DISCUSSIONS

Active learning almost always starts with getting students talking. The exercises in this opening section—which include several classic activities with time-honored track records—are designed to do just that. Ranging from a simple around-the-room discussion starter (with a twist) that will work in any classroom, to more complex and in some cases multistage group activities, these exercises are designed to train students in the critical skills that make for effective, even transformative, classroom conversation: how to enter a discussion, how to listen to your peers, how to frame a useful question, how to develop a supportable argument, and how to work together to create an illuminating analytical synthesis.

The section begins with three general, easily adaptable exercises. “The Sixty Second Game” and “Fishbowl” involve everyone quickly and help normalize a discussion-based classroom in which all are counted on to contribute, while “Read, Reread, Close Read” creates a community of careful readers through close listening. All three exercises model discussion as a collaborative activity rather than a sequence of loosely related comments funneled through the instructor. The next three activities use the students’ own questions to organize discussion, whether those questions are prepared ahead of time, as in “Put the Question” and “It’s Time We Talked,” or generated during class itself, as in “Reverse Entropy.” Each exercise in this set also helps students recognize what makes a good question in the first place. The final two activities, “ Debate” and “Leader, Skeptic, Scribe,” turn from pointed questions to arguable answers, asking students to produce and defend interpretive claims about literary texts. Adaptable to any genre and almost any class size, these eight exercises will help turn even the quietest students into lively, engaged participants.