

# Classroom Debates Made Easy

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Are you reluctant to hold a debate in your class because you are not sure how to organize one? Are you afraid a debate could turn into a “free-for-all”? Or perhaps you don’t know how to ensure an intelligent discussion among middle school students. Maybe you are already pressed for time and fear that a debate would take up too much time for preparation and follow-through. For years, I wanted to conduct debates in my classrooms, and for years I avoided them. When I finally decided to take the plunge, I “winged” it. After much trial and error, I am finally satisfied with my classroom debates.

Debates are exciting and rewarding, for both teacher and students.<sup>1</sup> Today, debates are my students’ favorite activity. I can conduct a quick and engaging whole-class debate through one homework assignment and one class period, or a more thorough debate over several class periods.

## Setting Objectives

The approach you choose will depend upon your objectives. If you want a whetting of appetites for a new unit, or a break in the routine, or an alternative assessment at the end of a unit, a speedy debate can work. If you are aiming to teach research skills, analysis of bias, persuasive writing, and more in-depth coverage of content, a lengthier whole-class debate is in order. If teamwork, cooperation, and more individual accountability are your goals, a debate between teams can be effective.

Usually in a social studies class, the teacher will introduce a controversial issue in the form of a question, such as: Should social security be privatized? But in a debate format, it is important to have an assertive statement, which speakers will either support or oppose. Propositions my students have debated include:

- Social Security should be privatized
- Welfare should be the responsibility of the states.

- Dropping the atomic bomb was a war crime.
- Marijuana should be legalized.
- Creationism should be taught in public schools.
- The death penalty is just and effective.
- Affirmative action is necessary and effective.
- The Confederate flag is a racist symbol.
- An Equal Rights Amendment will increase equality for women.

Propositions can be about historical or current events, depending on the subject of the unit of study.

## Motivating Students

I have worked as a special education teacher and as a “regular” social studies teacher in a variety of settings with students of varying abilities, from grade eight through twelve. In my 20 years of teaching, I have found that even the students who are truly afraid of speaking in class find debates exhilarating. All of the students quickly learn that the better their research, the more fun they have in the debate.

Often the first debate of the year is a little like the first pancake — a bit sloppy. The students are easily motivated after their first experience to work harder the second time around. Over the course of the school year, you will witness your

students’ research, critical thinking, and public speaking skills improve far beyond what they were before. Debates inspire students to do their best work. What more can a teacher want? Debates make teaching social studies easy!

## Whole-Class Debates

**Day one:** Give some tips on finding and selecting appropriate sites, and steering clear of problematic sites.<sup>2</sup> The internet makes finding information on any given topic so much easier than “in the old days.” Fifteen years ago, I had to allow at least a week for students to find appropriate articles or books to use in their research. Now, I simply tell my students to bring in four articles for the next class period: Two articles that support the proposition and two that oppose the proposition. The trade-off, however, is that the students need to be more sophisticated in their selection of sources.

Guidance from the teacher about sources is critical. When my class finished learning about Prohibition, we did a debate on whether marijuana should be legalized. Some of the articles the students brought in were not exactly scholarly. I suggested that there were plenty of medical, university, and otherwise scholarly studies supporting and opposing legalization, and that while “joesstonedcafe.net” might make some interesting points, such a source was not acceptable. (I made

that one up, but similar ones do exist.) Students are encouraged to challenge one another's sources during debates.

**Day two:** Distribute the **Handout** and explain the components of a model argument (**Part I**):

- The proposition is the statement students will either support or oppose. Try to phrase the proposition without negatives. For example, a proposition that states, "The U.S. should never have dropped the atomic bomb" is a poorly worded proposition when you are trying to teach students to also understand the terms "affirmative" and "negative." It is better to phrase the proposition as, "Dropping the atomic bomb was necessary," or "The United States committed a war crime when it dropped the atomic bomb."
- Affirmative arguments support the proposition and negative arguments refute the proposition. A proposition should be fairly general so as to allow a variety of more specific arguments. For example, an argument in support of the proposition above could be, "Truman hoped that using an atomic weapon against Japan would intimidate Stalin."
- Evidence includes quotes, statistics or other important information from knowledgeable people, usually professional experts in a field (depending on the issue), but can include first-hand accounts by witnesses or participants.
- Sources must be cited for each piece of evidence. Students should list the author, the title of the article, the title of the journal or website, and the date the information was published. A web address (URL) alone is insufficient. If your school emphasizes a particular style of research writing such as APA or MLA, the students should use that method with their citations.

- A conclusion reveals whether the student understands what he or she has written, particularly when the stated argument is vague and the evidence is too directly quoted.

After reviewing these components of a well-reasoned argument, distribute several appropriate articles that students can use in addition to the articles they may bring in. (This has the added advantage of keeping the students busy who did not do their homework.)

Ask a student to read aloud the Model Argument about requiring students to wear a school uniform (**Handout, Part II**). Explain that each student will write four arguments (two affirmative and two negative), and that each student must show you his or her arguments as they are completed. After students have had some practice writing arguments, I usually insist on seeing two arguments by the end of a class period (90 minutes). Students who have worked diligently, yet who have been unable to finish two arguments, may have until the start of the next class (after which I begin deducting late points).

While the students are working, look over the articles they brought in. Check the sources. Sometimes students will "cut and paste" articles from a webpage without including source information. They must have the source information in order to receive full credit.

**Day three:** I allow another class period for working on the arguments. At this point, I check to see that arguments are correctly identified as affirmative or negative, that the students cite a different source for each piece of evidence, and that they have written a conclusion. I also check that students have copied the proposition as originally written at the top of both affirmative and negative arguments. (When students list their negative arguments, they often revise the wording of the proposition so that its position is reversed. This is incorrect.)

The four completed arguments are due at the end of class. Again, if they have been working diligently, as long as the

four arguments are done by the start of the next class, I do not mark their work late.

I read through the rules for debate (**Handout, Part III**) and discuss any questions that students may raise about these rules.

**Day four:** The debate begins! Have students arrange their chairs or desks into a circle so that they can see one another. You will need to have some type of object that students can gently throw or hand to the next speaker. I use a Nerf ball.

On a notepad, I map out where each student is sitting. As someone speaks, I make a slash next to his or her name. If he or she uses research in the statement, I cross the slash. Thus I have a record of how frequently each student spoke, and whether each speaker cited a source for a statement.

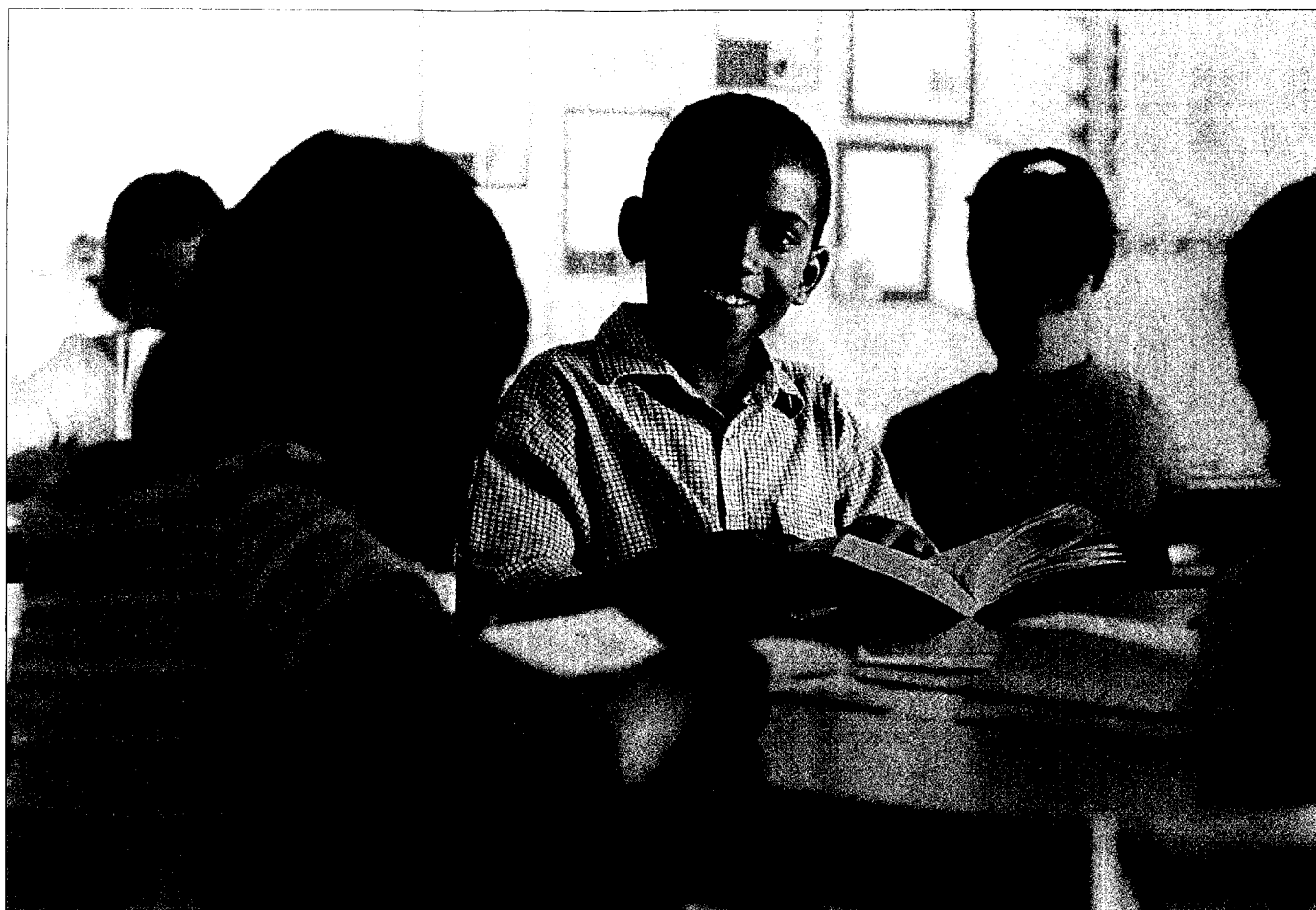
To start off the debate, I review the rules and summarize the issue. Sometimes I'll ask for a show of hands to see who supports the proposition. If a large majority supports one side, I encourage students to play devil's advocate, taking on the minority point of view. Occasionally, I will remind students to pass the ball to others who haven't gotten it yet. Mostly, I try to sit back, observe, and let the students select the next speaker (by passing the ball). Sometimes I do need to step in and referee, but rarely. I ring a bell on my desk if I need everyone to stop talking.

At the end of the debate, I offer some comments and observations and have the kids put the chairs back into rows.

I collect each student's four completed arguments for grading. I weigh the grades 50 percent for participation in the debate and 50 percent for their written arguments.

### Conducting a Speedy Debate

After students have had practice doing whole-class debates, they can easily handle a speedy debate. For a speedy debate, I will give students a "heads up" several days in advance. I provide articles and suggest that they add some articles of their own to their debate research. I distribute the articles and write the



proposition on the board. If no class time can be devoted to preparation, I usually require that students complete only two arguments for homework: one affirmative and one negative. I encourage students to write extra arguments for extra credit. On the date of the debate, we follow the same procedure described earlier.

### Conducting Team Debates

Team debates hold each individual student more accountable than do whole class debates. They are quite exciting, but also more time-consuming. Team debates work best after students have had practice with whole class debates.

At the end of my Civil Rights unit of study, I have debates about affirmative action, the Confederate flag, reparations for slavery, and harsher punishments for hate crimes. In a class of twenty-four students, I assign six students to each proposition. Teams of three will develop at least four affirmative arguments and four negative arguments, working together over several days. They will also prepare for

rebuttals (which are not necessarily the same as arguments; they can be brief but pointed replies which make sense in light of an earlier statement).

In a class of 90 minutes, we can get through two team debates. The students who are not debating, will observe, take notes, and vote for the team that presented the best evidence, and that had the best performance (sometimes the best performers do not have the best evidence, and the ability to tell the difference is an essential skill for citizens, who must think critically).

We flip a coin to see which team will begin as the affirmative side. The affirmative team presents its four arguments, one at a time, allowing the negative team to rebut each argument. A time limit of 30 seconds for each argument and rebuttal is helpful. The members of the rebutting team should try to rebut a statement without giving away all of their arguments, which they hope to present later. (This rhetorical pacing gets easier with practice.) Then the negative team presents.

After all arguments are presented, the teams switch sides. The new affirmative team presents first. Some arguments might now be redundant, but switching sides allows more information to get presented to the class, and in cases where one side of the debate is clearly more difficult to support, switching sides makes the process fair. (If time is short, each team might only present two of its arguments before switching sides.) After the debate, if there is time, I allow students to ask questions. 📖

### Notes

1. See also James A. Duplas and Dana Ziedler, "Critical Thinking and Logical Argument," *Middle Level Learning* 15 (September 2002): 10-13.
2. Often, when employing a Google online search, a Wikipedia entry will appear. Unless you have previewed the entries, instruct students to avoid these "open encyclopedia" articles, which are written without the usual oversight of reviewers and editors. See the letter to the editor "The Drawbacks of Wikipedia" by Deanna Buhr in *Social Education*, March 2006, page 61.

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# Debate!

## Take Part in a Useful Discussion About a Controversial Issue.

### I. Components of a Model Argument

- (A) The proposition is the statement that you will strive to either support or oppose.
- (B) Affirmative arguments will support the proposition and negative arguments will refute the proposition.
- (C) Evidence includes quotes, statistics, or other important information from knowledgeable people.
- (D) Sources must be cited for each piece of evidence. The author, the title of the article, the title of the journal, newspaper, or website, and the date of publication should all be cited. A web address (URL) alone is insufficient.
- (E) Your conclusion will show how well you can succinctly summarize the evidence and argument. It also reveals how well you understand what you have written earlier.

### II. A Model Argument about School Uniforms

**Proposition:** Wearing school uniforms improves the overall social and academic atmosphere of the school.

**Affirmative Argument:** Wearing school uniforms improves student behavior.

**Evidence #1:** Many teachers and administrators perceive improved behavior when students wear uniforms. According to an article entitled "Uniform Effects" by Debra Viadero (*Education Week*, January 12, 2005, pp. 27-29), Principal Rudolph Saunders of Stephen Decatur Middle School in Clinton, Maryland, states that students simply behave better when they are dressed in uniforms. "It's like night and day. We have 'dress down' days, and the kids' behavior is just completely different on those days." He

also perceives that students fight less and they focus on their schoolwork more. Teacher Betty Mikesell-Bailey, from the same school, says that in-school suspensions have declined and test scores have gone up since they instituted uniforms. Students no longer bully one another over their clothing.

**Evidence #2:** Long Beach, California was one of the first big-city school districts to adopt uniforms in 1994. Within the first year, crime dropped twenty-two percent (Alexis Aguilar, "Belleville West High Sizes Up Uniform Policy," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, September 9, 2004). Schools in and around St. Louis began adopting uniforms in 2000, and according to Superintendent Jed Deets of the Cahokia school district, behavior has improved. He also states that dress down days invite "a marked increase in behavior problems."

**Conclusion:** A requirement that students wear uniforms seemed to improve discipline in some schools where this was tried.

### III. Rules of Debate

- (A) The individual holding the ball is the only person who may speak. When finished, pass the ball to a person with an opposing argument. Give everyone a chance to speak.
- (B) Attack the argument, not the person. Any insult results in a deduction from your participation grade.
- (C) Earn full credit by quoting from your evidence (and understanding what you have quoted).
- (D) Some credit can be earned if you make logical arguments without citing research, but it is best to cite your sources.
- (E) A minimum of points can be earned by simply participating. Enthusiasm is good.
- (F) Zero points for zero participation. (Absentees must write a persuasive essay that cites from their research.)