



Some thoughts about conducting successful active learning.

1. Make it clear from the beginning of the semester that active learning will be a regular part of class.
2. Explain to students the thinking behind active learning.
3. My preference is to form groups randomly, to make it clear that they are random, and to form new groups frequently. However, I also like to have stable groups, which I call “home groups” that work together all semester long. I generally have student meet in random groups about 75% of the time and in their home groups about 25%.
4. Becoming better at working in groups is one of the goals of group activities. One way to encourage this is to have a process observer, one person who takes notes on how the group functions. At a certain point, you can call off the assigned task for the group and substitute a process discussion. The process observer reports from his or her notes, and the group attempts to identify problems that interfered with the group’s success.
5. Sometimes a class discussion of some of the problems that arise—how to handle a group member who is unprepared for class; how to keep one or two from dominating the discussion; how to encourage a quiet person to join in.
6. Sometimes it seems like a good idea to assign roles to the group members: a chair to moderate the discussion; a recorder to take notes a report out for the group; a process observer to make notes on how the group functions; a timekeeper to make sure enough time is allocated for all the assigned tasks.
7. Occasionally I have tried—with mixed success—to grade group work. I keep the stakes fairly low because fair grading is not easy and sometimes leads to controversy. If a certain number of points are allocated for accomplishing something like having your group’s thesis selected as the “strongest thesis” in the entire class or having your group’s sentence combination judged most effective is worth some small number of points.

On one occasion, I gave the winning group each group an appropriate number of points—say 30 for first place, 25 for second, and 20 for any other groups. I then asked the groups to allocate the points among the individuals in the group according to any formula they devised. Most gave them out evenly but allocated a few extras to someone who had make a major contribution or withheld points from someone who came to class unprepared to participate.

Ice Breakers.

These activities have several overlapping goals: to break the ice, to make everyone feel more comfortable, to encourage everyone to participate, to help students get to know each other.

Paired introductions. Have students pair off and interview each other. After five or ten minutes, have each person introduce his or her partner to the group. Alternatively, have each person write a mini-bio of his or her partner. Post these on a website for the class or reproduce as a handout.

Sometimes it seems like a good idea to provide a list of questions for the interviews:

1. Where were you born?
2. What is your goal at the college?
3. Do you work outside of school?
4. What kind of movies do you like?
5. What kind of food do you hate?
6. What kind of teacher do you try to avoid?

After 20 minutes of so, have each person introduce his or her partner to the class. You may want to give

them a time limit for these introductions and encourage them to select the most interesting information they learned rather than try to report on all the questions.

Paired interviews. A variation on introductions. Instead of just interviewing, each student will question his or her partner to ascertain an unusual fact, an interesting experience, or a surprising attitude of the partner. After a few minutes, these will be presented to the class.

Foursomes. Form groups of about four. Ask each the group to discuss what they all have in common and to determine the most surprising thing they all have in common. Report out to the class after fifteen minutes or so.

Shoe Identity. (This works better with smaller classes; otherwise, it may take too long.) Have students take off their shoes as they enter the classroom and leave them in the hall. Then ask everyone to go out and pick up a pair of shoes that are not theirs. They should return to the room and write a paragraph or so describing the person who owns the shoes they pick up. Then ask each writer to guess who wore the shoes they picked. Finally, return the shoes to their owner and have him or her tell what, if anything, in the paragraph was accurate.

Quirky Questions. Form groups of about four. Ask each group to discuss a set of questions you give them and be prepared to report out after 15 minutes or so. Here's a set of questions that have worked well for me:

- In the group, who was born in the most interesting place? Where?
- In the group, who has the most interesting name? What is it?
- In the group, who has the worst boss? What's so terrible about their boss?
- In the group, who is the best cook? What is their best dish?
- In the group, who speaks the most languages? What are they?

Reading

One of the great features of the readings we have students do in writing class is that we do not have an obligation to "cover" everything. We can focus on a few parts of the book that serve our purposes and ignore other parts that someone else might think important. We are not "teaching" the text; we are using the text to raise issues, to exemplify effective writing, to stimulate thinking, even to help students grow as readers. Below are some activities I like to use after students have read a text—an article, a chunk of a book, or something else.

Group Think. Form the students into groups of three to five. Give the same pithy question to each group. Ask them to agree on an answer—I like to insist the answer be one sentence. And then tell them to find evidence in the text to support that answer.

After the groups have had enough time—a good question may require 20 or 30 minutes of discussion—have each group write its sentence on the board. Rather than attempting to decide which group came up with the "right" answer, I like to discuss why they came up with different answers.

Speed dating. Form the chairs into two circles, the inner one facing out and the outer one facing in. Students take seats facing each other in pairs. On each pair of seats is a card with a question on it. Have students discuss their question for something like 3 minutes.

Then they move to their right and sit in a new chair with a new partner and a new question. Repeat as many times as time allows. I find that questions work best if they are directed to a particular sentence in the text and ask students about that sentence: what does it mean, why does the author say that, what assumptions does it make.

Assumptions. After students have read something, form them into groups of three to five and ask each group to come up with a list of assumptions that the text they have read makes. As they report out, compile a class list of assumptions.

Writing Activities

These activities are designed to encourage students to explore what works in essays.

This Class Has Talent. Form the students into groups of about four. Give each group copies of the same three papers, written by members of the class (names removed, of course). This activity works best for me if I chose fairly strong papers. Ask each group to decide which paper they think is the most effective and then to make a list of its strengths.

After 20 minutes or so, have the groups report out. Discuss the differences in their selection of the strongest paper and try to figure out—not which group is right—but why they disagreed. Also, discuss what counted as a strength.

The emphasis on discussing strengths rather than what we usually do in group work on papers—discussing weaknesses—is a real plus for this activity.

Challenging theses. Have students come to class with at least one thesis written down for their next paper, more than one is fine too. In groups of about four, have students challenge each others' theses with evidence and argument. Make sure each student takes good notes about the challenges to his or her thesis. These notes should be very helpful when they actually write the paper.

What Makes a Good Thesis Good? Have students come to class with at least one thesis written down for their next paper, more than one is fine too. In groups of about four, have students select the thesis that seems likely to produce the best piece of writing. Then ask them to list the reasons the group thought the thesis they selected was the most promising.

When the groups report out, first, discuss what the selected theses have in common. Then compare the reasons the groups gave for selecting the theses they selected. Look for similarities.

Devil's Advocate Day. Have students bring in an outline or set of notes for a paper. Have their partner challenge the arguments.

Grammar Activities

These are some ideas for active learning of grammar, punctuation, and usage.

Group Editing. Form groups of about four. Give each group a short text with errors in it. If you have been working with the class on certain types of errors, make sure the text has those errors. Ask each group to work together to edit the text eliminating as many errors as they can find. This works best if the group has only one copy of the text; otherwise, they tend to work as individuals.

The conversations the groups have during this activity are rich opportunities for them to sharpen their understanding of the grammar issue. You should not hesitate to answer questions.

When the groups report out, you can project the text on a screen. Give extra points if a group finds an error you didn't realize was there. A modest prize makes this more fun.

Sentence Combinations. Form class into groups of about four. Give each group a set of simple sentences to combine into as many different complex sentences as they can, without changing the meaning of the original set. Then ask each group to settle on the one sentence they like best.

Inductive Learning. With students in groups of about four, give them a set of data illustrating a grammatical rule. Print these handouts with a correct version of each sentence in black and one or more versions with errors in red. Have students figure out what the rule is.

Works best if you have them actually write out the rule. These can be projected and compared in discussion.

Non-Cognitive Activities

Some activities aimed at addressing non-cognitive issues.

The Smartest Thing. Ask students to come to class with an idea of the smartest thing they have done or have heard about someone else doing to be successful in college.

Form students into groups of four and have each group select the one “smartest thing” from its members. Report out on these.

Plan B. Start with the entire class. Ask them whether going to school is more stressful, less stressful, or about what they expected.

Explain that one strategy for dealing with stress is simply dig in and work harder. And often that strategy works; students manage through, determination and grit, to survive to the end of the semester and to pass their courses. But it doesn't always work. Point out that sometimes students just grind to a halt; the gears seize up, and they drop out of school.

Form students into groups of about four and ask the groups to come up with at least three strategies for what to do if it feels like the stress is becoming unbearable—if you feel like your gears are about to seize up.

Have groups report out.

Triage. Have students keep a chart accounting for every minute of their waking time a week. Then form them into groups of about four to discuss their charts.

The triage part of this comes when each student is asked what they are willing to give up from their week in order to have more time. Reporting out of what each group was willing to give up can be interesting. Be sure to look for patterns. What are the most common types of “time gobblers.”

Language Puzzles

I like to use little slivers of time to ask students to work on language puzzles—little questions that encourage greater awareness of how language works. Here a sample of some of these language puzzles. Sometimes I have students work on these in groups; sometime, individually.

1. Why “I” is capitalized
2. any vs some
3. the German green small car
4. Their is four mistakes in this sentence.
5. difference between envy and jealousy
6. “it’s all downhill from here.” is that good or bad?
7. is zero singular or plural?
8. how many vs how much?
9. What is the word we use to refer to an entrance to an interstate highway?
10. when to use “few;” when to use “less”
11. decapitated/capitated; deboned/boned; dethawed/thawed
12. what do “troops,” “pants,” and “scissors” have in common?
13. why is it “I am going to the library,” but not “I am going to the church”?
14. what is the rule for forming possessives: the queen’s of England carriage?