

GENERAL RULES FOR CLASS DEBATES

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Introduction

The classroom debates are designed to make our students increase their teambuilding, group problem solving and oral presentation skills. Students who take part in debates are more open-minded, have sharper critical thinking skills and know how to settle disputes. They get more tolerant to the other’s opinions and accept opposite points of view, thus becoming more adaptable in a world of continuous changes and challenges.

I am a teacher of English in a technical college and one of the greatest challenges of an English class is organizing debate activities with my students that study English just twice a week. As you can imagine, I had to take the basic rules of debating, make them easier and adapt the structure to our needs but in the same time, preserve the essence and general guidelines of a classic debate.

Every debate has two sides, **the affirmative side** and **the negative side**. The affirmative side, “pro”, supports a proposition/resolution. The opposing or negative side, “con”, opposes the proposition. There is also **a timekeeper/evaluator/moderator** that keeps the time allocated for each speaker, allows interventions and evaluates the teams. A moderator student should be able to speak clearly and keep everyone on task in a respectful manner. The moderator formally introduces the debate topic and allows students to speak alternating between pro and con. The evaluation may be the result of a team made up of the timekeeper (student) and of the teacher(s).

What Is a Debate?

- a debate - an argument with rules
- rules - vary from one competition to another;
- there are several formats for debates:
 - single-member teams or
 - teams that include several students
- in a typical debate:
 - two teams are presented with a resolution or topic
 - each team is given a set period of time to prepare their arguments
 - each member of each team delivers his speech in turn
 - the teams are evaluated and the winner of the debate is declared

Debate Preparation:

- Make sure you know the rules of the debate, including timelines.
- Research the topic and prepare logical arguments.
- Gather supporting evidence and examples for position taken.
- Anticipate counter arguments and prepare rebuttals.
- Be polite and courteous.

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- Listen attentively.
- Be respectful and supportive of peers.
- Speak only when recognized by the moderator.
- Use grammatically correct language.
- Speak clearly, slowly, and loud enough to be heard by the audience.
- Speak with passion and excitement.
- You may bring some brief notes, but you may not read them.
- Maintain good eye contact with the audience.

Nota Bene:

While debating, think of these three categories: **Manner, Matter** and **Method**.

- **Matter** is what is **IN** your speech, the content;
- **Manner** is **HOW** you say it (eye contact, voice, gestures);
- **Method** is the **STRUCTURE**, how organized your speech is.

Organization and roles

The 2 teams (3 students in each) are seated at 2 desks/tables in front of the classroom. Between the desks we need something from where each speaker, standing, delivers the speech. There should be also another desk for the timekeeper and evaluators. Separately, there are the desks for the public.

While a team is not required to use all of the time allocated to each debate component, speakers must stop immediately when the allocated time runs out. The timekeeper will announce the end of time 1 minute before by knocking once or making any other sign previously agreed upon. After this last minute ends, the timekeeper will stop the speaker immediately. Team members are prohibited from speaking to the audience or opposing team except at the times specifically allocated to them.

Debate opens with the affirmative team (the team that supports the resolution) presenting their arguments, followed by a member of the opposing team. This pattern is repeated for the second speaker in each team. Finally, each team gets an opportunity for rebutting the arguments of the opponent. Speakers should speak slowly and clearly. The judges and members of the audience should be taking notes as the debate proceeds.

For classroom use, it is not the success at winning the debate but rather the evidence of preparation and the quality of delivery that is important.

The order of the speeches:

A1 → O1

A2 → O2

↓

RA ← RO

Legend:

A1 = first student of the affirmative team (4 minutes)

O1 = first student of the opposing team (4 minutes)

A2 = second student of the affirmative team (4 minutes)

O2 = second student of the opposing team (4 minutes)

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RO = rebutter student of the opposing team (3 minutes)

RA = rebutter student of the affirmative team (3 minutes)

A1 - opens the debate by presenting the position of his team, their main thesis;

- offers a definition of the term(s) in debate;
- presents the structure of their position: *“I will speak about ... arguments 1 and 2 ... and my partner about ... argument 3”*;
- presents the first 2 arguments “Pro”.

O1 – opposes to A1’s position, stating his team’s position;

- disputes the definition(s) offered by A1 if such be the case;
- attacks the arguments of A1;
- presents the structure of their position: *“I will speak about ... argument 1 ... and my partner about ... arguments 2 and 3”*;
- presents the first argument “Con”.

A2 – supports A1’s “Pro” arguments;

- attacks the argument of O1;
- offers the third “Pro” argument;
- uses supporting facts, statistics, quotes during his speech.

O2 - supports O1’s “Con” arguments;

- attacks the arguments of A1 and A2;
- offers the second and third “Con” arguments;
- uses supporting facts, statistics, quotes during his speech.

RO - the opposing team begins the rebuttal;

- identifies areas of conflict in speeches of the opposing team;
- defeats the supporting arguments with counter arguments, quotes, facts;
- defends the opposing arguments **without adding any new information**, in a summative speech;
- metaphors, anecdotes, polite jokes, rhetorical questions can be used now in an attempt to make a pleasant impression and convince the jury.

RA – idem RO, but for his team.

Some advantages and disadvantages

Advantages:

- provide practice in developing sound and logical arguments
- make students think critically, creatively, “outside the box”
- give students an opportunity to practise active listening and public speaking
- enhance techniques of searching information, gathering, evaluating and synthesizing data
- enhance teamwork and friendly competition
- allow more interactive exchange among students and teachers

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Disadvantages:

- Students may not be familiar with debates as an assessment method
- Debates are time-consuming (e.g. time for research and preparation, time for presentation of each group)
- Some students can be offended when their point of view is challenged
- Students who do not like public speaking would be less motivated in participating
- Most of the students are left out of the debate, they are just audience
- Arguing too much gets your students into the habit of looking for debates more than for accuracy.

Debate Topics - Examples

- + This house believes that newspapers are a thing of the past
- + This House would ban homework
- + This House believes the Internet does more harm than good
- + This House supports the death penalty
- + This house would ban school uniforms
- + This house would ban cosmetic surgery
- + This House would ban junk food from schools.
- + This House believes that advertising is harmful
- + This house would ban smoking in public spaces
- + This House would go vegetarian
- + This house supports home schooling
- + This House would ban religious symbols in public buildings
- + This House believes single-sex schools are good for education
- + This House believes wild animals should not be kept in captivity

Evaluation

Votes are to be based upon presentation quality only, and not upon personal agreement or disagreement with the position assumed. The things that matter are the quality of preparation, presentation and time keeping.

When the debate is over, the point ratings will be summed. Whichever team has the higher sum will be the winner on that ballot. After all ballots are collected, the number of votes for each team will be announced. The team with more votes will be the winner.

We can use this kind of forms to be filled in by the timekeeper and evaluators:

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DEBATE BALLOT

Debate:

**1
Poor**

**2
Fair**

**3
Average**

**4
Good**

**5
Excellent**

A1 (PRO)

O1 (CON)

Rating = ____
Comments:

Rating = ____
Comments:

A2 (PRO)

O2 (CON)

Rating = ____
Comments:

Rating = ____
Comments:

RO (CON)

RA (PRO)

Rating = ____
Comments:

Rating = ____
Comments:

Total Points PRO:

Total Points CO

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Useful Debate Vocabulary

Stating an opinion

- In our opinion...
- We (don't) think that...
- The way we see it...
- If you want our honest opinion....
- According to the other side/ our opponents...
- As far as I'm concerned...
- Our position is the following...

Sequencing:

- Firstly..., secondly..., our third point is that...
- The first good reason to... is that... ; next ; what's more ; moreover....
- To begin, we think that... ; in addition, you have to know that... ; last but not least....
- The first point I would like to raise is this...
- Here's the main point I want to raise...
- I'd like to deal with two points here. The first is...

"I'm listening to the other side."

- I see your point, but I think...
- Yes, I understand, but my opinion is that...
- That's all very interesting, but the problem is that...
- I'm afraid I can't quite agree with your point.
- I think I've got your point, now let me respond to it.
- We can see what you're saying. Here's my reply...

Disagreeing:

- Excuse me, but that's not quite correct.
- Sorry, I just have to disagree with your point.
- Let me just respond to that, please.
- I'd like to take issue with what you just said.
- We said that... but the other side has not replied to our point.
- I'd like to focus on two points that the other side has failed to address.
- There are two issues our opponents have failed to dispute, namely...
- We pointed out that...
- Our opponents have claimed that...
- To recap the main points...
- Let's sum up where we stand in this debate.
- In summary, we want to point out that...

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Internet Sources:

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