

Serial Testimony

Serial Testimony is an activity that doesn't focus on convincing others or winning an argument, but rather on sharing perspectives that can inform how participants view themselves and the wider world. It can help to establish or reinforce the respect and relational trust necessary for civil dialogue. Because it relies on strict adherence to time limits, Serial Testimony deploys what Peggy McIntosh calls "the autocratic administration of time in the service of democratic distribution of time." Serial Testimony:

- requires participants to speak for themselves.
- asks participants to speak about their own experiences, rather than their opinions.
- prevents the views of single individuals from becoming the focus of discussion.
- brings each person into the conversation, if they wish.
- establishes a predictable order for people to speak in.
- provides the opportunity for everyone in a group to hear a wide variety of perspectives in a comparatively short time.
- allows matters of difference and commonality to be seen side by side.
- prevents disagreement and argument.
- interferes with familiar "pecking orders" or patterns of domination and subordination in speaking.
- respects freely chosen silence.

PROCEDURE

1. Select a facilitator who will keep track of each speaker's time. (Usually one minute per speaker works well to start.) Facilitators may speak for no more than the same amount of time as other participants, or they may choose not to speak.
2. Determine a sequence for speaking. (Pretty straightforward if you're sitting in a circle, but requires a brief clarification for virtual meetings.)
3. Facilitator reviews ground rules:
 - Listen to each speaker in stillness.
 - Do not interrupt with comments, questions, or physical signs.
 - On your turn, you may choose to pass (i.e., keep listening).
 - Concentrate on what others are saying before your own turn comes, and immediately after your turn, tune back in, rather than wondering *How did I do?*
 - In speaking, stay with your experiences and feelings and reflections, not your opinions.
 - During your turn, do not refer to what others have said before you. Focus on contributing your own experience.
 - Keep your comments within the time allowance.
 - Use this activity to practice how to listen and reflect as well as to focus your speaking.
4. Facilitator shares the prompt or question.
5. All participants take a moment to consider, or write in response to the prompt or question.
6. The round begins with the first speaker and follows the determined sequence.
7. As each speaker nears the allotted time, the facilitator signals in some unobtrusive fashion (perhaps slowly raising the timer, if everyone can see that).

Depending on the needs of the group, one round may suffice, but a session might include five or six rounds. Participants may debrief on patterns participants have noticed in the testimony, or anything they wish to say about their experience of the process. However, the generalizations that Serial Testimony intentionally interrupts may quickly resurface here, so a prompt like "What was this go-round like for you?" keeps participants' attention on their own experience.

Adapted by Peter Horn from notes by Peggy McIntosh in *Teaching Tolerance* (Issue 46, Spring 2014)
<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-2014/toolkit-for-beyond-the-knapsack>.