



# Lot's TALK

Pluralist Lab

CONVERSATION  
GUIDE

# About the Let's Talk: Pluralist Lab Format

Originally developed by the Program on Pluralism and Civil Exchange at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, the Pluralist Lab format is now offered as one of the resources available in FIRE's Let's Talk program.

Pluralist Lab activities, such as workshops, forums, reading groups, salons, and conversational dinners, build competency in civil discourse and encourage mutual understanding across lines of difference. Like all Let's Talk programming, the goal is not to "win" a debate or change minds, but to practice candid, reflective dialogue rooted in epistemic humility and curiosity.

Participants are expected to embrace the core Pluralist Lab principles of **curiosity, authenticity, and respect**, as well as practice Let's Talk heat-level escalation strategies that build up to questions that challenge assumptions and raise the emotional stakes. These workshops create the conditions for "I never thought of it that way" moments and give students the tools they need to build pluralistic, trust-based communities. The aim is to create space for empathy and understanding, encouraging participants to recognize the humanity behind differing perspectives and to challenge their own biases.

The Pluralist Lab format often works best in a half-day introductory workshop where participants can engage in meaningful conversations, explore different perspectives, and develop the skills integral to civil discourse. The workshop consists of structured and facilitated sessions and informal and unmoderated sessions. Drawing on techniques used in focus groups and marriage counseling, trained facilitators guide participants through innovative exercises to frame the conversation in productive ways.

These workshops primarily target university students, but they can be adapted to suit a variety of audiences

and environments, from schools and faith-based communities to civic organizations and businesses. FIRE can provide tools and templates for marketing, planning, and execution. [The Pluralist Lab](#) has trained hosts and facilitators — including FIRE staff — to conduct these workshops around the country.

Participating in an introductory workshop is a first step in building civil discourse skills and becoming a "[confident pluralist](#)." Through repeated practice, civil discourse skills become second nature for participants who model confident pluralism and can help others do the same.

We're developing a new generation of institutional leaders — people who model and embrace both "[inclusion and dissent](#)" and, through their spheres of influence, bring us toward a more pluralistic society. We are delighted to have you join us in this experiment and look forward to the time ahead!

## Theory of Change

Our theory of change combines reasoning from several distinct pedagogies.

**Contact theory**, especially as articulated by Tripp and Pettigrew's latest findings, holds that all that is needed for greater understanding between conflicting groups is contact. Rather than endless diversity training, what really moves people is positive, personal connections.<sup>1</sup>

**Kolb's model of learning** informs us that we need a cycle of opportunities to **watch and think** as well as **practice and feel** for abstract concepts to stick.

**Virtue development** reminds us of the importance of surrounding yourself with a community of fellow learners when adopting a new skill or habit.

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see "[The Contact Hypothesis Offers Hope for the World](#)" and "[All you need is contact](#)."

# Let's Talk: Pluralist Lab Introductory Workshop Essentials

To ensure consistency and uphold the standards of our program, the elements below are required for any introductory workshop to use the name "Let's Talk: Pluralist Lab Introductory Workshop."

Pluralist Lab exercises and techniques that are adapted and do not include all the essential elements below will not be considered an official "Let's Talk: Pluralist Lab Introductory Workshop." Adaptations should indicate they are "based on techniques and exercises developed by the Mercatus Center, The Pluralist Lab, and FIRE's Let's Talk Program."

The Introductory Workshop includes two structured and facilitated sessions and two informal, unmoderated conversations. It is typically hosted in small groups (7-10 participants), with at least one trained facilitator present. A private, quiet setting with a table is required.

## REQUIRED CORE ELEMENTS

To be considered an official "Let's Talk: Pluralist Lab Introductory Workshop," the following must be included:

### 1 Opening Commitments & Rules of the Game

The session begins with a group commitment to uphold the shared principles:

- Use the [Chatham House Rule](#): share ideas, not identities.
- Use first names and speak one at a time.
- Put away cell phones to stay fully present.

### 2 Facilitators should emphasize the ethos of pluralism

Embrace dissent and inclusion in equal measure. Consider quoting from the [Let's Talk: Leader Moderation Guide](#): "Civil discourse involves a mutual airing of views without spite. It is not a contest, but it is intended to promote greater understanding."

### 3 Informal Conversations

Informal moments — over snacks or meals — play a powerful role in building trust. Plan for 30 minutes at the beginning and end of each session to allow participants to build rapport organically. These connections often deepen the impact of structured discussions.

### 4 Facilitated Exercises

These three core exercises guide the group experience:

- **Triadic Illumination Exercise** Participants select one of two polarizing responses to a prompt and explain both their own choice and why someone else might choose differently. This conversation style helps build empathy. (See Let's Talk's [Think Clearly, Speak Clearly](#) guide for help on articulating strong arguments with intellectual humility.)
- **Reflective Writing Exercise** After the initial conversation, participants write down keywords or emotional responses that stood out. This reflection helps internalize what was heard and builds the foundation for further understanding.
- **Two Things / One Thing Exercise** To close, participants share two things they learned and one thing they're still unsure about. This encourages continuous inquiry and helps facilitators assess impact.

## FACILITATOR EXPECTATIONS

Facilitators using the Pluralist Lab format must have received facilitator training by a certified Pluralist Lab trainer. Facilitators are not content experts or debaters, but guardians of process — ensuring that each voice is heard and that conversation remains grounded in respect. They should possess the skills necessary to manage diverse groups and to encourage respectful dialogue throughout the workshop. The facilitator's role is crucial in maintaining the workshop's structure and ensuring that all participants feel heard and respected.

From the [Let's Talk: Start Up Guide](#):

*"When I engage in discussions on controversial topics with other members of this group, I will allow them to state their own views and treat them with respect and dignity, even if I disagree with them [...] I will not attack others personally, insult them, call them names, or otherwise impugn their character. I understand that the goal of Let's Talk is to provide a space for students of all viewpoints to share their perspectives, and I promise to do my utmost to ensure that people of all points of view feel safe expressing their opinions. I will welcome new participants and will actively encourage others on campus to come to discussions."*

*Please note: The only way to receive the full collection of Pluralist Lab resources (including key documents for hosting workshops which are not posted online), is to receive facilitator training by a certified Pluralist Lab trainer.*

## PARTICIPANT DIVERSITY

Workshops should include a variety of backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences. Intellectual diversity — across ideology, discipline, identity, and worldview — is essential to the program's success.

## A NOTE ON LONG-TERM GOALS

FIRE believes students are not just participants in civil discourse — they are future advocates, leaders, and defenders of free expression. As we state in the [Let's Talk: Start Up Guide](#):

*"While Let's Talk groups have no formal connection with FIRE and will vary in size and structure, FIRE is here to provide guidance and resources. We have a team of experts at your disposal who can help decode and demystify your school's policies, help you talk to administrators, and offer any other needed advice. Let's Talk groups are powerful tools for on-campus mobilization, bringing together supporters of free speech on campus who can actively fight to preserve expression rights for students and faculty [...] FIRE's Let's Talk program provides students with tools to work towards a more intellectually-open campus environment."*

By hosting or facilitating a Let's Talk: Pluralist Lab event, you're helping to create the conditions for open discourse to flourish.

Most importantly, by engaging with FIRE's Let's Talk program, you can equip yourself with the tools necessary to stand up for free speech when it is under attack. Let's Talk groups are FIRE's partners on the ground for on-campus mobilization in the event of a controversy and often spearhead policy reform initiatives. Reach out to [mobilization.team@thefire.org](mailto:mobilization.team@thefire.org) to learn more.

**Thank you for being part of this work.**

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The next several pages include space to reflect on several sample topical questions from the "[Topical Questions and Responses](#)" resource and are designed to work in conjunction with the "[Triadic Illumination Exercise](#)" format.







# Reflective Writing Exercise

**MY TOP SEVEN WORDS:**

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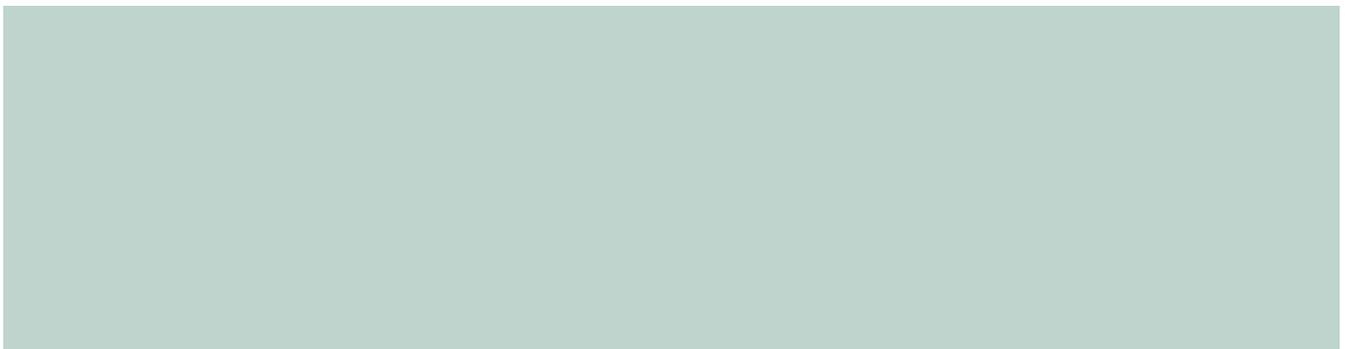
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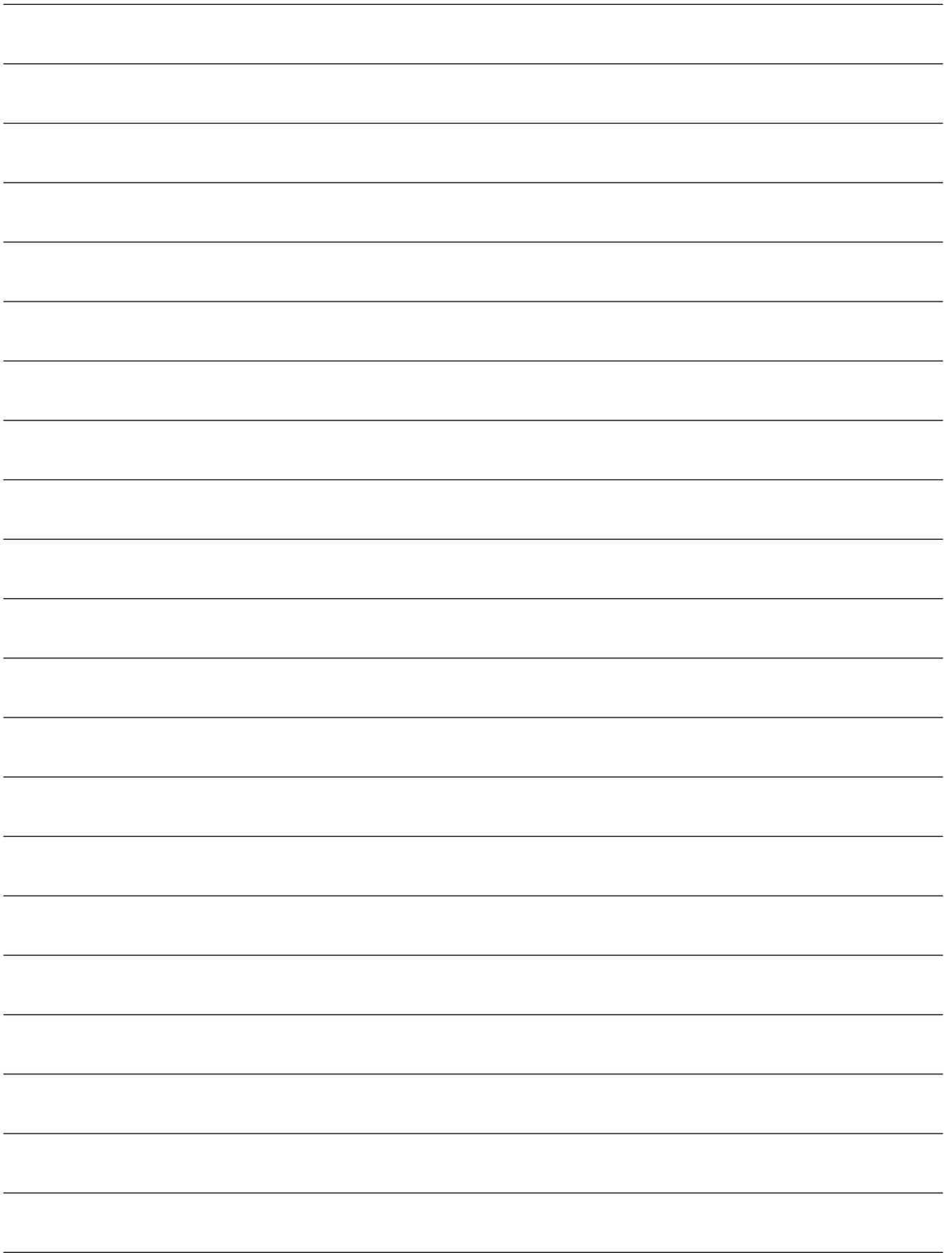
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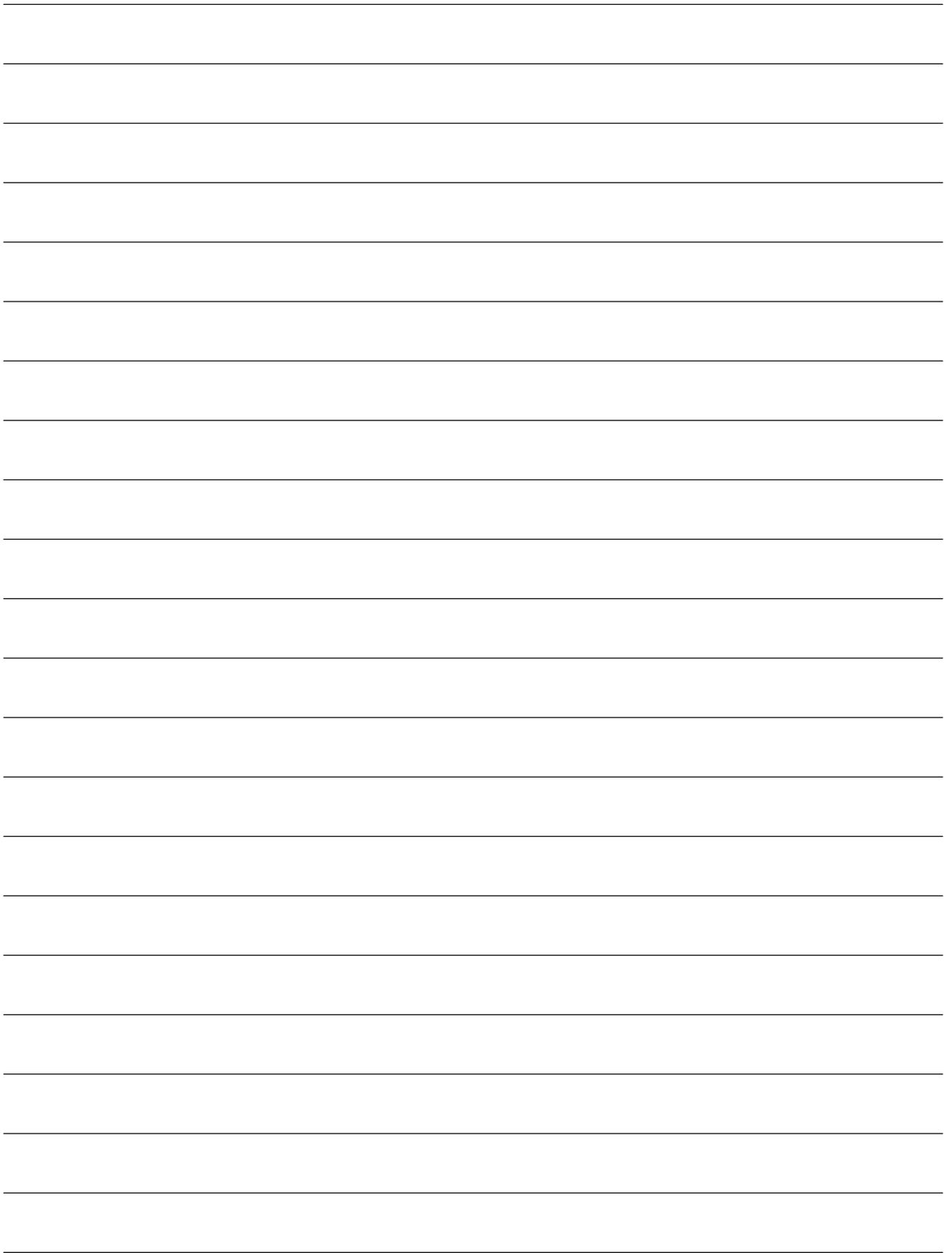
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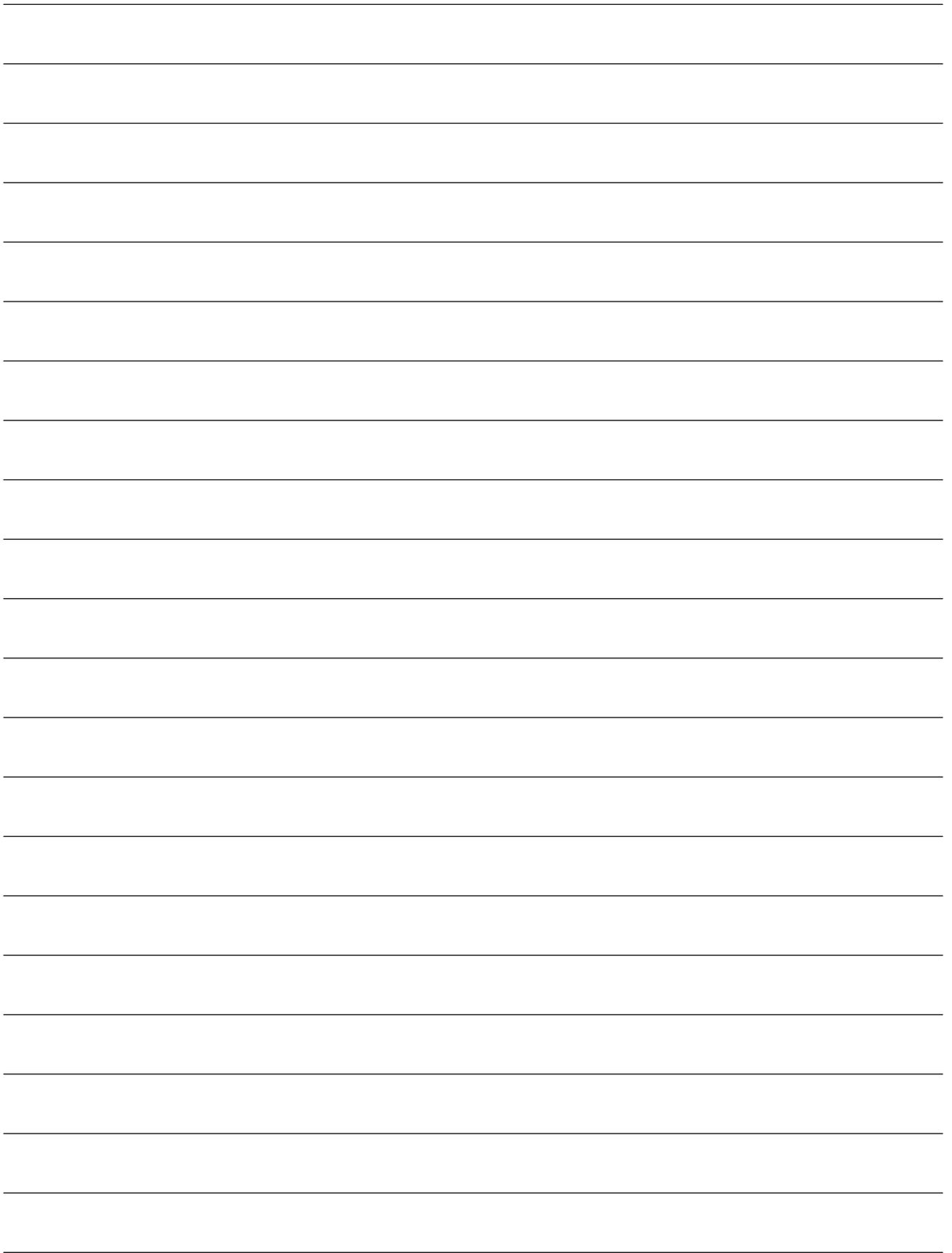
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**MY TWO WORDS TO WRITE AND DISCUSS. . .**











## How FIRE can help

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We are counting on you to help cultivate a culture of free speech on your campus! FIRE is here to provide guidance and resources. We have a team of experts at your disposal who can help decode and demystify your school's policies, help you talk to administrators, and offer advice on tricky free speech questions. Additionally, we can send guides, literature, speakers, and FIRE materials. Please do not hesitate to contact us with questions. We are here to help!

