



Pinwheel Discussions

Duration: 90 Minutes | **Overview:** Facilitate a “pinwheel discussion” on a complex text or topic you’ve studied in class.

Steps:

1. Assign perspectives: divide students into groups representing three different perspectives on an issue, plus a fourth “provocateur” group that prepares questions to push the conversation forward.
2. Prepare: Perspective teams collaborate to build evidence and craft arguments. Provocateurs develop their challenging questions.
3. Arrange the pinwheel: One representative from each perspective sits in the center as the first speakers. The rest of each team sits behind them for support.
4. Discuss and rotate: Students in the center discuss the issue while their teams listen and prepare. Students cycle through the center seat so everyone participates.

Best for...

- Complex historical events with at least three unique stakeholder perspectives (Reconstruction, the Great Depression, etc.)
- Current controversial issues that require nuanced thinking—and have many potential solutions (free speech regulation, immigration policy)
- Comparing multiple non-fiction articles on the same topic

Why this works: The Pinwheel Discussion gives students the time and structure they need to think before they speak. Instead of asking students to jump into a conversation unprepared—or rewarding the loudest voices in the room—this strategy builds collaboration and reflection into the process. In practice, the structure slows conversations down just enough to make space for nuance, helping students engage with complex ideas while practicing the habits of respectful, evidence-based civil discourse.