

spirited dialogue the 'How To' guide

Is it possible to have a multi-partisan conversation about policy that's fun and engaging - without being wonky or contentious? We think so!

Spirited Dialogues are informal policy conversation that bring together folks of all political or a-political leanings to talk about issues that have an impact on our lives - in a friendly, informative and - you bet! - fun way.

Join a Spirited Dialogue in your hood - or start one on your own. This is a kit to get you started.

Intro

We started Spirited Dialogues in NYC with a few simple ideas: bring together folks with different viewpoints in a casual spot, toss out a topic, maybe prep guests with materials or a presenter, and open up the discussion using a couple of rules: "be nice" and "try not to talk more than a minute."

It worked like a charm.

Getting a Spirited Dialogue started in your hood won't take much—an interest in open dialogue is all that's needed.

This Spirited Dialogue "tool kit" shows you how easy it is. If you're already a natural organizer or host/hostess, we're probably not going to tell you anything new. If your inner organizer is just beginning to bust out, however, we have a tip or two to steer you in the right direction.

Step I—Get a Buddy, or Two

You can easily pull off a Spirited Dialogue on your own, but it's more fun with a buddy or buddies. Especially if you're planning on doing a series of dialogues, a small team will make it easier to keep up your steam.

Tip: what works best is teaming up with someone who has different views from you or maybe even belongs to a different party (gasp!).

Step II—Find a Venue

A friend's living room, a local coffee shop, café, bar, restaurant or lounge with a private room all work well. You know your friends best—think about where they'd be most at ease. Obviously, you'll want to square things with the proprietor in advance—many will be happy to give a room or (if it's a small café in the off hours) the entire venue for free, with the understanding that your guests will be eating and drinking.

Tip: we recommend using a setting where people usually go to relax and socialize—and avoiding settings that are often used for more formal events. That'll help immediately set the mood of "laid-back" and "fun."

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Step III—Choose a Topic

cJ will post recommended topics, readings and fact sheets. Feel free to steal ours or choose one that floats your friends' boats instead.

Tip: especially if it's your first dialogue, we recommend picking a topic that is interesting and relevant without being deeply divisive—you want to set the tone of a "friendly" dialogue which might be hard to do if you start off with a topic like, say, abortion. Some examples of juicy topics that usually bridge the partisan divide: school vouchers or regulating/banning cigarettes and smoking.

Step IV—Getting a presenter, or two?

You don't need an expert or other presenter to cook up an excellent Spirited Dialogue, but many of our guests dig having someone who really knows their stuff. When we do ask experts to come, we only ask them to present for 5–10 minutes—it's less daunting for them and gives your guests more time to ask them questions.

*Finding "experts:" Some of your best bets may be looking to your local **newspapers, colleges, universities** or even **high schools**, but also nose around the internet to see if there are any **think tanks** or **activist organizations** in your area. Don't be shy; you'll be surprised how happy a professor or think tank fellow will be to come out and share their ideas with your group. Another place to look: your friends or Spirited Dialogue participants—while they may not be "experts," many may be psyched to bone up on an issue to make a brief presentation.*

Step V—Inviting the World—or just your circle of friends

After you've done a couple of Spirited Dialogues, it won't take much to get a good group together with just one or two emails (we have a sample at the back), but for the first go around, you may want to start talking up the idea a few weeks before hand.

In general: shoot an email invite out 2–3 weeks in advance, with a follow up reminder email 2–3 days before hand (attaching suggested readings if there are any).

For your first meet: start talking up the idea 4–6 weeks in advance, asking people if they'd like to be on the invitation list.

Tip: Since an invitation to a "policy discussion" may turn off about 95% of your friends (they'll think "serious", "dry" or "tense"), telling them early on that you're putting together a different kind of event that's "friendly", "informal" and "fun" is more likely to draw a larger and friendlier crowd.

Getting the right number: we find the ideal group size is about 15–20 participants. The question is how many do you invite to get 15 guests? Each crowd is different—but you'll find that even with the most gung-ho list of people, at best only half you invitees will come. If your guests are only mildly interested and have busy lives, we recommend inviting at least five times as many people as you'd like to show.

Get personal: if you're an organizer of events, you already know that nothing beats a personal invite. If you want better turn out, follow up your group emails with a short personal "hey, I hope you're coming next Tuesday" email to individuals. Oh, and, really mean it.

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Step VI—reading materials

If you're using a cJ highlighted SD topic, feel free to steal our suggested reading list and fact back-grounder. If going with your own topic, we suggest sending your guests out three articles: one that lays the foundation of the debate and one arguing each side of the debate.

Where to find good readings: Of course you can start off looking to see if cJ has an issue brief or guide on the topic. If we don't, you may be surprised to find the GAO or CBO has a really good balanced piece on the topic; the big weeklies like Newsweek or Time often have articles that aim to be balanced. For opinion pieces, do a search on the dailies' op-ed pages.

Step VII—hosting the event!

So you've sent out the invites, got the venue, maybe some speakers, now it's showtime! If you haven't picked up on this already—this is an informal and relaxed event, so make sure you relax and enjoy yourself! Here's our recommended set up. Of course, tweak it for how it works for your peeps:

Stuff to bring:

Come empty handed or bring a sheet for folks to get on the email list, print-out of the reading materials and fact sheets.

Before the talk:

Invite guests an hour or 30 min before the discussion to join you for a drink, tea, dinner or whatever feels right.

The talk:

Setting the tone. After welcoming folks and thanking them for coming, (re)introduce the concept behind Spirited Dialogues: they're about people engaging in open discussion and sharing viewpoints on "hot" policy issues in a "cool and friendly" atmosphere. We like to say there are no winners—but that hopefully everyone will leave with a stronger grasp of the issue and possible greater appreciation of all sides.

Presentations. Since this is a "discussion," make sure it doesn't turn into a lecture by prepping your presenters that they'll *really* only be talking for five minutes. You'll also have told them about the mood of the event, so their presentation should be informative *and* friendly.

Discussion. This, of course, is the trickiest part. You want to keep the discussion moving, lively, but not too heated (as in guests seething, collars popping, etc.). Luckily, we find that introducing two simple rules usually does the trick: "be nice" and "try not to talk for more than a minute." You will have assigned a moderator whose main job is to make sure the conversation runs smoothly.

You'll want to set up a system for who talks. One simple way is to put your moderator in charge and let them call on whoever has their hand raised. What we find works best, though, is to let each person who talks call on the next speaker when they're done. We also recommend you use a prop that gets passed around to whoever is speaking—an excellent way to avoid runaway discussions or arguments. If you make the prop something silly and soft (like a stuffed animal), it'll also help to keep the mood light (it's hard to get too serious with a stuffed frog in your hand).

Once all the guidelines are out there, open up the discussion –and enjoy the ride!

Tips for the talk

Tips on choosing a moderator.

Since the moderator can make or break the discussion, choosing a good one is crucial. Mostly, you want someone very likeable, but who's not afraid of taking charge—that is, someone who can lead without ticking people off. They're out there, don't worry (it could be you!)

Tips on moderating.

Moderate, don't monopolize. Try not to talk too much, if at all.

Polite prodding. Don't be afraid to ask folks to wrap up their thoughts if they're dragging on. (It goes without saying—"be nice" about it.)

Reining in the talk. If the discussion is really going off topic (you started talking about anti-smoking laws and somehow the conversation has led to the war in Iraq), draw it back to the subject at hand (and suggest that Iraq be a future topic).

Calling on the quiet ones. Never force a guest to speak, but if one has been sitting back and just listening through the first half of the discussion, ask them if there's anything they'd like to add to the discussion. You'll be surprised: the quiet ones often have the best insights.

Keep to the timeline. We usually promise an hour discussion (with presentations included). Even if the discussion is really chugging after an hour, wrap it up—most of your guests will appreciate it. Those who want more discussion can always stick around to chat more.

Relax, smile, enjoy yourself!

Sample Email Invite

Hello Dialoguiques –

School's out, but at citizenJoe we've got testing scores and charter schools on our mind. We hope you will join us Wednesday, July 26, for an open-air, open-ended and lively discussion on education in the US.

Jason P. of School.com will join us to briefly talk about what he knows best. **Steve Z.** will host us in that unique-est of NYC architectural structures – the party moat.

Day: Wednesday, July 26

Time: 6:30pm drink and chill, 7pm – 8pm dialogue, 8pm drink and chill some more

Place: Steve Z.'s Party Moat, address

Topic: Education in the US. Whether you're worried about the US' waning competitive edge or persisting achievement gaps between rich and poor/minority and white, you might agree our schools are in need of a little remediation. We'll be throwing the net open wide on this one: how much are our schools really in trouble and how much will some of the current solutions – No Child Left Behind and school choice (charter schools, vouchers, etc.) – help us leap to (stay at?) the head of the class.

What: Wine and munchies, a lot of ice. Dialoguers who bring ice cold six packs and other libations will get a gold star or smiley face.

We hope to see you there. As always, bring along your thoughts, opinions and friends – and expect a reading sampler to arrive within the next two weeks.

Spirited Dialogue is an informal series of policy conversations that brings together folks of all political or a-political leanings to talk about issues that have an impact on our lives - in a friendly, informative and, we like to think, fun way.

Why Spirited Dialogue? One evening of Spirited Dialogue isn't going to bring DC to the feet of the people, but these conversations usually leave us feeling more connected to what's happening on Capitol Hill and more appreciative of what people with other perspectives have to say. And as more Spirited Dialogues start springing up around the country, we may just empower more Americans to take a stand on the choices our nation is making. That, and it's a good excuse to hang out with friends and have a drink.