

# Group Formations: Pros, Cons, and Strategies

**Summary:** This document shares strategies about how you can arrange and group students during a class or workshop as well as how often you change formations and groupings. Common formations include: circle, dispersed, at desks, audience/playing space, small groups, and partners.

**Quick Takeaways:**

- **Try:** For students who feel vulnerable in the spotlight, try a low-focus formation like dispersed (“pick a spot in the room”) or a circle (you can even try facing outward!)
- **Try:** When you want to foster peer-to-peer collaboration and allow everyone to feel seen and heard, try small groups or partners.
- **Try:** For residencies, test out a few formations in your early classes--as well as the placement of the adults in the room--to see how your students respond.

The way in which a space is arranged has a profound impact on how students learn, participate, and engage with material.

Put specific thought and intention into:

- The way you set up a space
- How often you rearrange the space within a given class

It is important to switch spatial arrangements throughout the class so that students experience varied and dynamic structures. However, be mindful of how many times you change formations--each change is a transition, and transitions can be hard.

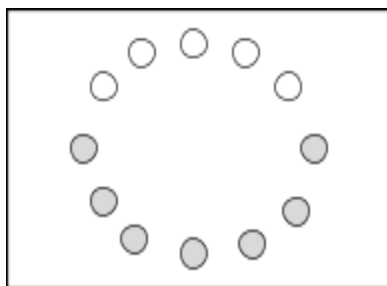
Conversely, while consistently using the same formation can be helpful to establish ritual and routine, overuse of a formation can make it ineffective. This resource will outline some common formations and arrangements, their benefits, and some accompanying tips and considerations.

When planning for group formations in the classroom, have an idea of how you will engage the other Classroom Professionals in the room, as some co-teaching styles support certain group formations. Read more about [co-teaching styles with partner Teaching Artists](#) and [engaging the other adults in the room](#).

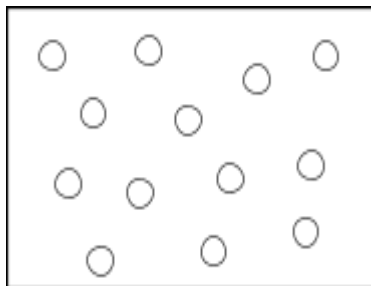
## Overall Quick Tips/Best Practices:

- For the start of a class, single workshop, and/or in early workshops in a residency, consider keeping students in the formation they are in when you enter the room or how they typically exist in the classroom space (i.e at desks or floor spots). If you are new in the space, this may help pave the way for a smooth introduction to new people and material.
- For residencies, consider building in a diagnostic period so you can test out different formations and see what works best for your group and build off of where they thrive.
- Consider creating a cue (verbal, musical, etc.) or ritual every time you change formations. This can get students prepared and ready for the change. To learn more about the importance of transitions and transition strategies, see [Transitions 101](#).

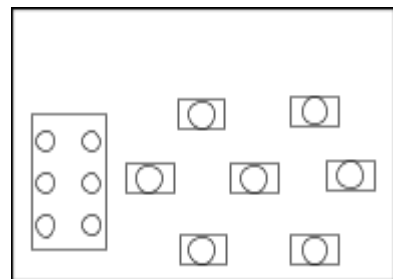
**Click on a formation diagram below to learn more about its benefits and applications.**



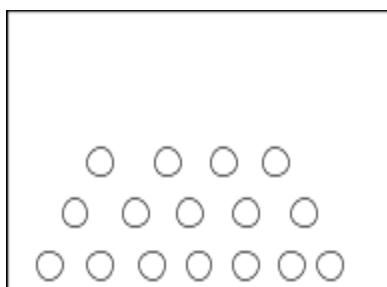
**Circle/Semi-Circle**



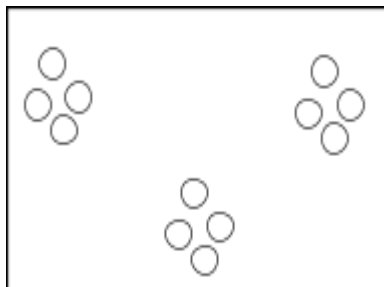
**Dispersed**



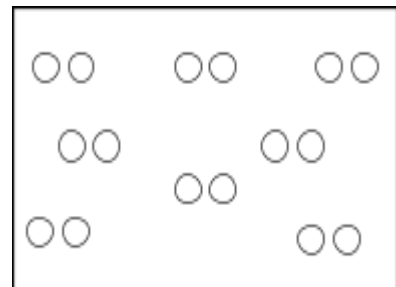
**At Tables or At Desks**



**Audience/Playing Space**



**Small Groups**

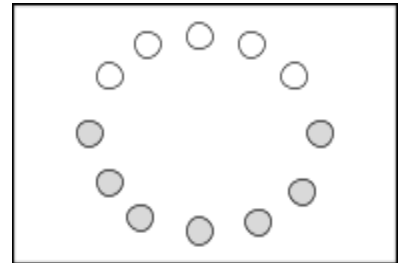


**Partners**

The description of each formation is accompanied by related benefits, quick tips, and suggestions for the placement of teaching artist(s) (TAs) and classroom professionals (which includes classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers).

## **Circle/Semi-Circle**

Students meet in a circle or semi-circle formation either seated or standing.



### **Benefits:**

- Promotes ensemble and community building.
- Encourages eye contact and connection with others in the space.
- Allows the full group to see others and be seen.
- Focuses the group with energy.

### **Quick Tips:**

- Circles tend to be fairly low focus but also may feel vulnerable and difficult for some students. If students are sharing in a circle, try having students face outside the circle to prepare before turning into the circle. This offers students a private moment to process and practice before sharing with others.
- Standing circles promote active energy. Seated circles promote a more grounded, calm energy. They are also a great equalizer when working with wheelchair users.
- Be mindful about how long you're asking students to stand or sit, depending on their energy and/or needs.
- If they have pre-existing circle spots or floor spots, use them!
- Take time to establish a true circle - avoid blobs or almost circles. Give students specific prompts to help them form a circle (i.e. take two steps back). Another offer is to challenge students to "make a circle that you care about."
- If your students need a visual cue to help them form a circle use colored masking tape, poly-dots or other tools. Find more options in our [Materials & Tools resource](#).
- Be sure to support the classroom community by welcoming any students who join the group late or are reentering the circle after spending time away for any reason.

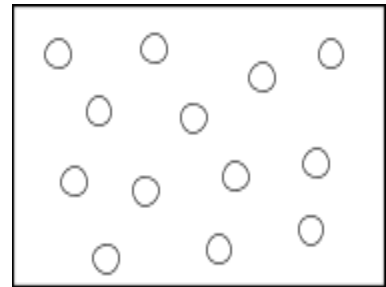
- A semi-circle works as a variation that gives more focus to the adult or leader

## TA/Classroom Professional Placement:

- For more direct focus, TAs and classroom professionals can choose to position themselves in one concentrated area of the circle.
- For more dispersed support, TAs and classroom professionals can spread themselves throughout the circle.
- For the semicircle variation - to provide spatial boundaries, try having the classroom professionals on each end.

## **Dispersed**

Dispersed activities refer to any formation in which students are scattered throughout the space. This can be static (i.e. every student finds their own spot in the space) or can be active (i.e. students moving throughout the space).



## Benefits:

- Promotes individual exploration within a group.
- Provides a low focus opportunity for students to participate in an activity.

## Quick Tips:

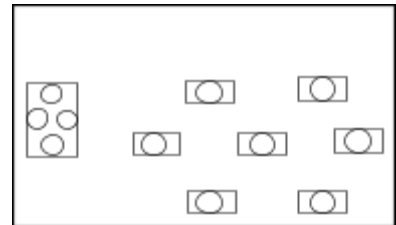
- This can be a great formation for students who have a lot of energy and have a tendency to wander.
- In this format, TAs can also add in a 'spotlight on' feature to highlight individuals within the group. This can be used in any formation but is particularly useful here where energy can feel diffused.
- Try marking specific spots on the floor with colored tape, poly-dots, paper taped to the floor to give students support for where to be. This can be useful for students who struggle with understanding personal space/bubbles, and for students who need specific boundaries.
- This formation can also be used to encourage students to interact with, experience, or respond to material on a gallery wall (visuals or post-its on a wall)

## TA/Classroom Professionals Placement:

- It can be helpful to have one facilitator leading and the other(s) participating and modeling.
- Students with higher support needs may find this format to be challenging, so facilitators may find it helpful to offer one on one support to individual students.

## At Tables or Desks

Students explore an activity individually, or in small groups from their desk spots (depending on the current set up). Even during collaborative projects, independent work time can be useful.



## Benefits:

- Provides students with a grounding, familiar home base.
- Gives students a focused spot with a working surface area.

## Quick Tips:

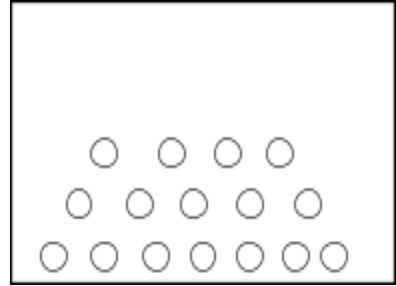
- This can be a great formation for the start of a class and/or a spot to return to if students need to recalibrate or find a safe space.
- This formation is particularly helpful in times of reflection, writing prompts, or making activities with lots of supplies.
- Students can also stand behind their desk spots if they need a focused home base for movement.

## TA/Classroom Professional Placement:

- Facilitators should find a balance between giving students space to participate on their own without help and wandering to offer one on one support as needed.

## **Audience/Playing Space**

This refers to anytime students are seated in one position facing an open area. The open area can either be a playing/sharing space or a means to focus on facilitators who are instructing from the open area. Variations on this formation include students in a semi-circle, which merges some of the benefits of a circle formation with an audience/playing space.



Other variations for dance include dance lines facing one direction or across the floor activities.

### **Benefits:**

- Creates an opportunity for showcasing and sharing work.
- Gives students a clear area in space to focus their attention.

### **Quick Tips:**

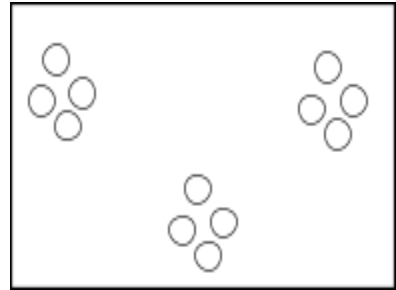
- Teaching Artists should consistently place the audience and playing space in the same spot each time. Switching up the orientation of where the audience is/playing space is can be very confusing.
- For a less high focus showcasing option, split students between both the audience and playing space, and have them share at the same time.

### **TA/Classroom Professional Placement:**

- TAs and Classroom Professionals can swap between participating with students/showcasing their creativity, instructing, and being in the audience/providing feedback.
- If there is scribing or mirroring involved, try doing it to the side of the 'stage' area so both the audience and performers can see it.

## **Small Groups**

This formation is characterized by dividing small groups of students into different areas of the space. This can be adapted into a station format, where students remain in a small group but rotate throughout the room to interact with different prompts or assignments. This formation is often helpful in times of devising or group-making.



### **Benefits:**

- Fosters peer to peer collaboration.
- Gives students who may get lost in the large group or who may need more support in individual work a way to engage with class content in a more focused environment.
- Provides students with an opportunity to collaborate on a specific element of art making which may get integrated with other groups to make a cohesive piece.

### **Quick Tips:**

- Small group work is fruitful but can get loud. Be mindful of volume and how this may trigger certain students. Give students a suggested volume to speak at or divide into multiple rooms if possible.
- To ensure that students have access to the prompt or assignment, consider giving them a written or visual breakdown of instructions to refer to in their small group as well as posting them where everyone can see.
- Students often enjoy the task of creating a group name. This gives students ownership over their group and is especially helpful if students are returning to the group again.
- If you are expecting students to return to a small group, make sure to document groups (student names and group names).
- Teaching Artists can switch up how they break into small groups. Options might include:
  - Traditional tactics like counting off
  - Organizing students by pre-existing groups like desk clusters
  - Dividing students by commonalities/interests
  - Playing a game that gets students into small groups.
- Small groups provide an opportunity to group students in several ways:

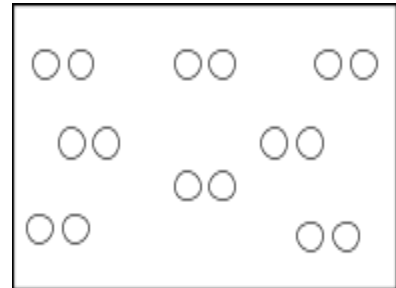
- Students with a mix of abilities
- Students with similar strengths or growth areas together.
- Students who love working together an opportunity to do so
- Students who might not otherwise work together have the chance to collaborate with others

## TA/Classroom Professional Placement:

- Consider giving students the opportunity to answer each other's questions and work through challenges together before jumping into a small group.
- For more complicated instructions or for groups who need further support with collaboration, each facilitator could lead a small group or station.

## Partners

This formation is characterized by giving students a single partner to work with. This can refer to moments when students have a partner and find their own space in the room OR when students are in two lines facing one another.



## Benefits:

- Promotes very focused peer to peer interaction.
- Gives students who get lost in large groups or need more support a way to engage with class content.

## Quick Tips:

- Consider utilizing a “turn and talk” in which partners turn to one another and share ideas together before answering a question or sharing with the group. Give them the option to share either their or their partner's idea.
- Partner work is fruitful but can get loud. Be mindful of volume and how this may trigger certain students. Give students a suggested volume to speak at or divide into multiple rooms if possible.
- To encourage community building, have partners create a partners handshake.
- Teaching Artists can switch up how they break into partners. Options might include more traditional tactics like counting off OR pairing students to the person



next to them. Other options include dividing students by commonalities/interests OR playing a game that gets them into partnerships.

- Partnerships provide an opportunity to group students across abilities OR to group students with similar strengths together. This can be an opportunity to give students who love working together an opportunity to do so OR to strategically encourage students who might not otherwise work together the chance to collaborate with others. Teaching Artists can challenge students to find a partner they haven't worked with, putting the onus on them to monitor and regulate.

### TA/Classroom Professional Placement:

- Facilitators should find a balance between giving students space to participate on their own without help and wandering to offer one on one support as needed.
- [Be strategic with how you are going to engage the adults in the room](#)

### Learn More:

- [EASE Classroom Set-Up Continuum Chart](#)