

Pyramid or snowball

How?

Pyramids, also called snowballs, involve students working solo, then in pairs, then fours (or sixes), and finally as a whole group in a plenary.

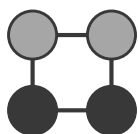
A key part of your task as the instructor is to create instructions for each stage and facilitating the plenary portion. You may want to make the questions you pose at each stage build on one another so that you move, for instance, from the concrete to the more abstract, from the simple to the more complex, from small-scale to large-scale, etc.



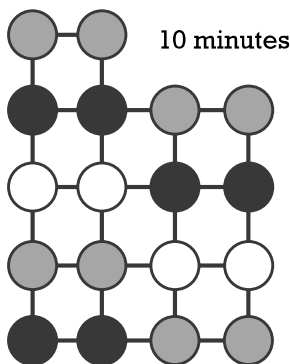
5 minutes Working **alone** might involve reading a case study or other text or starting to solve a problem. It lets students generate some ideas on their own and have material to discuss before pairing up.



15 minutes **Pairs** can risk being exploratory and tentative without being “exposed” to the whole group. The ideas from the solo portion start to grow.



30 minutes Most of the real work happens in the **fours** or sixes. These groups are a good size for involving everyone and developing a range of views. Students typically feel open to sharing their ideas because they have tested them already in their pairs.



10 minutes In the **plenary** portion, which involves all the groups, you can pool ideas from each of the groups in turn or can have an open discussion. This works in groups of up to about 24, though they might feel more mechanistic with larger groups.

Students want to know a little about what the other groups think, but not too much; and students who volunteer to speak might not say anything too illuminating. On the other hand, they do provide the instructor the opportunity to take the discussion to a higher level and to challenge the students’ ideas.

When?

- A pyramid could take a large chunk of your class time.
- Be careful not to overuse this method without varying it.

Why?

- Pyramids can be a successful way of leading into a larger group discussion.
- The initial stage can help more introverted students participate.
- Students do the vast majority of the intellectual work once you have devised the right set of questions to lead them. This can be satisfying to observe. At the same time, it may make you feel redundant; it’s worth reminding yourself that if they are engaging with the material, then they really are learning more.