



# 10 Icebreakers to Kickstart Meaningful Student Discussions

## Guidelines for using icebreakers

Icebreakers loosen inhibitions by stimulating, challenging, and motivating the participants. They help get the participants to open up and feel comfortable participating in the group's activities. To maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of using icebreakers, the facilitator should keep in mind the following guidelines.

- Spend some time before the activity reading the instructions and becoming familiar with procedures.
- Build interest for the rest of the activity with an effective introduction. State the instructions clearly and with enthusiasm. Always ask for questions and be sure that the group has a clear understanding of what is expected of them.
- Group members should never be forced to participate. Although the group leader may encourage total participation, each member must understand that he or she has the right to refrain from engaging in any icebreaker that feels uncomfortable or awkward.
- The facilitator serves as an important role model for the other students. The facilitator will find that his or her active participation in an icebreaker may help reduce some students' initial inhibitions and promote moderate risk-taking.
- Before implementing an icebreaker, the facilitator needs to consider carefully its appropriateness for the group. For RSVP, the icebreaker should be low-risk and its emphasis should be on preparing the group to have a meaningful discussion.

## Example Icebreakers

### 1. Group Juggling

**Materials needed: Six to eight small bean bags, Nerf balls, or balled-up socks per group (5-10 minutes)**

Organize into groups of six to 10 people. Form a circle and choose a leader. The leader starts with one ball and tosses it to someone across the circle, calling out their name before they throw it. That person then calls someone else's name across the circle and softly throws it to them. This continues until everyone in the circle has caught the ball and the last to do so tosses it back across the circle to the leader. Reinforce the order (which will be kept) by having everyone point to the person they throw to and catch from. The leader starts the process all over again adding balls until the group is working together to keep several balls aloft.

High energy and good focus come out of this game, as well as the ability to learn the names of others in your group. Feel free to stop the game for a bit of processing about what is working and what is not.

## 2. Warp Speed

**Materials needed: One ball or other object that you are not worried about breaking (5 minutes)**

The facilitator tells the group the object of the game is for everyone to touch the ball in order (any order) as efficiently as possible. The ball has to start in a chosen leader's hands and end in that same person's hands. They will be timed. Ready... go! After the first go around, the group is asked if they want to do it again faster and better.

They'll say yes most likely. Let them process, then say "Ready... go!" Do this activity until the group has surpassed the speed of sound.

This one is fun and quick and gets the group moving, talking, and working with one another.

## 3. The Party

**Materials needed: None necessary (Leader may want a noisemaker to signal the end of this activity.) (5 minutes)**

Tell the group that they have assembled every one of their best friends at a party. The problem is, they know everyone, but no one else knows anyone else at the party. Their mission (all of their missions) is to introduce each of their best friends to each of their other best friends—in less than two minutes. Show them proper introduction etiquette (i.e., Nadeem, my buddy, I want you to meet someone you'll love. Shake hands with Lady Bird. Lady Bird, I want you to say hello to Nadeem).

This is a high-energy starter-upper that is great with big groups. And it is a blast for the facilitator to watch.

## 4. The Right Family

**Materials needed: A copy of the story of the Right family; one passable object per participant (5-10 minutes)**

Have the students stand beside their desks. Explain to them that every time they hear the word "right," they are to make a quarter turn to their right and pass the object. Every time they hear the word "left," they are to make a quarter turn to their left and pass the object. Practice a few times by reading the first couple sentences so people get the hang of the idea.

**Read the following story to the players.**

"This is the story of the Right family. Last night, the Right family went to see a baseball game between the Boston Red Sox and the Minnesota Twins. They left the house at six o'clock, right after the family finished dinner. Mr. Right drove everyone to the game in the red family van, which is always parked on the left side of the garage. In the van were Mrs. Right, Bobbie Right, Katie Right, and Joey Right. As they drove down the street, Mrs. Right waved to Lisa, their neighbor, who lives two houses down on the left. She was watering her garden on the right side of her house. As the Right family approached Fenway Park, Mr. Right exclaimed, 'I can't remember where I left the tickets!' Joey Right said, 'Dad, I saw you put them in your right-hand pocket.' Mr. Right checked, but they were not there. Katie said, 'No Dad, that isn't right. You left the tickets with me for safekeeping. I have them right here in my purse.' 'What a relief,' said Mr. Right as he turned left into the stadium parking lot. Joey almost left his baseball glove in the van, but right when Mr. Right was about to lock the doors, he remembered he had left it under his seat. The Right family had to wait in line for a bit, but finally made it to their seats in left field. As they sat down, Mr. Right looked to his left at the whole Right family and smiles. He had made the right decision in getting tickets for this game."

Remind the group that listening is an essential part of RSVP and shows respect to hear what their classmates are saying. If time permits, ask the following detail-oriented questions to see what the group remembers: Where are the Rights going? What teams are playing? Where are they playing? How many Right family members are there? What are their names? At what time of the day was the game? Who almost forgot the baseball glove? Who had the tickets? How did the Rights get to the game?

## 5. Count to 10

**Materials needed: None (5-10 minutes)**

The object of the game is for the entire group to count to 10, starting at one. The only rules are that no one person can say more than one number in a row; the group cannot go in any order and cannot be directed by anyone; and if two or more people say a number at the same time, the group has to start over at one.

You'll be surprised how great this activity works. Groans will accompany near misses and cheers will follow success. This game will get a group very on track, together, and quickly.

## 6. How Am I Called?

**Materials needed: None (5-10 minutes)**

Form into groups of three and introduce yourselves to the others in your group by explaining how you got all of your names. Were you named after a movie actress? Your grandfather? Include your middle name, too. After the small groups have shared, have members of each group share something interesting with the large group.

This activity is a great way to get to know more than a name in a short amount of time. Other than looks, names are the first thing we generally learn about one another. "How Am I Called" deepens that first impression quickly to learn about cultural and familial norms.

## 7. Pleasant Memories

**Materials needed: None (5-10 minutes)**

Break the group into pairs. Ask the pairs to decide who will be the downhill ski and who will be the snowboard. The snowboards go first. Those who go first will talk for two minutes about, for example, their pleasant memories of playing as children. Or they will talk about pleasant memories of their favorite teachers.

The "seconds" will listen without interrupting, always keeping good eye contact, only giving small encouragement (smiling, nodding). At the end of two minutes, switch. At the end of the time, thank your partner. If there's time, the large group might debrief about the question, about listening, and about talking without interruption.

This activity rocks. It's great to watch people soak up the attention and great to watch people listen to one another. It's a wonderful way to build safety and connection one person at a time.

## 8. Something Unique

**Materials needed: None (10-15 minutes)**

Tell the participants to look in their wallets or pockets or purses or briefcases and find something that is special and unique to them. Take it out and tell the group about the object and its importance.

Wow! You'll be amazed at the depth of this activity. It's a way for participants to share that is very real and remarkably safe.

## 9. Two Truths and a Lie

**Materials needed: None (10-15 minutes)**

In small groups of six to eight, have everyone think up two truths about their own life and one lie. Then people take turns telling their unbelievable truths and their very believable lies. After each turn, the group votes on which statement is indeed the lie. Some people are better liars than you ever imagined.

This is a really fun way to find out a few of the more bizarre and unusual truths about your group. It takes a little more time, but is worth every minute. It generates lots of laughs and conversation starters.

## 10. Stand and Declare, or Corners

**Materials needed: Enough space in corners of the room for people to gather (5-10 minutes)**

This is a good exercise for an entire class or a larger group of people. Prepare a set of statements (four or five) about which people are likely to disagree, such as “Terrorism is the biggest issue facing our country” or “The minimum wage should be set at \$10 per hour.”

Read the first statement, then tell people to go to a corner of the room that represents how they would respond to the statement: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree (you could even have these responses on the wall in each corner of the room ahead of time).

Continue this process with each statement you have prepared.

This exercise allows a group to see the wide range of conflicting opinions on issues. A longer version allows each person to say why they were in each corner and gives people a chance to switch positions after hearing everyone give their reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the statement.

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