



Get In-Formed: The Power of Forms to Get to Know Your Students

by [Brent Warner](#)

As we start to prepare for our new semesters, many of us have begun to reach into our toolbox of “Would you rather” questions, “Find someone who” bingo sheets, and “Two Truths and a Lie” type activities. All of these are great fun, and good ways to get your students comfortable with each other, but as teachers we often have a hard time hearing any more than a couple of responses at a time. Additionally, while encouraging students to speak up, circling the room, and doing our best to monitor for language issues, we’re lucky to remember one or two things about a handful of students by the end of the first hour.

I’d never advocate for leaving the icebreakers behind, but a number of teachers are recognizing the need to develop more personal one-to-one relationships with their students (see these articles at [Edutopia](#), [teachthought.com](#), and [The Education Trust](#)), and the often quick shift from icebreakers to classroom content may not leave much time for teachers to get the direct time with students they need to build the foundations of a trusting relationship. Luckily, there are lots of solutions to help us make deeper, more meaningful connections with our students, and today we’ll discuss some of the many ways you can use one simple tool to get you started building a stronger classroom environment.

Taking the Time

Before we get started, it’s worth reminding ourselves of the old truism, “Students don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” This maxim comes up in education circles all the time for good reason! But in the hustle and bustle of the first weeks of school, many of us sneak by with a smile and a few kind words, and then we often move along to our next responsibility. Make no mistake, though: Your students can tell the difference between a superficial greeting and taking the time to think about them (yes, each of them!), hear what they have to say, respond to them, and be vulnerable in your own sharing. So, as you look through the following suggestions, I’d like to challenge you to make two promises to yourself and to the class you have yet to meet:

1. I will complete my own responses to any activity I ask my students to respond to, and I will let them see my responses before asking them to send anything to me.
2. I will set aside the time I need before the second class meeting to watch, read, or listen to every student’s response, and I will respond to each of them privately and thoughtfully.

I recognize that this may add quite a lot of time to your first days of work, but it will also set the tone for the whole semester, and it will give students the opportunity to see that you are there for them. So did you promise yourself? Great! Let's get started!

Surveying Students Through Online Forms

Many teachers offer surveys at the beginning of the semester, but usually not much comes of them. Some of us hand out paper forms where students can fill out a few quick questions. Others have moved online to quickly collect basic information. However, using simple online tools, like Google Forms or Microsoft Forms, allows us to make far deeper connections than you might initially imagine.

Text Questions

Let's start with the basics. Many of us know that we can collect basic text answers through forms. But far fewer have considered how to turn boring questions into real touch points. Of course, you can ask questions like "Why are you studying here?" or "What's your favorite food?", but consider changing the questions to elicit more visceral responses:

- Share one way you hope that learning English can improve your life.
- Describe in detail the best meal you've ever had.

A simple change to the form of your question can be the difference between "I answer this in every English class I ever join" and "Oh, this teacher wants to know about me!"

Links

The power of forms doesn't end with just a lot of text. Students can do so much more, but the easiest next step is asking them to share links. One of my favorite uses for links is to ask students to share a link to their favorite song on YouTube. You can listen to their favorite song while reading the rest of their responses, and you can also add the song to a class playlist. Students almost always forget that they shared the song with you, so I like to start playing the playlist a few weeks later during class breaks, and they're often shocked to hear their favorite song playing over the classroom speakers. As a bonus, you can follow up the request to link their favorite song with a question about it. Again, surface level questions like "Why do you like this song?" will usually come up with answers like "Good rhythm," or "She is cool," but a question like "What memories come up when you hear this song" will open up a treasure trove of personal connections.

In addition to music links, you can have your students share links as far as your imagination takes you. Here are a few possibilities that you can have them share; feel free to customize as you see fit to match your population:

- **Wikipedia article:** Favorite actress, athlete, artist, historical figure, and so on.
- **Funniest meme:** This could be in their language and they could try to explain why it's so

funny to them.

- **Who should I follow on Instagram or TikTok?:** Again, follow up with questions, such as asking about the best upload that content creator has made.
- **Most underrated website:** Perhaps a site you refer to on a regular basis, or something that helps you be more productive.
- **Favorite app that isn't social media:** Many phones let you see what apps you use most regularly, and often times people are surprised at what comes up as most used.

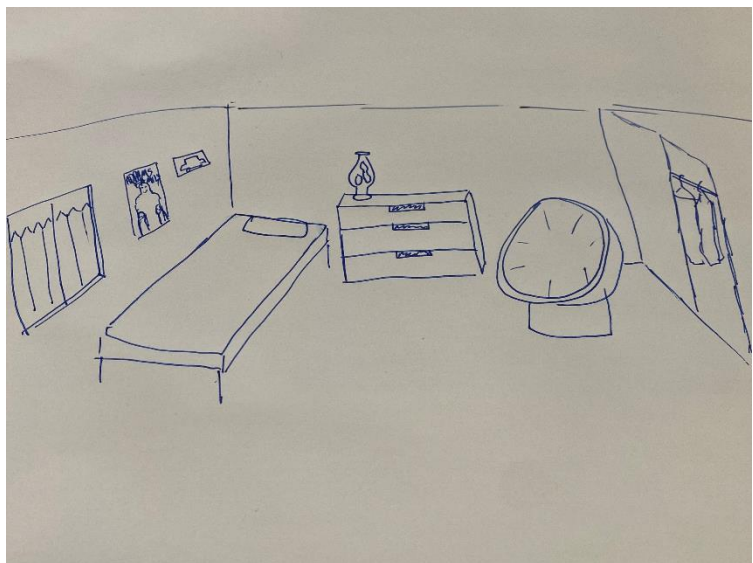
Once you start breaking your form questions from traditional questions to linkable resources, you can build a much stronger understanding of what drives your students. Savvy readers will note that I didn't include questions about movies or TV shows. As much as I love movies myself, I've noticed over the years that more and more students respond with "I don't watch movies/TV shows." A sign of the times? Maybe. Regardless, I've found they're more likely to share content that is short and digestible, so I've updated my questions to reflect that change.

Uploads

The ability to upload files directly into forms means that students can send you any media—no need to get them logged into the EdTech flavor of the month to record an introduction or snap a picture. Whatever they can make, however they can make it, they can send it straight to you: photos, videos, digital drawings, written documents, and so on; their world is at your fingertips.

Keeping in mind that the goal is to get to know them as *people*, not students, consider some of the following things you might ask them to upload. As always, make sure you follow with a question that probes at what makes the upload personal to them. I've added some potential follow-up questions, but I encourage you to think of better ones!

- **A photo of your pet:** How would you describe its personality? Tell a story where it showed its personality off.
- **A short video from your most recent vacation:** What is one thing you didn't get to do while you were there?
- **A drawing of your childhood bedroom:** What were you most proud of in your room? (Note: I'm a terrible artist, so showing off my own stick-figure drawings can set students at ease for showing their own work.)
- **An audio recording of a place you go to relax or have fun:** (This can be ambient noises from a coffee shop, birds chirping on their favorite hiking trail, a concert they went to recently, or anywhere



else.) If you could never go to this place again, what would you tell people about it?

As you can see, once the ball starts rolling, you'll have a harder time editing and cutting questions than you will coming up with them. And hey—you don't have to have the perfect survey right away. You can build it, adjust it, and improve it every semester.

To see an example online form with all of the elements I discussed in this article, see [this one](#) I created on Google Forms. Please feel free to reuse any of the questions, or even the form itself.

The most important part of this process is to take the time to enjoy their responses. Here is a chance to revel in each student's unique experience and to get to know them as more than just another passing face, but as a person with an incredible history, dreams, and a limitless future. With some simple tech and a dedication of a little time, you can do more than just break the ice—you can crack the iceberg of the student-teacher relationship.

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