

# Icebreakers

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

An outline of the process for facilitating an icebreaker activity in class, and several icebreaker formats that can be used in onground and online courses.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

After selecting the icebreaker format most appropriate for your class, work through the facilitation process. For assistance, please [contact CET](http://cet.usc.edu/).

Icebreakers are in-class activities, usually done at the beginning of class and during the first few weeks of a course, that help establish a collaborative environment. As students get to know each other through participating in the icebreakers, they can develop into a class community and may be more comfortable when later asked to work in groups. University-level icebreakers are based on course content-related topics and help students get to know each other without revealing anything too personal. They can be used in onground or online courses

### Characteristics

Icebreakers are commonly used at most levels of education and outside of academia at professional and social events. While the Internet is full of suggestions for icebreakers, the type of icebreakers appropriate for the university level have the following characteristics.

* are academic/content-based
* facilitate familiarity with both content and classmates
* require all students to speak and/or write
* are debriefed with the instructor
* are not usually repeated
* are not usually graded
* are short (10 minutes)

### Facilitation process

Icebreakers, like any other active learning strategy, are highly structured and planned activities. The instructor and students have steps to complete before, during, and after an icebreaker.

#### PRE

* Instructor prepares materials/room/student groups or teams
* Instructor gives directions for/explains/models icebreaker
* Students review any required materials/content needed for the icebreaker

#### DURING

* Students perform icebreaker tasks
* Instructor facilitates, monitors, and keeps time

#### POST

* Students prepare any deliverable or debrief
* Instructor leads reflection/debrief to tie icebreaker back to purpose and content

### Icebreaker formats

The following are icebreaker formats you may wish to try in onground or online courses. They need to be adapted to your course/content. Developing icebreakers for an online course requires knowing the type of online course delivery (synchronous vs. asynchronous) and the features of the platform in use (such as breakout rooms, hand raise or polling option, faces visible on screen, etc.) Also, icebreakers for onground classes typically take full advantage of the physical space in the room but can be adapted to account for situations in which student mobility is not possible. In general, to adapt for onground class situations in which mobility is not possible, consider accomplishing an icebreaker through polling. Without moving from their seats, students can answer poll questions with their devices (phones, tablets, laptops) while the instructor displays the live responses. For more information on polling, see the CET Polling Implementation resource. For variations on polling using other tech tools, browse USC [Rossier’s Instructional Technology Group E-Learning Toolkit](http://rossier-itg.weebly.com/e-learning-toolkit).

#### Lines and clusters

Have students line up or group themselves/cluster together based on prompts you read aloud. Prompts will be related to course topics/content and require students to work together to get information from each other. Starter example: Have students organize themselves until they line up in alphabetical order by first or last name. Follow this with the next prompt related to course content.

* If mobility is not possible, consider sharing a Google doc that allows all students to type in the same document simultaneously while the instructor displays live results on screen. The instructor establishes the categories/groups/structures required and the students fill in their names/responses in the appropriate sequence or group on the document.
* For synchronous online courses that have a whiteboard feature, the instructor can create multiple whiteboards per category/group and have students fill in their names/responses on the appropriate whiteboard.

#### Circles

Have students form an inner and outer circle with the inner circle facing the outer one so each student is looking at a partner. Pairs discuss answers to content-related questions the instructor has provided, or students have been asked to create. Instructor calls time every few minutes so the inner circle can rotate, and students receive a new partner until the circle has completely rotated back to the initial pair. This activity can also be done in two lines rather than circles, with one line moving to form new pairs and the other line stationary. Note cards or small pieces of paper can be used to facilitate this activity with the instructor providing the questions on them, or the students writing their own questions on them.

* If mobility is not possible, students may stay in their seats and turn to the classmate in front, behind, and on each side of them.
* For synchronous online courses that have the feature of breakout rooms, the instructor can make and remake randomized breakout rooms so students will be placed with new partners each time.

#### Sides

Have students physically move to one side of the room or another based on the prompts the instructor reads aloud. This requires students to choose one answer/item/position over another. Prompts often start with “Which is better/worse…” or “Would you rather…” or “Do you agree or disagree…”

* If mobility is not possible, students may stay in their seats and each be given two different-colored cards to display when questioned, making their answers visible to the room.
* For synchronous online courses, this can be done if the platform used has a feature where students can display one of two different icons, such as a red or green button, or two different emoticons.