



Debate

What is Debate?

A debate involves students in researching and analyzing a controversial topic based on a stance which will lead to a series of oral presentation of standpoints and arguments by the two opposite teams (sometimes may involve interaction with the audience as well).

Structure of Debate

Participants

Generally, the participants in a debate consist of three groups: a team which stands for the debate topic ('the affirmative team'), a team stands against the debate topic ('the negative team'), and a group of audiences.

For the two debating teams, they need to:

1. research materials/information/resources relevant to the debate topic
2. synthesize and analyze their researched materials for building up their arguments
3. demonstrate their ability and critical attitude to integrate knowledge into the discussion of the debate topic

Students who are not in the debate teams could be asked to chart the debate's progress, take notes of the main points, and compare the strength of arguments and rebuttals.

Teachers also play an important role in running debates. They may have to be the hosts of the debate, and ensure the debate is running at an appropriate pace. They also need to assess the performance of the students during the debate, and provide feedback to enhance their learning afterwards.

The flow of a debate

Each debate team normally consists of 3 or 4 members, with the captain initiating the motions and presenting the summaries. The other team members will assist in the development of arguments, take notes on the opposing arguments delivered by the opposing team, and brainstorm ideas and questions for rebuttals as the debate proceeds.

A normal flow of a debate:

1. The affirmative team captain begins by introducing the debate, and defines the motion by stating what his/her team understands by the motion. He will then introduce the team members and outline the perspectives they plan to approach the issue in question. He will then start raising the first argument for the motion.
2. There should be no interruption from the opposing team during the speeches, and each person is given a strict time limit to speak.
3. The captain of the team arguing against the motion would then do the same as the other captain, except that he/she would be raising the argument against the motion.




4. The debate would then proceed by having the team members presenting their arguments and rebuttals: Affirmative Member 1, Negative Member 1, Affirmative Member 2, Negative Member 2, Affirmative Member 3, Negative Member 3...
5. After the team members finished their presentations, the captain of the Negative team would give a summary, in which no new material is allowed to be added at this stage. The captain of the Affirmative team will then give the summary for his team.
6. The host may allow some time for the two teams to challenge each other's perspectives. This must be carefully facilitated by the host.
7. Depending on the teacher's preference, the debate can be concluded at this point, or can be followed by a further discussion session where all participants can express their opinions freely.
8. As part of the marking scheme, the host can ask the audiences for a show of hand to see if they have changed their viewpoints after the debate.

Organization of a debate

Debates can be organized in various ways. For example,

1. To ask students to prepare information on both sides of the topic, and they will only know which side they will be on the day of the debate (Students have the chance to look at different sides of an issue)
2. To invite one or two winning students from previous years to join the debate teams (More support and exchange of experiences in searching information, formulating arguments and rebuttals)
3. To ask students to argue for the side which they oppose to (This helps students to critically think about the flaws of their own beliefs)
4. To arrange a questioning session for the audiences (audience may have other ideas that may not have been mentioned during the debate)
5. Debates can be video-taped for students (can be used for self-assessment, peer-assessment of the performance among students, and for teachers to give some feedback to students)

Y	Declarative	
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Y	Functioning
	Take Time to Set
Y	Take Time to Answer
	Take Time to Correct
	Take Time to provide Feedback
	Suitable for Large Class
	Can substitute with Computers
	Passive
Y	Active
Y	Process Oriented Method
	Product Oriented Method

P = Possibly Y =Yes

Advantages of Debate

- Allow students to look at both sides of an issue
- Improve students' communication and expression skills in a public setting
- Enhance techniques of searching information
- Improve skills for gathering, evaluating and synthesizing data from various sources in order to develop arguments
- Foster appreciation of opposing viewpoints
- Enhance debating/arguing techniques against opposing opinions
- Allow more interactive exchange among students and teachers

Disadvantages of Debate

- Students may not be familiar with debates as an assessment method
- Debates are time-consuming (e.g. time for research and preparation, time for presentation of each group)
- Students who do not like public speaking would be less motivated in participating

How to design a good debate assessment?

1. Discuss the concept of 'debate' with students (such as how does debate contribute to the teaching and learning process?).
2. Set up an interesting debate topic for students.
3. Allocate students into different groups ('affirmative' and 'negative' groups, and audiences), ensure every student has a role.
4. Ensure there is division of work among students (e.g. selecting a team member to jot down and summarize the main points in the debate, and audience students can serve as scorers of debate)
5. Encourage students to prepare arguments for both sides
6. Consider the length of the debate



7. Set up rules for the debate
8. After the debate, ask students to write an essay to reflect their own opinions and the knowledge gained through the debate

Marking Rubrics

MARKING RUBRICS	Excellent	Proficient	Average	Poor
Preparation:	Prepared a very broad scope of information and deep, critical analysis of the given topic; information is collected from a wide range of sources and perspectives which effectively contribute to development of arguments	Satisfactory preparation of information and analysis for the given topic; major issues about the topic was well covered	Demonstrated preparation for the basic information of the given topic, but no evidence of analysis coming from the student was shown	Failed to prepare even the basic and essential information of the given topic
Organization and Presentation	Logical flow in the presentation of arguments; information organized in a coherent manner; powerful and persuasive presentation	Generally clear flow of arguments; presentation is persuasive but with minor problems	Able to give the basic framework of the presented ideas, but lack of persuasive power	Information not appropriately digested; presented without any focus; chaotic flow
Use of Arguments	Plenty of very strong and persuasive arguments	Many fairly strong arguments but a few are not persuasive	Arguments are generally on the right track but not convincing and strong enough	Arguments are not significant and even irrelevant to the debate topic
Rebuttal	Excellent defense and attack against the opposite side; able to identify the weakness of the opposite side	Satisfactory defense and attack against the opposite side; attempted to find out weakness of the opposite side	Fail to defense for some issues; a few successful attack against the opposite side	Fail to defense against the opposite side; unable to attack the opposite side in most of the issues

Web References and Resources

- Field Trip Earth: Educator Resources: Debates
<http://www.fieldtripearth.org/strategy.xml?id=6>
- Debate Grading Rubric, California State University Northridge
<http://www.csun.edu/~ds56723/phil338/hout338rubric.htm>



- Group Debate Guidelines, Course MGT341 Contemporary Ethical Issues in Business, Culverhouse College of Commerce
<http://www.cba.ua.edu/~dford/Group%20Debate.htm>
- Fallahi & Haney (2007). Using debate in helping students discuss controversial topics. *Journal of College Teaching and Learning*, 4, 83-88.
<http://www.cluteinstitute-onlinejournals.com/PDFs/515.pdf>

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