California State University Northridge

# New Student Icebreaker: Instructions and More

## Instructions for faculty:

1. Develop two or three course-related questions that students can answer anonymously on the first day of the course (that is, without knowing things you haven’t yet taught them). ALTERNATIVE: invite them to write down a question about the course.
2. Distribute a blank sheet of (white) paper to each student.
3. Read your first question and ask them to write a brief answer without signing their name.
4. When they finish (don’t wait too long), instruct them to crumple their paper and toss it across the room so each student ends up with a crumpled “snowball.”
5. Read your second question and ask the students to write a brief answer, again anonymously.
6. Repeat step 4: When they finish (don’t wait too long), instruct them to crumple their paper and toss it across the room so each student ends up with a crumpled “snowball.”
7. Ask students to write a response to one of the previously written answers on their snowball.
8. You’ve achieved “Think and Ink” so now if you like you can ask them to “Pair” and then “Share” (speak to one other person about their snowball before you get the whole class to debrief).
9. Debrief the class as a whole, in any case.

## How one faculty member extends the icebreaker beyond the first day of class:

“On the first day of class I facilitate the Snowball Exercise icebreaker which asks students to write down responses to questions and then toss their paper snowball to others around the room. This exercise promotes discussion about the course, creates a comfortable and more open atmosphere, and allows me to form groups that can be used throughout the course. I use colored paper for the Snowball Exercise and then I group students together according to the colors. The first day’s assignment requires that the members of each Snowball Group contact each other and talk about some topic. During the first 4-5 weeks of the term, students will then become members of two other types of groups, for a total of 3 types of working groups in the class. This allows students to have multiple opportunities to find peers to build academic relationships. On any given day, for any topic, I might call for students to get into their Snowball group. Students often laugh just thinking about how the group was formed and quickly settle into the group’s discussion topic for the day.”

--Nyla Jolly Dalferes, Assistant Director for First and Second Year Career Programs and User Services; U100 faculty member

## Two further suggestions:

1. Avoid referring to the activity as an "icebreaker." Too many students have negative thoughts attached to the concept ("It's cheesy.").
2. During or after the icebreaker, find a way to tie the activity to the course. Providing a course-related message or tie-in can make the experience more powerful and memorable for everyone and prevent students from feeling they're participating in an activity that has no point.

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