

Small Group Discussion Protocols (20 Examples)

Each of these protocols will have a “time required” section which is my best guess of how much time each will take. That estimated time is based on students having about a minute to respond individually to any issue. That limit was chosen on the assumption that the small group discussion is intended to prepare the students for the large group discussion. If the small group discussion is intended to develop meaningful outputs, the times will probably be longer.

It will also list an “Online equivalent” for the exercise. When selecting the tools you wish to use online, you will first have to decide whether an activity works best synchronously or asynchronously. In general, I tend to aim at asynchronous interaction first, because it allows participants around the world to log in at their convenience. I like the idea of global conversations, and they tend to be richer and more diverse. Asynchronous discussions also give participants more time to think about their about their responses, and give shy or contemplative participants a better chance to contribute. Asynchronous interactions take a long time though (several days at least), which may lead you to choose synchronous interactions instead. Synchronous interactions are quicker and because they often involve audio or video, they can more quickly establish a sense of community and a perceived rapport with the instructor.

Synchronous Tools: Synchronous communication means that the participants are online at the same time (or at least, are pretending to be!). For voice communication, one can use Skype or another VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol). Skype is still free for two-person Skype to Skype calls within the U.S. and the price for international calls is quite low. Skype also allows video, although for more than two people one needs to purchase Skype Premium, which currently allows up to ten participants to have a video conversation.

For text messages, one can use IM (Instant Messaging) tools like Skype, Windows Live Messenger, Tencent QQ, Yahoo!Messenger, Blauk, and AIM (AOL Instant Messenger). One can text over both the computer or cell phone. Chat rooms are also a possibility although the current preference is to use a virtual classroom environment like Wimba Classroom or Adobe Connect because of the variety of tools that these bring together. Wimba Classroom, for example allows instructors to take a show of hands, take questions, show videos, use a whiteboard, feature a visiting presenter, host a chat room (both for the entire class and break-out rooms for small group work), polling, and conduct a variety of other activities. The most promising development in the last year is Avatar Kinect, which promises to raise avatar chats to a new level, particularly with Microsoft’s current plan to release Kinect for the PC.

Asynchronous Tools: Asynchronous communication means that the various people in the conversation do not have to be online at the same time. Email is an obvious example, but texting by cell phone is much more prevalent among current traditional age students.

Many online classes use discussion forums, and they may be housed in LMS (Learning Management Systems), social media (like LinkedIn or Facebook), or just on the web in a public forum (although this has a variety of privacy issues). In fact, so many online instructors use discussion forums that many students are bored and annoyed when they see yet another discussion forum when they enter a new class. That is not a good way to start your class! I highly recommend using the protocols in this handout to customize your forums.

Other asynchronous methods are wikis, blogs, RSS feeds, and Twitter. Online office hours are typically held asynchronously, and these can be done with a restricted membership Twitter Account or with a shared blog with an RSS feed that can be subscribed to by students through their cell phones. GoogleDocs is also popular for group work restricted to one's class list.

When turning in written responses to the instructor, written responses should generally be in Word 97-2003 format (.doc), which is a format that is most easily readable regardless of the age and type of the computer. When shared with a group, written responses should be in PDF format, as Adobe Reader is available as a free download for all computers.

The first protocol is simply a student answer to a question, artifact or task posed by the instructor.

1. **Critique:** Students are asked to respond to a question, artifact or task posed by the instructor or another student. These are typically used in large group discussions and are included here primarily because the online equivalent is one of the basic building blocks of later online protocols.

Time required: 1-2 minutes per participant.

Online equivalent: Students are asked to post a response (usually asynchronously) to a question or task posed by the instructor. Responses are posted on a shared space like a blog or forum. When used in synchronous environments, Critiques will usually get less nuanced responses.

The next six of these discussion protocols can be used in lectures of several hundred people to create "participatory lectures."

2. **Turn to Your Partner:** Divide participants into pairs that will discuss the concept together. This is the fastest way to have participants share their understanding of the topic and prepare for a larger discussion.

Time required: 1-4 minutes.

Online equivalent: In a synchronous chat (on a CMS, Wimba, Connect, etc.), have pre-assigned class partners. Partners go to private chat to discuss with each other.

3. **Think-Pair:** Give participants a minute to think about or write a personal response to the concept under discussion. Then have participants turn to their partner and discuss.

Time required: 2-5 minutes.

Online equivalent: Same as *Turn to Your Partner*, but with 1 minute of individual writing first. Alternatively, this can be turned into a Write-Share in which students write and then share their written response in an asynchronous format. Students should be instructed to post responses to their partner's response but is probably more efficient when students respond to at least three responses by other students.

4. **ConcepTest:** Have participants take a minute to write down an answer to a question posed by the instructor. Then have each participant turn to the person next to them. Participants

without a partner should either raise their hand and look for a partner near them, or (less desirably) join another pair near them. Then for two minutes the participants then either try to convince each other their answer is correct. After they have discussed, the instructor assesses their answers (perhaps by a show of hands in response to a multiple choice question). In the case of more complex problems, this process could be repeated several times for each of whatever natural steps there are in solving a more complex problem.

Time required: usually 5 minutes.

Online equivalent: Use a *Think-Pair* and then have students return to the synchronous chat and take an online survey. In the Wimba Classroom, one would use the formal polling tool. One could also use SurveyMonkey or other online survey.

5. **Think-Square:** As with *Think-Pair*, but with four people (a Square).

Time required: 4-8 minutes

Online equivalent: As with *Think-Pair* but this time students are pre-assigned to Squares. The members of the Square should be assigned by the instructor, either through random assignment, or preferably as a result of pre-existing expertise (which may be determined at the start of the class with a pre-test). Using the Write-Share described under *Think-Pair* would be a way to apply this asynchronously.

6. **Think-Pair-Share:** As with *Think-Pair* above, but then have each pair combine with another pair to form a larger group and share their thoughts.

Time required: 5-8 minutes

Online equivalent: As with *Think-Pair*, but with prearranged Squares (groups of four). Doing the *Think-Pair* first can be cumbersome for a synchronous exercise, so instead just do a Think-Square. For an asynchronous equivalent, use a Write-Share-Compare in which students write papers individually and then post them to the teacher (for an individual grade) and to a shared space where other students can access it. The second half of this assignment is for students to read 2-3 of the other students' papers and then post a *Critique* of those papers. Allow 3-6 days for this sort of protocol.

7. **Value Line (aka. Line-up):** This discussion method gets the participants up and moving around. It also makes a good icebreaker. The instructor either asks students to identify themselves by a number (most years of experience, number of pets, etc.) or places two oppositional stances (ex. Democrat vs. Republican) and asks students to talk to each other and sort themselves into the correct positions. Once they are agreed as to their order, divide the total number of students by 6 (or however many students you want in each group). That will give you the number of small groups you will have. Then have the students (still lined up) count off by that number (ex. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.). Then assign spots in the room to each group and have them join their group. With the proper question for students to organize themselves by, this method gives a heterogeneous mix in the groups.

Time required: Usually less than a minute per student.

Online equivalent: Asynchronously, an online polling tool such as Survey Monkey or the Forms function in Google Docs could be used to gather student responses, which the instructor would then analyze or map and report upon. Synchronously, one could use the polling feature in a virtual classroom system, Poll Everywhere (<http://www.polleverywhere.com/>), or GoogleForms.

8. **Stand and Share:** The facilitator gives a question or problem. When participants have a solution, answer or comment, they stand. When all have stood, the facilitator asks each for their input. Once they have given it, they can sit down.

Time required: 2-3 minutes to solve the issue, then a minute or less per person in the discussion.

Online equivalent: This is most easily done in a discussion forum or chat room, but probably would have the greatest impact in a virtual classroom environment, with a video appearance by each student.

9. **Debate (aka. Structured Controversy):** In this discussion method, the class is divided into two groups of participants, who then debate a topic in a reasoned and organized fashion. This could be a formal parliamentary debate or a more simplistic model. A debate usually involves these parts:

- a. Decide upon the motion to be debated. The motion may be expressed in this format: "Resolved, that President Truman believed that dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was necessary and proper."
- b. Divide the class into teams and decide which will argue for (*pro*) and against (*con*) the motion.
- c. Pro and con teams take turns adding a statement that either supports their argument or refutes that of the opposing team.
- d. The instructor should debrief the debate at the end, explaining which arguments he found most and least compelling as an expert commentator.
- e. As a group, the participants now reflect upon whether their beliefs have changed as a result of the debate.

Option: One group of participants can be designated to be the jury. After the two teams have made their arguments, the jury will summarize the debate, discuss strengths and weaknesses of the arguments, and make a decision. This can take the place of the debriefing or precede the debriefing by the facilitator.

Time required: 1-2 minutes per person in each group, plus 10-15 minutes of debate and 10-15 minutes of debriefing.

Online equivalent: Online debates can take a very long time, so either a synchronous or nearly synchronous format would probably be best. A Twitter channel might be the best place for this. The ease of accessing older Tweets changes from month to month, but there are currently several ways to archive the class's Tweets, including TweetScan Data, The Archivist, Twapper Keeper, Twitter Tools, Twistory, and others. GoogleDocs and other wikis do not typically work well for debates but if you have an extraordinarily well-behaved group of students, it could work as well.

The rest of these protocols are best used in small groups involving 5 to 7 participants. The first of these, Round Robin, is often over-used but a number of similar protocols are given can be used to keep student interest.

10. **Round Robin (aka. Go Around):** Form the groups and have the participants take turns sharing one reflection about the day's topic. A variant of this in the 1970s was called Phillips 66, because students worked in groups of six for six minutes on a given issue, and then reported back.

Time required: 1-2 minutes per person in group.

Online equivalent: This could be used in almost every form of online discussion. If deep thought is necessary, use an asynchronous format. If you just want to maintain energy and build student confidence, use a synchronous format.

11. **Expense Account:** Each person in the group gets 3 tokens (pennies are easy to use). Each time someone speaks, they put a token in the center of the table. If you don't have any tokens left, you can't speak. When everyone is out of tokens, everyone can retrieve their tokens and start the process over. This method gives everyone a chance to speak, but in less structured way than *Talking Stick*.

Time required: 3 minutes per participant.

Online equivalent: This is a synchronous exercise. A shared whiteboard would be ideal, since participants could draw the pennies they are turning in. Virtual classroom environments often have this sort of virtual whiteboard but they are also available online (see <http://www.virtual-whiteboard.co.uk/home.asp> for example).

12. **Thinking Colors (aka. Six Thinking Hats):** Participants are organized into groups of five (with the sixth color typically assigned to the facilitator). Participants are each assigned a card of colored paper, and are asked to play the role represented by the color during the discussion:

- *Neutrality (White):* Asks Questions. Given the available information, what are the facts?
- *Feeling (Red):* Responsible for instinctive gut reactions or statements of emotional feeling (but not any justification).
- *Negative judgment (Black):* Seeks mismatches in the discussion by applying logic and identifying flaws or barriers.
- *Positive Judgment (Yellow):* Seeks harmony in the discussion by using logic to identify benefits.
- *Creative thinking (Green):* Keeps the conversation going through statements of provocation and investigation.
- *The Big Picture (Blue):* Often used by the discussion facilitator, who sets the objectives, keeps the group on task, and sets new objectives.

Time required: 1-2 minutes per participant.

Online Equivalent: This can be used with all discussion formats, but it could be made more fun through 2D avatar chat, where each person is represented by an icon that shows the role they are playing.

In the next group of Round Robin formats, each person must share their individual responses before the group talks as a whole. These protocols are designed to encourage both individual cognitive dissonance (by requiring individual commitment to ideas) and group diversity (by ensuring that all voices are heard).

13. **Talking Stick:** Drawn from the practices of the indigenous Americans, the purpose of this protocol is to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak. It can also be helpful if you have students who constantly have their hands up, in that it can give them a format for group work. Form the groups and have participants take turns speaking for one minute on the subject and their thoughts about it. Designate a particular pen as "the talking stick." The participants pass the stick around the circle, with only the person holding the stick being able to speak. Allow each participant to speak for one minute *without interruptions* and then pass the "talking stick" to the next participant. After all have spoken, allow a few minutes for them to discuss as a group. When combined with *Illustrative Quotation* CAT, this variation is called *Save the Last Word for Me* by some developers.

Time required: 1-2 minutes per person in group.

Online equivalent: Order responses by telling students to respond in alphabetic order by last or first name, in reverse alphabetic order, or by age from youngest to oldest. This can be used in either asynchronous or synchronous format, although it makes most sense as a synchronous exercise.

14. **Roundtable (aka. Group Passing Technique):** The purpose of this method is to give everyone a chance to speak and also to have a written record. Participants take turns writing on a single sheet of paper, stating their ideas aloud as they write. The tablet of paper keeps circulating around the group.

Time required: 1-2 minutes per person in group.

Online equivalent: This is essentially a discussion forum. Any form of text-based asynchronous or synchronous discussion will work. Students might be required to individually compose responses of 50 words or more that they will then cut and paste to the web. Allow 1-2 days for each person in this sort of sequential group presentation.

15. **Role-playing (aka. We Wear the Masks, Séance):** The purpose of this method is to allow participants to speak with a voice other than their own and to understand the voices of others. This method can help the shy participants to speak more openly, since they can hide behind the mask of their role. When done F2F, this exercise requires a good deal of trust of everyone in the group. As the instructor, you must ensure that everyone feels safe and relaxed as possible. Then assign a role to each participant and have them discuss the topic in character. When the emphasis is placed on the individual responses, this exercise can force students to consider alternative viewpoints or test them on their understanding of a character or stance. When the emphasis is placed on the dynamic interplay of characters, it evolves into

theatrical improvisation. If you desire this, be sure to share these following rules with your students:

1. *Don't Deny*: Accept what your fellow actors offer and try to make it work collaboratively. Do not deny or block their offering by saying, "No, this isn't a tavern, it's a library."
2. *Help Each Other*: Either everyone looks good, or no-one will. If you stick slavishly to one idea, everyone else has to give up their ideas and try to figure out yours. Build a scene or story collaboratively.
3. *Provide Details*: Try to inject details into the scene that make it come to life. This makes the job of the other actors easier, since they will have more with which to work.
4. *Stay in the Moment*: Keep your focus on your character and on the scene.
5. *Use More than Words*: Get into it. Use your body and gestures to help bring the scene to life.

And if the preparation for this activity was minimal...

6. *Don't Ask Questions That Require a Thoughtful Response*: Asking these sorts of questions increases cognitive load and slows down the action as the other person tries to think of a response.

Of course, the third rule can be ignored if the students have prepared for the conversation through their homework, especially if the goal is to test student understanding of the particular characters or stances they are playing.

Time Required: 1-2 minutes per participant with minimal preparation. 3-5 minutes per participant with extensive preparation.

Online equivalent: This is actually easier online, where participants typically feel more anonymous anyways. Students have probably already played various roles informally on the web, either through games or just chatting. The exercise works best as a synchronous exercise. Form students into small groups with their own chat space where they can meet. Require that one member of the group record or archive the chat and then send that file to you. You can then review all of the files for appropriateness and then share them with the rest of the class. If useful, this might then lead to an asynchronous large group discussion about the exercise or its results.

16. **Brainstorming:** This process is intended to stimulate the generation of ideas in a small group by reducing the level of risk involved with creativity. Participants are given a task or issue. Brainstorming questions rather than answers is called *Questorming*. One of the members or an external facilitator is instructed to write down all ideas generated on a blackboard, whiteboard, or a Word document projected digitally against a wall. The members of the group are then instructed to shout out ideas that the facilitator writes down. No one is allowed to criticize or comment upon any of the ideas, because the emphasis is on creativity and generating a lot of ideas first. As with most exercises stressing creativity, there needs to be a lot of trust already developed in the group for unusual ideas to emerge. After the group determines that enough ideas are up on the wall, or after an allotted period of time, participants are instructed to improve or combine these ideas. Participants may elaborate on their ideas to ensure clarity. Duplicate ideas or ones that are infeasible are then removed. At this point, the group selects one or more ideas and determines how they will be implemented

and how their success will be evaluated, or the group divides to develop individual responses based on the list of possible ideas. Recent studies have shown that brainstorming does not increase the number of ideas generated, but it may improve morale, build team work, and increase student satisfaction.

Time required: 20-30 minutes.

Online equivalent: Electronic brainstorming is the online version of *Brainstorming* and has the advantage that the online environment tends to reduce the fear of criticism by participants.

17. **Simple Jigsaw:** In groups of five, assign each participant a brief unique reading (for in-class or out-of-class). The group is given a general topic to discussion, and each participant takes a turn discussing it from the viewpoint of their unique reading.

Time required: 2 minutes per person.

Online equivalent: Students are given their unique reading as homework and then discuss in their small groups synchronously at their normal small group meeting time.

18. **Double Jigsaw:** If you have a class of 20 participants, divide them into four groups of five participants each. Each participant is assigned a brief reading (for in-class or out-of-class) upon which they will be the expert. Each group is assigned a general concept category. When the class discusses, the groups discuss the concept via the knowledge of each expert. When they are done, the instructor then sends one person in each group to a new group, thus forming five new groups made up of "experts" on a different concept. Again, the class discusses in their groups. This is a good way to get the class to examine an issue from many perspectives. The double jigsaw works best with 3 groups of 3, 4 groups of 4, 5 groups of 5, etc. A variant of this is "Three Stay, One Stray," in which one member of each team rotates to the next team after the first round of conversation in their group. The straying member shares the original group's thoughts on the issue with his/her new group.

Time required: 2 minutes per person for the first group plus 1-2 minutes per person for the second group.

Online equivalent: Students are given their unique reading as homework and then discuss in their small groups synchronously at their normal small group meeting time. Then, at the full class synchronous meeting, they can be assigned to new small groups to discuss the material in a synchronous break-out group. Alternatively, they can share their original group's conclusions on wikis open to members of the second group.

19. **Affinity Map:** This activity works best when begun with an open-ended analytic question that asks for defining elements of something, or that has many answers and thereby provides many points of entry for deepening a conversation.
1. *Preparation:* Hang pieces of chart paper on a wall in the room so that small groups can gather around the paper. Hand out to every participant a "block" of post-it notes (perhaps 5-10 maximum).
 2. *Writing:* Ask the question and request that participants write one idea in response per post-it note. Instruct them to work silently on their own.

3. *Posting*: Split into groups (of 4 – 8). In *silence*, put all post-it notes on the chart paper.
4. *Organizing*: Reminding participants to remain silent, have them organize ideas by “natural” categories. Directions might sound like this: “Which ideas go together? As long as you do not talk, feel free to move any post-it note to any place. Move yours, and those of others, and feel free to do this. Do not be offended if someone moves yours to a place that you think it does not belong, just move it to where you think it does belong – but do this all in silence.”
5. *Naming*: Once groups have settled on categories, have them place post-it notes on chart paper in neat columns. At this point, ask them to converse about the categories and come up with a name for each one.
6. *Reporting*: Have the groups pick a “spokesperson” to report their ideas to the larger group. Gather that data, and have an open discussion using open-ended questions such as: What do you notice? Were there any surprises? What do you not see that you think it missing? Were there any surprises?

Time required: 10-15 minutes, plus 5-10 minutes of reporting out.

Online equivalent: There are online virtual post-it notes that can be used, including Lino it (<http://en.linoit.com/>) and MyStickies (<http://www.mystickies.com/>). Use them in conjunction with a virtual whiteboard. A virtual classroom environment is the perfect place to do this because it combines chat options as well.

20. **Send-a-Problem (aka. The Envelope Game, Directed Brainstorming):** Each group member writes a question on a card. They then take turns asking the group to solve the question. If there is a consensus on the answer, it is written on the back of the card. After all questions are answered, the card stack is sent to the next group, who repeats the process *without looking at the first group’s answer until they have reached a consensus*. Directed Brainstorming is a variant of this is to have individuals write responses or solutions on cards and then randomly swap them with other participants. In this version, the participants are asked to improve upon the idea they received and this process is repeated 2-3 times.

Time required: 2-3 minutes per person for each group that works through the card stack. 4-6 minutes for Directed Brainstorming.

Online equivalent: This is best used asynchronously, with small groups developing their responses or questions in a wiki and then posting the response in another group’s wiki. If groups are numbered, the groups could pass the responses to the group with the next number. Directed Brainstorming does not seem to be possible to replicate in its original form.