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# Fostering a Reflective and Supportive Community

We believe that a Facing History and Ourselves advisory ought to be a microcosm of democracy—a place where explicit rules and implicit norms protect everyone’s right to speak; where different perspectives can be heard and valued; where advisees take responsibility for themselves, each other, and the group as a whole; and where each member has a stake and a voice in collective decisions. This section of the introduction to *Community Matters* includes descriptions of four strategies with some suggested activities to help foster a reflective and supportive advisory community that invites questioning, collaboration, and problem-solving: contracting, journaling, opening routines, and closing routines.

Two ways in which you can create a strong foundation for a reflective advisory are by incorporating advisory contracts and advisory journals into your routines. Even if you already incorporate both of these elements into your regular classroom, we recommend taking a moment to refresh yourself by reading the sections that follow, **Contracting in a Facing History and Ourselves Advisory** and **Journaling in a Facing History and Ourselves Advisory**, which will help you consider how these strategies can serve as effective tools to help foster civil discourse in your advisory group. For additional thoughts about your role in this process, consult the resource **Fostering Civil Discourse: A Guide for Classroom Conversations**, available at [facinghistory.org/advisory-media](https://facinghistory.org/advisory-media).

In addition to journaling and contracting, beginning and ending each advisory meeting with a short opening and closing routine can help create a space that is welcoming and feels different from “regular class.” By taking five minutes at either end of each advisory meeting to take the pulse of the group and to weave in fun opportunities for interaction or quiet reflection, you can help to set a tone for the meeting that invites participation and sharing.

## A: Contracting in a Facing History and Ourselves Advisory

Contracting is the process of openly discussing with your advisees expectations about how members of the group will treat each other. It is an effective strategy for making your advisory a reflective community that values the unique contributions of its members, honors different perspectives, and engages in shared decision-making. These types of communities are usually created through deliberate nurturing from advisees and advisors who have shared expectations about how group members will treat each other. The instructions below describe how to discuss advisory norms and then draft and agree to a formal contract of behavior.

Advisees should create their advisory contract in the first two to three weeks of the school year, after they have had an opportunity to learn each other's names, play some interactive games, and understand the purpose of advisory at their school. The first activity in **Section 1: Welcome to Advisory!** offers a detailed explanation of contracting, as well as a number of ways that advisors can develop advisory contracts with their groups.

Advisory contracts are not static documents. Advisory groups should revisit their contracts periodically throughout the year. Good times to revisit, and possibly revise, the contract include:

- Before and/or after reading or viewing a challenging piece of content
- Before engaging in a discussion about a potentially controversial or challenging topic
- When an advisee feels that they, or members of the group, have not lived up to one or more of the expectations on the contract
- At the beginning of each section of *Community Matters* (each section begins with a contracting activity that fosters reflection, promotes discussion, and invites revision)

## B: Journaling in a Facing History and Ourselves Advisory

A journal is an instrumental tool for helping advisees develop their ability to critically examine their surroundings from multiple perspectives and to make informed judgments about what they see and hear. Many advisees find that writing or drawing in a journal helps them process ideas, formulate questions, and retain information. Journals make learning visible by providing a safe, accessible space for your advisees to share thoughts, feelings, and uncertainties. Journals also help to nurture a sense of community and offer a way for advisees to process their thinking before sharing their ideas and questions in pairs, small groups, or circle discussions. Frequent journal writing also helps advisees become more fluent in expressing their ideas in writing or speaking. Below, we describe some of the many ways you can use journals as an effective learning tool in your advisory sessions.

### Questions to Consider Before Using Journals in Advisory

#### 1. What sort of notebook should advisees use for their journals?

Because advisees will be writing in their journals throughout *Community Matters*, and at times they will reflect on past entries, it is important that they always have their journals with them during the advisory meeting. You can use exam “blue books” or have advisees staple together 15 to 20 sheets of lined paper (they can design a cover) that will serve as their advisory journals. These types of journals are cheaper than spiral notebooks or composition books and easier to store in pocket folders along with advisory handouts and readings.

#### 2. Are journal entries public or private?

Advisees are entitled to know in advance of each writing opportunity if the entry is private or if they will be sharing their ideas with a partner or with the group as a whole. Some advisors might want to collect advisee journals periodically to better understand their advisees’ thinking and engagement with the material. You might collect their journals once a term and only read a few pages that the advisee selects and marks with a sticky note. If you are reading their journals, you can establish a rule that if advisees wish to keep information in their journals private, they should fold the page over or remove the page entirely. Or you might never collect their journals and instead listen in on or join small-group discussions.

#### 3. How should journal content be shared?

Advisees are often best able to express themselves when they believe that their journal is a private space, and, as explained above, it is important that they always know in advance of writing the purpose and audience for each entry. At the same time, we encourage you to provide multiple opportunities for advisees to voluntarily share ideas and questions they have recorded in their journals. Some advisees may feel more comfortable reading directly from their journals than speaking “off the cuff”

in discussions, while others will prefer speaking more generally about the ideas and questions they explored in writing rather than reading aloud from the page.

#### **4. What is appropriate content for journals?**

At Facing History, we believe that the purpose of journal writing is to provide a space where advisees can connect their personal experiences and opinions to the concepts they are exploring in advisory. Therefore, some material that is appropriate to include in personal diaries or a blog may not be appropriate to include in advisory journals, and it is important for advisors to help advisees make this distinction. To avoid uncomfortable situations, many advisors find it helpful to clarify topics that are not suitable material for journal entries. Also, as mandated reporters, advisors should explain that they are required by law to take certain steps, such as informing a school official, if advisees reveal information about possible harm to themselves or another student. Advisees should be made aware of these rules, as well as other guidelines you might have about appropriate journal writing content.

#### **5. What forms of expression can be included in a journal?**

Students learn and communicate best in different ways. The journal is an appropriate space to respect different learning styles. Some of your advisees may wish to sketch their ideas, for example, rather than record thoughts in words. Other advisees may feel most comfortable responding in concept webs and lists, as opposed to prose. When you introduce the journal to advisees, you might brainstorm different ways that they can use it to express their thoughts.

### **Suggestions for How to Use Journals in Advisory**

Once you settle on the expectations for journal writing in your advisory, there are many possible ways that you can have advisees record ideas in their journals. Here are some examples:

- 1. Advisor-selected prompts:** One of the most common ways that advisors use journals is by asking advisees to respond to a particular prompt, such as a question or quotation. This writing often prepares advisees to participate in an activity, helps them make connections between the themes of an activity and their own lives, or provides an opportunity for advisees to make meaning of ideas in a reading or film. In many of the advisory activities, you will find suggested prompts for journal writing.
- 2. Brainstorming:** The journal is an appropriate place where advisees can freely list ideas related to a specific word or question. To activate prior knowledge before they encounter new material, you might ask advisees to brainstorm everything they know about a concept or an event. As a strategy for reviewing material, you might ask them to brainstorm ideas they remember about a topic.
- 3. Freewriting:** Freewriting is open, no-format writing. Freewriting can be an especially effective strategy when you want to help advisees process particularly sensitive or provocative material. Some advisees respond extremely well to freewriting, while

others benefit from more structure, even if that means a loosely framed prompt such as, "What are you thinking about after watching/reading/hearing/discussing this material? What does this text/scenario remind you of?"

- 4. Creative writing:** Many advisees will enjoy writing poems or short stories that incorporate the themes addressed in a particular activity, video, or reading. To stimulate their work, some advisees benefit from ideas that structure their writing, such as a specific poem format or an opening line for a story (for example: "I could not believe my eyes when I walked down the hall and saw . . .").
- 5. Drawings, charts, and webs:** Advisees do not always have to express their ideas in words. At appropriate times, encourage them to draw their feelings or thoughts. They can also use symbols, concept maps, Venn diagrams, tables, and other graphic organizers to record information.
- 6. Vocabulary:** Advisees can use their journals as a place to keep their working definitions of terms, noting how those definitions change over time. The back section of their journals could be used as a glossary, the place where they record, review, and revise key definitions.
- 7. Structured sharing:** While there will be times when some advisees will not want to publicly share thoughts from their journals, most of the time they are eager to have the opportunity to select something from their journals to share with a small group or the larger group in a discussion. At these times, you should let advisees know in advance that what they wrote will be shared with the group. Another way to share is with a pass-around, where journals are "passed around" from one advisee to the next. Advisees read the page that is opened (and only that page!) and then write about connections they see in their own lives, things they have seen or read, current events, or moments in history.

## C: Opening Routines for Advisory Meetings

Advisees are more likely to participate when advisory feels like a supportive community. Remember that the goal of advisory is to create a space where students can find support, have a voice, and feel comfortable. Opening routines can help set a welcoming and inclusive tone, especially if they're used repeatedly and involve advisee input and, eventually, leadership. Opening routines can be playful, personal, and reflective, and they can be done in small groupings or as a full group. It's the tone and repeated use that helps to shape the advisory atmosphere.

Choose an opening routine for each advisory session that will help set the energy level that the day's meeting needs or that connects to the topic, piquing curiosity.

### 1. Connection Circles

This routine can be used for lighthearted community building or in a more serious way, to check on everyone's perspective on a group decision or current topic. The questions below can be used once or multiple times over the course of the year, with advisees working in pairs, trios, or in full-group Wraparounds. You might also use the Concentric Circles strategy for this opening routine. Visit [facinghistory.org/advisory-media](https://facinghistory.org/advisory-media) to learn about the Wraparound and Concentric Circles teaching strategies.

- Who is a leader you admire and why?
- What is your wildest career fantasy?
- If you were a street sign, what would you be? Why?
- If you could meet anyone from history, who would it be?
- Where do you feel most like yourself?
- What is one goal you hope to accomplish this year?
- What are some highs and lows from your time at school so far?
- What's something healthy or helpful you did in the last day?
- How were you an upstander this week? (This is an example of a go-round question to use once "upstander" has been introduced.)
- What was the most helpful mistake you made this week?
- Which classmate did you learn something from this week?
- "I feel mostly \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_."
- "The main thing on my mind right now is \_\_\_\_\_."
- What is something you did really well last week?
- What's a choice you made recently? If given another chance, would you do anything different?

## 2. Take a Stand!

This routine uses the Barometer strategy (visit [facinghistory.org/advisory-media](https://facinghistory.org/advisory-media) to learn about this teaching strategy). Create a list of statements to which advisees are likely to have a wide array of reactions, from “Yes! I strongly agree!” to “Nope! I strongly disagree,” from “I can’t wait!” to “Never,” or another pair of opposing labels. For community-building purposes, a few interesting and varied questions will provide an opportunity for advisees to interact with one another. To use the “Take a Stand!” opening routine to pique interest in a topic that you will be discussing during the advisory session, write a few statements or choose one or more quotations that relate to the topic and will prompt a range of responses.

- Explain the Barometer format to the group and then facilitate the activity. Because this is a warm-up routine, you might only use one to three statements before digging into the main activity for the session.
- Sample “take a stand” statements:
  - I’d much rather see a movie in a theater than stream it.
  - Rainy weather is better than sunny weather.
  - It’s important to get to know different kinds of music.
  - Individual sports are better than team sports.
- To foster advisee leadership and sense of ownership over the space, ask an advisee to run the exercise next time. They can also write statements on index cards for the group to use in future opening routines.

## 3. Mindfulness Minute

Sometimes the most supportive opening (and/or closing) routine provides a chance for everyone to catch their breath and feel calm. Here are four options that use the different senses:

- Take a deep breath, paying attention to your breathing: how it enters, flows through, and leaves your body. Take a second breath that is slower and more conscious. Take a third breath that is even slower and more conscious. Continue slow, conscious breathing for the remainder of the minute.
- Listen to the noises in the room for 20 seconds. Then listen for noises outside the room, in the hallway and other rooms, for 20 seconds. Then listen for noises outside the school for 20 seconds.
- For one minute, look at something really carefully—all the parts of a pencil or pen, shades of light on a book or desk, how an ant or spider moves, the nuances of a poster, the dust in the air.
- Choose a simple action, like raising your hand or standing up and sitting down. Do it in super slow motion. Be aware of what your body is doing to prepare for the movement, and what different parts of your body are doing for each tiny segment of the movement.<sup>3</sup>

3 Adapted from Rachel Poliner and Jeffrey Benson, *Teaching the Whole Teen: Everyday Practices That Promote Success and Resilience in School and Life* (California: Corwin, a Sage Company, 2017), 152–53.

To foster advisee leadership and sense of ownership over the space, ask an advisee to run the exercise next time, choose which option the group will use, research new options, and/or make up their own opening mindfulness routine.

#### **4. Notable Quotable**

Quotations are excellent resources to provoke thought and prompt conversation. There will be many occasions in advisory when a quotation about community, courage, success, failure, fear, feeling like an outsider or insider, or another topic can serve to open the advisory meeting effectively. To foster advisee leadership and a sense of ownership over the advisory space, after you have facilitated the “notable quotable” routine a few times, ask for volunteers to run the activity next time or to choose a new quotation from a favorite book or website. This activity can be used as an opening or closing routine.

- In all cases, project/pass out and read aloud the quotation, give time for advisees to think, and then ask advisees to share reflections in small groups or with the whole group. The following sentence starters can help advisees respond to a quotation:
  - The quotation made me think of/about . . .
  - The speaker/writer is trying to encourage . . .
  - I wonder what the speaker/writer meant by . . .
  - Parts I agree with are . . . Parts I don’t understand are . . . Parts I’d challenge are . . . Parts that raise questions for me are . . .
  - The quotation relates to my personal experience because . . .

#### **5. Fist to Five**

This quick activity helps you take the pulse of the room and can be used as an opening or closing routine. You can also use it during an advisory to check for understanding, assess advisees’ confidence with the material, or seek general consensus.

- For an opening routine, after advisees have entered the room and are seated in a circle, pose a question and have them respond by holding up a fist or one, two, three, four, or five fingers. The fist, which represents zero, marks the low end of the scale (“I don’t understand,” “I’m not feeling well,” “I don’t feel confident”), and the five marks the high end (“Great,” “I’m excited,” “I’ve got it!”). Some examples of “fist to five” questions include:
  - “Fist to five, how are you feeling on this Monday?” (after the assembly, on this Friday, in light of learning about . . . , etc.)
  - “Fist to five, how do you feel about your time management last night?”
  - “Fist to five, how do you feel about your understanding of the bystander effect?”
  - “Fist to five, how ready are you to start our first activity?”
  - “Fist to five, how well do you understand the instructions for the next activity?”



## D: Closing Routines for Advisory Meetings

Closing routines can serve as a transition from advisory back to academic classes, help advisees summarize or reflect on something from the session, and offer a connection or preview to the next advisory. You can vary how you implement the closing routine. Advisees might be in pairs, trios, or sitting in a circle. At times, you might choose to have your advisees write their responses on an exit card, sticky note, or index card with or without their names. Alternatively, closing routines can be verbal activities with no writing.

Repeating a closing routine will help advisees internalize the behavior, which will lead to more meaningful reflections. Furthermore, once they have internalized the routines, they can have a voice in choosing which one they would like to do at the end of a meeting.

### 1. Maintain and Modify

Make a routine of asking the following questions:

- What helped us function well as an advisory today that we should maintain?
- What's something we should modify so we can improve?

### 2. Revisit the Contract

After your group creates its advisory contract, you might read aloud the contract and then pose one or more of the following questions to celebrate high-functioning days or reflect on challenging days.

- How well did we demonstrate our contract today?
- What examples can you give from this session of a member of our group honoring our contract?
- What needs some attention? How might we make it better in the next session?

At the end of a week, quarter, or term, you might revisit the contract to determine whether or not it needs to be revised before moving forward.

"We've had these guidelines for \_\_\_\_\_ now. Are there any we need to clarify? Add? Demonstrate better?"

### 3. Grab a Goal

Ask advisees to think about a goal they would like to set. It might be an academic goal or a personal goal, one related to school or not related to school. Consider prompting them to help them establish their goals:

- This week I will . . .
- This week I am going to try . . .

- In the next advisory meeting, I will . . .
- My goal in \_\_\_\_\_ is to \_\_\_\_\_. To achieve my goal, I need to . . . <sup>4</sup>

#### 4. Give and Get

Make a routine of asking the following questions, where “got” could be something like had fun, got information, or got help with a challenge. “Gave” could be something like helped someone, participated fully, offered an idea, or gave full attention when listening.

- What’s something you got today in our advisory?
- What’s something you gave?

#### 5. One-Word Wraparounds

Close advisory sessions with one-word Wraparounds (visit [facinghistory.org/advisory-media](http://facinghistory.org/advisory-media) to learn about this teaching strategy), which are very fast go-rounds in a circle. For example, after giving advisees time to think, prompt them to say a word to describe how they’re feeling about their day or a word to describe how they are feeling about an upcoming event like the weekend, homecoming, exams, etc.

#### 6. Closing Challenge

Offer a challenge for advisees to do over the course of the next week. Check in about the “closing challenge” during opening or closing routines in the upcoming week.

Some possible challenges might include:

- Invite someone new to sit next to you in the cafeteria.
- Introduce yourself to your guidance counselor, homeroom teacher, coach, principal, etc.
- “Like” someone’s social media post in your advisory or at your school and add a positive comment.
- Invite someone you don’t know well to be on your team in PE or in your group in a class.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Alber, “6 Opening and Closing Routines for New Teachers,” *Edutopia*, August 17, 2016, accessed July 3, 2018, <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/6-opening-and-closing-routines-new-teachers-rebecca-alber>.

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Poliner, a national leader and author for advisory programs, contributed to this section.