

Chalk Talk

A chalk talk creates an opportunity for a small group of students, or even your whole class, to have a silent conversation in writing in response to a topic or question you pose. A chalk talk can be used to assess prior knowledge at the beginning of a unit, or you can use it at any point during a unit to assess the extent and depth of the students' learning. Advantages of a chalk talk include allowing quieter students an equal opportunity to be heard and providing a natural check on students who may tend to dominate oral conversations.

To facilitate a chalk talk, follow these steps:

- Explain to the students that a chalk talk is a silent exercise: no one may talk until you indicate that the activity has concluded.
- Encourage the students to add to the chalk talk as much as they would like. Any information may be added, even if the student is not sure whether it is correct.
- Write the topic or question on which the chalk talk will focus in a circle in the middle of the newsprint or board on which the students will work.
- Give each student a marker or piece of chalk, or set out these supplies for students to use and share.
- Begin the chalk talk. If students are hesitant, prompt them by writing two or three interesting questions or subtopics, branching out from the central topic, which may generate thoughts and responses.
- Students may comment on the initial question or topic; or as more comments and questions are written, they may comment on the comments, drawing connecting lines to illustrate the flow of ideas.
- Continue the chalk talk for at least 5 minutes, more if it seems worthwhile and productive. Because there may be extended periods in which students simply look at the chalk talk and consider what else to write, be wary of stopping the exercise prematurely.
- If you wish to refer back to the chalk talk—for example, at the conclusion of the unit—be sure to save it. If your students did the chalk talk on the board, take a digital photograph before you erase it.

You may choose to participate in the chalk talk along with your students by adding your own ideas and reflections or by adding connecting lines to indicate patterns or contradictions you observe in students' thinking. Alternatively, you may simply observe as the exercise unfolds, noting for yourself areas of strength and weakness in your students' knowledge.

In addition to its obvious uses for assessment, a chalk talk can also be employed as a safe way to initiate a discussion of a difficult or controversial issue. When the conversation occurs silently, in writing, students may be both more thoughtful about their own views and more respectful of dissenting opinions.

(This handout is adapted from www.teachersnetwork.org/NTNY/nychelp/mentorship/chalktalk.htm.)

