

X = X-Ray Vision

Most people see what is and never see what can be.

200

High-Impact
ABC Strategies

easily help us form mental pictures. The issue here is that the words we focus on may not reflect the speaker's intended meaning. For example, the two words "Don't run!" only one creates a picture—"Run!" Thus, the picture formed by these words is actually the opposite of the speaker's intention.

As teachers, we want to avoid mental images that accidentally direct students' focus toward *negative* actions or consequences. Instead, we need to consciously create images of *positive* actions or consequences in our students' minds (Bayor, 1972).

The Connection

The generations in today's classrooms have grown up with history's most prolific array of visual stimulation. Plugged in to online and electronic games, their experience is primarily visual. While all human beings instinctively turn words into pictures, never has this been more powerful than the highly visual Y and Z generations.

The Big Picture

One of the most curious words in the English language is "not," because in terms of visual imaging, the brain *cannot process the word "not."* It is as if, within the human mind, the word doesn't exist. When presented with "not," the brain will immediately create the picture that the person speaking meant to avoid. For example, right now, try to follow these instructions: "Do NOT imagine a huge pink gorilla!"

Most people have a very difficult time following these directions. When they read those words, the very first image that pops to mind is that of a pink gorilla. Once there, it's difficult to remove. Go ahead, try it right now. Can you erase the image of the pink gorilla? If you're having trouble with this, don't be surprised. It takes a while to clear the image from our mind. And, if you successfully avoided imagining the gorilla, you probably first had to see it, then replace it with another picture, and focus all your attention on it instead. The instant you stopped thinking about the other image, what happened? Usually, that big pink gorilla came walking right back in!

Here's another classic example of this situation. A mother has just handed her 2-year-old daughter a glass of milk. She says to the child: "Now honey, don't spill your milk!"

Based on the discussion so far, what image is instantly created in the child's mind? The child immediately sees . . . spilled milk! Now that the

image is clearly embedded in the child's mind, what happens? Of course, she *tries* to keep the milk in the glass, but that picture of milk all over the table keeps coming back to her! Suddenly, apparently without warning, the little girl's arm flies out and knocks over the glass of milk. The mother, horrified, rushes over and says, "I told you not to spill your milk! Weren't you listening to me?"

Actually, the child was listening quite closely to her mother's words. However, the choice of words created an image that influenced the child to spill the milk! The mother would have got a better result by deliberately using language to influence more positive behavior. For example, she might say, "Honey, please be careful to keep the milk in the glass."

Now the child has a picture of the milk in the glass and she is much more likely to replicate this picture in reality.

Not isn't the only word that may create an opposite effect from our original intention. Here are some commonly used negative words:

- | | | |
|---------|-------------|---------|
| ■ Can't | ■ Shouldn't | ■ Avoid |
| ■ Won't | ■ Couldn't | ■ Stop |
| ■ Don't | ■ Wouldn't | ■ Never |

To avoid accidentally directing our students in the wrong direction, we need to become aware of when and how we use these words. The more aware we become, the more our brains will trigger useful alternatives.

Focus on Classroom Management

Suppose we say, "Don't make a lot of mistakes, or you'll fail the test!"

What images are we creating in our students' minds? We're highlighting mistakes and failure—probably not the images we were intending to create. Instead, we might say, "Be sure to get as many correct as possible, so you have the best chance to receive an excellent score on this test." With these words we can focus our students' minds in a more useful direction.

The same idea applies to appropriate classroom behaviors. As teachers our goal is to maintain positive attention and focus. We can achieve this by using words that direct a student's attention toward these actions. Instead of telling them what *not* to do, if we use words that clearly indicate what *is* expected of them, we have a far better chance of seeing that behavior.

For example, if we say "Stop throwing that ball around the classroom," we are telling them what not to do. Instead, we might say, "Please place the ball back in the toy box, and return to your seat." Using these words we've created a clear picture of the behavior we expect.

In Practice

Consider each example shown here. If spoken as originally shown, the statement may have some unintended, potentially negative results. The examples then offer one possible option for rephrasing so the message has a better chance of registering in the mind of the listener—you can probably think of many others.

Example	Possible problem	Rephrasing option
"Don't look over there."	Where do a student's eyes immediately turn? Right to where we don't want them to look.	"Look over here" or "Keep your attention focused in this direction."
"Try not to be late to class."	These words create a picture of being late.	"Be on time" or "Be early."
"Be careful at recess. We don't want sprained ankles or broken bones."	Students' attention is now firmly focused on spraining their ankles or breaking their bones!	"Play safe" or "Be safe, healthy, and whole" or "Take care of yourself."
"Please complete this assessment without looking at your notes, at the board at the front of the room, or at anyone else's paper."	Now there are three things the students are thinking about, any of which may be strong enough to distract them. Suddenly they find their eyes wandering over to the paper nearest them, or discover that they are fixated on peeking at their notes.	"Please complete this assessment with only the information in your head" or "Keep your attention on your paper as you complete this assessment" or "Keep your eyes on your own paper at all times."
"Be aware of the danger of losing your patience."	This focuses students' attention directly on the danger of losing their patience.	"Stay patient" or "Maintain your cool at all times."
"At no time during an emergency should you allow panic and emotions to overwhelm you."	Look at all those negatives carefully compressed into a single sentence. Scary.	"Stay calm at all times" or "In an emergency, remain calm and focused."
"Avoid exiting this room by that door because you might set off the fire alarm."	These words prompt an awareness of the fire alarm. The second image stays with the students longest. If we have to talk about setting off the fire alarm, we should end with a more positive image.	"Everyone look toward this door. It is connected to the fire alarm and should only be used in an emergency. Now, would everyone please point toward this other door. This is the door we will be using at all other times."

ASSESS YOUR CURRENT USE OF X-RAY VISION

- I deliberately and consciously choose my words with the intention of having students create a useful mental picture.
- I sometimes use words that will create the best positive mental image, although this is more by accident than deliberate choice.
- I frequently use words that may accidentally be creating a very different mental image in the student's mind than the one I intended.

Your Ideas

Try this idea for yourself. In each case below, change the original, negative statement into one that creates a more positive, useful image in your student's brain:

Negative Statement: "Don't drop your pencil."

Positive Statement: _____

Negative Statement: "Don't forget your library books tomorrow."

Positive Statement: _____

Negative Statement: "Stop leaving your litter on the playground."

Positive Statement: _____

Negative Statement: "Never use swear words at school!"

Positive Statement: _____

Negative Statement: "Try not to color outside the lines."

Positive Statement: _____

Now, try some on your own. First, write a sentence in the negative, perhaps something you either hear often at school, or maybe even remember saying yourself! Then, adjust the words so that it creates a more positive mental image.

Negative Statement: _____