

10 Strategies for Forming Groups

Small-group work is an important part of active training. It is important to form groups quickly and efficiently and, at the same time, to vary the composition and sometimes the size of the groups throughout the session. The following options are interesting alternatives to letting participants choose their own groups or counting off up to a designated number.

1. Grouping Cards

Determine how many participants will be attending the session and how many different groupings you want throughout the session. For example, in a class of twenty, one activity may call for four groups of five; another, five groups of four; still another, six groups of three with two observers.

Code these groups using a colored dot (red, blue, green, and yellow for four groups), decorative stickers (different stickers in a common theme for five groups, such as lions, monkeys, tigers, giraffes, and elephants), and a number (1 through 6 for six groups). Randomly place a number, a colored dot, and a sticker on a card for each participant and include the card in the participant's materials. When you are ready to form your groups, identify which code you are using and direct the participants to join their groups in a designated place. Participants will be able to move quickly to their groups, saving time and eliminating confusion. You may want to post signs indicating group meeting areas to make the process even more efficient.



2. Puzzles

Purchase six-piece children's jigsaw puzzles or create your own by cutting out pictures from magazines, pasting them on cardboard, and cutting them into your desired shape, size, and number of pieces. Select the number of puzzles according to the number of groups you want to create. Separate the puzzles, mix up the pieces, and give each participant a puzzle piece. When you are ready to form the participants into groups, instruct the participants to locate others with the pieces to complete a puzzle.

3. Finding Famous Fictional Friends and Families

Create a list of famous fictional family members or friends in groups of three or four. (Examples are Peter Pan, Tinkerbell, Captain Hook, Wendy; Alice, Cheshire Cat, Queen of Hearts, Mad Hatter; Superman, Lois Lane, Jimmy Olsen, Clark Kent.) Choose the same number of fictional characters as there are participants. Write one fictional name on each index card. When you are ready to form groups, ask the participants to find the other members of their "family." Once the famous group is complete, they are to find a spot to congregate.

4. Name Tags

Use name tags of different shapes and/or colors to designate different groupings.

5. Birthdays

Ask participants to line up by birthdays and then break into the number of subgroups needed for a particular activity. In large groups, form subgroups by birth months. For example, 150 participants can be divided into three roughly equal-size groups by composing groups of those born in January, February, March, and April; May, June, July, and August; and September, October, November, and December.



6. Playing Cards

Use a deck of playing cards to designate groups. For example, use jacks, queens, kings, and aces to create four groups of four. Use additional number cards, if necessary, to accommodate a larger group. Shuffle the cards and deal one to each participant, then direct the participants to locate others with similar cards and to form a group.

7. Draw Numbers

Determine the number and size of the groups you want to create, put numbers on individual slips of paper, and place them in a box. Participants then draw a number from the box indicating which group number they belong to. For example, if you want four groups of four, you would have sixteen slips of paper with four each of the numbers 1 through 4.



8. Candy Favors

Give each participant a wrapped sugarless candy of a different flavor to indicate groups. For example, your groups may be categorized as lemon, butterscotch, cherry, and mint.

9. Choose Like Items

Select toys of a common theme to indicate groups. For example, you might choose transportation and use cars, airplanes, boats, and trains. Each participant would draw a toy from a box and locate others with the same toy to form a group.

10. Participant Material

You can code participant materials using colored paper clips, colored handouts, or stickers on folders or tent cards to predetermine groupings.

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