

# Project Content

## 20 Stages of Teaching Controversial Topics



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Discussing, debating, and writing about controversial topics has many benefits for ESL students in the development of speaking, critical thinking, and writing skills. It is also an academic expectation that students should be able to analyze a controversial topic and take a position on it.



Teaching controversial topics helps students in this task of analyzing a topic like *same-sex marriage* and the various perspectives on it and taking a position. However, teaching controversial topics can be difficult and should be handled with care. Following are some activities that move students from beginning discussion on issues to more advanced **debate** and are designed to take place over at least several class sessions.

Not all activities need be completed, and the instructor may choose to end the unit before progressing to the ending big debate, depending on the students' level, interest, and time constraints.

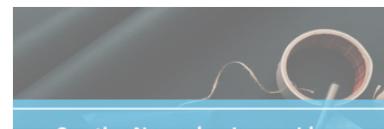
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### Beginning the Discussion

- 1 Begin by presenting some everyday ethical issues and dilemmas, such as a list of "What Should You Do If-?" (a stranger drops his wallet on the bus, etc). Have students discuss their responses in groups.
  
- 2 Teach some of the language related to ethical dilemmas, such as the use of the second conditional: "If I were you, I would—" or "If it were up to me—."
  
- 3 Also teach some formulas related to stating opinions: "As far as I'm concerned—" and "In my opinion—"

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- 4 Discuss **ground rules for discussion** of ethical/controversial topics, such as listening and not interrupting. Teach the **language of polite disagreeing**: “/ understand what you’re saying, but I think—“
- Speaking
  - Role Playing Games
  - Mingling Activities
- 5 To further the understanding of expectations for participation in discussion, the teacher can **develop a rubric that rates students** by how much they participated and the quality of that participation. Go over the rubric with students so that the expectation is clear and frequently update them on their progress.
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## Extending the Conversation

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- 6 After this basic introduction to discussing issues, the teacher is now ready to introduce more controversial topics.

**Start by explaining what a controversial topic is:** a topic that reasonable people may disagree on, such as whether the government should provide health care to its people. There are a number of different perspectives on this issue: economic, human rights, etc. However, whether the people should have clean drinking water is not a controversial topic as no reasonable person would disagree with the position.

- 7 As a class, **brainstorm some controversial topics and put them on the board**. Students may have a hard time coming up with suggestions, so the teacher should have some topics prepared: *same-sex marriage*, *capital punishment*, and *mandatory school uniforms* are all popular topics ([see more example controversial topics here](#) or [here](#)).

- 8 Choose one sample controversial topic and together **come up with the various perspectives** on it: a religious perspective, an economic perspective, etc. What would people from these various perspectives likely think about the topic?

- 9 Divide students into groups of about three or four students. **Have students discuss the list of topics on the board** that they came up with and their various perspectives. Have them choose one topic for their group to discuss.

- 10 On the board, write the terms:  
**Strongly Disagree**   **Disagree**   **Agree**   **Strongly Agree**

Have students explain in their groups which position they take on the topic and why.

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## Moving into the Debate

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- 11 Come together again as a class. Review the groups' discussions. Select one topic as a class.

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- 12 Tell students they are going to debate the issue. Go over the format of a debate, or modified debate—with each side taking a position on the issue, supporting it, and countering the other side's claims. Also discuss types of support and reliable sources for support.

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- 13 Explain the terms “*Pro*” and “*Con*. ” Work together to list reasons “*pro*” and “*con*” for a sample topic, not the topic students have chosen.

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- 14 Teach the etiquette of debate—waiting your turn to speak, waiting to be recognized, listening to the other side and taking notes, and politely disagreeing.

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- 15 Also teach some of the specialized language related to the particular topic: if the debate is on same-sex marriage, then “*civil union*,” for example, is likely to come up.

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- 16 First do a mini-debate. Have the students divide into pairs, and each member within a pair select a side, pro or con, and proceed to debate with their partner for two minutes on the issue.

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- 17 For the larger debate, have the class divide into two sides to prepare. Students may want to adopt roles within their group as researcher, leader, etc. They may wish to do outside research on their topic to support their position.

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- 18 On the day of the debate, the two sides, pro and con, should face each other. The teams should take turns introducing themselves, their position, and their major support. Then each side can provide a major counterargument. Finally, each side provides some additional comments, summarizes, and closes.

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- 19 The teacher may wish to follow up with an essay after the debate. Students are now prepared to write a persuasive paper, which is much like the written form of the debate, in that it involves taking a position on a topic and supporting it.

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The remaining topics that were not used in the debate can be listed on index cards to be pulled out for future discussion or debate.

Although requiring some planning and perhaps taking a little difficulty to set up, teaching, analyzing, discussing, and debating controversial topics reap huge benefits in developing critical thinking skills, writing skills, and discussion skills for ESL students.

How often do you have similar debates in your classroom?

**Bonus:** [Download](#) the printable PDF checklist with 100 powerful controversial discussion topics that will make even your quietest students speak for hours.

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