

It is easier for people to discuss difficult topics in a caring and open way when they feel safe and at ease with others. These activities, when used along with collaboratively-established norms, are intended to help participants connect at the start of a meeting and feel less guarded.

These opening prompts and ice breakers will work best in groups of 15 or less. If the group will be larger than 15, have people form into smaller groups for the connection or ice breaker.

Opening Prompts

Opening prompts are simpler than ice-breakers; instead of being games, they are typically questions that can be answered by each person in turn. Participants should respond to the question or prompt only, and not to each other. Connection prompts work well in pairs, groups of three, or in a circle with more people. They're useful in both in-person and online gatherings.

Gratitude

Before starting the meeting, go around and give each participant the chance to share something big or small that they appreciate.

Observation

Invite participants to share something they have noticed or seen differently recently. This prompt may be adapted to fit the circumstances; teachers may be invited to share an observation they have made about a student or to describe something they just noticed or see now in a different light; alternatively, participants can be invited to share signs of the season they have been noticing (spring, summer, fall, or winter).

I'm Here For

Write the first name of a child, colleague, or community member who you wish to keep in the front of your mind as you engage in today's work. Turn and share the name (or even who they are and what they mean to you) with an elbow partner, or share in a circle.

Norms Reflection

If the group that is meeting has an established set of norms or agreements, you can invite participants to review the norms or agreements and consider which ones resonate with them, or which ones they want to commit to focusing on during the day's meeting. Turn and share with an elbow partner, or share in a circle. This question can be returned to at the end of the day, when participants are invited to reflect on how they did or how the group did at upholding norms.

Ice Breaker Activities

Ice breakers are light and non-threatening activities that can help participants relax, laugh, and connect, particularly at in-person gatherings. Please find several example ice breakers below:

Favorite Foods

Invite participants to think of their favorite food, then to circulate through the room and find others who share that favorite food (or a food in that category). Once people have found pairs or formed groups, they can share with others in the group a memory connected with that food, or describe how they like to prepare it.

Mystery Cards

Each person in the group writes three things about themselves on an index card:

1. One thing they think they have in common with many people in the room
2. One thing they think they have in common with a few people in the room
3. One thing they think is unique to them

Each card, which should not have the person's name on it, is dropped into a basket. Then the facilitator reads each card, statement by statement, and everyone in the group who is described by each statement stands up. The goal is to figure out who wrote each card and also to see all the surprising commonalities or characteristics.

Two Truths and One Lie

Once gathered, have everyone come up with two things that are true about themselves and another thing that's false. Then have each person present what they came up with. The goal is for everyone else to guess what is true and what is not; this leads to stories about past life experiences and facilitates engaging and enjoyable conversation.

This or That

The facilitator poses a question (for example, "Which animal is a better pet, a dog or a cat?") and participants move to a corner of the room with people who have the same opinion. Then they talk about why they made that choice. Other possible questions include:

- Would you rather live in the country or the city?
- Would you rather be indoors or outdoors?
- Would you rather play sports or watch sports?
- Would you rather have a sports car or pickup truck?
- Would you rather be able to fly or be able to change into an animal?

Switch Places If

Arrange chairs in a circle; there should be one fewer chairs than people. A speaker should stand in the middle of the circle and say something that is true about themselves. If that is also true about other participants, they should stand up and find a new seat to sit in. The speaker should also attempt to find a seat. It's just like musical chairs! Whoever is left standing each time will be the next speaker. Playing at least a few rounds can help a group get to know each other.

Continuum

Participants arrange themselves along a continuum (for example: agree to disagree, or comfort to discomfort) according to a prompt provided by the facilitator. Three prompts is often an effective number. Prompts in the sequence of three can begin light and personal and end up focusing on the day's topic. Or they can all be light and non-threatening. Once the continuum is established, colleagues can turn and talk to someone next to them, or share out to the whole group. Example prompts include:

- a. It's important for teachers to get to know students as individuals
- b. Every student should learn a world language
- c. Students should have the opportunity to retake assessments

You can also have fun with this one by using prompts such as:

- d. Dogs make better pets than cats
- e. Chocolate is the best flavor of ice cream
- f. I prefer going to the beach rather than going to the mountains

Head, Heart and Hands

Invite participants to share in response to these questions (choose any ones you like, or make up your own connected to the three words):

- Head: "What is your mind working on these days?"
- Heart: "What is your heart working on these days?" Or, "What is in your heart?" Or, "What do you love?"
- Hands: "What are your hands working on these days?" Or, "What do you want to let go of?"

This activity works well in triads or groups of four, so that each person has a few minutes to share.

Additional Resources

If you're a frequent facilitator and are looking for additional ideas and suggested ways to start meetings, look no further than the School Reform Initiative's [ice breakers and warm-ups](#).

Great Schools Partnership thanks [Everyday Democracy](#) for their collaboration in the fieldwork and shared learning that shaped many of these ideas.