



RESPECTFUL DEBATE

"It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it."

-Joseph Joubert

OVERVIEW

Students debate historical or current events topics from multiple perspectives in healthy ways that allow for productive dialogue and a mutual search for meaning.

LEVELS

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School
- College

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Any time of the year
- When students discuss a controversial topic
- To set the tone for respectful debate

TIME REQUIRED

- The debate format can be conducted in one 45-minute class period or extended to two or more 45-minute class periods, depending on the depth of student research and debate. For instance, teachers can have students debate the chosen topic with no background reading or with extensive background reading that can be assigned as classwork or homework. The extra reading would be more time-intensive, but would also have the benefit of broadening students' understanding of the topic and enriching the debate.

MATERIALS

- Poster board, smart board, or chalk board that displays the debate topic
- Writing utensils and paper or computers for students to capture their arguments
- Computers and internet or news articles that students can use to research the topic

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Work with their peers to research and persuasively argue for and against a debate topic
- Respectfully listen to their classmates and paraphrase opposing arguments
- Entertain multiple perspectives
- Consider using the skills they learned through this activity (e.g., perspective-taking, empathy, self-control, critical thinking, communication, and civil discourse) in their personal lives

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to think of a time when you disagreed with someone about a topic. What [social-emotional skills](#) did you use to engage in a respectful discussion with this person?

INSTRUCTIONS

If your students have not had experience with a debate format, you may want to begin with something basic such as, “Should students have to take tests in school?” or “Should students be allowed to chew gum in the school?”

Coordinate: (Approx. 5 min)

- **Divide class:** Randomly assign half the class to “pro” side and half the class to “con” side.
- **Announce topic:** Announce the debate topic and write it somewhere that is visible to the students. (Example topic: “*Should it be a requirement for guns to have technology that would only allow their registered owners to use them?*”)

Prepare: (Can range from 10 min – 45-min)*

*The lower end of the timing suggestions assume the entire lesson is taught in one 45-minute class period, whereas the higher end of the timing assumes the entire lesson is taught over two or more 45-minute class periods.

- **Set norms:** Before beginning, set norms for the discussion. You may even engage students in a pre-discussion regarding how they will interact with one another. Sample questions include:
 - How can you show respect to one another during the debate?
 - How might you show your classmates you are listening?
 - How might you handle challenging emotions?
 - How could you show empathy to students who are experiencing strong emotions?
- **Provide articles in advance (optional):** Provide students with articles about the topic that offer diverse and/or nuanced perspectives and have all students read every article. (Note: Can assign these articles for homework or as classwork. The number, length, and difficulty of the articles will affect the length of this lesson. Materials should be drawn from your ongoing curriculum.)
- **Generate ideas:** Both sides have 5 minutes (or more, depending on how long you would like to make the lesson) to write down as many examples as they can that support their position. (Note: Feel free to split the sides into smaller break-out groups for a few minutes and then have the entire “pro” group reconvene and the entire “con” group reconvene to pool their ideas).
- **Select roles:** Have both sides decide who will play the different roles, such as debaters, note-takers, and timekeeper. (Note: the number of debaters can range from one student presenting every point to a different student presenting each point, and there can be multiple note-takers).

Debate: (Can range from 12 min – 25 min)

- **Reconvene** as a class.
- **“Pro” side starts the debate:** “Pro” side gives their position and supports it with one or two examples.
- **“Con” side responds:** “Con” side summarizes (“reflects back”) what the “pro” side said and confirms with the “pro” side whether they summarized accurately (if they did not, the “pro” side can provide a corrective statement). The “con” side then gives their own position and supports it with one or two examples.
- **“Pro” side responds:** “Pro” side summarizes what the “con” side said and confirms with the “con” side whether they summarized accurately. (If they did not, the “con” side can provide a corrective statement.) The “pro” side then has the option of providing one additional example in support of their own position, if they wish.
- **“Con” side responds:** “Con” side summarizes what the “pro” side said and confirms with the “pro” side whether they summarized accurately (if they did not, the “pro” side can provide a corrective statement). The “con” side then has the option of providing one additional example in support of their own position, if they wish.
- **Finish up:** Give each group one more opportunity to ask a respectful question of the other group—and to add an additional example in support of their own position.

Switch: (Can range from 12 min – two 45-min class periods)

- **Swap sides:** Have the “pro” and “con” sides switch and repeat steps 4 through 11 with the same debate topic so that students are able to really push themselves to see the topic from a different perspective.

Debrief: (Can range from 5 min – 20 min)

- Discuss: Facilitate a conversation about the skill of “Perspective-Taking,” which is the ability to see situations from multiple perspectives. Sample questions include:
 - Has your opinion changed at all about this topic from when we started? How?
 - What helped you change your opinion?
 - Did summarizing what the other side said and/or switching sides help change your opinion? What about the summary or switching was helpful?
 - What lessons does this activity teach us about opinions we might have about issues in the news, or historical events?
 - What did you learn from your classmates during the debate?
 - How might debates like this help you start questioning your initial opinions and consider other perspectives about issues in history, current events, or dilemmas at school?

Additional Tools for Teachers: If a conflict arises during the discussion, you may use the following strategies to help students cope.

- Acknowledge emotions, review class norms, and problem-solve.
- Acknowledge the feeling in the room.
- Take a break and have students quickly write down or draw what they may be currently feeling, thinking, and/or experiencing.
- Reorient students to the class norms and skills including respectful debate, empathy, and responsible listening. Help students use these tools to communicate their experiences in a way that encourages understanding.
- Help students focus on solutions, not problems in conflicts.
- If a student attacks another student’s character (which is known as an ad hominem argument) rather than the argument itself, point this out, clarify the difference, and redirect the focus of the debate.

Note: You may even consider engaging students in an activity prior to the debate to help foster their [empathy skills](#), [self management](#), and [self awareness](#).

SOURCE

This practice was developed by [Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development \(SECD\) Lab](#) as part of their Students Taking Action Together (STAT) project.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Did the debate structure work well in supporting healthy expression of disagreement? What would you do the same or differently next time?
- Have you noticed a change in how students talk about social issues and/or a greater willingness to engage with multiple perspectives?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In one [study](#), undergraduate students who either favored or opposed the death penalty were assigned to one of three conditions. In one condition students simply received information describing the alternative arguments and were asked to read it. In the remaining two conditions, students received the information along with instructions to either try to be unbiased as they engaged with the information or to try to read the information as if they themselves held the opposing viewpoint. After, students made judgments about the information they had received. Students were more receptive to the other perspective when they had been explicitly instructed to take the other perspective.

Furthermore, research shows that [active learning techniques](#), in which students actively discuss and reflect on ideas rather than passively absorbing them, boost students' engagement and learning. Debate-type activities, in particular, in which students must consider other points of view and clarify their own, have been shown to improve students' [critical thinking](#), [perspective-taking](#), and [communication skills](#).

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Students who are [more engaged at school](#) overall tend to do better in academics and in life. More specifically, activities like Respectful Debate promote the kind of critical thinking and communication skills that students will be able to apply across contexts, and that will serve them well in their future educational and career trajectories.

What's more, the ability and willingness to listen to, understand, and respond respectfully to different perspectives is critical in today's globalized world. To make truly [ethical and responsible decisions](#), students must be able to engage in dialogue with others while developing their own ideas.

TERMS OF USE

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