

Structured Discussion Formats

Body Voting:

Students physically take a stand by moving to a corner/side of the room to indicate their position on a controversial issue or on a topic of interest. Each group of students discusses its position, and then the groups share their positions and rationales with the other groups. At this point, individuals may elect to change their stand on the issue by moving to another group.

Chalk Talks:

1. Write an open-ended question on the whiteboard and give each student a piece of chalk, preferably in different colors.*
2. Inform students that this is a silent activity—all talking should be done with their chalk.
3. Initially, students write their responses to the question on the whiteboard.
4. Eventually, while still maintaining silence, students should “chalk talk” and respond, react, or connect to other students’ initial responses.

** Large pieces of chart or bulletin board paper and markers may be used.*

Conversational Moves:

Each student in a group is given a 3x5 card on which a conversational move is listed. During the course of the discussion, each student should make his/her move. For example:

1. Ask a question or make a comment that shows you are interested in what another person has said.
 2. Ask a question or make a comment that encourages someone else to elaborate on something that person has said.
 3. Make a comment that underscores the link between two people’s contributions. Be explicit about what that link is.
 4. Use body language (in a slightly exaggerated way) to show interest in what different speakers are saying.
 5. Make a comment indicating that you found another person’s ideas interesting or useful. Be specific as to why this was the case.
 6. Contribute something that builds on or springs from what someone else has said. Be explicit about the way you are building on the other person’s thoughts.
 7. Make a comment that at least partly paraphrases a point someone has already made.
 8. Make a summary observation that takes into account several people’s contributions and that touches on a recurring theme in the discussion.
 9. Ask a cause and effect question—for example, “Can you explain what you think will happen if we don’t _____?”
 10. At an appropriate moment, ask for everyone to stop and reflect on what’s been said so far in order to review the main points that have been made.
 11. Ask another member of the group for clarification.
 12. Express your appreciation to another member of the group who has said something to help you “get it.”
 13. Disagree with someone in a respectful and constructive way.
 14. Ask a question to bring another person into the discussion.
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Generating truth statements:

Groups of about four students create three endings to open-ended statements (e.g., “It is true of advertising that . . .”), then choose one or more to share with the class.

Rotating stations:

Locate each small group at a station where they are given 10 minutes to discuss a provocative issue and record their ideas on newsprint or a chalkboard. When this time is up the groups move to new stations in the classroom where they continue their discussion, based on the ideas they encounter from the previous group. Rotations continue every 10 minutes until each group has been at all of the positions and has had a chance to consider all of the other groups' comments.

Snowballing:

Students begin this activity by responding to questions or issues as individuals. They then create progressively larger conversational groups by doubling the size of their group every few minutes until by the end of the activity everyone is reconvened in the large group.

Think-pair-share:

The teacher poses questions to the class, where students are sitting in pairs. Students silently think of a response individually for a given period of time, then pair with their partners to discuss the question and reach consensus. The teacher then asks students to share their agreed-upon answers with the rest of the class.
