

## Graffiti Board

Encourage your students to write messages of their own for the classroom community. A Graffiti Board can strengthen community, elevate student voice, connect to content, and show your students that you care about what is on their minds. Most of all, it demonstrates to students that you—the adult, the teacher—trust them: to be respectful, to figure out what to do with a big blank space without a teacher telling them, to be inclusive, to take the risk of sharing their thoughts publicly. By carefully implementing this activity, you communicate the expectation that students should embrace not only the freedom to speak (and write and draw), but also the responsibility to do so in a manner that builds, and does not tear down, their school community.

### What you will need:

*Time estimate:* Budget at least 15 minutes for the initial conversation

*Materials:* Butcher paper, tape/staples, markers, art supplies

### Directions:

1. *Set up:* Find a place to accommodate one sheet per day or week of the school year – on the walls, across the ceiling, in a publicly accessible scrapbook/ binder, etc. Find as large a space as you can create, on a wall in your classroom or in a hallway, for a Graffiti Board. It can be a blank bulletin board with a large piece of butcher paper covering it, or just a large piece of butcher paper taped to a wall. Make sure it's sturdy enough for lots of hands to touch it over a period of days and weeks. Put a crate with pens and/or thin markers nearby.
2. Designate this space for students to fill with whatever they choose: words; doodles; quotes from people they admire (or don't); excerpts from books or poems; their opinions about their school, their community, or their country; celebrations; frustrations; questions they want to pose to other students, teachers, local and national leaders, and on and on. The Graffiti Board should be entirely student-driven. Challenge yourself *not* to start with a prompt.
3. While the structure of this activity is extremely simple—big blank space, pens, see what happens—the implementation is complex. It's critical to lay the groundwork for the Graffiti Board activity before you begin it. Here are a few questions to consider incorporating into initial and ongoing conversations with your students:
  - What is graffiti? How does Webster's dictionary define it? How do others define it? (Try [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com); the Online Etymology Dictionary <http://www.etymonline.com/>; or Google the term.)
  - How do we make sure everyone (in our class, school, whichever group we are hoping will participate) feels comfortable writing on the Graffiti Board?
  - Should we sign our names next to the things we write or draw or can they be anonymous?
  - How do our class/school rules inform how we ought to use the Graffiti Board?
  - What could go wrong?

- What's the difference between provoking thought and offending people with perspectives different from mine?
  - Is there ever a situation in which we'd decide to take down the Graffiti Board?
  - What could go right?
  - What expectations can we establish for the use of our Graffiti Board that can maximize the things that go right and minimize the things that go wrong—and still make it fun? (Because it will not be fun if there are a thousand rules...)
  - When do your personal freedoms infringe on the freedoms of others?
  - Is it OK to take photos of the Graffiti Board and post them on social media? OR: Knowing that it's likely that photos will be taken of our Graffiti Board and shared beyond our school community, should we adjust any of the expectations we've developed for our use of the Graffiti Board?
  - Should adults be invited to contribute to the Graffiti Board or should it be for students only?
4. Once the Graffiti Board has been in use for a while, continue the conversation with the class:
- How is writing posting on the Graffiti Board the same as posting on social media? How is it different?
  - Revisit the question: What is graffiti? Has our understanding of the definition changed since we began writing on our Graffiti Board?
  - Has the Graffiti Board influenced any of your conversations—with other students, with adults, with people outside of school?
  - What is the difference between freedom and license?
5. Students should be able to write and respond to one another over a period of days, weeks, and even months. If you have multiple classes, you may choose to create one for each. You can leave them all visible, or unroll the Graffiti Board at the beginning of each period and roll it back up at the end. Capture each iteration.

## Resources

- In *Consider the Walls*, Professor Patricia Tarr gives guiding questions to educators as they analyze their classroom space. Among them, she asks: Do the posters invite participation and active involvement or passive reception of information (Shapiro & Kirby 1998)? [Learn more here.](#)
- Facing History uses the graffiti wall as a way to help students “hear” each other’s ideas. One variation is used to help students process after a powerful, emotional conversation, video, guest speaker, or reading. Read more at [their website.](#)