

# Classroom Debates

*By having students discuss and organize their points of view for one side of an argument they are able to discover new information and put knowledge into action.*

Using debates in the classroom provide students the opportunity to work in a collaborative and cooperative group setting. By having students discuss and organize their points of view for one side of an argument they are able to discover new information and put knowledge into action. Classroom debates help students learn through friendly competition, examine controversial topics and “strengthen skills in the areas of leadership, interpersonal influence, teambuilding, group problem solving, and oral presentation” (Leuser, n.d., para. 1).

Debates can be used in all disciplines on a wide range of topics. Table 1 illustrates examples of subject matter topics for debate which can easily be adapted for a variety of subject areas.

Table 1

<b>Arts</b> There should no restrictions upon artistic expression	<b>English</b> Language is not a skill
<b>Business</b> Corporations should be abolished	<b>Geology</b> Mountain top mining is good for the economy
<b>Education</b> Intelligence testing is without value	<b>Health</b> There is nothing morally wrong with doing drugs
<b>Engineering</b> Only bridges over waterways need to be routinely inspected	<b>Math</b> Elementary school mathematics should be confined largely to arithmetic
<b>Sociology</b> It is morally okay to break laws you don't agree with	<b>Science</b> The theory of evolution is based on both science and faith

## Debate Format

Teams work well for classroom debates but two students can be paired as well. Adapt the following format to fit your specific goals and objectives. Adding a third, shorter round will allow teams to further defend their arguments.

Alternatively, have all students prepare both a pro and con position for a designated class session. During this class period two teams are randomly selected who will then state their arguments. The other students will contribute differing remarks and suggestions for a more active and well-prepared class discussion.

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Table 2

<b>Round One Team One</b>	Presentation of “Pro/positive” or “Arguments for”	10 minutes
<b>Team Two</b>	Presentation of “Con/negative” or “Arguments against”	10 minutes
<b>Team Discussion Period</b>	This period is used for teams to prepare their responses	5 minutes
<b>Round Two Team One</b>	Response or rebuttal of “Pro/positive” or “Arguments for”	5 minutes
<b>Team Two</b>	Response or rebuttal of “Con/negative” or “Arguments against”	5 minutes

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...

**Whole Class Discussion**

To determine which team provided the most convincing arguments. A vote can be taken or a more detailed evaluation form can be used to assess each team. (10-15 minutes)

*Note:* Explain to the students that the success behind using debates in the classroom is not in winning and losing but rather how well teams prepared for and delivered their arguments and get potential buy-in from those who help the opposite point-of view.

1. Prepare guidelines and a set of rules to assist students as they prepare for the debate.
  - a. Include a time frame in which they have to prepare for the debate and how they are to present their material.
  - b. Allow non-debate students to be adjudicators to help them learn how to be objective in rating their peers’ performance.
  - c. Determine if non-debating students will be allowed to vote.
2. Provide resources which will help students learn about debates and their structure. Consider holding a practice debate to help students understand the process.
3. Consider having students prepare brief “position papers” which also includes their reaction to the debate process and how they were able to reach consensus in their team’s arguments.
4. Select the format you plan to use: teams, individual students, all students (see format above).
5. Research controversial, news-breaking and stimulating topics to encourage dynamic and energized classroom discussion. Students are more likely to be authentic when they debate a subject to which they can relate.
6. Review the debate process previously established and ask for questions and clarifications on the day of the debate,
7. Prepare rating rubrics and distribute to adjudicators before the debate begins.
8. Begin the debate, giving students as much autonomy as possible.

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9. Facilitate classroom discussion and debrief the process at the end of the debate.
10. Distribute both student and instructor evaluations to the teams.
11. Have a plan in place if the debate gets “hot” and students argue instead of debate. Review guidelines before the debate begins to minimize inappropriate discussion and behavior. Also, getting to know your students through observation and actively listening to their classroom conversations can provide helpful information when selecting topics for debate.

### **Summary**

Using debates in the classroom provides students the opportunity to explore real-world topics and issues. Debates also engage students through self reflection and encourage them to learn from their peers. Finally, debates prepare students to be more comfortable engaging in dialogue related to their beliefs as well as their areas of study.

### **Reference**

Leuser, D. (n.d.). *Classroom debates*.

<http://oz.plymouth.edu/~davidl/bu342/Debates.DOC>

### **Selected Resources**

*Classroom debates: A one page tutorial*. (n.d.).

<http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/DE/PD/instr/strats/debates/tutorial.pdf>

University of California - Berkley. (1983). Using classroom debates.

<http://teaching.berkeley.edu/compendium/suggestions/file181.html>