

Debate In the Classroom

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Debate in the Classroom

Why have debates

- ✓ Debates require students to engage in the four language activities – reception, production, interaction and mediation.
- ✓ The debaters (or perhaps the entire class, depending on how the teacher organizes the activity) is required to do research into the topic. This requires reading and note-taking.
- ✓ The participating students speak. They start with prepared material and while listening to the opponents, take notes. At some point, they may have to improvise in order to form their rebuttal.
- ✓ The audience (the rest of the class/student body) is listening to authentic English spoken by their peers (about a topic that interests them).
- ✓ The audience has to gauge the arguments of both teams and decide which was more persuasive.
- ✓ With a careful choice of topic, debates can be FUN!
- ✓ Students can discover new strengths in public speaking.

What is a 'debate'?

A debate is a formal discussion on a particular topic in a public meeting, in which opposing arguments are presented.

In a formal debate, specific language structures are used. However, in our classrooms, we will follow some of them, but not all. (See examples on the next page.) In addition, particular procedures are followed. We will follow most of them.

The debate format is relatively simple. The pros and cons of an issue are discussed. There are two teams, each consisting of three members. One team defends the affirmative side; the other, the negative side. Each team member of each side speaks for five minutes (this isn't an iron-clad number), alternating sides.

Procedures of a debate

There are eight stages in a debate. They are:

1. Team A, speaker 1 opens the debate by defining the topic and presents the team's first arguments.
2. Team B, speaker 1, redefines the topic, rebuts Team A arguments and presents Team B's arguments.

3. Team A, speaker 2 rebuts the arguments of Team B, rebuilds own case and provides more arguments.
 4. Team B, speaker 2 rebuts the arguments of the previous speaker, reiterates position and adds more arguments.
 5. Team A, speaker 3 responds to the previous speaker and rebuilds team arguments (and may summarize the team's arguments).
 6. Team B, speaker 3 does the same.
- Optional:
7. Team B, speaker 1 or 2 summarizes the team's arguments.
 8. Team A, speaker 1 or 2 summarizes the team's arguments.

Preparing for the debate

It's important that the students prepare as many cogent arguments as possible to support their position; equally important is to attempt to conjure up their opponent's arguments so that they will be able to rebut them and not be caught off-guard and unprepared. Rebutting an unexpected argument could be quite difficult and could cause the team to lose the debate, even if their arguments were solid.

Each argument should be clearly and logically stated, and examples should be given.

Students should not write out their entire speech. They should prepare cue cards or an outline with key words and phrases.

Students should practice until they know their case well. However, it's essential that they say it expressively and not in a monotone, as someone simply reciting something by heart.

Useful language during the debate

- 🔗 My friends
- 🔗 Today we will be debating....
- 🔗 We believe....
- 🔗 Let us define....
- 🔗 Before I bring my own arguments, let's see what my opponent has said....
- 🔗 S/He said.... But in fact....
- 🔗 Our first / second argument is...
- 🔗 Our next argument...
- 🔗 For example....
- 🔗 We believe our opponent's viewpoint is flawed because....
- 🔗 As we have seen...
- 🔗 In summary....
- 🔗 To conclude, our arguments....

During the debate

It's crucial that debaters take notes while the opposing team members speak. This way they can prepare to rebut their opponents' claims. Rebuttal may have several forms.

- 💡 One is showing that the opposing team's argument is illogical.
- 💡 Another way is to point out negative consequences the other team hasn't referred to.
- 💡 If a student can't think of a way to rebut an argument of the opposing team, it may be worthwhile to attempt to minimize it by showing its lack of importance.
- 💡 Sometimes a good example may help, but it must be extremely relevant and / or distinctly connected.

***Note 1: Each speech should end with a concluding sentence.

*** Note 2: During a debate, there are NO interruptions. Each speaker is given his turn to state his case and no-one else may speak.

Determining the winner

In formal debates, each round of the debate has a judge who decides which team did the better job of debating. The judge is instructed to base his/her decision on the arguments made (see the rubric below) in the round of the debate, not on his/her personal beliefs about the issues. Usually, a judge takes notes and does his or her best to follow all of the arguments. At the conclusion of the debate, the judges write a ballot which explains their decisions. At the end of the debate, the debaters may see the judges' written opinion. Judges may be teachers, parents, former high school debaters, or other interested adults. Students may also be judges. Some judges are very experienced, but many are not. Sometimes students are disappointed by a decision that a judge makes. We assume that the judges are doing their best. Remind the students that debate is subjective and will be seen differently by different people. One difficulty that a judge may face is a very close debate. What should they do if they feel the debate is a tie? There are different methods to break the tie. Some judges reward the team with better delivery skills. Some judges award the tie to the negative side because the affirmative side gets the benefit of the last word. Some may award a tie to the team that defends the status quo (present system).

For our less formal debates, it may be preferable to assign a panel of judges who may be chosen from the teaching staff, school administration, parents or even students. Since they don't have experience in judging debates, the panel should receive a clear rubric explaining the point distribution.

Possible rubric (prepare one for each team):

Speaker	Well-built argument* 5% each = 20%	Convincing argument 15% each = 60%	Delivery** 5% each = 20%	Total
1 First argument				
2 Second argument				
3 Third argument				
1 or 2 Summary				
Total				

*Notes:

*Well-built argument – It's not enough for the argument to have convincing content. It must also be presented in an organized fashion.

**Delivery means speaking clearly (not mumbling) without unnecessary pauses, fillers (um, ah) and not reading from a text.

Tips for debaters – persuasive speaking

- 👁 Make eye contact with your audience – let them know you are talking to them.
- 👁 Use variety – in your voice, body language and facial expressions – that way you will keep everyone's attention.
- 👁 Make sure your body language and tone of voice are appropriate to what you are saying – if you are talking about something sad, do not smile and vice versa.
- 👁 Do not move around too much. Watch out for distracting gestures such as playing with something in your pocket or touching your hair.
- 👁 If you stand up straight with your head up and your shoulders back, everyone will think you are confident, even if you're really feeling nervous.
- 👁 Try to sound like you care about what you are talking about – if you sound bored, your audience will be bored too.
- 👁 Try to pick interesting and persuasive language – if you just say 'good' and 'bad' all the time, it will not be as effective as choosing your words carefully.
- 👁 Try to pick examples/stories or analogies that you think are appropriate for your audience.

- 👁 Try to have a strong opening so that you make an impression from the beginning – think in advance of a powerful way to grab the audience’s attention – and a strong closing so that you leave them on a strong note.
- 👁 Make sure you have a glass of water nearby and do not be afraid to use it if you have a dry mouth.

Adapting debates to our needs

It's always up to the teacher to gauge the students' level of English, desire to engage in a challenging new activity and willingness to "expose" themselves publicly. It may be wise, at least at first, to limit the debate to two speakers instead of three and to impose a shorter time on each speaker presenting the arguments. In addition, perhaps students will feel more comfortable speaking in small groups and not in front of the entire class. Finally, using topics that truly interest and even excite students, may encourage them to participate.

Choosing a topic to debate

A good debate topic is one that lets the participants and the audience learn about both sides of an issue. Consider the following factors when selecting a debate topic:

- Interest: Would the topic be interesting to the debating teams, as well as to the audience listening to the debate? Selecting a topic that's interesting makes the preparation part of the debate more exciting, as well as the debate livelier.
- Argument potential: You want to choose a debate topic that has solid argument potential. If one side is clearly right, or if there isn't a lot of available information, students will have a hard time crafting a solid debate.
- Availability of data: Data points make an argument more robust. If there's no information available, students won't have on what to build their case.

There are various ways to choose debate topics. Here are a few:

- 🗨 Take old bagrut composition questions
- 🗨 Brainstorm ideas with students
- 🗨 Make up your own. (Make sure the topic has substance and interest, so that there's what to talk about and arguments to bring.)
- 🗨 Pick one from the list on the next page.

Possible topics for debate (Always keep in mind your students' previous knowledge)

1. Is it better to keep the school year as is, or to have school all year (including the summer) and to have more short vacations (or shorter school days, or more enrichment activities)?
2. Should candy/chocolate be given as a reward in school?
3. Are introverts too quiet, or are extroverts too loud?
4. If someone is a vegetarian, should his hosts serve only vegetable-based foods?
5. Should junk food be banned from school?
6. Are morning people more productive than night people?
7. Is it better to live in a small apartment in the city or a large apartment outside the city?
8. Various issues that come up during the study of literature, e.g., in *A Summer's Reading*, do you think George read the books in the end?
9. Is it more important to learn a new talent or perfect one you already have?
10. Is it better for a bird to be free in the forest or safe in a cage?
11. Is it more important to be very good at one thing or just okay in many things?
12. What's better, to have one close friend or a lot of casual friends?
13. Is it preferable/wise to win at all costs or to compromise?

Some light-hearted topics

*** Note: Do fun debate topics make for funny debates? Or for good debates?

Well, this one is hard. Students sometimes see an “easy” or “fun” topic and don't prepare properly. They don't develop their arguments as they would for a hard topic and then we get bad debates. Because if you don't have any arguments, you can't really be funny. So, proceed with caution.

1. Are pizzas cut into squares better than those cut into triangles?
2. Should every home have a robot?
3. Should girls be required to take cooking or homemaking classes?
4. Should the municipality paint the city's tree trunks in bright colors in honor of Purim?

Speech Structure Template

Attention Grabber:

Introduction:

Roadmap:

1. _____.
2. _____.
3. _____.

Mechanism / Rebuttal:

Point 1:

Point 2:

Summary and Call to Action:

Speech Structure Example

Attention Grabber:

My friends, we see a terrible problem in our world... / we believe that... / etc..

That is why we propose/oppose

Roadmap:

I will have ____ points in my speech:

The first one will be...

The second one will be...

Definition & Mechanism:

Just to clarify, by... we mean....

When we say... we are talking about...

Our model is

Rebuttal:

Before making my points, I would like to rebut what we heard from the previous speaker:

☞ We were told that... to which we say...

☞ They claim that... but...

☞ They said that... I have two answers for that...

Arguments (use argument structure for each point):

And now, to my first point:

Conclusion:

And that is why..... [Point conclusion]

Moving on to my second point:

And that is why..... [Point conclusion]

Mock Debate – Should Tests be Abolished?

First set of arguments as a sample:

Team A, Speaker 1:

My friends, would you be willing to go to a doctor who couldn't pass a test in physiology? Well, if Team B's proposition to abolish tests would be approved, that could be the result...doctors who haven't proven that they know important information could be treating patients.

Examinations test students' knowledge. If a student does well on a test, he's proven that he knows the material, regardless of the age or stage. This may not seem relevant in many subjects, but nevertheless, high test grades often indicate intelligence, the ability to absorb considerable chunks of material and the desire to succeed.

Therefore, abolishing tests would eliminate the yardsticks for these attributes, which would be disastrous.

Team B, Speaker 1:

Dear friends, the intention behind abolishing tests isn't to allow incapable and uneducated people to become doctors or any other professionals. Rather, the aim is to prevent teachers from labelling capable, knowledgeable students as unsuccessful, not interested in the subject and failing. How often has it happened that failing students who were assessed with alternate methods suddenly blossomed? Standard written tests are a blight and should be avoided.

Therefore, abolishing today's standard tests could eliminate the incorrect yardsticks used to measure various attributes, which would allow many students to flourish.

The Winners

DEBATING TEAM

This certificate is awarded to:

For presenting the best debate

Date

Signature

The Best

JUDGE

This certificate is awarded to:

As recognition for judging our debate

Date

Signature