

Four Types of OTR

Verbal, Nonverbal, Written, and Action-Based

A downloadable toolkit for getting every student responding

What is an Opportunity to Respond?

An opportunity to respond (OTR) is the **interaction between a teacher's academic prompt** (visual, verbal, written, or technological) **and a student's active response** (verbal, written, gestural, or technological).

The goal: every student has to think and commit to an answer, not just the students with their hands up.

Why OTRs Matter

Frequent, meaningful OTRs are one of the most impactful strategies for both academic growth and prosocial behavior. Students who are actively engaged are less likely to be off-task or disruptive, and they get more chances to practice, get feedback, and feel successful. This matters most for students with more intensive academic and behavioral needs.

OTRs line up with SESI's Support, Prevent, Connect approach:

Support: predictable, structured ways for every student to participate.

Prevent: less frustration and off-task behavior because students are busy responding.

Connect: a real doorway into the lesson for every learner, not only the confident hand-raisers.

OTR also aligns to **High-Leverage Practice 18: Use strategies to promote active student engagement** (Council for Exceptional Children, exceptionalchildren.org, and the CEEDAR Center, cedar.education.ufl.edu).

Four Types of OTR: Verbal, Nonverbal, Written, and Action-Based

Each type gives students a different way in. Rotate through all four so no student's only option is the one that is hardest for them.



Verbal

Students say it.

- Choral response
- Turn and talk
- Warm call
- Sentence starters



Nonverbal

Students show it.

- Thumbs up/down
- Hand signals
- Stand if true
- Color-card voting



Written

Students write it.

- Whiteboards
- Quick writes
- Cloze / fill-in
- Digital polls



Action-Based

Students do it.

- Manipulatives
- Sorting cards
- Move to a spot
- Act it out

Strategy Cards

Verbal OTRs

Strategy	How it works	Example	Make it accessible
Choral response	Whole class answers together on your cue. Best for short, single-answer prompts (facts, vocabulary, steps).	Teacher: "A shape with three sides is called a... (signal) Class?" Students: "Triangle!"	Use a consistent signal; pair with a visual so students can check themselves.
Turn and talk	Partners confer, then share with the class (also called think-pair-share).	Talk to your partner about the video and come up with two questions, then share.	Assign partners ahead; post roles (speaker/listener) and sentence starters.
Warm call	Tell a student you will be asking for their thoughts after think time, then call on them. Kinder than a cold call.	"Maya, when we come back together, I'll come to you to share your idea."	Pre-rehearse with a partner or a written note before sharing.
Sentence starters	Students answer using a posted frame so language is not the barrier.	"The main idea is ___ because ___."	Offer picture-supported frames; fade as students gain independence.

Nonverbal OTRs

Strategy	How it works	Example	Make it accessible
Thumbs / hand signals	Students signal agreement, confidence, or a choice. Quick whole-class check.	"How confident are you, one to four?" Students hold up fingers.	Teach the signals first and post them; scan the room and follow up with low signals.
Stand if true	Students stand (or move) when a statement is true.	"Stand if this number is even."	Offer a seated option (e.g., hold up a card) for students who need it.
Color-card voting	Each student holds response cards (A/B/C or true/false) and reveals on cue.	Show a problem; students hold up the card for the correct answer.	Use large, color-coded cards; add symbols or pictures.



Written OTRs

Strategy	How it works	Example	Make it accessible
Whiteboard response	Everyone writes an answer and shows it on cue, so you see every response at once.	"Write the next step, then show me on 3."	Allow drawing, word banks, or a partner check before showing.
Quick write	One to two minutes of silent writing about a prompt.	"In one sentence, explain..."	Provide a frame or word bank; allow dictation or typing.
Cloze / fill-in-the-blank	Students complete a partially written statement or step.	The first step in solving is ____.	Add choices or a picture to support recall.
Digital poll	Students respond on a device and the class sees the results.	Two students enter answers on iPads while others use whiteboards.	Have a paper backup if technology fails.



Action-based OTRs

Strategy	How it works	Example	Make it accessible
Manipulatives	Students show an answer by building or arranging objects.	Use counters to show $16 \div 4$.	Model first; provide a mat that shows where to place items.
Sorting cards	Students sort words, pictures, or problems into categories.	Sort sentences into fact or opinion.	Start with two categories; add a visual key.
Move to a spot	Students move to a corner or marked spot to show a choice.	Point to where you think "south" is; go to the corner for your answer.	Define a clear path and routines; give a stationary option.
Act it out	Students demonstrate a concept or step with their bodies.	Act out the steps of the water cycle.	Let students choose a role; allow partner or small-group performances.

Make it Work: Five Planning Moves

- **Write OTRs into the plan.** Plan the prompts and the response type ahead of time, just as you plan checks for understanding (CFUs). Tie each one to the lesson objective.
- **Build in think time.** Pause before asking for responses (and before naming a volunteer) so more students can process.
- **Teach the routine first.** Model and practice the signal, the materials, and the expectation (“when I say show me...”). Reinforce students who follow it, using behavior-specific language.
- **Use the full I Do / We Do / You Do structure.** Add more OTRs during “We Do,” then check independence in “You Do.”
- **Look at the responses, then adjust.** If many students are incorrect, reteach. If most are right, move on. Follow up with students who hesitated or gave low signals.

Intentional, not Just Loud

More OTRs does not mean more cold-calling, and it does not mean choral response for everything. Match the response type to the learning goal and the students in front of you, and add supports so every student can respond successfully.

Lesson Planning Self-Check

Review a recent or upcoming lesson. Mark each item.

- ☐ I planned at least one OTR in each part of the lesson (opening, I Do / We Do, You Do, closing).
- ☐ I used at least two of the four OTR types.
- ☐ Every student had to respond, not just volunteers.
- ☐ I allowed think time before asking for responses.
- ☐ I posted or modeled supports (sentence starters, word bank, visuals).
- ☐ I responded to what I saw and adjusted my teaching.

Quick Tally: Who Responded?

During a 10-minute stretch of instruction, tally how many prompts required every student to respond versus only some. Then choose the OTR type you use least and plan one for your next lesson.

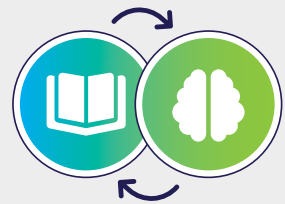
All students responded	Some students responded	OTR type used

Try this next lesson

Academics and behavior go hand in hand. They're two sides of the same coin.

Pick the OTR category you use least (verbal, nonverbal, written, or action-based) and build one into your next lesson. Notice who participates that did not before.

The measure of a good lesson was never the hands you saw. It's the thinking you couldn't.



Sources & More

- Johnson, H. N., Wakeman, S. Y., & Clausen, A. M. (2023). Inclusive supports and strategies to increase opportunities to respond for all learners. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 56, 72–80.
- High-Leverage Practices for Students with Disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children, <https://exceptionalchildren.org>, & CEEDAR Center, <https://cedar.education.ufl.edu/>), HLP 18: Use strategies to promote active student engagement.
- IRIS Center, Vanderbilt University: <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/>



About the Author

Faith Ware | Vice President, Teaching & Learning, SESI

Faith Ware leads SESI's Teaching & Learning team, driving instructional leadership, special education programming, and large-scale program development. She specializes in compliance, instructional development, and leadership training that helps schools support diverse learners.

Questions or want help implementing these strategies? Contact the SESI Integrated Support Team at integratedsupport@sesischools.com.

