

THE TIMEOUT DIALOGUE GUIDE

Roles and Participants in a Timeout Dialogue

Organizer: An organization or individual responsible for the practical arrangements, invitation process, and ensuring the dialogue's overall impact. Every dialogue must have at least one organizer.

Facilitator: A person – either from the organizing body or external – who guides the dialogue and prepares a detailed plan together with the organizer. The facilitator also applies their own expertise, for example, by taking into account the needs and characteristics of the target group. Every dialogue must have at least one facilitator.

Note-taker: A person who documents the conversation, corrects any typos afterward, and shares the notes with the facilitator and organizer for further use. A note-taker is not always required, but their role becomes more important if the dialogue outcomes will be used to support decision-making or other follow-up work.

Participant: A person who may have valuable perspectives – based on either knowledge or experience – related to the conversation topic. The dialogue cannot take place without participants; ideally there are between 3 and 15 people, depending on the available time. The dialogue benefits from participants coming from diverse backgrounds and life situations, as this allows everyone to learn new things and deepen their understanding of themselves, others, and the world around them.

The Structure of a Timeout Dialogue

- 1 Welcome and introductions
- 2 Ground rules for a constructive dialogue
- 3 Introduction to the topic
- 4 Individual reflection / dialogue in pairs
- 5 Group dialogue
- 6 Deepening the dialogue
- 7 Individual reflection / dialogue in pairs
- 8 Group dialogue
- 9 Writing down personal insights
- 10 Sharing insights with others
- 11 What happens next?
- 12 Thank you and closing

Preparing for a Dialogue Session

1 Choose the topic and purpose of the dialogue

Wonderful that you're planning to organize a Timeout Dialogue! Everything begins with having a clear purpose and topic for the dialogue. Do you see a need for a constructive and calm conversation in general, or perhaps for a series of dialogues as part of a broader process – such as decision-making or a study? Timeout works well in both cases. If the dialogue is organized as part of a larger process, you may also want to include a note-taker to support follow-up work.

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2 Decide on the time and place

It's important to reserve enough time for the dialogue – typically between one and four hours, depending on the number of participants and the purpose of the dialogue. Consider what time would make it easiest for your intended participants to attend. Whenever possible, organize the dialogue in a space where people can sit in a circle. Make sure the room is quiet, without through traffic. Also take into account accessibility and ease of access. If needed, the dialogue can also be held online.

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3 Invite Participants

Think about whether you want to organize the dialogue for an existing group or invite people who may not yet know each other. Consider who is affected by the topic and who should be part of the conversation. Also think about who usually isn't included in such events – and make sure to invite them, too.

The best way to invite people is to create an engaging title for the dialogue and reach out to participants personally, or through your partners and networks. Start inviting well in advance so you'll have time to send reminders closer to the date. Let participants know that the session will follow the Timeout Dialogue approach, and briefly explain what that means. Also share what you aim to achieve through the dialogue.

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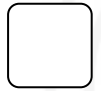
4 Plan the Dialogue Script

Prepare yourself to facilitate the dialogue by drafting a script. You can use the Timeout Dialogue structure, the dialogue card, and the ready-made scripts and materials available on the Timeout Foundation's website as support. Adapt the script using your own expertise and the needs of your target group. Prepare a few dialogue-oriented questions in advance – for example, 2 to 5 – that help participants go deeper into the topic. You don't need to ask every question, but having a few additional ones ready can be helpful to keep the conversation flowing.

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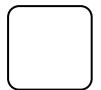
5 Preparing the Space and Setting the Atmosphere

Print out the ground rules and place them where everyone can see them – for example, in the center of the circle. Have a thick marker and paper ready for making name tags. Provide each participant with paper and a pen for writing down insights or reflections. You can place something visually engaging in the middle of the circle. Offering some light snacks and drinks at the beginning of the dialogue is usually appreciated and helps create a welcoming atmosphere.



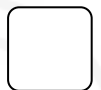
6 Acknowledging Different Participants and Language Realities

Be mindful of the diversity within the group – people may come from different backgrounds or have varying levels of comfort with the language used in the dialogue. Use your own experience and understanding of the group to support an inclusive environment. The Timeout method is flexible – what matters most is that it supports participants' ability to have meaningful conversations, think together, and take part in the dialogue. If you know in advance that someone may find the language of the dialogue challenging, reach out to them directly to ask what would make participation easier and more accessible for them.



7 The Role of the Note-taker

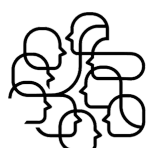
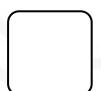
If the Timeout Dialogue is part of a broader process, or if the notes would be useful for later work, invite a note-taker to join. The note-taker's task is to record the conversation as accurately and anonymously as possible, so that individual participants cannot be identified. Inform participants already in the invitation that the dialogue will be documented anonymously, and remind them again at the start of the session while introducing the note-taker's role.



At the Beginning of the Dialogue

8 Introduce the topic and purpose of the dialogue

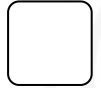
Start by explaining why everyone has gathered today and what the dialogue will focus on. Let participants know that you will be facilitating the dialogue and guiding the speaking turns. You can briefly describe what a Timeout Dialogue means – an equal and calm conversation about meaningful issues. The aim is to deepen understanding of oneself, others, and the topic at hand. If the dialogue has additional goals – for example, being part of a broader decision-making process – mention those as well. If a note-taker is present, explain their role too.



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9 Emphasize that the dialogue is created together

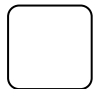
Tell participants that their contributions don't need to be perfectly worded, nor do they need firm opinions to share their thoughts. The purpose of the dialogue is to learn from one another and to hear everyone's perspectives and experiences. A Timeout Dialogue is about thinking things together, reflecting, and gaining new understanding – it's not a debate or a test of knowledge. Encourage openness to new viewpoints and remind participants that it's okay for thoughts to be unfinished.



10 Encourage equal participation

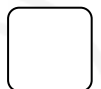
In a Timeout Dialogue, it's important that everyone has the opportunity to take part. Explain that for the conversation to work well, you hope everyone will contribute in some way. Let participants know that as the facilitator, you might occasionally invite someone directly to share their thoughts. At the same time, reassure them that it's completely fine not to have something to say every time.

Address participants by their first names – it helps create a friendly, comfortable atmosphere. Write down their names and keep simple notes of who has spoken; this helps you notice and include quieter participants. If you wish, you can use a talking piece – whoever holds it has the floor to speak.



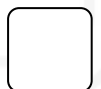
11 Supporting Confidentiality in the Dialogue

Let participants know that they are welcome to share that they took part in the dialogue, as well as their own reflections or general themes that emerged during the conversation. However, ask them to seek permission before sharing something that a specific person said. This helps maintain trust and respect among participants.



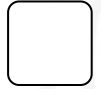
12 Introductions

Invite everyone to introduce themselves by first name only. There's no need to mention job titles, positions of trust, or last names. It's a good idea to start with an icebreaker question to help people relax and connect. You might ask, for example, about their favorite ice cream flavor, favorite season, a recent experience related to the topic, or simply how they're feeling as they join the dialogue.



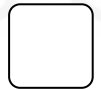
13 Go Through the Ground Rules for Constructive Dialogue

Explain that every Timeout Dialogue follows the Ground Rules for Constructive Dialogue. Place the rules where everyone can see them – for example, in the center of the circle or otherwise visibly in the space. Go through the rules together and make sure that everyone feels able to commit to them. Maintaining a constructive tone is everyone's shared responsibility, but as the facilitator, your role is to ensure that the agreed-upon ground rules are followed.



14 Set the Tone with an Opening Activity

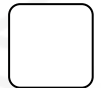
The purpose of the opening activity is to help participants tune in to the topic of the dialogue. This activity can take many forms – for example, a short text shared in advance, a brief expert introduction, a film clip, image cards, a research finding, or a song. A good opening activity sparks thoughts and curiosity, but doesn't steer participants in a particular direction or take too long.



During the Dialogue

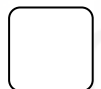
15 Ensure the Ground rules are followed

Gently remind participants of the agreed-upon ground rules if someone acts differently than what was decided together. For example: "We agreed at the beginning not to interrupt each other. Let's try to stick to that so everyone can share their thoughts peacefully." Remember that anything shared during the dialogue should not be used against anyone – either during or after the dialogue.



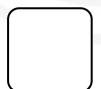
16 Acknowledge and encourage

Be kind and appreciative. Thank participants as they share their thoughts and experiences, and acknowledge when they act in line with the shared principles. Encourage quieter participants to contribute, and at the end, remember to thank everyone for their participation. As a facilitator, be mindful not to highlight one person's contribution above another's.



17 Encourage individual reflection and pair conversations

Invite participants to first take a moment to reflect on the topic on their own, and then to discuss with the person next to them. You can assign pairs and ask, for example: "What thoughts, feelings, or memories came up for you after the opening activity?" This kind of personal reflection or pair dialogue can also be repeated later during the conversation. It helps participants gather their thoughts calmly and supports participation.



18 Encourage sharing from personal experience

Remind participants that it's enough to share their own experiences or thoughts related to the topic. You might ask: "What situations, events, or experiences have shaped the way you think about this topic?" Important subjects often stir up emotions, so it's good to be prepared for that. The purpose, however, is not to focus on one individual, but to help everyone participate and better understand why and how we see things differently. Also remind participants that they don't need to share anything they're not comfortable with: "Today, you can share the thoughts you wish to – you don't have to tell everything."

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19 Keep the dialogue on topic

Conversations may sometimes wander, but the more the dialogue stays connected to the main theme – and to participants' personal experiences and reflections – the deeper the understanding becomes. You can ask, for example: "Could you tell a bit more about how this experience you mentioned relates to today's topic?"

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20 Encourage participants to build on each other's thoughts

Timeout Dialogues are not about giving prepared speeches. To deepen the dialogue, participants can continue from where others left off. You might ask: "What thoughts or experiences did other people's comments bring up for you?" You can also, if appropriate, share a personal experience related to what participants have said, to help the conversation go deeper.

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21 Gently balance participation if needed

In a Timeout Dialogue, it's essential that everyone has a chance to contribute. Try to distribute speaking turns evenly. If someone is very active, you can kindly ask them to hold off for a moment so others can speak: "Thank you for sharing your thoughts. Now it would be great to hear from others too – would you mind waiting a bit before your next turn?" Keep a simple tally of speaking turns to help you notice who hasn't spoken yet.

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22 Create space for quieter participants

Invite those who haven't yet spoken to share their thoughts: "It would be lovely to hear what others are thinking as well." Of course, no one should ever feel pressured to speak. You can also have participants discuss in pairs or small groups before returning to the whole group. Sometimes it takes several dialogues before everyone feels comfortable speaking – and that's completely fine.

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23 Deepen the dialogue

Use the questions you prepared in advance to bring out hidden perspectives and go deeper. Ask: “What haven’t we talked about yet that relates to this topic?” Or explore meaning: “Why is this topic meaningful or important to you personally?” Highlight the different perspectives and possible tensions that have emerged: “I notice that some of our thoughts differ. What kinds of experiences might have influenced the way we think about this?”

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24 Summarize and highlight different perspectives

From time to time, it’s helpful for the facilitator to summarize what perspectives have been shared so far. This helps participants see that there are many ways to experience and understand the topic. Don’t worry about conflicting views – acknowledge them clearly when they appear. There’s no need to resolve differences during a Timeout Dialogue; instead, focus on understanding why we see things differently. Sharing personal experiences often helps with this. Avoid debate or deadlock, and remind participants that Timeout is not about arguing or reaching consensus. If needed, suggest taking a short break.

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At the End of the Dialogue

25 Reflecting on insights

Thank everyone for a meaningful and constructive dialogue. Invite participants to write down or draw the insights, feelings, or thoughts that emerged for them during the dialogue. They can also note what they learned through the conversation. You might say: “Write or draw one insight, key thought, or feeling that stayed with you from our dialogue.” Let participants know if you plan to collect the reflection notes for documentation, a summary, or communication purposes

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26 Sharing insights

Ask each participant to share, for example in one sentence, an insight, thought, or feeling that stood out to them. Emphasize that thoughts can be unfinished – that’s perfectly fine. For example: “Please share one insight, key thought, or feeling that stayed with you from today’s discussion.”

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27 Explain what happens next

Did the dialogue meet the original need? Was the goal of a constructive and equal dialogue achieved? What are the next steps – will there be a follow-up session? Will the notes or documentation from this dialogue be reviewed somewhere, and how will the outcomes be shared? Be open and transparent when explaining what will happen after the dialogue, and avoid making promises that cannot be fulfilled.

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28 Thank participants and ask for feedback

Thank everyone for taking part, and ask for feedback either right at the end of the session or the following day. Feedback helps you develop as a facilitator and as an organizer of Timeout Dialogues.

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Other Important Notes

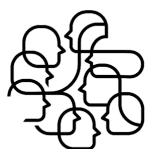
29 You learn the Timeout method best through repetition. If possible, use the Timeout approach several times within a short period.

Based on our experience, Timeout is easy to learn. Sometimes there may be too little time, too many participants, or simply a realization that more dialogue and trust building is needed. That's all part of the process. It can take time for participants to feel comfortable joining a shared dialogue. The more often a group engages in Timeout-style dialogues, the better their dialogue and communication skills become. Remember to make time for dialogue!

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30 Share Your Dialogue experiences with Us

We'd love to hear about the Timeout Dialogue you organized. We continuously collect data and feedback about how the method is being used, and every piece of information is valuable to us.

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