

# Written Conversations

In “written conversation,” students write a series of simultaneous notes to one another in response to a particular question that they have chosen or that the teacher has assigned. This teaching technique has a number of advantages:

- It allows all the students to participate in a conversation (albeit a silent one), rather than a full-class discussion in which only some students are truly actively engaged.
- It gives more introverted students the chance to write their thoughts rather than speak them aloud.
- It provides a quieter classroom atmosphere than paired spoken conversations, which, for some students, is more conducive to reflective thought.

The steps for organizing a written conversation are as follows:

1. Organize the students into pairs.
2. Provide a question on which the conversation will focus, or provide several options for questions and let the students choose one. The question should be open-ended enough for sustained conversation.
3. For 3 minutes, the students write their first response to the question. They must remain silent during this time and must write for the entire 3 minutes. They may write words, phrases, or complete sentences; make connections and inferences; put forward ideas and musings; and even pose further questions. They should not be concerned with spelling or grammar.
4. When the teacher calls time, the students exchange their papers, read what their partner has written, and take another 3 minutes to write a response.
5. Repeat this procedure (numbers 3 and 4 above) once, twice, or even three more times, depending on your students’ tolerance for silent writing and the time you have allotted for this exercise.
6. Once students have written responses and exchanged papers for the last time, invite them to discuss out loud with their partners for 2 or 3 minutes. Be prepared for a noisy buzz of lively exchanges!
7. Conclude this exercise by inviting volunteers to share interesting insights or highlights that emerged in their written conversations or notable areas of agreement or disagreement they discovered with their partners. Note that this exercise can be used alone or as an effective lead-in to a full-class discussion, as it gives all students an opportunity to generate fresh ideas about a particular topic.

(This exercise is adapted from *Best Practice: Today’s Standards for Teaching and Learning in America’s Schools*, third edition, by Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde [Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005], pages 236–239. Copyright © 2005 by Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde.)

