

# Opening Ideas

## Facilitation tips, tools and techniques

Our job as adult educators is to involve small group participants in their own learning processes to maximize their potentials. Workshops and small groups that are most effective engage learners from the time they enter the door until they leave.

This information sheet focuses on the importance of openings and recognizes that much happens between the time the learner arrives and when the workshop or group actually begins.

### *What is an opening?*

An effective opening brings learners mentally into their workshop and connects them with each other and the coming content.

### *How much time should I devote to an effective opening?*

Spend roughly 10% of the total workshop time on your opening. Therefore, if the workshop is three hours long, then the opening would be 18 minutes long.

### *What happens if I cover different topics in the workshop?*

If you have two different components in a workshop, consider using two mini-openings, one for each piece of content. The same guiding principles apply to each mini-opening. Each mini-opening relates to the content for that section, and the opening's length of time is adjusted accordingly. For example, if you are presenting a four-hour workshop with two content areas, each taking roughly two hours, then you could have two 10–12-minute mini-openings. Often, we jump straight into new content without an effective transition from the previous content.

### *How do I involve all learners?*

For all openings, mini or regular, make sure that learners are actively involved and, when possible, that the opening connects learners to what they already know about the coming content. Effective openings are non-threatening, so everyone feels able to participate. Everyone gets to talk. Involving everyone generally increases the comfort level in the room. By actively involving learners you get their attention, curiosity and buy-in, making it easier for you to lead them through the content.

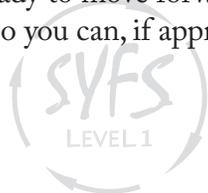
### *What do learners tend to remember?*

Research shows that learners best remember things that happen first (primacy), things that happen last (recency) and the unusual.

Effective openers may re-connect learners with their prior knowledge, introduce a few new facts and bring the whole group to roughly the same level, ready to move forward with the content. Openers also help you gauge the knowledge level within the group so you can, if appropriate, adjust the content accordingly.

*Handout: Opening Ideas*

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Consider trying one of these three opening ideas next time you lead a small group or workshop:

### OPENING 1: ONE FACT

1. Introduce the (new) content title.
2. Ask learners to stand as they are able and form pairs with someone not next to them (adds movement).
3. Ask learners to share one fact they already know about this topic. Allow two to three minutes for this discussion.
4. Ask that two pairs consolidate and share the facts they learned. Emphasize crisp reporting and allow a maximum of three minutes for total sharing.
5. As a whole group, ask each team of four to share one fact that they now know. Write the fact on a flip chart sheet. Work your way around to each team, asking for new facts not already listed. If time allows, go back to the first team and ask if there was another fact not already mentioned.

### OPENING 2: WE PREDICT

1. Introduce the title of the (next) content piece.
2. Ask participants to work in groups of three to five, preferably not with people they already know.
3. Ask each small group to predict what the content might include, where or when they might be able to use it or statistics the content might include.
4. Ask each small group to write down five to seven predictions. Allow eight to 10 minutes.
5. As a whole group, ask each team to share one prediction. Write the prediction on a flip chart sheet. Work your way around to each team, asking for new predictions not already listed. If time allows, go back to the first team and ask if there was another prediction not already mentioned. At the end of the workshop, you can ask learners how many predictions they got right and what they feel they are still missing.

### OPENING 3: ONE QUESTION

1. Introduce the topic title and a very brief outline.
2. Ask learners to spend two to three minutes on their own and write down one question they would like answered by the workshop.
3. Ask learners to form pairs or small teams and share their questions.
4. Ask learners to share a few of their questions with the whole group as you write these questions onto a flip chart.
5. As the workshop nears its end, you could ask teams to go back to their questions that were posed prior to the workshop to determine if they were all answered and what they feel they are still missing. By having teams refer back to their questions, it will help demonstrate learning.

Excerpted and adapted from David Gibson, Trainers Tip 70 – Mini Openings, *Tips for Trainers e-Book*, (London, England: Eureka-tp.com). Used with permission.

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## Guiding Principles

### *An effective opening:*

- brings learners mentally into their workshop,
- connects them with each other, and
- connects them with the coming content.

*Go back to the guiding principles when you plan your opening and ask yourself if it aligns with all three.*

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