Chalk Talk
Coalition of Essential Schools

Chalk Talk is a silent way to:
• Generate ideas  • Develop projects  • Check on learning  • Solve problems  • Reflect

Because it is done completely in silence, Chalk Talk allows students to interact visibly and directly with ideas and silently with each other. It encourages thoughtful contemplation, generates questions and ideas, and gives students a change of pace. Chalk Talk can be an uncomplicated silent reflection, or a spirited, but silent, exchange of ideas. It has been known to solve vexing problems, surprise everyone with how much is collectively known about something, or get a project planned. Chalk Talk can also be used as a documentation tool to capture the collective thought processes of the participants. Chalk Talk can be extended for various purposes. For example, participants can use the results of the Chalk Talk to help categorize ideas, prioritize tasks, and allocate responsibilities.

Steps or Procedures
1. The teacher explains very briefly that Chalk Talk is a silent activity. No one may talk at all and anyone may add to the Chalk Talk as they please. Participants can comment on each other’s ideas by drawing a connecting line to the comment.

2. The teacher writes a relevant question, term, or topic in a circle on the board.

3. The teacher places chalk/markers at the board or the teacher provides chalk/markers for every individual/pair/group. With large classes, it can be helpful to limit the number of students who are writing on the board at the same time. Those who aren’t at the board should stand or sit in a position that allows them to see what’s being written.

4. Students write, as they feel moved to write. Allow plenty of wait time before deciding that this session of Chalk Talk is over.

5. How the teacher chooses to interact with the Chalk Talk influences its outcome. The teacher can stand back and let it unfold or expand students’ thinking by:
   • Circling interesting ideas to invite comments or note a theme emerging
   • Writing questions about a participant’s comment
   • Adding his/her own reflections or ideas
   • Connecting two interesting ideas/comments together with a line and adding a question mark.

   Note: Active teacher interaction encourages students to do the same.

6. Time frame for a Chalk Talk is dependent upon the question, attention span of the students, and class size. Generally, if no one adds anything to the Chalk Talk in a period of one to two minutes, then the activity should draw to a close, though the teacher should say, “Are there any more additions?” before closing. Chalk Talks typically last no more than 10-15 minutes.

7. The teacher, a student/pair/group or the class as a whole briefly summarizes the results of the Chalk Talk, noting significant themes, connections, and questions.

8. In a possible extension of Chalk Talk, the teacher or the class can re-format the results into a list or categories to guide future work.