



Small Group Discussions

Four students, twenty minutes, mixed across the sides they argued. Every student speaks, and they say things the plenary will not produce.

College and high school.

Four students, twenty minutes, deliberately mixed across the sides they argued. It buys two things a plenary cannot: every student speaks, and they say things they will not say with the whole room watching. Its cost is that you cannot hear it all, so it needs a reporting structure or it evaporates.

It is also the middle step of the sequence that works. Write first, so everyone has something to say. Small groups next, so they can say it before the room is watching. Then the plenary, where the quiet students are no longer starting cold.

Running order

0-1	Form groups of four. Say out loud that they must not be with people who were on their side. Enforce it; students will drift toward their own delegation.
1-6	Each student reads one written answer aloud, uninterrupted, before anyone discusses anything. This is the whole trick.
6-18	Discussion. The group picks the one explanation it thinks is most right and the one it most disagrees about.
18-20	Nominate a reporter. Someone other than the student with the most senior role in the simulation.

Script

“Get into groups of four, and make sure you are with people who were **not** on your side. Twenty minutes.

Each of you reads your answer to question two out loud, the reason it happened, before anyone discusses anything. Then pick the one explanation your group thinks is most right and the one you most disagree about. You will report both.”

Then, in plenary: “Groups, report out. The explanation you agreed on, then the one you fought about. I am writing the disagreements on the board, because those are what we spend the rest of the period on.” [Take all reports before responding to any of them.]

Taking every report before responding to any of them is not politeness. It stops the first group from setting the frame and the rest from trimming their answers to fit it.

Three tasks worth assigning to a small group

- **The losing side explains what would have had to be different.** Not why it was unfair. What they would have had to trade, to whom, and when. This is where students learn that a priority they would not trade early is a priority they lose late.
- **Reconstruct the other side's constraints.** Each group states the opposing position in terms its holders would recognize as fair. It is the straightest small-group route to understanding an opposing viewpoint.
- **Focus on one thing, chosen by the group.** The Diamond framework narrows the analysis to a single skill selected by the learners, to avoid overload, and invites people who were **not** central to the action to speak first. Both moves are worth stealing.

What to watch for

- Groups of five become groups of three plus two. Four is the number.
- Without the read-aloud step, the most confident student in each group frames the discussion and the exercise reproduces the plenary problem at a smaller scale.
- If you circulate, listen rather than join. A group that is being watched by the instructor reverts to answering the instructor.