

Debating in the classroom

(Resources from Parliament's Education Service)

Getting warmed up

Here are some quick warm-up games and exercises to get students thinking and to lay the groundwork for more formal debating. They can be used sequentially to build up skills over time, or you can pick and choose those that are right for your students.

Warm up your voice

Debating is a vocal business so use these fun tongue twisters to get everyone warmed up and speaking clearly. The class stands in a circle and you conduct the tongue-twisters, repeating and speeding up as you go until it all falls apart!

Red leather, yellow leather

Seventy-seven benevolent elephants

She sells seashells on the seashore

Wayne went to Wales to watch walruses

Paper review

Give each group a copy of a newspaper – either printed or online, national or local.

The groups have five minutes to choose three stories from their paper that they think will make good debating subjects.

Allow five minutes more to whittle the choice down to one subject and to list the main points for and against.

Get each group to report back to the whole class.

Ask each group to describe the method they used to agree their final choice such as arguing, secret voting, open voting, coin toss etc.

Draw out the key elements of: individual ideas, opinion forming, influencing others, rational argument, citing facts and accepting the majority opinion.

Vote with your feet

Get the class up on their feet and assign one side of the classroom as 'For' and one as 'Against'.

Flash up on your interactive whiteboard, or call out a range of quick-fire proposals for new laws. The class must vote with their feet, immediately moving to the appropriate side of the room.

You could choose topics that are relevant to your school or area, or use ideas from the 'Paper review' activity, or try one of these topics:

- Tests should be brought in for people wanting to use skateboards as a mode of transport.
- All those aged under 16 should watch a maximum of five hours of television a week.
- School uniform should be banned in all schools.
- School uniform should be compulsory in all schools.
- Owners of large dogs should pass a test to prove they are able to control them.
- The wearing of cycle helmets should be enforceable by law.
- There should be a roughly equal number of female and male MPs.
- The working week and weekend should be swapped – a two-day week and a five-day weekend.
- Students should be free to leave school at 14 and get a job.
- Private car ownership should be banned to protect the environment.

When everyone has voted, ask one or two people from either side to explain why they voted that way. Give students the opportunity to change sides if they wish.

Debate circle

The class sits in a circle. Select an issue such as one of those above, and send this around the circle. The first person says 'Yes, because...' and comes up with a reason for the issue, the second person says 'No, because...' and gives a reason against. Carry on around the circle until you reach the beginning again. People further around the circle will need to think more creatively to offer new ideas.

If anyone gets stuck suggest that they take one of the ideas already given and develop it, as in: 'No, because as Mahinda said it would take all the fun out of skateboarding and I think that this might lead to more social problems'.

Convince me

This is a small-group debating method. It develops many of the skills needed in more formal debating but allows students the safety of group work without being put 'on the spot' in front of the whole class. It is organised as follows:

Split the class into small groups. It is important that these have an odd number of members. A group of five will have one for, one against and three deciders.

A group of seven will have two for, two against and three deciders OR one for, one against and five deciders.

Method

A topic is chosen. You could give the same topic to all the groups and, at the end of the session, tally the votes and use this to initiate a class discussion; or each group can have a different topic.

The topics can be given in advance with time to prepare or they can be given with just a few moments thinking time. The first approach is better for developing in-depth thinking and research skills, while the second favours confidence and 'thinking on your feet'.

Allow the 'For' side two minutes to propose the motion to their group and say why they think it is a good idea.

Set a stopwatch and call time, blowing a whistle or ringing a bell for changeover. The 'Against' person in each group then opposes the motion, explaining why they do not support the idea. Call time again after two minutes and ask the deciders to vote. The odd number will ensure a result unless you choose to allow abstentions.

If time allows you could then swap around the roles within the groups with new 'For', 'Against' and 'Deciders'.

You could:

- Allow the debaters to each have a further two minutes to refute each other's argument.
- Allow the deciders to question the debaters after each round.
- Introduce the idea of 'giving way' where anyone in the group can hold up a hand to interrupt the speaker who may agree to 'give way' to allow for a question from their opponent or one of the deciders. You will need to allow more time with this approach. You could appoint one of the deciders in each group as a timekeeper who pauses their timer during interruptions

Formal House of Commons style debate

Running a House of Commons style debate will bring together all of the debating skills your students have developed and involve everyone in the 'drama' of debating important issues.

Students will have to learn to balance their passion for the issue with reasoned and persuasive argument.

Running a House of Commons style debate in the classroom

Step 1

You may wish to set up the room to look like the House of Commons chamber with rows of chairs facing each other and the Speaker's chair centrally placed at one end.

Divide the class into two sides, 'For' - the team proposing the motion, and 'Against' - the team opposing the motion. Give the two teams 10 minutes to discuss their opening argument and key points (at least three) for their side.

Remind the teams that for this debate it doesn't matter if they really are 'For' or 'Against' the motion, their challenge is to argue their case effectively and persuade the members of the other team to change their mind.

To help these large teams organise, you may wish to subdivide each into three smaller teams to work out the arguments, and then bring these small teams together to agree the main points. Some classes may need additional help at this stage. At the end of this section the teams should:

- Have a clear grasp of the subject of the debate
- Have their opening argument ready
- Have at least three key points to support their argument
- Know who is going to 'lead' on each point

Step 2

Before you begin, outline the rules for the debate:

- All arguments must be heard. If anyone shouts out or heckles, you as the Speaker will have to call for silence.
- Once the floor is opened for further comments at the end, those wishing to speak must stand to get the Speaker's attention and wait to be called to speak.
- All other members on each team should listen carefully to the arguments to decide if they will vote 'For' or 'Against' at the end of the debate – has anyone changed their mind?
- Set a time limit for the entire debate at which point the vote must be taken (Guide time – 15 minutes but this is flexible depending on the age and interest of your group as well as the time available).

Step 3

Take the role of the Speaker and bring the House to 'Order' before inviting the 'For' team to propose their motion. Next, give the 'Against' team a chance to use their own opening statement in a response. The debate should now move back and forth between the sides until the prepared arguments are finished. The team members may want to amend their arguments as the debate progresses.

Once all the statements have been made, the debate can be opened up to the floor so that each side may add their own points. Remind them that they must stand to get the Speaker's attention and wait for permission to speak.

Step 4

Once the debate has come to a natural lull or when you have run out of time, ask each main spokesperson to sum up their side, beginning with the opposing team, followed by the proposing team. They can use their opening statement as a basis for summing up and add any other ideas from the debate that they feel may persuade people to vote for their view. As the 'Speaker', bring the debate to a close and propose the question to the house for a final vote.

You can either 'vote with your feet' (division) by assigning two sides of the room as the 'For' or 'Against' sides, asking the students to move to the side that gets their vote, or by the raising and counting of hands.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Procedure for debate made simple

