

# SILENT CHALK TALK

**Purpose:** The “Silent Chalk Talk” is a way to reflect, generate ideas, assess background knowledge, check on learning, develop projects, or solve problems. Because it is done completely in silence, it gives groups a change of pace and encourages thoughtful contemplation. (time varies according to application)

1. The facilitator explains very briefly that the chalk talk is a silent activity. No participant may talk at all. Anyone may add to the chalk talk, as they please. You can add new ideas in word or symbol form as well as comment on the ideas of others simply by drawing a connecting line, etc., to the comment.
2. The facilitator writes a relevant question of statement in the middle of a large piece of chart paper. Sample questions/statements:
  - What did you learn today?
  - What I learned in Zoology this year:
  - So what? Now What?
  - What are you thinking now?
  - Simply: “Evolution” or “Fractions”
  - Etc.
3. The facilitator provides everyone with a marker (alternatively: lay a small pile of many-colored markers on the ground in front of the chart) and signals to the group that “the chalk talk may now begin”.
4. Participants write as they feel moved. There are likely to be long silences- this is quite natural, so allow plenty of wait time. As the number of comments/connections increases... so does the total body of work on which to react. There will often be a curve of response that nearly appears exponential. Have faith in the process. Sparse contributions in the beginning can be helped along by the facilitator’s contributions.
5. How the facilitator chooses to interact within the chalk talk influences its outcome. To allow the student group to build its own collective experience/product... the facilitator should take a “less is more” approach. Interact as little as possible to keep the flow going and in the direction you are wanting. However, many times it is valuable to allow students to take a new or unexpected tack in order to truly evaluate the thinking of the entire group. When the facilitator feels the need to move the event forward or expand thinking processes along the way, they may do so by:
  - Writing questions about a comment.
  - Circling other interesting ideas, thereby inviting comments to broaden.
  - Adding his/her own reflections or ideas. (modeling thinking)
  - Connecting two interesting ideas/comments/questions together with a line... or a line and a question mark, etc.

Actively interacting invites participants to make the same kinds of expansions. A chalk talk can be an uncomplicated silent reflection or a spirited exchange of ideas.

6. As the comments begin to subside, the facilitator may then give a two-minute warning. After two minutes, the facilitator then closes the chalk talk.
7. The facilitator then leads a discussion (debrief) of the content learning, if applicable, as well as the process of the chalk talk itself. This step is crucial, and should never be skipped or slighted in any scenario. This step cements the content learning that happened during the experience as well as supercharges the metacognitive nature of the lesson.

Consider having students write one or two summarizing statements of the entire lesson on a Post-It, or notecard. Have them tape/stick the note on the chart in a blank space on the way out of the room for the day. These cards add another layer of thought onto the chart and are often a visible evaluation of the processes within the chalk talk.

### **Final thoughts/Modifications:**

- If the chalk talk is to be left posted as a reminder of the exercise, consider making the chart as large as possible (much like a “graffiti wall”). If the chart is small, and your class is large, some students may have trouble reading from where they stand or kneel. If students begin the chalk talk by writing too small, you may choose to make your first contribution to the chart early. Add a comment in large and bold print. This usually serves as a pretty clear signal to print larger.
- The amount of time spent active in the silent chalk talk depends highly on variables such as: topic at hand, purpose of chalk talk, age of students, preparation, interaction of facilitator, and the prior experience of the students.
- The first experiences students have with this strategy should probably be reflective in nature. This is the most powerful part of the silent chalk talk and often the most neglected with in a typical classroom situation.
- In the beginning of a school year, the chalk talk is an excellent way to assess and activate the background knowledge of your students before any attempt to introduce new learning.
- As students become comfortable with the process, they naturally see the value in using this method to review their understanding prior to and or prepare for a summative evaluation.
- Further along a continuum, where students become more accustomed to solid, reflective thinking in this and other formats, consider modifying toward some form of alternative assessment. Experiment with variables such as smaller venues. (fewer students/ individual tables/ poster board), try monitoring an individual's comments & additions with one color/student, giving positive scores for comments, connections, types of comments, etc.
- Regardless of the application, care should be given to not squash the power of this format to generate reflective thought within your students. Jumping ahead to using the chalk talk as some sort of “exam” without several positive, scaffolded experiences prior will likely diminish the power of this strategy.