer* or *renaissance*, [recommends Todd Finley](#).

**Spell it out:** Here's an interesting tweak to the noise-level chart referenced above: "I bought wooden letters that spell 'NOISE' and added magnets to the back of each letter," [writes Instagram user sjaeke](#). "They lay low on the whiteboard and when the class noise level begins to get loud, I quietly walk over and push the 'N' up so everyone can see it. I don't say a word. I just walk away or continue what I was doing. Some will see me do this and tell others to quiet down. I rarely get to the 'I.'"

## KEEPING HIGH SCHOOL Students COMPOSED

Here are methods to keep teens—developmentally on a whole other level—focused.

**Play music:** Putting on music during an activity can help keep kids quiet—or dispel disruption once it's begun to brew. You could always opt for classical—but if you want to combine a calming orchestral vibe with modern hits your students love, [Jennie Montaña suggests](#) putting on the [Vitamin String Quartet](#)—a group that covers pop and rock songs as string music. A few other teachers recommend "lofi hip hop radio —beats to relax/study to"—a popular [24/7 music stream on YouTube](#).

**Offer a polite verbal warning:** "Quickly say, 'In one minute, I'll need your undivided attention, so please wrap up your

conversations,” [Samantha Straub suggests](#). “If you give them a warning that there’s going to be a transition, the kids get on board faster and with less protest.”

**Request “professional courtesy”:** At Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, California, teachers in 1:1 classrooms get students’ attention through a request for [professional courtesy](#)—meaning “computers are at half-mast, headphones are out, and students are completely present with the teacher in that moment.”

**Strike up a conversation:** “I could get an entire class to quiet and focus by going to two or three students in the front of the classroom and asking a question about a drawing or painting I was working on,” [writes art teacher Joetta Currie](#). Students in the back won’t want to be left out of the conversation; they’ll get quiet so they can hear.

**Shock them:** If you happen to know another language—even just a few words or phrases—you might be able to shock your class into silence, [suggests Polly Darton on Facebook](#), who likes to deploy some basic German—anything from “Eins! Zwei! Drei!” to “Ich liebe dich.” (It doesn’t matter if the students know what you’re saying; in fact, it’s probably more shocking if they don’t.) Our audience also reports that randomly breaking into song has a similar effect, if you don’t mind looking a little silly.

**Go silent:** Take things a step further: Become completely silent. “Stand quietly until everyone gets curious as to why you’re not talking,” [suggests Dave Shahan](#). Consider peppering your silence with the phrase “I’ll wait”—and some well-placed stares. This answer was popular among our audience, but other commenters



warned that silence can backfire when dealing with a particularly rambunctious class, so it's good to have a back-up plan in mind.

## **HELP OTHER TEACHERS OUT!**

*We'd love this article to be an evolving document of best practices, so please use the comments to add any of your own favorite strategies for quieting a rambunctious classroom. If we see something we love, we may well add it to the list!*