# COLLABORATIVE STRATEGY: Written Discussion

In *Texts and Lessons for Content-Area Reading* (Heinemann 2011), co-author Harvey “Smokey” Daniels calls this his Number One Most Important Teaching Strategy Ever.

**Setting up.** In groups of four, give each student a full-size blank piece of lined paper and tell each student to put his/her name in the upper left-hand margin.

**Students read the article.** Have students read a controversial/engaging article or selection of text.

**Explain** to students that they will be participating in a written and oral conversation.

**Provide the written conversation strategy rules orally and in writing (on whiteboard/ chalkboard).** Say something like,

Interesting article, right? Today we are going to have a conversation in small groups. But this time we are going to have that conversation in writing instead of out loud. We are going to write notes about our thinking, pass them around, and write back to each other. Okay?

There are four rules for this kind of conversation:

1. Use your best handwriting, so people can read what you are saying.
2. Use all the time I give you for writing. No fair writing a couple of words and putting down your pen.
3. Don’t talk, even when passing notes to each other. We want to keep all of the energy in the writing.
4. I will be collecting the papers when you are done, so stay on task.

**Begin the silent conversation.**

Now we are going to start our written discussion. Remember, you are just writing an informal note to the students in your group. What did you think about while reading this? What reactions, thoughts, questions, or feelings did you have about the article or this topic? Just tell what’s on your mind—spelling and grammar don’t count on this. I am going to give you about two minutes to write, and then we will start exchanging papers.

**Monitor.** Circulate through the class, looking over shoulders. Keep time, not by exact minutes, but by watching kids write. When most kids have written about a quarter of a page, warn them that it is almost time to stop writing and pass.

**Call for the First Pass.**

Okay, in about twenty seconds we are going to pass papers for the first time, so you might want to finish the sentence on which you are working right now. (Pause) Ready? 5-4-3-2-1-pass! Decide in which the direction the papers are going to go, and stick to it.

Now just read the note your classmate wrote, and right beneath it, write an answer, just like you were talking out loud. You can tell your reaction, make a comment, ask questions, share a connection you’ve made, agree or disagree, or raise a whole new idea about the article. Remember to use all the time I give you and keep writing. Just keep the conversation going.

**Monitor again.** Walk the room, looking over shoulders to get the timing right.

**Call for Additional Passes.**

Pass again, please. Now you have two notes to respond to, right? So I’m going to give you a little more time. You can respond to one note, to the other, or to both. Just keep the conversation going.

Reiterate instructions if needed, especially about not talking.

**Repeat and continue.** Again, don’t pace by actual minutes, but by watching how kids are coming along, and call “Pass” only when most people have written at least a few lines. Have kids write and pass three or four times. Three is usually plenty, and hands unaccustomed to handwriting will be tired by then. And yet, four turns sometimes pushes the conversation to a deeper level.

**Return to sender.** When you are ready to stop, have the kids pass back their papers so that everyone gets the one they started with, the paper with their entry at the top. Say: *Now read the whole thing over and see the conversation that you started.*

As soon as students are done reading and they start talking—and they will—say: Okay, go ahead and continue this conversation out loud in your group. Use the writings as evidence, support or however they help you to keep talking. And thanks for playing along with the silent part of today’s class.

At this point, you can **let the discussions be open,** oryou can offer a more focused prompt. You can also **shift directly to whole-class discussion**: *Let’s gather as a class and see where our written discussion took us. Will each group please share one highlight, one thread of your discussion? Something you spent time on, something that sparked lively discussion, maybe something you argued about or laughed about? Take a second to scan the writings in front of you. Now, who would like to share?*

**Exit slip.** *Discuss the write-around* process. *What worked for you and/or what made it hard?* *How can we make it better next time?*

# Facilitation Points:

**Selecting Text.** When trying written conversations for the first time, use a highly student-relevant and controversial text, so that students won’t have to struggle for something to write about. Once they have learned the structure, bring on more subject-related text.

**Enjoy balanced participation.** This strategy gives students equal air time.

**You can go digital.** Of course, students can hold written conversations online. Teachers who use the iPads may explore such possibilities. The written discussion becomes asynchronous; students can join in a discussion when they have time, even from home. These are great options, but Daniels warns that this may not be as powerful as when the notes are written “live,” side by side, with immediate responses where everyone can switch to talking out loud in one second.

**Legalize drawing.** In some circumstances, such as students who are just learning English, accommodations may be made, such as drawing as a way to join in a conversation. Key words and phrases may be acceptable if students cannot yet write sentences.