

Phrases for Praises

All praise is not created equal. Research shows that some forms boost the self-esteem and confidence that support long-term motivation, while others decrease motivation in students. Read the scenarios and examples of praise below. Mark the examples that you think are most effective and explain why.

1. Susan has been struggling with math. Today she got her first 100 on a math test.

A: See, I told you you were good at math - great work!

B: Wow, I know how hard you've been studying and it looks like it's really paid off!

Explain your thinking:

2. In the faculty room, two teachers are discussing how to keep their students organized.

A: I try to find a way to acknowledge some small improvement every day so they stay aware and on top of being organized.

B: Even if they are staying organized, I don't compliment them every day because I want it to count when I say it.

Explain your thinking:

3. Steven is often late for class. Today he arrived on time.

A: I'm so glad you are here. We're about to get in project groups and you always add so much.

B: I'm glad to see you're on time today. Keep it up because we have a big test tomorrow, first thing.

Explain your thinking:

4. Jamal has a big paper due and is nervous because he got a low grade on his last paper.

A: You were really good at creating outlines when we did that lesson. I think you can use that strength to create a clear and strong paper.

B: Your last paper had so many good points. Just be confident - you can ace this.

Explain your thinking:

Using Effective Phrasing for Praising

In her article, “5 Keys to Motivating Struggling Learners,” education author and expert Barbara Blackburn highlights these elements of effective praise: ¹

P ositive	Praise is constructive, not a criticism disguised as a compliment <i>“I noticed how thoughtfully you handled that difficult conversation.”</i>
R einforces High Expectations	Praise is given for quality, not substandard work <i>“That was a hard problem and you took the time to understand it.”</i>
A ppropriate	Praise is specific, timely and connected to the work <i>“Your opening sentence on the essay was effective.”</i>
I ndependence is Promoted	Praise encourages self-reliance, not dependent on approval <i>“I’m so proud you figured that out on your own.”</i>
S incere	Praise is authentic and unexpected, not fake or predictable <i>“I don’t always say it, but I’m impressed by your positive attitude.”</i>
E ffort and Progress are Noted	Praise is focused on process, not ability <i>“It’s obvious you put a lot of time and thought into your project.”</i>

The following examples from the exercise on the first page are models of effective praise:

1. Susan’s teacher focuses on **effort** and **progress**, not on her innate ability:
B. Wow, I know how hard you’ve been studying and it looks like it’s really paid off!
2. This teacher’s feedback might feel more **sincere** because it is unexpected and not predictable:
B. Even if they are staying organized, I don’t compliment them every day because I want it to count when I say it.
3. Steven’s teacher is **positive** and does not inadvertently criticize him for past lateness:
A. I’m so glad you are here. We’re about to get in project groups and you always add so much.
4. Jamal’s teacher **reinforces high expectations** and avoids false praise for his earlier work:
A. You were really good at creating outlines when we did that lesson. I think you can use that strength to create a clear and strong paper.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you do to ensure that you use effective phrases for praises with your students?
2. What are some challenges you find with using praise effectively?

¹ Barbara Blackburn, “5 Keys to Motivating Struggling Learners,” MiddleWeb, <https://www.middleweb.com/35119/5-keys-to-motivating-struggling-learners>.