

# Playful Techniques

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## Building Community & Engagement

1. **Friendship Bracelets with a Twist** – Have students create a bracelet with a word that represents their academic journey, goal, discipline, or a concept in class. Use it as a discussion starter.
2. **What Kind of Animal Would You Be?** – Instead of typical icebreakers, ask students to describe themselves as an animal and explain why. Extra points if they can relate those characteristics to their field of study.
3. **Speed Friending** – Like speed dating, ask students to rotate quickly through short discussions on different course-related questions. They can also practice pitches, review questions, or answer questions on content.
4. **Academic Tarot Cards** – Print discipline-relevant keywords on index cards (e.g., “The Independent Variable,” “The Postmodernist,” “The Innovator”) and have students draw a card and explain how it applies to class content or their learning experience.
5. **Semester-Long Bingo** – Create a bingo board with participation challenges: “Attend office hours,” “Join a study group,” “Explain a concept to a friend,” or “Ask a question in class.”
6. **The ‘Mascot’ Challenge** – Each small group adopts a “class mascot” (drawn or AI-generated) and uses it for team-based challenges throughout the semester. Wherever the mascot “lands” or is placed, that group or individual contributes next.
7. **Group Identity Challenge** – Groups create a unique team name, logo, and slogan related to the course content or their project. This identity stays with them for team-based activities throughout the semester.
8. **Selfie Challenge** – Assign students to take selfies at different locations on campus that relate to class themes or provide a scavenger hunt element related to your discipline.
9. **Class Awards\*** – Let students vote on fun awards at the end of the semester, like “Best Discussion Contributor” or “Most Likely to Start a Study Group.”
10. **Playlists for Learning** – Make a discussion post or a Google doc and ask students contribute songs for different study moods: “Pre-Exam Hype,” “Deep Focus,” or “Celebratory Victory.” You can also ask them to create playlists connected to the content or their disciplines... or try motivational, creativity, or other playlists that lists podcasts, quotes, study habits, or other materials aimed at empowering students.
11. **Create an Instagram Page** – Ask students to post photos related to content (or their project or interests) in a private social media page that only they can access.
12. **Battle of the Memes** – Students submit memes in discussion posts or in class that summarize a concept or lecture, and the class votes for the funniest or most accurate.
13. **Good News Minute** – Start class with a quick round where students share personal or academic good news, or create a discussion post for online course and remind students to contribute there.
14. **Write Songs** – Ask student to use free AI tools to write songs that introduce them and/or teach concepts.

## Making Content More Playful

15. **Cards Against [Your Discipline]** – Adapt “Cards Against Humanity” into a concept-matching game relevant to your subject. Students must justify their pairings.
16. **Course Concept Escape Room** – Create an escape room challenge where students must solve puzzles or problems based on course material to “escape” within a set time limit.
17. **Exquisite Corpse (Concept Chain)** – Students write a sentence about a concept, fold the paper, and pass it on for others to add, creating an evolving explanation or creating a unique narrative.
18. **This Is Not Cherry-Flavored Jellybeans** – Use sensory misdirection (like mismatched flavors and colors) to teach cognitive biases, perception, or top-down processing.
19. **QR Code Scavenger Hunt\*** – Hide QR codes around the classroom, syllabus, or campus linking to key concepts, bonus material, or even a “Rickroll.”
20. **Bingo of Terms & Concepts** – Instead of calling numbers, provide definitions or examples, and students must match them with the correct term.
21. **Write a Postcard to an Expert\*** – Students write a question or idea as if sending a postcard to an expert in the field, then swap and respond in character as the expert.
22. **Soundtrack to the Text\*** – Students assign songs to readings, theories, or historical events and justify their choices.
23. **One-Minute Metaphors** – Students are given a random object (or draw one from a bag) and must connect it to a course concept within one minute. (Let them use AI tools and have contests for the worst pun or the lamest metaphor.)
24. **Doodle Notes** – Instead of traditional notes, students create sketchnotes (drawings and diagrams) to summarize a lecture or reading.
25. **Blind Concept Drawing** – Borrow from Pictionary and ask a student to describe a course-related concept without saying its name, while another student tries to draw it based on the description.
26. **Emoji Storytelling** – Have students explain a historical event, scientific process, or concept using only emojis, then challenge their peers to decode the message.

## Gamifying Participation & Review

27. **Catch the Ball Review\*** – Use a whiteboard marker to write questions on a beachball and tossed it around during class; the catcher answers the question before tossing it to another student.
28. **Sticky Hands Selection\*** – Use toy sticky hands to “grab” discussion prompts or key concepts from a pile.
29. **20 Questions Concept Guessing\*** – One student thinks of a course-related concept while the class asks yes/no questions to determine what it is.
30. **Dinner Party Debate** – Assign students different perspectives (historical figures, scholars, theorists) and have them engage in a dinner party-style discussion. If teaching literature reviews, have students take on the roles of their various sources and imagine the discussion they’d have over the topic.
31. **Flyswatter Game\*** – Spread answer choices across the board. The first student to hit the correct answer with a flyswatter gets the point.

32. **AI-Powered (or Not) Jeopardy** – Create questions and categories from content and class notes and have teams compete.
33. **Wheel of Discussion** – Use a spinning wheel to randomly select students, determine the topic or concept to be discussed , or award extra points. (We like this free [tool](#).)

### Encouraging Reflection & Metacognition

34. **Paper Airplane Takeaways\*** – At the end of class, students write a reflection, ask a question, or leave a comment and fold it into a paper airplane, and fly it to another student, who reads it aloud. (You can also ask them to fly them at you and collect them to read for the next class. Extra credit points if they hit you!)
35. **Regular ‘Weigh-Ins’** – Check in with students about their progress and stress levels via anonymous polls or discussion boards with memes that measure moods or confidence.
36. **Two-Minute Time Capsule** – Students write a short note to their future selves about what they hope to remember from the class, then receive it back at the end of the term.
37. **Expectation vs. Reality Check-In** – At mid-semester, students reflect on their expectations for the class and compare them to their actual experiences.
38. **Headline Challenge** – Students write a newspaper headline that captures the essence of a week’s lesson.

### Reducing Stress & Boosting Engagement

39. **Syllabus Mad Libs** – Instead of a standard syllabus review, create a fill-in-the-blank Mad Libs version that injects humor into the class expectations.
40. **Reverse Trick-or-Treating** – Instead of just passing out candy, the instructor hands out study tip “treats” during class.
41. **Fortune Cookies for Reflection\*** – Generate discussion prompts, growth mindset phrases, or humor-based fortunes inside handmade or digital “fortune cookies.” (A free online resource can be found [here](#).)
42. **Theme Days** – Spice up lecture days with themes like “Superhero Theories” (relating theories to superpowers) or “Meme Mondays.”
43. **Dinosaur Costume Office Hours** – Because why not make students *want* to attend? Even a simple fun prop can ease students' anxiety.
44. **The ‘Halfway There’ Celebration\*** – Mark the semester midpoint with music, snacks, or a class selfie to encourage perseverance.  
Cele
45. **Dance Breaks Before Exams\*** – Even a short 60-second dance or stretch helps reduce stress and improve focus.
46. **Testing with a Twist\*** – Hand out tests on rainbow paper, play soft background music, or let students choose one question they want answered before starting.
47. **Pass the Positivity** – Start class with a student passing a “positivity beach ball” to another student, who shares something good happening in their academic journey.
48. **Homework Lottery** – Occasionally draw one student’s name for a small prize if they completed their homework.

*\*Ideas with asterisks come directly from Professors at Play PlayBook: Real-world techniques from a more playful higher education classroom, edited by Lisa Forbes and David Thomas. Free downloads of the book can be found [here](#).*