

As an experienced middle school ELA and social studies teacher, I've seen how review games can either energize a class or descend into noisy, shallow activities that do little to deepen understanding. While many teachers turn to candy as small rewards, there are smarter, more meaningful incentives that align better with learning goals and classroom culture. In this post, I'll share strategies for using **small, non-candy rewards** to boost engagement during review games — with an emphasis on active retrieval, thoughtful team structures, and student ownership.

Why Small, Non-Candy Rewards Matter

My department lead experience coaching new teachers has taught me that classroom routines and pacing need to intentionally promote deep thinking. Candy rewards may motivate a quick burst of attention but rarely encourage the *why* behind answers or extended engagement. Instead, small rewards that serve as tools for the game or give students agency bring both motivation and rigor.



When students compete or collaborate, rewards like an “extra hint,” “extra time,” or the chance to “choose the next category” directly tie back to the learning task. They also help cultivate a respectful environment where think time is protected and every voice matters. This approach beats shallow noise in favor of meaningful, active retrieval practice — the gold standard for strengthening memory and understanding.

Key Features of Effective Review Games

1. Team Challenges with Simultaneous Answer Reveal

One of my go-to structures involves small teams answering questions simultaneously instead of taking turns. This prevents one student from blurting out answers while others zone out. Each team collaborates quietly [one-minute memory challenge](#) within a set timer (I keep a timer in my pocket and actually use it!) to agree on an answer, and then all teams reveal their answers at once.



- This structure **protects think time** by allowing every group to discuss.
- It keeps all students actively involved, knowing their team's explanation will matter.
- It avoids the "buzz-in" dynamic that often benefits a few outspoken students at the expense of the group.

2. Scoring That Rewards Explanations and Identifying Why Another Answer Is Wrong

Rather than just awarding points for getting the correct answer, I clock the value in how well students explain *why* the correct answer is right and why other answers may be misconceptions or incomplete. This adds layers of cognitive engagement and moves the focus from fast recall to thoughtful reasoning.

For example, after teams reveal answers, I ask, "Who can explain their thinking? Why might another team's answer be mistaken?" Teams earn points not only for accuracy but for the quality of their explanatory reasoning. This also increases peer learning and accountability across teams.

3. Student Ownership Through Question Writing

Students love to write their own questions — it's a powerful way to shift them from passive recipients to active constructors of knowledge. As part of review game preparation, I often assign question design in small groups. Then the class plays a "team challenge" using these student-generated questions.

This process:

- helps students internalize content by thinking about important concepts or tricky topics
- makes the review feel more relevant and student-centered
- leverages peer voice to diversify question difficulty and perspectives

Small Rewards That Promote Learning and Ownership

Avoiding candy doesn't mean losing motivation. Instead, offer rewards that reinforce engagement or give strategic advantages in the game. Here are three effective small rewards I use regularly:

Reward	Description	Why It Works	Example Use
Extra Hint	Teams may trade earned points to receive an additional hint on a tough question.	Encourages strategic thinking about when to use help and deepens understanding by	

scaffolding difficult content. "If your team is stuck, spend one point to get a clue about the answer." **Extra Time** A small time extension on the team discussion timer before revealing answers. Protects think time, encourages deeper collaboration and discussion within teams. "Your team earned extra time before locking in your answer—use it wisely." **Choose the Next Category** Winning teams select the next review topic or question category. Gives teams ownership and investment in the game's flow, increasing motivation to perform well. "Great job! You get to pick the next category: 'American Revolution' or 'Literary Terms.'"

Implementing This Approach: Step-by-Step Guide

1. **Set Up Teams:** Create small groups that collaborate well. Assign roles if needed (recorder, spokesperson, timer manager) to distribute responsibility.
2. **Review Rules:** Explain the team challenge format and simultaneous answer reveals to ensure all students understand the expectations and flow.
3. **Explain Scoring:** Emphasize that points are awarded for correct answers, quality explanations, and constructive critiques of other teams' reasoning.
4. **Introduce Rewards:** Share the available small rewards (extra hint, extra time, choose category) and the criteria for earning or trading them.
5. **Launch the Game:** Use your timer to monitor discussion periods. Encourage teams to reason out loud within their groups efficiently.
6. **Facilitate Explanation Rounds:** After simultaneous reveals, call on teams to justify their answers and comment on others' logic.
7. **Manage Rewards Usage:** Allow teams to redeem earned points for small rewards strategically during the game.
8. **Wrap Up and Reflect:** Debrief with students: ask for the "why" behind their answers and reward choices. Solicit feedback on what worked and what could improve.

Why This Focus on 'Why' and Active Retrieval Matters

One classroom pet peeve is activities where students are noisy but cognitively checked out, or when "review" turns into rereading notes. With this method, students must articulate their reasoning, defend their choices, and thoughtfully consider alternative answers.

When we focus on *active retrieval*—making students retrieve information without simply rereading—we strengthen neural pathways essential for durable learning. Simultaneous answer reveals and team collaboration provide a safe space to think critically and reflect on misunderstandings. Plus, adding light gamification promotes fun without sacrificing rigor.

Final Thoughts

Small rewards need not be candy or trivial items. Thoughtful incentives like extra hints, bonus time, or the power to select the next category transform review games into meaningful, engaging learning experiences. Pair these rewards with team challenge structures that protect think time and scoring that values explanations, and you'll see a shift from shallow participation to deep cognitive engagement.

Remember, always ask for the "why" behind answers—it's the key to uncovering real understanding and driving growth. With these strategies, your review sessions become moments where students feel ownership, collaboration, and challenge in equal measure.

Happy reviewing, and may your classroom be filled with thoughtful discussion — not just noise!