

# A Simple but Powerful Class Opening Activity

The rose and thorn check-in is a quick strategy for building community and developing student voice.

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## Social and Emotional Learning



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At the start of a recent class, my students gathered a bouquet of good news: a trip to Ireland, an end to recent car troubles, an upcoming visit with a friend. These were highlights they shared during our start-of-class routine, the rose and thorn check-in.

In this quick activity, students participate by sharing roses—something positive going on for a student that day—and thorns, which are negative, or at least less than positive.

Students can choose their level of vulnerability: A rose can simply be “the weather is nice today.” A low-stakes thorn might be “I feel tired.” Yet many students choose to share more personal items: “My rose is that even though I’m stressed out, I got all my homework done” or “My thorn is that my dog is sick and I’m really worried about her.”

Going around the classroom, each student states one rose and one thorn. I share mine too. The whole process takes five minutes or less. Yet though this fast activity may seem simple, the rose and thorn check-in is an essential part of my classroom community-building.

## **Benefits of the Check-In**

**Students know that every voice matters:** The rose and thorn check-in gets every student’s voice into the room at the start of each class. Although students can always say “pass” instead of sharing, each student has the opportunity to be heard, every single day. The check-in is also a great opportunity to practice active listening, turn-taking, and following group norms.

**Students develop awareness of others’ emotions—and how to respond to them:** When students share their roses and thorns, they give their classmates a snapshot of their emotional state. And if I hear a student say that their thorn is “I didn’t sleep much last night” or “I feel like I can’t focus today,” I can adjust my interactions with that person accordingly.

**Students increase their comfort with vulnerability:** Rose and thorn check-ins are opportunities for students to practice being emotionally vulnerable with their peers. This comfort level translates directly into the ability to share opinions and take academic risks in other contexts.

# Facilitation Tips

**Acknowledge each person's contribution:** My colleague John Milton Oliver, who also uses this strategy, suggests saying “thank you,” followed by the student's name, and then turning your attention to the next person in the circle. This models acceptance while also keeping things moving.

**Discuss how emotions impact learning:** Before or after the check-in, invite students to consider how their roses and thorns might affect their ability to participate in class that day. Ask students to brainstorm how they might support a classmate who shares a big thorn or how to celebrate a friend's exciting rose.

**Model authenticity:** While remembering your role and professional boundaries, try to authentically share: “My rose is that my class last period went really well,” or “My thorn is that I'm a little behind on giving feedback on your papers, and it's stressing me out.” Show students that it's OK to be vulnerable.

## Tending to Challenges

Here are some tips for making this activity go smoothly:

- **Practice, practice, practice:** Depending on the skill level and existing cohesiveness of your group, it can take many tries to get the hang of the routine. Don't give up—and make sure to keep it quick and consistent.
- **Monitor time:** My younger students are often eager to negotiate with me: “Can I please have three roses and two thorns?” Give students think time to write or draw what they will share.
- **Make a plan for following up on concerns:** Occasionally, students may share something concerning. Make a plan for how you and the class will respond. Many times, this simply means following up individually with a student to offer support. For topics that could use a whole-class discussion, consider building in opportunities for group processing, such

as a weekly community-building circle.

## **Help Your Garden Grow**

When your class gets the hang of the rose and thorn check-in, feel free to modify it. For example, I taught one group of students who reframed it as Harry Potter and Voldemort. Let your students take ownership over how to make the check-in feel meaningful to them.

As students get better at sharing, you can add a third part to the share: the rosebud, something that they're looking forward to in the near future. Students can develop other variations or components as well.

If your group is too big to do a full share, my colleague John suggests a lightning round, in which the roses and thorns are condensed to two or three words: "Thorn: sick dog! Rose: sunshine!" You could instead create small groups of three or four students each who share their full check-ins with one another instead of the whole class.

As teachers know, there's never enough time in a class period to accomplish everything we'd like to. The rose and thorn check-in may feel like "one more thing," but I see it as an investment in my classroom community. Making time to hear each student's voice demonstrates that I care enough to prioritize listening.