

Cues and prompts

Cues and prompts are essential tools in special education, helping students access the curriculum, build independence, and participate meaningfully in learning activities. They are often embedded in teaching strategies to support students with disability—especially those with intellectual, communication, or sensory needs. Understanding the distinction between cues and prompts, and how to implement them effectively, is key for educators working in special schools from Prep to Year 12.

Definitions and Key Differences

Cues

Definition: A cue is a natural or instructional signal that directs the learner's attention or prepares them to perform a skill or behaviour.

Purpose: Cues are indirect and aim to set the stage for a response.

Examples: A bell ringing to signal transition, showing a visual schedule, or asking, "What comes next?"

Prompts

Definition: A prompt is a direct, additional support given immediately before or during a student's attempt to complete a task, helping them perform the skill correctly.

Purpose: Prompts are explicit supports and are usually more intrusive than cues.

Examples: Physically guiding a student's hand, saying "Put your pencil down here," or pointing to the correct answer.

Key Differences

Feature	Cue	Prompt
Level of Intrusiveness	Low	Varies (can be high or low)
Purpose	To alert or signal	To guide or assist correct performance
Timing	Before the behaviour	Before or during the behaviour
Fadeability	Often remains over time	Should be systematically faded

What Are Prompts?

Prompts are cues or supports provided to help a student learn or perform a skill correctly. They are an evidence-based teaching strategy, commonly used in special education to:

- Reduce errors and frustration during learning
- Increase the likelihood of correct responses
- Support skill acquisition and independence
- Guide communication, behavioural, academic, and functional tasks

Prompts can be verbal, visual, gestural, physical, or modelled, and are typically faded over time to avoid dependence.

Types of Prompts with Definitions & Examples

Prompt Type	Definition	Example (Prep–Year 12)
Verbal Prompt	Spoken instruction or cue	"What do you do next?" (during handwashing routine)
Visual Prompt	Images, symbols, written schedules	Student follows a picture sequence to pack their bag
Gestural Prompt	Pointing or motioning toward the correct action	Teacher points to the bin when student holds rubbish
Model Prompt	Demonstrating the correct response	Teacher models raising a hand before speaking
Physical Prompt	Hand-over-hand or light touch to guide movement	Helping a student zip their bag or use AAC device

Prompts should be individualised based on the student's learning profile and used consistently.

Prompting Hierarchy

Prompts range from most to least intrusive:

- Full physical
- Partial physical
- Model
- Gesture
- Verbal
- Visual
- Independent

Teachers should aim to use the least intrusive prompt that still leads to success, then fade the prompt as the student gains skill.

Why Cues and Prompts Are Critical in Special Education

Support Diverse Learning Needs

Students in special schools often need structured scaffolding to access curriculum content or routines. Cues and prompts offer differentiated, individualised supports aligned with developmental or cognitive stages.

Promote Independence

Systematic use of prompts—with planned fading—enables students to learn functional skills with less reliance on adults over time.

Facilitate Communication and Behaviour

Many students benefit from visual, gestural, or verbal supports to understand instructions, initiate tasks, or make transitions smoothly.

Enhance Engagement

Well-timed cues and prompts maintain attention and participation, particularly in students with ASD, ADHD, or complex communication needs.

Align with Evidence-Based Practices

Prompting and cueing are foundational in Positive Behaviour Support (PBS), Explicit Direct Instruction, and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA)—all evidence-based in special education contexts.

Examples of Cues and Prompts (VAKT-Aligned)

Cues and prompts should be chosen and layered based on student need, sensory profile, and the VAKT framework (Visual, Auditory, Kinaesthetic, Tactile):

Visual (V)

Cues:

- Picture symbols on a task board
- Visual schedules or first-then charts
- Colour-coded materials or spaces

Prompts:

- Pointing to a visual (e.g., the bin for clean-up)
- Placing the correct picture close to the student
- Modelling using symbols on AAC device

Auditory (A)

Cues:

- Timer buzz to signal pack-up time
- Transition music or bells
- Verbal direction: "Time to write."

Prompts:

- Verbal instruction: "Pick up your spoon."
- Echoic prompt: "Say 'I want more.'"
- Sound effect paired with a task (e.g., beep for microwave start)

Kinaesthetic (K)

Cues:

- Moving to a learning area (signals group time)
- Clapping rhythm to gather attention

Prompts:

- Hand-over-hand guidance for writing
- Physical nudging toward a direction
- Guided tracing over a shape or number

Tactile (T)

Cues:

- Textured object to signal start of an activity
- Braille or tactile marker on a book

Prompts:

- Tapping a student's hand gently to initiate movement
- Placing an object in their hand to prompt use
- Using textured cue cards (e.g., sandpaper letters)

Example Scenarios Across Year Levels

Year Level	Scenario	Cue	Prompt
Prep	Transition to lunch	Picture card with "lunch"	Point to lunchbox, say "Open your lunchbox"
Year 3	Writing name	Whiteboard with model name	Hand-over-hand support, verbal "Start with J"
Year 6	Requesting help	Visual help card on desk	Verbal prompt: "Do you need help?"
Year 9	Participating in cooking	Photo sequence of steps	Physically guide hand to stir mixture
Year 12	Travel training	Visual route card	Point to bus sign and gesture to line up

Examples of Prompts in Practice

Here's a comprehensive and practical overview of prompts as a teaching strategy, tailored for use with students with disabilities from Prep to Year 12 in a special school context.

Prep–Year 3 Examples (Early Years)

Goal	Prompt Example
Washing hands	Visual schedule near sink + gestural prompt to tap the soap
Greeting others	Model greeting ("Hi, [name]") and verbal encouragement
Following directions	Teacher gives short verbal prompt: "Find your chair"

Year 4–6 Examples (Middle Primary)

Goal	Prompt Example
Writing name	Visual model of name + teacher points to the next letter to copy
Group activity	Gesture prompt to pass object in a circle
Using AAC	Verbal cue: "Tell me what you want" + model pressing "I want music"

Year 7–9 Examples (Junior Secondary)

Goal	Prompt Example
Transitioning	Visual cue card: “To playground” + staff points toward exit
Emotional regulation	Verbal prompt: “What’s our strategy?” (paired with calm choice board)
Social skill	Teacher models appropriate turn-taking in conversation

Year 10–12 Examples (Senior Secondary / Transition Planning)

Goal	Prompt Example
Vocational task	Verbal + visual checklist for steps in folding laundry at a worksite
Travel training	Teacher gestures to traffic light + verbal cue “Let’s wait for green”
Community access	Visual support with money symbols; model how to pay for an item

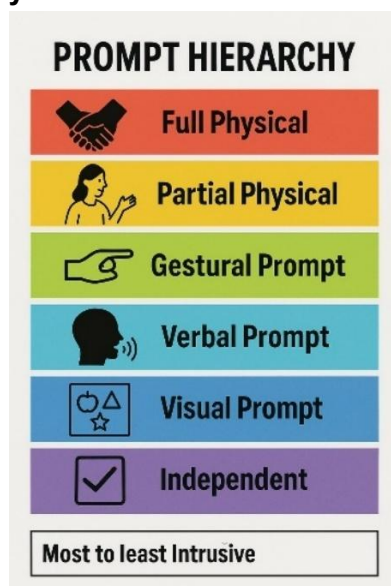
Tips for Effective Prompting

- Prompt immediately after the instruction to prevent error.
- Be consistent: Ensure all staff use the same prompt level.
- Fade systematically: Move toward independence by reducing the intensity.
- Pair prompts with reinforcement: Celebrate success to encourage repetition.
- Use data: Track prompt levels needed for each student over time.

Avoiding Prompt Dependency

- Prompt dependency occurs when a student only responds when prompted. Prevent it by:
- Using a clear prompt hierarchy
- Fading prompts as soon as possible
- Giving wait time to encourage independent initiation
- Reinforcing unprompted responses

Summary



Prompts are a vital, structured support to help students with disabilities access learning, routines, and communication. When used intentionally, systematically, and with fading, they build independence and confidence across all developmental stages. Also, see the section above re. cues.

Here's a cheat sheet for teachers in a special school context to help them design, deliver, and track the efficacy of prompts effectively. This resource is tailored to educators supporting students with diverse learning needs, including those working at levels well below age expectations.

Prompts

<http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/sites/autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/files/imce/documents/Prompting-Complete-10-2010.pdf>