**Group-Lead Discussion Ideas**

**PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS**

*a.k.a. Values Continuum, Forced Debate, Physical Barometer, This or That*

**Basic Structure:**A statement that has two possible responses—agree or disagree—is read out loud. Depending on whether they agree or disagree with this statement, students move to one side of the room or the other. From that spot, students take turns defending their positions.

**Variations:** Often a Philosophical Chairs debate will be based around a text or group of texts students have read ahead of time; students are required to cite textual evidence to support their claims and usually hold the texts in their hands during the discussion. Some teachers set up one [hot seat](http://www.d120.org/assets/1/avid/Using_Philosophical_Chairs.pdf) to represent each side, and students must take turns in the seat. In less formal variations (which require less prep), a teacher may simply read provocative statements students are likely to disagree on, and a debate can occur spontaneously without a text to refer to (I call this variation This or That in my [classroom icebreakers](http://cultofpedagogy.com/classroom-icebreakers/) post). Teachers may also opt to offer a continuum of choices, ranging from “Strongly Agree” on one side of the room, all the way to “Strongly Disagree” on the other, and have students place themselves along that continuum based on the strength of their convictions.

**PINWHEEL DISCUSSION**

**Basic Structure:** Students are divided into 4 groups. Three of these groups are assigned to represent specific points of view. Members of the fourth group are designated as “provocateurs,” tasked with making sure the discussion keeps going and stays challenging. One person from each group (the “speaker”) sits in a desk facing speakers from the other groups, so they form a square in the center of the room. Behind each speaker, the remaining group members are seated: two right behind the speaker, then three behind them, and so on, forming a kind of triangle. From above, this would look like a pinwheel. The four speakers introduce and discuss questions they prepared ahead of time (this preparation is done with their groups). After some time passes, new students rotate from the seats behind the speaker into the center seats and continue the conversation.

**SOCRATIC SEMINAR**

*a.k.a. Socratic Circles*

**Basic Structure:** Students prepare by reading a text or group of texts and writing some higher-order discussion questions about the text. On seminar day, students sit in a circle and an introductory, open-ended question is posed by the teacher or student discussion leader. From there, students continue the conversation, prompting one another to support their claims with textual evidence. There is no particular order to how students speak, but they are encouraged to respectfully share the floor with others. Discussion is meant to happen naturally and students do not need to raise their hands to speak. This [overview of Socratic Seminar](https://www.facinghistory.org/for-educators/educator-resources/teaching-strategy/socratic-seminar) from the website *Facing History and Ourselves* provides a list of appropriate questions, plus more information about how to prepare for a seminar.

**Variations:** If students are beginners, the teacher may write the discussion questions, or the question creation can be a joint effort. For larger classes, teachers may need to set up seminars in more of a fishbowl-like arrangement, dividing students into one inner circle that will participate in the discussion, and one outer circle that silently observes, takes notes, and may eventually trade places with those in the inner circle, sometimes all at once, and sometimes by “tapping in” as the urge strikes them.

**AFFINITY MAPPING**

*a.k.a. Affinity Diagramming*

**Basic Structure:** Give students a broad question or problem that is likely to result in lots of different ideas, such as “What were the impacts of the Great Depression?” or “What literary works should every person read?” Have students generate responses by writing ideas on post-it notes (one idea per note) and placing them in no particular arrangement on a wall, whiteboard, or chart paper. Once lots of ideas have been generated, have students begin grouping them into similar categories, then label the categories and discuss why the ideas fit within them, how the categories relate to one another, and so on.

**Variations:** Some teachers have students do much of this exercise—recording their ideas and arranging them into categories—*without* talking at first. In other variations, participants are asked to re-combine the ideas into new, different categories after the first round of organization occurs. Often, this activity serves as a good pre-writing exercise, after which students will write some kind of analysis or position paper.

**CONCENTRIC CIRCLES**

*a.k.a. Speed Dating*

**Basic Structure:** Students form two circles, one inside circle and one outside circle. Each student on the inside is paired with a student on the outside; they face each other. The teacher poses a question to the whole group and pairs discuss their responses with each other. Then the teacher signals students to rotate: Students on the outside circle move one space to the right so they are standing in front of a new person (or sitting, as they are in the video). Now the teacher poses a new question, and the process is repeated.

**Variations:** Instead of two circles, students could also form two straight lines facing one another. Instead of “rotating” to switch partners, one line just slides over one spot, and the leftover person on the end comes around to the beginning of the line. Some teachers use this strategy to have students teach one piece of content to their fellow students, making it less of a discussion strategy and more of a peer teaching format. In fact, many of these protocols could be used for peer teaching as well.

**CONVER-STATIONS**

**Basic Structure:** Another great idea from [Sarah Brown Wessling](http://sarahbrownwessling.com/), this is a small-group discussion strategy that gives students exposure to more of their peers’ ideas and prevents the stagnation that can happen when a group doesn’t happen to have the right chemistry. Students are placed into a few groups of 4-6 students each and are given a discussion question to talk about. After sufficient time has passed for the discussion to develop, one or two students from each group rotate to a different group, while the other group members remain where they are. Once in their new group, they will discuss a different, but related question, and they may also share some of the key points from their last group’s conversation. For the next rotation, students who have not rotated before may be chosen to move, resulting in groups that are continually evolving.

**FISHBOWL**

**Basic Structure:** Two students sit facing each other in the center of the room; the remaining students sit in a circle around them. The two central students have a conversation based on a pre-determined topic and often using specific skills the class is practicing (such as asking follow-up questions, paraphrasing, or elaborating on another person’s point). Students on the outside observe, take notes, or perform some other discussion-related task assigned by the teacher.

**Variations:** One variation of this strategy allows students in the outer circle to trade places with those in the fishbowl, doing kind of a relay-style discussion, or they may periodically “coach” the fishbowl talkers from the sidelines. Teachers may also opt to have students in the outside circle grade the participants’ conversation with a rubric, then give feedback on what they saw in a debriefing afterward, as mentioned in the featured video.

**HOT SEAT**

**Basic Structure:** One student assumes the role of a book character, significant figure in history, or concept (such as a tornado, an animal, or the *Titanic*). Sitting in front of the rest of the class, the student responds to classmates’ questions while staying in character in that role.

**Variations:** Give more students the opportunity to be in the hot seat while increasing everyone’s participation by having students do hot seat discussions in small groups, where one person per group acts as the “character” and three or four others ask them questions. In another variation, several students could form a panel of different characters, taking questions from the class all together and interacting with one another like guests on a TV talk show.

**SNOWBALL DISCUSSION**

*a.k.a. Pyramid Discussion*

**Basic Structure:** Students begin in pairs, responding to a discussion question only with a single partner. After each person has had a chance to share their ideas, the pair joins another pair, creating a group of four. Pairs share their ideas with the pair they just joined. Next, groups of four join together to form groups of eight, and so on, until the whole class is joined up in one large discussion.

**Variations:** This structure could simply be used to share ideas on a topic, or students could be required to [reach consensus every time](http://www.englishadvantage.info/for-teachers/activitygame/pyramid-discussion/) they join up with a new group.

**Objectives:**

* Create a group of five
* Examine the topic you must discuss by looking at the reading or other relevant material we are discussing in class—but you can certainly bring in resources that go beyond class materials
* You may ask the class to read and/or engage with material ahead of time
* Explain to me—at least two days ahead of time—what information you will cover
* Choose a presentation format you are comfortable with
* Organize your presentation and make sure it takes up at least 40 minutes of class time.
* Everyone in the group must speak
* I will help you develop ideas if you are stuck
* I will grade your discussion based on your understanding of the topic, attempt to engage the class in a discussion, your audience awareness (level of formality), and your organization of ideas