

“Don’t” Instructions vs. “Do” Instructions – Is One Really Better Than the Other?

Description

Stop teasing your sister!

Don’t jump on the coffee table!

I think I read in a parenting book once upon a time that psychologically-savvy parents tell their kids what *to* do, instead of what *not* to do. But I must admit that I occasionally catch myself doing the un-savvy thing and telling the kids what not to do.

Because sheesh, when I’m preoccupied with the chili on the stove, keeping the dog out of the garbage, and trying to make sense of an article I’m reading, it’s so much easier to say “hey – that thing you’re doing, stop it!”

But does such cognitive laziness come at a cost? Especially when it comes to motor skills and performance?

A test of avoidant instructions

A [team of researchers](#) recruited 28 golfers for a study on putting performance – 14 “high-skilled” golfers (mean handicap of 5.5), and 14 “low-skilled” golfers (mean handicap of 21.1).

After a quick warmup, the golfers performed 3 sets of 10 putts, each with a different set of instructions.

In the first set of 10 putts, the golfers were simply instructed to make as many putts as possible.

In the second set of 10, the golfers were instructed to make the putt – but to be careful not to miss to either the right or left (some golfers were told not to miss to the right; others to the left), as follows:

“One of the most common mistakes an expert golfer can make when attempting a left-to-right putt is to miss the putt to the [left/right] of the hole. Your goal is to putt the ball and try and make it land in the hole, but be careful not to miss the putt to the [left/right]; don’t miss the putt to the [left/right].”

The instructions didn’t change much in the third set of 10, except with the addition of the word “remember.” As in, *“Remember, your goal is to...”*

So what do you think – did the “don’t” instructions cause more misses? And would there be any difference between the higher-skill and lower-skill golfers?

High skill vs. low skill

The researchers were curious about putting accuracy, of course, and whether the golfers would miss in the same or opposite direction to which they were instructed. But they were also interested in any changes to their swing kinematics. The timing of their swing, the path of their swing, the alignment of the face of the putter, the point of impact, and so on.

As far as shot accuracy goes, all golfers, regardless of skill level, tended to overcompensate. Meaning, if a golfer was told to avoid missing to the right, they missed to the left instead. In much the way that if you tell a student not to play too fast, their reaction will probably be to play too slow, for instance.

But here's the interesting thing. The avoidant (a.k.a. "don't") instructions did not seem to affect the high-skilled golfers all that much. Their putting score after the "do" instructions (**42.4**) was about the same as their score after the "don't" instructions (**43**). Their swing mechanics and timing remained stable too.

It was a very different story however, for the *low-skilled* golfers.

For one, their putting accuracy scores got worse, going from **38.2** in response to the "do" instructions (make the shot) to **35** for the "don't" instructions (don't miss to the right/left).

In addition, there were significant disruptions to the mechanics of their putting strokes after being given "don't" instructions as well. For instance, their swings – both the backswing and forward swing – slowed down. Seemingly becoming more deliberate, hesitant, tentative, and controlled. Where instead of trusting in their strokes and ability, they appeared to exert too much conscious control over their putt, which is one of the [likely culprits in "choking"](#) under pressure.

What did the better golfers do differently?

So why weren't the higher-skilled golfers affected by avoidant instructions? And how did they manage to maintain a more consistent level of performance?

The authors propose a few reasons, among them, that the better golfers may have been better able to focus on simply making the putt as opposed to trying not to miss. Like [the trick](#) to walking through a crowd without bumping into anyone or having to engage in the awkward "I'll go this way, you go that way" dance.

It's also possible that they were better able to trust the effectiveness of their stroke and simply hit the ball, instead of making significant conscious mechanical adjustments (which often [end up being more disruptive anyway](#)).

But it's important to note that the golfers weren't under any particular pressure in this particular study. If they had been, I suspect that the higher-level golfers' performance may have dropped a notch or two in response to the "don't" instructions as well.

So what can we take away from all of this?

Takeaways

Takeaway #1: Don't use don't (most of the time)

Especially when teaching, coaching, or conducting younger or less experienced musicians, it seems like it would be best to avoid "don't" directives like "don't rush" or "don't use too much bow" or "don't play too loud." We're probably going to get closer to what we want by saying "hold the tempo steady" or "slow down your bow" or "aim for a nice mezzo forte."

Takeaway #2: When to use don't (sometimes)

That being said, I think strategic use of avoidant instructions could potentially be a helpful training tool when preparing for performances. How so?

Well, under pressure, even the best of us are liable to think "don't crack the high note...don't crack...don't crack...and...\$#&*!"

So what we need to be able to do when the troll who lives inside our head rears its ugly head, is:

1. Catch ourselves thinking a performance-sabotaging thought
2. Redirect our mind to more task-relevant and performance-enhancing thoughts, with strategies like [quiet eye](#) or a [distal external focus](#)

The authors call this "metacognitive training."

And perhaps by asking a friend or teacher to shout out what *not* to do at strategic moments as we play, we can train ourselves to keep our minds focused on (and get) what we *want*, rather than what we *don't*.

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