

CLASSROOM COMMUNITY  
BUILDERS

Activities for the  
First Day & Beyond

WALTON BURNS



*Classroom Community Builders*  
*Activities for the First Day and Beyond*  
by Walton Burns

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## Book Scan

This activity introduces students to the course and the textbook by taking a quick trip through the textbook. It works best early in the class, preferably on the first or whenever they first get their textbooks.

TIME	<i>25 minutes</i>
MATERIALS	<i>The class textbook</i>
LANGUAGE	<i>Expressing preferences, “I like...”, “I don’t like...”, “I need help in...” Expressing expectations and wishes, “I hope that...”, “I would like to...”, Expressing interest, “I’m interested in...”</i>

### Procedure

1. Put students in pairs or small groups. Ask them to get out their textbooks.
2. Give them 5-10 minutes to look over the Table of Contents (or Scope and Sequence, if it’s a language coursebook) and find one topic or unit that they both think is particularly interesting.

For academic subjects, ask students to discuss what they know about the topic and what kinds of debates or controversial issues are related to this topic. They can then talk about what more they want to know or hope to learn about it.

For language courses, have students to look over the topic or theme of the unit, and the language features to be taught. Ask them to discuss how well they think the topic and the language are matched in each particular unit. There are a few ways they can do this:

- Have them list some ways related to the theme they might use the grammar or vocabulary. Do they think it’s a good match?
- Have them think of other situations in which they might find

those grammar or vocabulary features useful. Could the author have chosen better language points for that theme?

3. Once they've discussed their impressions for 10-15 minutes in pairs, ask each pair to report back to the class one interesting statement or question they've come up with.

## Difficult Situation

One source of discussion that generates a lot of student opinion is an advice letter. As students discuss the situation and debate their opinion of what to do, they gain appreciation for different points of view.

TIME	<i>10-20 minutes</i>
MATERIALS	<i>A description of a difficult situation</i>
LANGUAGE	<i>Modal verbs to give advice and make suggestions; Expressing your opinion</i>

### Procedure

*Before class:* prepare a description of a dilemma that students can discuss and give advice about. A “Dear Abby” letter is a great way to do that. Make sure the situation is one students can understand and are likely to have differing opinions about.

1. In class, put students in groups. Hand out the letter. Have students read it, and find the most important facts. In the sample difficult situation handout, the key facts are: Steve is stealing food from the restaurant where he works; Steve is having a hard time because he is helping his father; Steve and Adam are friends and Adam doesn’t want to hurt Steve; Stealing is very serious and Steve could get in a lot of trouble.
2. Give students 10 minutes to discuss the situation in their groups and try to agree on what advice to give Adam.
3. To wrap up, have each group tell the class what their advice is and why.

## A Difficult Situation Letter

*Read the letter below describing a problem. Then work with your group to first find all the facts of the problem. Finally, discuss what you think the writer should do.*

Dear Problem-Solver

I have a problem. I work as a manager at a very nice restaurant. The other manager, Steve, is a really nice guy. We joke around at work a lot. And we even hang out a lot outside work. I also know that he's having a hard time right now. His dad got sick last year. So now, Steve has to take care of him. Steve spends all his money on doctors' bills and medicine for his dad. On top of that Steve has two kids to take care of. His wife has an ok job, but it's still not enough.

The thing is, I think Steve has been stealing from the restaurant. I always see him going home with boxes of food. Look, we all take some leftovers home from time to time. And the chef sometimes makes us food to take home, like on the holidays or if he's making something really special. But Steve goes home every day with something in his bag. I asked him about and he acted really weird.

And it's not just meals. I saw him in the pantry the other day, pulling out bags of flour and sugar and putting them in a cardboard box. After work, I saw him putting that cardboard box in his car. So now he's stealing food supplies too. I don't want to lose him as a friend. And I know that he isn't stealing because he's greedy. He really needs the help to feed his family. But stealing is wrong. And he's stealing food now, but what if he starts stealing money? And he could get into a lot of trouble if he gets caught.

What should I do?

Befuddled in Food Service

## Judgment

This is another activity to generate discussion and diverse opinions. Students have to judge what the punishment should be for people who have committed various social faux-pas, or other annoying behavior.

TIME	<i>10-20 minutes</i>
MATERIALS	<i>A list of annoying behaviors</i>
LANGUAGE	<i>Modal verbs to make suggestions; expressing an opinion and giving reasons for it</i>

### Procedure

1. Write a list of annoying behavior on the board. It often makes sense to start with less serious behavior and move to more serious problems. Some examples that work well include:

staring	throwing litter on the street
singing in public	using bad words
talking to yourself	pushing people in a crowd
spitting on the street	cutting in line
	answering a cellphone at the movies

2. Put students in small groups to discuss what the punishment for these different behaviors should be. Emphasize that you are not looking for the actual legal consequences of these acts. Encourage students to be creative in thinking of how people should be punished (or why they don't deserve to be punished).
3. To wrap up, have each group share some of their best ideas with the class.

## **Collaborative Stories**

Having students write a story together is a lot of fun. It demystifies the creative writing process. And it gets students talking about language together. The key is to make sure both students are equally involved in the process. Here are some ways to do it.

### **Pictures**

1. Put students in groups and give them a series of pictures. You will need to choose if you want the pictures to be random or relate to each other.
2. Each student has to pick one or two pictures that they like.
3. The group then writes a story that makes a whole story using all the pictures that the students chose.

### **Vocabulary Words**

1. Put students in pairs or groups and give them 3-5 vocabulary words. These should be words they know.
2. Give them a situation and have them write a story using both the situation and the words. For advanced students, make the situation completely unrelated to the vocabulary.

### **Storyboarding**

1. Put students in pairs and give each student half of a storyboard, a set of pictures that describe a story.
2. Each student describes what happens in their storyboard to tell each other the full story.

As a variation, take a story board and cut it into thirds.

Give one student in each pair the first-third and give the other student the last third.



As a pair, they must figure out what the middle could be, coming up with a plausible series of events between the first third and the final third.

In the end, you can show them the missing bit and let them compare, or not.

### **Twist Ending**

1. Have students write the beginning of a short story that ends in a twist or cliff-hanger. To help them with this, you can write some ideas for cliff-hangers on the board. Here are some easy to use ideas from *Plot & Structure* by James Scott Bell (<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/158297294X/>)

A sudden disaster: “At that moment, the car hit a tree.”

A sign or omen: “The dog dropped dead at that moment.”

A secret is revealed, “My mother said, “Actually I’m not your mother. In fact, I’m not even human!”

A major decision, “I told my boss, ‘I quit,’ and walked out of the office without another word.”

2. When the student gets to the cliff-hanger, they hand the paper to another student. Then each student reads the new story in front of them and continues it following the cliff-hanger.
3. In longer writing classes, you could continue this with a series of two or three cliff-hangers.

## Plane Crash Survival

This fun activity gets students thinking about how different objects can be used in the context of surviving in the wilderness. It also forces them to have to rely on each other's knowledge. This version of this activity is adapted from an exercise on Scouting Web (<http://www.scoutingweb.com>).

TIME	<i>20-45 minutes</i>
MATERIALS	<i>Plane Crash Survival Worksheet</i>
LANGUAGE	<i>Expressing opinions; hedging; agreeing and disagreeing.</i>

### Procedure

1. Put the students in small groups. If you happen to know that some of your students are experienced outdoorsmen, break them up so that they are not all in the same group.
2. Hand out the worksheet and go over the situation: They are the survivors of a plane crash. They have a very limited number of items which they must rank in order of usefulness.
3. Give students some time to understand the situation and ask questions. Make sure they understand all the vocabulary. Try to emphasize that they have nothing else with them. This part may require a bit of creative story-telling on your part to explain why they don't have a cellphone or keys or something. As needed, tell them that cellphones fell out of their pockets, their luggage got smashed, and so on.
4. Once students feel they grasp the task, give them 15 minutes to rank the items on the list.
5. Then bring the class back together and have them share the items they think are most important. You can do this by going through the list item by item and having students vote with a

show of hands, who thinks it's important. Call on a few students to discuss why each item is useful or not useful.

**Variation**

To make the activity go faster, you can have them choose the five most important items, or choose three items they don't want to keep.

## Plane Crash Survival Worksheet

You and your group were flying in a small airplane that crashed. None of you were hurt, but the pilot was killed. The airplane looks like it cannot be repaired. You are in the middle of the woods somewhere far from any towns or cities. You do not know exactly where you are. It is the middle of winter. It is very cold outside. There is snow on the ground and there is a running stream nearby.

You need to survive until the rescue team finds you.

You are wearing normal casual clothes for the winter, including winter coats. You go through the plane and find the items below. Everything else, including anything in your pockets, was destroyed or lost in the crash.

- \_\_\_\_\_ A small ax
- \_\_\_\_\_ A loaded gun
- \_\_\_\_\_ Newspapers (one per person)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Cigarette lighter (without fluid)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Extra shirt and pants for each survivor
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20 x 20 ft. piece of heavy-duty canvas
- \_\_\_\_\_ A sectional air map made of plastic
- \_\_\_\_\_ One quart of vodka
- \_\_\_\_\_ A compass
- \_\_\_\_\_ One big chocolate bar per person

*Your task as a group is rank the items in order of importance for your survival. As you do so, think of the uses for each. You must come to agreement as a group.*

## Identity Circles

A quick activity that demonstrates how we construct our identity and how we relate to different groups. Like the Same and Different, students are encouraged to find things they have in common as well as differences.

TIME	<i>10 minutes</i>
MATERIALS	<i>a pen and paper</i>
LANGUAGE	<i>Present Simple to talk about themselves, their jobs, and hobbies, such as “I am a...”, “I like to...”; names of groups; relationship words; Comparative structures such as, “We are both ...”</i>

### Procedure

1. Have students think for a few minutes about five labels that they think apply to them. You can make suggestions to help them such as father, mother, student, good friend, gardener, stamp collector, or intellectual. The goal is to have them come up with five ways they identify or think of themselves.
2. Ask them to write the most important label on a piece of paper and circle it.
3. Now have them write the second most important one on a piece of paper and make a larger circle around that word and the first circle, so they end up with two concentric circles.
4. Then ask them to write the third label and yet another concentric circle. Continue in this way until students have five concentric circles and five labels.
5. They can then share their papers with the whole class or in a small group. Encourage students to look for similarities and differences.

do this in class or assign it for homework. Depending on the class, you may want to teach letter format or even do a mini-lesson on register and tone for personal letters.

3. Collect the letters and read them. Use them to learn about your students, their interests, and their motivations for taking the class.
4. You can follow up by telling the class the most interesting thing you learned about each one of them or by writing them short notes of acknowledgment, such as, “Interesting that you want to be a doctor!”

### **Variations**

- If you have access to student addresses or emails before school begins, you can send them your letter before school and ask them to write back or bring their answer to class.
- You can also reimagine this lesson as an email or blog post. In fact, if you have a class blog or web page, you could write an actual post online and have them leave their answers in the comment section or as new blog posts.