



How to Promote Successful Discussions by Testing the Water

What Do Our Students Already Know, Think, and Feel?

Students carry thoughts, feelings, and beliefs from their lived experiences into our classrooms. Some students know a lot about many topics, and others may know very little. Students' cultural and belief systems also vary widely. To boost lesson success, teachers can survey students to see what they know and believe about topics before starting civil discourse lessons.

Why Should We Test the Waters before Class Discussions?

Have you ever dipped your toe in a lake to find that the water was cold? Or maybe you looked a little closer and saw that just below the water's surface was an object you needed to be careful around? Like testing the water of a lake, teachers can use surveys and warm-up activities to get a preview of students' prior knowledge.

These tools can help us learn the following:

- student understanding
- possible potential biases
- students' interest levels
- possible hazards

There are several ways to learn about students' prior knowledge and beliefs.

PRIVATE SURVEYS PRIOR TO CLASS DISCUSSION

Before holding class discussions, teachers may assign brief surveys through the school learning management system or Google Forms to discover students' preconceived ideas about discussion topics. Survey results are seen only by the teacher, so students may be more honest in their responses if they know that other students will not see their answers.

Results tell you a lot about students' perceptions of discussion topics and can be used to build scaffolds to enhance the student learning experience. Surveys can be simple, with just a few [multiple-choice](#) or [open-ended questions](#). The sample templates provided in this toolkit can be customized to fit your lessons.

CANVA WHITEBOARD AND REAL-TIME POLLING

The use of digital whiteboards and real-time online polling tools can increase student engagement and reveal students' prior knowledge and beliefs. Teacher-created whiteboards allow students to add words and pictures to a shared group slide. Teachers can customize slides to let students add their opinions, feelings, and beliefs in response to questions. This activity increases student connection to and understanding of the discussion topics, and it reveals the students' level of prior knowledge and beliefs.

WARM-UP DISCUSSION STARTER ACTIVITIES

Present a slide deck with 10 engaging analogy warm-ups to help you discover what students know, think, and feel about the topics you are about to discuss.

Each slide lets students consider their views in relation to images. Students choose the image that represents how they feel about a topic based on their own life experiences and perspectives.

The pictures don't necessarily relate to the topic you are discussing; they are meant to get students activating prior knowledge. Although this activity can be funny at times, it may provide you with very real insight into any student biases or beliefs.

In the Ready-Made Teacher Tools you will find a [slide presentation](#) containing 10 samples for you to use. Feel free to make your own relational images connected to the content you are teaching.