



FLIPPING COMPLAINTS INTO GRATITUDE

"Live life as if everything is rigged in your favor."

—Rumi

OVERVIEW

Students practice turning complaints into gratitude statements, and learn they have a choice to replace negative thoughts with more positive and optimistic ones.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Anytime during the year

TIME REQUIRED

- 30 minutes

LEVEL

- Middle School

MATERIALS

- Index cards
- Blank paper
- Writing materials

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Practice turning complaints into gratitude statements

- Understand that in some situations, they have a choice to replace negative thoughts with more positive and optimistic ones

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to write down at least two complaints you might have. Now “flip” them into gratitude statements. For example:
 - I hate having to grade all these papers → I’m grateful that I have the opportunity to help students improve their writing skills, which will serve them greatly in their lives.
 - I can’t stand my commute home → I’m grateful for the time to breathe deeply and reflect on the day/listen to my favorite music or podcast or book-on-tape -- it’s time for me.
- How did this exercise make you feel?
- Gratitude can help us to reframe negative experiences as ones that may hold hidden opportunities for growth or learning -- and flipping complaints into gratitude statements helps develop our agency for choosing our attitude.

INSTRUCTIONS

THE PRACTICE

- Ask the class:
 - *What is a “complaint”?*
 - *Close your eyes and think back: Have you complained about anything today? This week?*
- Hand out a blank sheet of paper and ask students to list all the complaints they can recall making in the last week. If they have difficulty, they can list complaints they used to make or have heard. Ask:
 - *What are some examples of complaints you thought of?*
 - *Why do you think people complain about things?*
 - *Are there ever benefits to complaining?*
 - *What are some drawbacks of complaining?*

- Point out that complaining can be a way to get attention, to avoid taking responsibility for one's actions, or even to form connections with others who share our complaints.
- Complaining can sometimes result in a needed change being made in our environment or our relationships, or allow us to release feelings of frustration. However, complaining can also create negative habits of mind by focusing our attention on things that are unsatisfactory, rather than on what is good in any situation. Unless we turn our frustration into positive action, "venting" our negative emotions may not make them go away; in fact, it may cause them to increase.
- Explain:
 - *We are going to practice "flipping" complaints into gratitude statements.*
 - *Some examples of what this might sound like:*
 - *Complaint: "I hate having to study for the math test!"*
 - *Gratitude Statement: "I'm grateful that I'll be able to show how much I've learned this year."*
 - *Complaint: "I can't believe we're having that disgusting pasta for lunch again!"*
 - *Gratitude Statement: "I'm grateful that I'll have enough to eat so that I won't feel hungry during the afternoon!"*
- Give each student two index cards, and ask them to write two of the complaints that they listed earlier, one complaint per card. Tell the students:
 - *Now, form pairs and exchange one of your complaint cards.*
 - *The person who receives the complaint card must flip it over, and write on the back of the card a gratitude statement, one that turns the negative view of the situation into a positive view.*
 - *When each person has written a gratitude statement, read it out loud to your partner.*
 - *Now, look at these gratitude statements.*
 - *Do they make sense?*
 - *Is there really something you could choose to be grateful for in this situation?*
 - *Can you come up with another gratitude statement for this situation?*
 - *Return the cards to their original owner.*
 - *Next, look at your second complaint card.*
 - *This time, write a gratitude statement on the back of your own card.*
 - *Once you have done that, read the original complaint and the new gratitude statement to your partner.*
- Bring the class together and ask for a few volunteers to share their complaints and reframed gratitude statements.
- Ask:
 - *Was "flipping" the complaints into gratitude statements easy or difficult to do? Why?*
 - *What might be some reasons to try to "flip" complaints?*
 - *For some people, complaining can become a habit. What do we have to do to change a habit?*

CLOSURE

Ask students to reflect on how it felt to change complaints into gratitude statements. What emotions came up? Did they notice a change in their attitudes towards situations or people? How could they encourage friends and family to flip from complaints to gratitude?

EXTENSIONS

One way to break a habit is to create a physical reminder of the behavior you are trying to change. An example would be to wear an elastic band on your right wrist. When you notice that you are complaining, you must take the band off and move it to your left wrist. The next time you notice you are about to complain and do something else instead (either not expressing the complaint, or expressing gratitude instead), you can move the band back to your right wrist. The goal is to keep the band on your right wrist for an entire day. Then try to extend that to an entire week. Write about the activity and your observations at the end of the week.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

Do you notice if, after this practice, students are complaining less and instead seeing the “good” in situations?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A recent study found that [pet peeves](#)--or complaints about specific events--in romantic relationships were negatively related to a person’s well-being and relationship satisfaction. In contrast--and perhaps as an antidote to pet peeves--another study found that [using gratitude to positively reframe a situation](#) leads to fewer depressive symptoms.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Scientists suggest that [complaining](#) is a way to take responsibility off ourselves, providing the comforting response that we crave when we fail or are disappointed.

When students are faced with a difficult situation that they either have no control over or that may reflect badly on them, educators have a golden opportunity to help them change how they view the situation by reframing the situation in a more positive light.

This, in turn, may help to boost students’ positive emotions, helping them to put [more effort](#) into overcoming obstacles, [engage](#) in classroom activities more, and be [less stressed at school](#).

SOURCE

“[Nurturing Gratitude From the Inside Out: 30 Activities for Grades K–8](#)” was originally developed by [The Inner Resilience Program](#), in partnership with the Greater Good Science Center and the John Templeton Foundation. For the entire curriculum, [click here](#).