Sprint retrospective ideas: formats that keep retros useful

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The Sprint Retrospective is where a team plans how to improve its quality and effectiveness. Most retros fail for one of two reasons: the same format every time until people stop thinking, or actions that are agreed and then forgotten. A few varied formats and a strict rule about actions fix both.

TL;DR The short version

- Retrospectives fail when the format never changes or when agreed actions are forgotten.
- Use a steady structure, rotate formats such as Start, Stop, Continue or Mad, Sad, Glad, and keep it safe to raise real problems.
- Limit the team to one or two small actions that can be finished in the next Sprint.

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A reliable structure

1. **Set the stage:** a quick check-in so everyone speaks early.
2. **Gather data:** what happened this Sprint, including facts such as incidents, carried-over items and cycle time.
3. **Generate insights:** why did it happen?
4. **Decide what to do:** one or two concrete improvements, each with an owner.
5. **Close:** a quick check on whether the retro itself was useful.

Formats to rotate

- **Start, Stop, Continue:** simple and quick, good for new teams.
- **Mad, Sad, Glad:** brings out feelings that facts miss.
- **4Ls (Liked, Learned, Lacked, Longed for):** balanced and forward-looking.
- **Sailboat:** wind (what helped), anchors (what slowed us), rocks (risks ahead), island (the goal).
- **Timeline:** plot the Sprint day by day and mark highs and lows; good after a difficult Sprint or incident.
- **Five Whys:** take one problem and ask why until you reach a cause you can act on.
- **Data retro:** start from a chart, such as cycle time or deployments, and ask what explains it.

Making actions stick

- Limit to one or two actions. Ten actions means none.
- Make each small enough to finish within the next Sprint.

- Give each a single owner.
- Put actions in the Sprint Backlog, as the 2020 Scrum Guide suggests the most impactful improvements may be.
- Start the next retro by checking the last actions.

Safety first

People only raise real problems if it is safe to do so. Keep managers out unless the team invites them, focus on systems rather than individuals, and never use retro notes against anyone. The same principle drives the blameless postmortem.

Remote retros

Use a shared board, give silent writing time before discussion so quieter people contribute, and keep cameras optional. Timebox tightly: the Guide caps the Retrospective at three hours for a one-month Sprint, and shorter Sprints usually need less.

> Related credential: Agile Delivery Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. Schwaber, K. and Sutherland, J. (2020). The Scrum Guide. scrumguides.org.

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