



Explore new ways of thinking DEBATE TOOLKIT

Civic Education Working Group
2016



Debate is a formal discussion where two opposing sides follow a set of pre-agreed rules to engage in an oral exchange of different points of view on an issue.

Civic education & debating

Civic education is learning the competencies, i.e. skills, knowledge and attitudes, required to be an active, democratic and responsible citizen. Its ultimate goal is to educate the population on democratic citizenship and make them aware of their rights and responsibilities. So what does debating have to do with anything? Well, if it increases critical thinking, argumentation, informed citizenship, mutual understanding, tolerance & cultural exchange, and if it empowers youth to let their voice be heard, it has the potential to actually shape active and responsible citizens! In short it can help you to know more and form a better-founded opinion.

The effects of debating

These empowering effects have been proven to be there. Incorporation of debate in education has been shown to improve academic attainment, develop critical thinking, better communication and argumentation skills, and boost aspirations, confidence and cultural awareness*. Give it a try and you'll see that maybe some of your convictions are based on one-sided information, and that there might be some truth to other beliefs.

*Akerman, R., & Neale, I. (2011). Debating the evidence: an international review of current situation and perceptions. CfBT Education Trust.

Forms 1/2



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There are plenty of forms and variations you can choose from, and of course you can create your own style. We have outlined two styles here:

Oxford style

"Oxford-Style" debating is a competitive debate format featuring a sharply framed motion(topic) that is proposed by one side(pro) and opposed by another(con). Oxford Style debates follow a formal structure which begins with audience members casting a pre-debate vote on the motion that is either for, against or undecided. Each panelist presents a seven-minute opening statement, after which the moderator/chair takes questions from the audience with inter-panel challenges. Finally, each panelist delivers a two-minute closing argument, and the audience delivers their second (and final) vote for comparison against the first. A winner is declared in an Oxford-Style debate either by the majority of the audience or by which team has swayed more audience members between the vote before the debate and the vote after the debate.



Forms 2/2



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Parliamentary debate style

Parliamentary debate is conducted under rules derived from British parliamentary procedure. There are several variations on this type of debate. It features the competition of individuals in a multi-person setting. Speeches are usually between five and seven minutes in duration. In the most used variation, the debate consists of four teams of two speakers, sometimes called factions, with two teams on either side of the case. Since this style is based on parliamentary debate, each faction is considered to be one of two parties in a coalition. They should show how they are different from the other team on their side of the case in order to succeed.

All speakers are expected to offer Points of Information (POIs) to their opponents. POIs are particularly important in British Parliamentary style, as it allows the first two teams to maintain their relevance during the course of the debate, and the last two teams to introduce their arguments early in the debate.

Other styles

There are plenty of other styles you could use. Perhaps you want to get inspired by debates you know, such as debate in your city council or parliament. Or perhaps something in the direction of informal and forum debate, as is relatively common from TV shows and politics. A good starting point if you want to explore something else is the Wikipedia page on debate (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debate).

Topics 1/2



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Try to mix business with pleasure: Combine the useful with the enjoyable. Think of topics that you think:

- Your members/participants should know more about. Could there be a need to challenge or confirm current views? Would you like to deepen your knowledge? Should your participants attain an attitude towards something?
- Your members/participants would like to talk about. Is it motivating, relevant, exciting enough for your participants?

You might want to consider topics that AEGEE is working on. Such debates can be relevant for AEGEE's policy work or challenge the existing assumptions in the organisation. This is not a requirement, as any civic matter matters!

Phrase your topic clearly and unambiguously. Your debate should not center on obscure claims of minutia. The exact formulation can vary among the forms of debate and your preference, but try avoid (double) negations in the preposition. A good way to check your proposition is to try to make the negative/opposite form of it and to check if that is indeed the other side of the debate you want to see.

Topics 2/2



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The IDEA website includes a database of possible debate topics and lists the top 100 Debates from their website (ranked by total views)

http://idebate.org/view/top_100_debates. Each topic includes a prompt describing the topic, a list of points for and against, and a bibliography of resources.

An example proposition



University education should be free!

University education should **not** be free!

Opposite check



Preparation of participants 1/2



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After choosing a relevant and exciting topic, it is time to prepare. Regardless of whether you have or have not assigned sides to your participants yet, it is advisable for participants to develop both a pro and con case, persuasively supported by evidence and reasoning. As most forms of debate are relatively short, participants usually center their cases on a few quality arguments. Each team, however, should research several arguments on both sides of the issue, so it can adapt its case to the opposing team's claims as necessary. Having arguments in direct contradiction with each other will enhance clash in rebuttals and prove to be a great learning experience.

Organization of speeches through effective communication and clear outlines is important so any audience or judge, as well as the opposing team can follow each of the arguments and the supporting evidence. Effective persuasion requires credible, unbiased, quality supporting evidence, which may include a mix of facts, statistics, expert quotations, studies, polls; but it may also be real-life examples, anecdotes, analogies, and personal experience.

Preparation of participants 2/2



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When organising a debate, tell your participants to consult a variety of articles and sources. Mind them that they should not overwhelm their case with evidence; rather, they should select the best evidence to represent their claims.

It may help to search for previous debates on the topic in online debate databases such as www.idebate.org/debatabase and www.debate.org/debates

Concluding: allow some time for your participants to prepare properly.



Argumentation: Content



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First condition you have to meet is a relevance. You should discuss the problem which is directly related to the topic of discussion (for example, do not talk about Palestinian conflict when the discussion is about International justice implemented after Yugoslavian war).

Then you should answer three basic questions:

- 1) What is the problem and the cause of this problem?
- 2) Why is your opinion relevant and your arguments valid?
- 3) What are benefits, gains, constraints or fallacies of such proposition?

These questions are fundamental for explanation and justification of your arguments. Of course, you should prepare yourself to face the critical insight to your arguments. But that does not mean that you should not be controversial. On the contrary, you OUGHT TO BE controversial (but, of course, in adequate sense).

Argumentation: logical fallacies



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A logical fallacy is a flaw in reasoning. Strong arguments are void of logical fallacies, whilst arguments that are weak tend to use logical fallacies to appear stronger than they are. Logical fallacies are like tricks or illusions of thought, and they're often very sneakily used by politicians and the media to fool people. Don't be fooled! Coming to recognise and calling out these fallacies, strengthens your critical thinking instantly.



Why not print out a poster like the one find on the page yourlogicalfallacyis.com and make sure your participants learn how to argument properly, like a good philosopher.

Code of Conduct



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- Respect different opinions. They can show you different point of view.
- Don't judge others by the opinions they have, or are portraying. The most evil points of view might be the most educative.
- Do not insult others.
- Discuss arguments, not personal affairs.
- Do not attack nationality, background, gender or language of anybody.
- Give proper reasons for your comments.
- Avoid obscurity and ambiguity.
- Do not discuss things which are NOT directly related to the topic of discussion.



Chairing & Judging 1/2



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The chair of the debate makes sure the debaters adhere to the rules of the debate. The chair takes care of the time limits or, in a debate without time limit, makes sure both sides are equally heard. Furthermore the chair decides on points of order made and intervenes in case the code of conduct is not observed. The chair should not interact in the content of the debate in any way after the first debater started their argumentation.

There are several ways to judge a debate. This really depends on the form of the debate and what skills you would like to focus on. Judging is usually either done by an audience or by a jury. The chairperson can possibly be judge as well.

If you want to have a jury or judge that evaluates teams on the quality of the arguments, they should focus on the quality of those arguments actually made, not on their own personal beliefs, and not on issues they think a particular side should have covered. Judges should assess to what extent each argument supports the truth or falsehood of the chosen preposition. (Reminder: the pro should prove that the resolution is true, and the con should prove that the resolution is not true.)

Chairing & Judging 2/2



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An easy and effective way to judge is to ask yourself “If I had no prior beliefs about this resolution, would the round as a whole have made me more likely to believe the resolution was true or not true?” However, judges should discount unfair, obscure interpretations that only serve to confuse the opposing team.

A judge can also consider the clarity of the communication. Judges weigh arguments only to the extent that they are clearly explained, and they will discount arguments that are too fast, too garbled, or too jargon-laden to be understood by a well-informed citizen.

If agreed on beforehand, other aspects can be taken into account as well. In some debate forms and cultures, humour is a very important factor. In other forms, before and after polls are done with the audience and the winner is the team who swayed the most audience members.



After the debate



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Now the debate is over we can actually see what it brought to your participants. Many persons will for themselves decide where they actually stand. This is not necessarily on one of the two sides, as the informal talks afterwards allow for people to express their nuanced opinion. Always try to have some space for aftertalks, either organised in your session, or simply over a coffee/drink.

If you debated on a topic that is (potentially) relevant for AEGEE, make sure to use this opportunity to discuss with your participants what AEGEE's position on the topic can be, or what AEGEE can and should do in the field you discussed.

Perhaps new ideas for projects or campaigns start in your debate, or old ideas are challenged. Everything is possible!





We wish you many fruitful debates!