

Chain Notes

Chain Notes is a strategy that begins with a question printed at the top of a paper. The paper is circulated from student to student. Each student responds with one or two sentences related to the question and passes it on to the next student. Upon receiving the previous “chain of responses,” a student adds a new thought or builds on a prior statement.

Chain Notes provides an opportunity for students to examine others’ ideas and compare them to their own thinking. In the process of examining others’ ideas, students build upon them or add new ideas of their own. This strategy encourages students to move beyond recall since they must first synthesize and evaluate what others have recorded before adding their own ideas. Chain Notes provides an opportunity for students to draw upon various levels of knowledge, including facts, definitions, specific ideas, big ideas, analogies, illustrative examples, and evidence from their own or class experiences to contribute to building the chain.

Chain Notes elicit different ideas students have about a concept they encounter during or after a lesson or sequence of lessons. Chain Notes are best used to check for understanding after students have had sufficient opportunities to explore and learn about the concept addressed by the question in the note. Analysis of the notes reveals the extent to which students draw upon formal definitions and ideas presented and discussed in class as well as the inquiry investigations and experiences they have had. The notes reveal students’ level of sophistication and accuracy in thinking about the concept, the terminology they use and the common misconceptions.

How to implement the strategy:

1. Select a broad, open-ended question focused on a particular concept relevant to the current content.
2. Write the question at the top of a long sheet of paper.
3. Post the question somewhere in the room so everyone can see it as well.
4. Pass the note around the class from student to student, having each student add a one- or two-word sentence that relates to the question and builds upon, extends, or disagrees with others’ comments.
5. Make sure students know that should read all the prior responses before adding their own “note.”
6. Encourage students to build upon the last note made so it connects with the idea they are adding.
7. Have students turn the sheet over when they run out of space on the first page.
8. Have students continue to pass the Chain Notes around even if they engage in other tasks.

Note: Make sure students know that the notes should be brief and that it should take no more than one to two minutes per student to read and respond and pass it on.

9. Take up the Chain Notes when completed and read aloud or project so all the students can see the responses.
10. Allow students an opportunity to give feedback on the statements made by their peers.
11. Have students discuss whether they agree or disagree with the statements on the paper and defend their reasoning.

Adapted from:

- Keeley, Page (2008). *Science formative assessment: 75 practical strategies for linking assessment, instruction, and learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA. Corwin.