The Ultimate List of Icebreakers for College Courses

50 icebreakers perfect for any classroom

Icebreakers are designed to help students get to know one another, so that they can let down their guard and feel comfortable becoming active members of your course. These activities gauge prior academic and non-academic experiences, preferences and tastes.

Icebreakers can be used at the start of your course or before any group assignment to loosen students up. By offering a sense of belonging early on, your students may be more likely to participate and engage with their peers.

The following icebreakers can be used in online, blended or in-person courses.

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ICEBREAKERS TO BUILD CONNECTIONS DURING THE FIRST WEEK OF CLASS

Use these icebreakers on the first day—or week—of class to understand what students are hoping to get out of your course. These activities can also serve as excellent team-building exercises and can help students realize what they have in common with their peers.

1. COLLABORATIVE RESUME

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 4–6 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), blended, in-person

This icebreaker activity provides a snapshot of students' past education and employment experiences. Learners create a group resume that captures what they hope to get out of your course, their current knowledge of your subject, and any related work experiences that they wish to highlight. If you're running this activity synchronously online, consider using breakout rooms to encourage widespread participation. In an asynchronous class, give students a time limit and have one student submit the assignment via your LMS or Top Hat.

2. SHRED YOUR WOES

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), blended, in-person

Ask students to get a piece of paper or online notepad (for virtual usage) and check-in with each other on their mental and physical health and academic journey thus far. You may provide prompts such as "how do you feel about this course?" or "what is on your mind unrelated to this class meeting?" Ask students to write responses down on their paper and reassure students that they don't have to share their answers if they don't want to. After five minutes, ask students to rip up their pieces of paper and discard their responses. This exercise helps students identify their state of mind and let go of any concerns they may have.

3. SWEET STORIES

GROUP SIZE: 15–20 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

Ask students to take one piece of candy out of individually packaged bags such as M&Ms or Skittles. Have students respond to a question depending on the color of the candy they select. For example, students might share an exciting travel story if they pull a yellow piece of candy out of their packet. Ensure you create different questions corresponding to each color ahead of time.

4. EIGHT NOUNS

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), blended, in-person

Using a live chat or discussion board, ask students to post eight nouns that best describe themselves. Give them a few examples to get started. After five minutes, encourage students to share why their set of nouns are representative of their personalities and backgrounds. This icebreaker helps students get to know one another.

5. PERSONALIZED ACRONYMS

GROUP SIZE: 15–20 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), blended, in-person

Ask students to use the letters of their name to make an acronym that represents them in some way. Give students three-to-five minutes to prepare a response, then encourage everyone to share their acronym starting with their first letter (in an asynchronous environment, students can do this at their own pace). For instance, someone whose name starts with 'A' might say, "Hi, I'm Andrew. A is for Austria, a country I've always wanted to visit." Repeat this process until the student has shared all letters of their name with the group.

6. SPONTANEOUS SHOW AND TELL

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous)

In small groups, have students share a household object, souvenir or memento with their peers. Students can take turns describing their object and explain the relevance and meaning behind it. This activity works well in breakout rooms in synchronous classes.

7. BEACH BALL

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

Ahead of class, write different get-to-know you questions on each segment of a beach ball. The questions could be "what was one of your highlights from the summer?" or "who is your celebrity idol and why?" Arrange students in a circle and toss the ball. The student who catches it answers the question closest to their left thumb, then tosses the ball to another student.

8. WHAT'S IN FRONT OF YOU?

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous)

This icebreaker helps to humanize the reality of online learning. If students are comfortable doing so, encourage them to share a photo of what's in front of their workspace at home. In a synchronous class, have students upload their photos in your live chat or display the object directly on screen. They can also add a brief description for context. In an asynchronous environment, split learners into discussion groups and have students upload their photos in their respective groups.

9. STORY OF YOUR NAME

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), blended, in-person

This activity allows students to better understand their peers' unique backgrounds and family histories. Go around the room (or use a discussion board if you're teaching synchronously or asynchronously online) and have students share their name and its relevance or meaning. This activity allows students with similar backgrounds or cultures to identify with one another.

10. DON'T JUDGE ME

GROUP SIZE: 15–20 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), in-person

Ask students to share one thing that they feel guilty about this week—whether it's personal or professional. Give students five minutes to individually reflect and then ask for volunteers to share. Those who aren't presenting can share words of encouragement should they wish to do so. This exercise allows students to practice vulnerability while building trust amongst one another.

11. AROUND THE WORLD

GROUP SIZE: 100 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous)

With online learning, students may be spread across the globe. This activity aims to humanize the learning experience by revealing which students are in close proximity to each other. If you're teaching synchronously in Top Hat, create a click-on-target question and upload an image of a map. Have students click on the country they are currently in. If you're teaching asynchronously, consider using a discussion board where students can post their location and a fun fact about the country they're in.

12. PERSONAL BRAND

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

Tape a piece of paper to the wall. Once students enter your classroom, have them write two-to-three hashtags that describe themselves. After everyone has written their hashtags, have students explain what they wrote down to the rest of the group, helping everyone get to know one another.

13. THREE PS

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Divide students into small groups and ask them to share three pieces of information with one another: something personal (as personal as they're comfortable with), something professional and something peculiar. In a synchronous online class, consider using breakout rooms for this activity.

14. THEN VERSUS NOW

GROUP SIZE: 50 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), blended, in-person

This activity lets students share what they envisioned themselves being when they grew up—and whether that answer holds true in college and how students feel about it either way. In an in-person class, students might raise their hands and share with the group verbally. In a synchronous online class, you may want to pose a question like "what did you want to be when you grew up?" on a platform like Top Hat. As responses roll in, you can show students' responses in a word cloud, where the most popular answers will be enlarged. In an asynchronous online environment, consider posting this question in your discussion board.

15. FIND SOMEONE WHO...

GROUP SIZE: 30 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

Students are given a customized Bingo card and are encouraged to mingle with their peers—asking questions until they find someone who meets the criteria inside each square. Statements could be, "travelled to another continent" or "has a younger sibling." Students are given a set time frame to find classmates who fit the description. Whoever gets a 'Bingo' first wins (consider offering a bonus point or two on an upcoming assignment)

16. SEQUENTIAL ANSWERS

GROUP SIZE: 40 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), blended, in-person

Pose a general question such as "what was your favorite memory from summer?" and have students respond either in small groups or in your class as a whole. Assign one student to start and have them name who's up based on whose tile is next to them in your virtual class. In an in-person setting, pose the same question and have students respond one row at a time in your lecture hall or classroom.

17. GET THAT COIN

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), blended, in-person

Ask students to make sure they have some loose change on them when attending class. Have students introduce themselves, select a coin and share one interesting fact or event that occurred in their lives the year the coin was minted. If the coin was minted in a year before they were born, ask students to share a notable global event and explain the significance behind it.

18. SIT DOWN IF…

GROUP SIZE: 100 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

In small classes, ask students to stand in a circle. Alternatively, in large classes, consider having students stand in front of their seat in the lecture hall. Next, begin by saying, "sit down if…" and then list a trait, characteristic or statement. These could range from "you travelled outside of America this past year" to "you have an older sibling." Students who identify with your statement are asked to take a seat. This activity helps students realize who else is similar to them and can help form alliances and friendships early on.

19. STRING A STORY

GROUP SIZE: 15–20 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

Come to class with a big roll of yarn or string and cut various pieces ranging from five to 20 inches in length. Bunch the pieces of string together and place them to the side. Have each student draw a piece of string from the pile and slowly wind it around their index finger. As they are winding the string around their finger, students must introduce and talk about themselves—in whatever capacity they wish—until the string is completely wound up.

COURSE OR ASSIGNMENT–SPECIFIC ICEBREAKERS

Use these icebreakers to get students prepared to participate before you run in-class exercises.

20. ALPHABET BRAINSTORMING

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5 or 6 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), blended, in-person

This icebreaker activity works well as a diagnostic exercise. Split students into groups and assign each cluster three or four random letters of the alphabet. If teaching remotely, use breakout rooms to divide students into teams and send their group a message in Zoom with what portion of the alphabet they should cover. Students are expected to generate as many topics related to your subject starting with that letter as possible within ten minutes. This exercise indicates what students already know about your subject and gives you a chance to share what topics you'll be covering this semester and how those relate to what students suggested.

21. WHO SAID THAT?

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5 or 6 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), blended, in-person

Use this activity to prime students' curiosity before running a group case study. Divide your class into groups of five or six students. Share a list of scholars with each group in advance. Read aloud a famous quote and have students guess who might have said that quote based on the list you shared with them. This allows students to reflect on their previous knowledge of your course material while also forming new associations. Consider giving the team who gets the most correct answers some bonus points on the subsequent case study assignment.

22. CLASS IN ONE WORD

GROUP SIZE: 15–20 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), blended, in-person

Have students share their perceptions of your discipline in one word—such as 'complicated,' 'analytical,' or 'enjoyable.' Students can go around in a circle—or the order they appear in your Zoom tile view—and describe their past experiences in your field using a single word. In an asynchronous course, set up an anonymous discussion question in Top Hat and have students respond on their own time. This activity offers a humanizing view of who else is in the same boat.

23. IDEA BUILDING BLOCKS

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students
COURSE TYPE: In-person

Divide the class into teams and present them with a problem related to your course material. One team member writes down a solution and passes the piece of paper along to the next team member, who builds upon that idea. The paper is passed around until each team member has added onto the original solution. When their time is up, a spokesperson can present their ultimate solution to the rest of the group or to the class. This activity helps develop students' problem-solving and collaboration skills, with learners working towards a common goal.

24. SYLLABUS QUESTIONNAIRE

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Before sharing your syllabus with students, place them into groups and have them generate a list of questions they have about the course. After each group has their list prepared, distribute the syllabus and have students find answers to their questions using this document. Re-convene as a group and give students an opportunity to ask any further questions that couldn't be answered from the syllabus.

25. NAME GAME
GROUP SIZE: 20 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

Distribute a sticky note to every student and have them write down the name of a famous scholar in your discipline on the note. Students can then place the note on their forehead and interact with their classmates, asking questions to understand which person they are embodying. This exercise helps students loosen up and informally interact with their classmates. It also helps them learn about a historical figure previously unknown to them.

26. THE LIVING LIKERT SCALE
GROUP SIZE: 20 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

Before class, write numbers '1' through '7' on pieces of paper and place them across the room. The sheet with '1' on it could refer to 'strongly disagree' while '7' might refer to 'strongly agree.' Pose a series of statements related to your discipline—such as "I think television can make children act aggressive" in a social psychology class—and have students move to the side of the wall according to their stance. Students who are comfortable sharing their opinions pertaining to the topic may do so.

27. ABSURD QUESTIONS
GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), blended, in-person

Pose a fantastical, outrageous or fictitious statement to each group. Statements can be tailored to your discipline such as "what if everyone lived to 150" for a developmental class or "what if there was no such thing as evolution" for a biology class. Students are asked to develop as many answers to the question as they can by considering all political, social, economical and psychological angles. They can then share the answers out loud or, if you're teaching remotely, on a discussion board.

28. CRAZY QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

In this activity, give every student two index cards and ask them to write a course-specific question on one card and the answer on the other card. Have students form a circle and put the question cards in one pile in the circle, while placing the answer cards in a second pile. Have one student read a question card aloud. The next student reads aloud an answer card, which of course, doesn't match the question—only creating humor. This activity can lighten the mood and help prime students' curiosity around certain topics in advance of an assignment.

29. BLIND CONTOUR

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

This exercise is designed for visual arts students. Split students into groups of five and have each student choose an object to sketch—without looking at their paper. Give students five minutes to complete their sketch, then have them share it with their group members and ask the remaining students to guess what they drew. Repeat the process with another item or object, until time runs out. This game helps hone students' observational skills, while making sure students are mentally present.

30. HOPES AND FEARS

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 2 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), blended, in-person

Have students partner up and, if teaching online in real time, place them into a breakout room. Alternatively, encourage students to use a Google Doc to capture their thoughts if facilitating an asynchronous class. Ask students to write down their biggest hopes and fears for your course in five minutes. After time's up, consider reading some of the answers anonymously to help students realize who else feels the same as they do.

31. WHY AM I HERE?

GROUP SIZE: 15–20 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Have students draw a picture that represents why they enrolled in your course. Encourage them to think beyond the fact that they may need your course credit to graduate. They could think about wanting to learn more about your field or simply that their friends were enrolled in your class, too. After five minutes, have students share their picture with the larger group if they're comfortable—helping students feel like part of one interconnected community.

32. IT WAS THE BEST OF CLASSES, IT WAS THE WORST OF CLASSES

GROUP SIZE: 15–20 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

Divide your whiteboard into two sections. On one side, write "the best class I ever had" and on the other side, write "the worst class I ever had." Without referring to specific professors or courses, ask students to share what they liked and disliked about their previous courses. Make a list of these items to potentially implement—or avoid—in your own course this semester.

33. PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS

GROUP SIZE: 20–25 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

A statement that has two possible responses—agree or disagree—is read out loud. Depending on whether they agree or disagree with this statement, students move to one side of the room or the other. After everyone has chosen a side, ask one or two students on each side to take turns defending their positions. This allows students to visualize where their peers' opinions come from, relative to their own.

ICEBREAKERS TO ENCOURAGE TEAM BUILDING

A sense of community is essential in higher ed courses. That especially holds true with online learning. Use these activities to help students get to know one another's interests and preferences.

34. SCAVENGER HUNT

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students
COURSE TYPE: In-person

Scavenger hunts aren't just for kids. While this icebreaker game requires some preparation, it encourages students to work together: planning a strategy, dividing up tasks and communicating progress. Split your students into teams and give them a time limit to find as many items as possible on a list you've provided. You can make this more challenging by offering clues or riddles rather than the names of items.

35. CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

GROUP SIZE: 20 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

Students form two circles: an inner circle and an outer circle. Each student on the inside is paired with a student on the outside; they face each other. Pose a question to the whole group and have pairs discuss their responses with each other. After three-to-five minutes, have students on the outside circle move one space to the right so they are standing in front of a new person. Pose a new question, and the process is repeated, exposing students to the different perspectives of their peers.

36. POKER HAND

GROUP SIZE: 50 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

Shuffle a deck of cards and distribute a card to each student. Set a time limit and ask students to find four classmates and form a poker hand. It can be helpful to have the basics of the game displayed in a visible place—such as the whiteboard—for students to refer to. This activity helps students improve their ability to read their classmates and may even develop their analytical skills.

37. TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 10 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), blended, in-person

Ask students to share three statements about themselves: two statements that are true and one lie. In groups of ten, one student shares their statements with the others. The remaining students will guess which statement is the lie. Breakout rooms can be an effective way to facilitate this session synchronously while discussion boards can be used to run this asynchronously. If you're using the latter, have all students weigh in under the originator's thread before they reveal the answer.

38. MOVIE PITCH

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Put students into groups of five and ask them to come up with an idea (and pitch) for a new movie they would like to hypothetically produce. After ten minutes of preparation, ask one or two students per group to share their pitch with the rest of the class. Once all groups have presented their pitches, the remaining classmates will vote on which idea they think deserves funding. Award the winners a small reward of your choice, such as a bonus point on an upcoming assignment or a gift card.

39. STORY TIME IN THREE WORDS

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), in-person

In this activity, one student picks a topic or theme and begins telling a story. After sharing three words, another student continues and shares another three words. The goal is for students to move as quickly as possible from person to person, without knowing what the student before them will contribute. In person, group students according to certain criteria, such as alphabetically, to determine order. In a Zoom class, consider taking a screenshot of your Zoom tile view and share the image with students to help them understand the order.

40. LONGEST LINE

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

In this activity, students form a line based on criteria of your choosing. It could be alphabetically by first name or by birthday month. The goal is for students to create their line as fast as possible—a result of clear and open communication in medium-sized groups. Consider setting a time limit of three-to-five minutes to help students work efficiently with their peers.

41. ACT AND REACT

GROUP SIZE: 15–20 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

Ask students to write down an event or scenario on a piece of paper. These may range from "I just got fired from my job" to "I just got stung by a bee." Fold the pieces of paper up and put them in a bag or hat. Have students randomly draw a slip of paper and react to the experience using their facial features, gestures or words. The remaining students can guess what just happened. This activity will help lighten the mood in your class and allows for student-student interaction.

42. I WON THE LOTTERY

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Tell your students that they have just won the lottery. Explain to them that they must list all the things they would do with their money—ranging from material objects, to travel and luxury, to charitable work. Give students ten minutes to list their items in groups—using breakout rooms if necessary—then reconvene as a class to have an open discussion about what common items made their list.

43. A SUDDEN STORY

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

Start this activity by telling any story—academic or otherwise. It could be, "Yesterday, I logged onto Facebook and started to scroll when suddenly…" Then, have students add onto your story by asking them to contribute a line and finish with 'suddenly' before passing it onto the next person. Students aren't expected to repeat what was contributed before them, they just need to add a line. If you're running this activity online, consider sharing a screenshot of your Zoom view so students know who's next in line. This exercise lightens the mood in your class and allows students to interact with one another in an informal way.

44. SNOWBALL FIGHT

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 10 students
COURSE TYPE: In-person

Have students write at least two interesting facts about themselves on a small piece of paper. Have students stand in a circle and ask them to crumple up their paper and throw it in a pile. Then, ask students to pick up a random piece of paper and read aloud the traits listed. The person who recognizes their own traits can then elaborate on what they wrote, allowing them to open up and help their classmates find similarities in personal backgrounds.

45. WE'RE GOING ON A PICNIC

GROUP SIZE: 25 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

In this icebreaker, students take turns alphabetically listing items to bring with them on a hypothetical picnic, while repeating what was shared thus far. The first student will say, "I'm going on a picnic and I'm bringing (something that starts with 'A')." The next student will repeat the item that was just shared while adding an item that starts with 'B.' In a synchronous online class, consider taking a screenshot of your Zoom tile view and sharing it with your class to help students know what order to proceed in. This game is easy to facilitate and helps strengthen students' active listening skills.

46. THREE OF A KIND

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

In this icebreaker, students are asked to find three of their peers that they share something in common with—such as their hair color, a professor they had in another course, or a sport they play. Students walk around the room, asking probing questions to understand their peers' backgrounds. This activity helps students realize commonalities between them and their peers, which may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

47. FIND YOUR PAIR

GROUP SIZE: 25–30 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: In-person

In advance of class, prepare word pairs—such as salt and pepper, or ketchup and mustard—on separate pieces of paper. Have students select a piece of paper from the pile, ensuring they don't share their word with anyone else. Students then walk around the room and ask yes or no questions to their peers to try and figure out what word they have (and helping them get to know more people in your class). Once students have figured out what word they have, they then must find their pair (if they haven't already) by continuing to ask questions.

48. THIS OR THAT

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 5–10 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), in-person

This activity allows students to see where their peers stand on a variety of different topics and issues. Instructors should distribute a list of provocative statements before class, allowing students to read ahead. Then, they can ask students to indicate whether they agree, disagree or are neutral on the topic in advance, using an online discussion thread or Google Doc. In class, use another discussion thread or live chat to have students of differing opinions share their views. After a few minutes, encourage one or two members in each group to defend their position amongst a new group of students. Ask students to repeat this process for several rounds to help familiarize themselves with a variety of standpoints.

49. RATHER THAN

GROUP SIZE: 15–20 students (maximum)
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous), in-person

This icebreaker allows students to learn about their peers' preferences and personalities, all while testing their memory. Have one student share something they'd like to do, such as skydive. The next student restates what was shared plus adds something that they would rather do (i.e., "skydive, go snorkelling.") The activity continues until every student has had a chance to contribute. In a synchronous online class, consider taking a screenshot of your Zoom tile view and sharing it with the class so students know what order to proceed in. This activity helps students practice their active listening skills in medium-sized groups.

50. DESERTED ISLAND

GROUP SIZE: Groups of 3–5 students
COURSE TYPE: Online (synchronous or asynchronous), in-person

In this icebreaker, small groups of students imagine they're stranded on a deserted island. After dividing students into teams, provide them with a list of items for survival. Students must prioritize and rank those items—first on their own, and then as a group. Not only does this test their problem-solving skills, it helps them differentiate between the needs of the individual and the needs of the collective.

EVERYETHING YOU NEED TO TEACH YOUR COURSE

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