

Debate in the Classroom

What is debate?

For the purpose of this document, debate is a topic-focused speaking competition between teams. Participants act as themselves, not as imagined selves or simulated others. The teams should have ample time to prepare. While impromptu debates can be excellent ways to synthesize the content of a course, the focus of this document is on prepared, research-based debates.

Why debate?

Debating is an excellent vehicle for learning through experience.

- *Preparation:* Students work with a team (or partner) to develop their positions - research responsibilities are divided, arguments are invented, answers to opposing positions are readied.
- *Focus:* Debating requires careful listening. Participants are compelled to take notes and draft responses simultaneously. Debate demands that speakers think on their feet, as their prepared remarks might need tweaking or they might be required to answer an on-the-spot question. Debate also offers an important, comparative form of immediate feedback. A post-debate critique is an excellent opportunity to illustrate the ways the various student contributions interacted with/connected to one another, to reinforce course material, and to push students to work on specific presentation skills.

Research suggests that debating improves academic skills and performance¹ particularly for at-risk U.S. students.² Teachers often find students more engaged during debates, and discussion from in-class debates often extends outside of the classroom. Debate has benefits across the curriculum³, and can give ESL/EFL⁴ students the communication experience that can most assist with learning in English-language classrooms.

How to stage a classroom debate

- *Consider your purpose:* What goals are most important for your class? How important will a written component be? Will you use this as an opportunity for students to research outside of the normal course reading, or will this be more of a way to reinforce the course reading itself?
- *Choose a topic:* In-class debates normally focus on contentious issues that are directly related to the course lectures, seminars and readings. Are human rights universal? Is there such a thing as global citizenship? Should non-citizens have the right to vote? Is nuclear power a safe energy alternative? Exactly what you assign is related to your goals, but you will likely find that topics that depart from the status quo (especially focused on a particular course of action) are the easiest for students to prepare. A good topic will be one sentence in length, and will clearly (and equitably) divide the available arguments between sides. There are three general types of topics you might set:
 - *Fact* – is something true? (Democracy requires a clear separation of church from state.)
 - *Value* – which world should we prefer? (When they are in conflict, individual liberties should take priority over national security.)
 - *Policy* – what should we do in the face of a problem? (The European Union should admit Turkey.)
- *Assign research:* Debate encourages research skills. You might assign some relevant readings to the debaters and the entire class, but also encourage debaters to conduct their own supplemental research. This research might be reflected in writing assignments associated with the debate.
- *Assign teams:* Whatever process you use to determine teams (you select, students select, selection is random), you should consider how it will relate to the way you determine who takes what side in the debate. It's likely that not everyone will get what they want, potentially forcing some to defend a side with which they disagree. You should consider this possibility carefully when drafting a topic. There are definitely ways for students to defend positions with which they disagree while also not being forced to speak against their core beliefs. You should also consider whether you will allow students to select their speaking positions on their teams, or whether you will select their positions for them.
- *Choose a format:* The most important consideration when determining how you will format a debate is time. You should make sure you have enough class time to set up the room, hold the debate, and provide feedback. You should also expect that something will go wrong, and attempt to account for various eventualities. In general, the following guidelines should assist in keeping things as simple as possible:
 - *Individual speeches* – Each speaker should speak one time, and each speech should be the same total length. Speeches should be engaging, and should combine the delivery of prepared material with some impromptu interaction with what is actually happening in the debate. Students should be encouraged to quote and or

paraphrase from relevant research, and should verbally cite sources as appropriate. Speeches should have obvious structure, and ideally speakers will preview that structure near the beginning of their remarks.

- *Questions during the debate* – Speakers should field questions from other debate participants. Questions might take the form of Points of Information (find more here: <http://howtodebate.blogspot.com/2014/09/points-of-information-definition-and.html>) or could come in a short cross-examination period after each speaker (You can read more about cross examination at <http://www.speaking.pitt.edu/student/public-speaking/crossexamination.html>.)
- *Q&A* – Incorporating audience Q&A is a great way to include student audience members in the discussion. Using the time immediately following the debate for audience questions can further the conversation in a variety of ways, and it may also provide you a moment to collect your thoughts before providing your feedback. If you choose to include a proper Q&A period, make sure to organize it ahead of time. If you will not moderate Q&A, consider selecting a student to do it so that it is organized and productive.
- *Evaluate and debrief* – Debating provides a unique opportunity for immediate feedback and learning. You are able to speak comparatively about the contributions of multiple students, to highlight critical interactions between and among arguments, and to have the attention of multiple students who will desire critique. Consider announcing a winning side and providing the reason(s) for your decision. Don't forget to involve the audience as well, especially as you focus on things related directly to key course material.

Grading

Obviously, you will know what works best for you and your students. Because debating brings together so many various tasks, you should ensure that the instructions you give are completely clear. Here are some suggestions to consider when developing a debate assignment:

- *Content vs. style* – Style and delivery are often too subjective to emphasize when grading, especially in a classroom with ESL learners or others who find speaking particularly challenging. Emphasizing organization and content as the essential components of your grading can help level the field, ensuring that those who are less skilled in impromptu speaking or are less proficient in English can feel like they have the opportunity to excel.
- *Speaking vs. writing* – Speaking and writing can be mutually reinforcing for student learning, and combining written and oral work can provide a failsafe for those occasional moments when someone is unable to execute a speech. A written assignment can indicate that the student prepared and thought through the material, and can allow students to feel they have the opportunity to make some mistakes (or brilliant moves) when speaking without the fear of failure.
- *Individual vs. group* – Sometimes individuals let down their teams. When this happens, students need to know that their grades are not negatively impacted by their teammates' failures. This is a reason to consider determining and announcing a winner. The competition incentivizes teamwork, but the failure of a team to work is not a failure of the student to excel. A team might lose because an individual let them down, or might win because they were a great team, but their individual grades would be a separate consideration. An individual could lose as part of a team, and simultaneously earn the best grade in the class on the assignment.
- *Equity* – Speakers will fill different roles based on their positions in the debate. A first speaker, for example, would need to do all of the introductory work to set up the debate, whereas the last speaker on a side would need to explain and evaluate what happened in the debate. This fact underscores the importance of clarifying the expectations (in terms of role or tasks) of each speaker position. You should attempt to give speakers somewhat equal (albeit different) tasks relative to one another, in both difficulty and total number.
- *Feedback* – Consider the privacy concerns of students (as well as their feelings) when providing immediate oral feedback. Ground your remarks in the content and relationships among arguments, but avoid highlighting individual failures that could indicate a given student's potential grade. If you comment on the result of the debate during your immediate feedback, explain it more in terms of why a team won than why a team lost.
- *Debater vs. audience* – The audience might be included in a graded way, such as a written evaluation of the debate. They might also be tasked with providing oral feedback or participating in a Q&A session. Whatever the role of the audience member it is likely to be less stressful than the role of debater, thus protecting the performance of speakers should be primary. Advise the audience to avoid interrupting speakers in minor ways (with technology, when leaving or entering the room, etc.), and also to avoid interrupting speakers in more disturbing ways (heckling, non-verbal exaggerations, vocal disagreement). Clarify the acceptable and encouraged behaviors of audience members, such as applauding after speeches or taking notes throughout the debate.

¹ A meta-analysis of the impact of forensics and communication education on critical thinking
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<https://www.wfu.edu/debate/MiscSites/MetaArticle1999.doc>

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https://www.rowlandhall.org/uploaded/PDFs/Debate/Benefits_of_Debate_-_Skills.pdf

The Value of Speech, Debate and Theater Activities: Making the Case for Forensics. Kevin Minch. NFHS Publication, 2006.
http://www.wiaa.com/ConDocs/Con536/Making_the_Case_for_Forensics.pdf

² Urban Debate and High School Educational Outcomes for African American Males: The Case of the Chicago Debate League by Briana Mezuk, University of Michigan. The Journal of Negro Education, Volume 78, No. 3, Academic Success for School-Age Black Males (Summer 2009) pp. 290-304.

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³ A research-based justification for Debate Across the Curriculum, Joe Bellon, Argumentation and Advocacy 36 (Winter 2000) pp. 161-175.
<https://malcolmxdebates.files.wordpress.com/2009/02/bellon-debate-across-the-curriculum.pdf>

⁴ Academic Listening and Speaking Tasks for ESL Students: Problems, Suggestions and Implications, Dana Ferris and Tracy Tagg. TESOL Quarterly, Volume 30, No. 2 (Summer 1996), pp. 297-320.

Using Debate in EFL Classes, Ali Alasmari & Sayed Salahuddin Ahmed, English Language Teaching, Volume 6, No. 1, 2013.