

Methodologies for organising a debate

Why debate and not argue? An introduction to what a debate is.

A debate is a more formal type of discussion where the goal is not to freely talk about a topic and/or combine multiple opinions in a conversation, but to use conversational skills to find arguments for or against a specific question. When debating, the participants learn fundamental skills like how to thoroughly research a topic, present standpoints, listen to others, and think quickly during an active conversation.

Personal benefits of a debate:

According to the rethorics of Aristotle, there are 3 main components to debating:

- **Logos:** Correct reasoning, participants learn how to construct a strong argument.
- **Pathos:** Touching your audience, participants learn how to speak eloquently and convince the people they are speaking to by emotionally connecting to them.
- **Ethos:** Raise credibility, participants learn how to seem credible by being adequately prepared and radiating confidence and authority.

Debate is an interesting and engaging way to improve your wits and quick thinking by training your brain to interpret information and give a cohesive rebuttal under a time limit. It also helps with being a convincing speaker outside of a debate context and being more credible to your peers or superiors when trying to persuade them.

Societal benefits of a debate:

The utility of a debate extends beyond a formal debate. Teaching young people how to use certain debate tactics is beneficial in a larger social context.
For example:

- A population that asks critical questions and can express their opinions in a concise way
- People learning to listen to each other and have more interesting, constructive conversations
- debating about current socio-political questions in a critical manner contributes to a rounded political education

Why we chose Debate, not Argue as our theme:

We want to create an environment where we can exchange opinions, experiences, and discuss; not fight, over who is right or wrong. We believe that the philosophy of debate is the focus on substantive strong arguments and making a bigger societal change rather than playing on people's emotions to convince them of your personal opinions. In a society that is more and more polarised we are giving a platform to people, who can influence young minds. Together they can help shape a society of common respect and understanding.

How to choose a good topic and question/statement for a debate

In this section we will present guidelines for how to formulate a good debate question. Debate questions are used in the basic 2 on 2 debate format, which you will become familiar with in the next chapter. Other debate formats may also use statements, motions or other kinds of phrases to debate on.

Think of a relevant general topic:


People usually debate issues that have a particular concern in their societies or surrounding environments at a given time. That's why a good topic for a debate should be relevant for the group of people debating and should come from current affairs. Most debates stem from social, political, moral or economic problems in a particular region.

Formulate a proper debate question:


When you know the topic you want to hold a debate on, a debate question might naturally come out of it. However, there are some requirements, that you should look at when formulating a proper debate question:

- **The question should begin with should/shall.**
A good debate question always proposes a motion.
- **It has to be a decision-making question** (Yes or No).
One must be able to answer the question with yes or no.
- **It should be legally defined** (as much as possible).
- **It has to be a practical question, not technical or theoretical.**
It should propose concrete measures or regulations. e.g. legalization of same-sex marriage, enforcement of military conscription
- **It should be a positive (not negative) question.**
The proposition should be able to answer with yes.
The question should not include the word 'not'.
- **It should be of general interest** (usually political).
- **It should include concrete formulations** (as brief as possible).
- **There should be a balance of pros and cons.**
Both the proposition and opposition should find arguments to support their statements.
- **The topic should be controversial** in the region, so that the debaters could easily come across pros and cons.

Some good examples of debate questions:

- Should Lithuania legalize cannabis for recreational use?
 - Should there be unconditional basic income implemented in the EU?
 - Should the voting age be lowered to 16 in the European Parliament elections universally across the EU?
 - Should an independent public broadcaster be established by the European Union?
 - Should same-sex marriage be legalized in Poland?
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Some bad examples of debate questions:

- Why should the European Union build its defense forces?
- no proposal, merely asks why; cannot be answered with yes or no.
 - Should education on sexual harassment be a mandatory part of secondary school curriculum?
- it is recommended that debate questions include an exact location
 - Should NATO not be involved in the Russo-Ukrainian war?
- negative question (not)
 - Should all people obtain higher education?
- too theoretical, does not propose concrete measures.
 - Should women be banned from voting in elections in Canada?
- immoral question.
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DEBATE NOT ARGUE

Establishing the rules and format of the debate



Every debate should have a pre established format and set of rules where speaking time is fairly divided between the pro and contra team. There should always be a set of jury members who will not only make sure the rules and time-limits are respected, but will also judge the arguments and form of the debate participants to ultimately decide the winner. Optionally, there can also be a timekeeper who specifically oversees time-limits and warns the contestants when they are approaching the end of their speaking time. Finally there can also be a moderator who mediates when a team wants to react to a statement (especially in the case of a free form debate round) and intervenes when participants are acting out of line.

Basic debate structure

There are many types of debate formats. Below we give a detailed overview of a commonly used, easy to understand format. In this case the debate will take about half an hour and consist of 2 teams of 2 participants

Preparation	5 minutes
Opening speeches	2 minutes pro; 2 minutes contra
Discussion	10 minutes
Closing speeches	2 minutes pro; 2 minutes contra



Preparation

After each team is appointed either the pro or contra side they get an amount of time to structure their arguments and choose their speaking order. With known question the participants get 5 minutes to prepare the structure of the debate, with an unknown question this can be 15 minutes or more.

Opening speeches

Both teams get 2 minutes to present their opening arguments. Starting with the pro side which also has the responsibility of defining the statement. After this, the contra side will present their opening arguments. This is not yet the time for teams to react to the other teams arguments, but simply to present their own.

Discussion

After this there will be a 10 minute discussion. This is where a moderator would be most useful, as this is a more free-form type of round. This is the time to clarify ones arguments, and question or refute those given by the opponent.

Closing speeches

Both teams get 2 minutes to present their closing arguments. No new arguments should be given during this time, this is merely to summarize the debate and articulate the most important arguments from both sides in a clear and concise way. Here the contra team starts with their closing arguments, they can talk about the focus of the debate and the main (dis)agreements and why they think the arguments given point to a conclusion in their favour. Lastly the pro team should close off the debate by giving a final overview and arguing why the statement still stands in their favour.





Other well-know types of debates

There is an endless variety of debate formats and each format can be changed by adding a round, adding time, changing the speaking order, adding a jury question round, adding or removing free form discussion periods etc.

Here are some examples of well-know debate formats that can be used to draw inspiration from for your own format or can be strictly followed if a more challenging style is preferred.

British Parliamentary Debate

In this format there are 4 teams with 2 speakers each where 2 teams take the pro side (called the government) and the other 2 take the contra side (called the opposition). Each side has 1 opening team and 1 closing team. Even Though 2 teams are on the same side of the argument they are not necessarily there to help each other, and will be judged as a single team competing against 3 other teams.

The speeches in a British Parliamentary style debate are quite long, as they are typically 5-7 minutes. Just like in a regular debate, the speaking time alternates between the pro and contra side per speaker, and the debate is opened by the pro side's opening speaker. The closing speakers (in this case called the whip) are, just like in the first format we discussed, not expected to formulate new arguments but rather to summarize the debate. In the case of the British Parliamentary Debate, the final speaker is from the contra side, not the pro side.

An interesting addition here is the POI (points of information) where speakers can ask to react to an opposing team during their speech. If accepted by the moderator, the person who offered it has 15 seconds to offer a rebuttal or ask a question. The first and last minute of a speech is so called protected time where no POI may be offered.

American Parliamentary Debate

In this format there are 2 teams of 2 participants: The Government team (prime minister and member of government) and the Opposition team (leader of the opposition and the member of the opposition)

The debate itself consists of 6 speeches that each have a very specific timing:

- **Prime Minister's Constructive:** 7 minutes, 30 seconds
- **Leader of the Opposition's Constructive:** 8 minutes, 30 seconds
- **Member of Government:** 8 minutes, 30 seconds
- **Member of the Opposition:** 8 minutes, 30 seconds
- **Leader of the Opposition's Rebuttal:** 4 minutes, 30 seconds
- **Prime Minister's Rebuttal:** 5 minutes, 30 seconds

POI (see British Parliamentary Debate) are only permitted during the first four speeches, Though prohibited in the first and final minutes of each speech. The speaking participant can choose themselves to hear the POI or dismiss it.

A single judge, who has extensive knowledge of debate themselves, listens to the round and provides quantitative and qualitative assessments of each round as a whole and of the individual speakers before the next round.

Organizing a debate training and preparing participants for a debate

When organizing a debate you must make sure that the potential debaters are familiar with the debate format you are going to use and debate culture in general. If not, then some time before the debate itself, debate training session(s) must be organized. A good debate training should be conducted by experienced debate trainers or debaters, who must be familiar with the debate format being taught. Preferably they should have used it in debates themselves or at least become familiar with it in advance.

A typical debate training session usually lasts up to 4 hours (with breaks). However, in order to prepare inexperienced debaters you might need to organize several debate training sessions. These might or should include:

Ice-breaker games:

That would encourage participants to talk and be actively involved in the training. An example of these games would be a simple get-to-know game with every participant introducing themselves (e.g. name, nationality, age, debating experience, school, occupation)

Introduction to debates in general:

What is a debate? Why is debating important? What are the advantages of debating?

Explaining debate topics and questions:

How to come up with a good debate topic? How to formulate a proper debate question? Here you can play a little game with participants, asking them what they would imagine to be a good debate question.

Explaining debate rules and structure:

What is the debate format you are using? What is its structure? What are the rules?

Various games and exercises:

These help to make learning the debate format easier. How to formulate a proposal? How to build a strong argument? Mini debates (up to 5 min) and so on.

Debate assessment:

After you are finished explaining the rules and structure, you might want to talk about judging and evaluating the debate. What is a good debate? How does one assess it? What are the criteria?

Mock debates:

At the end of the training session you might organize a short mock debate on a simple debate question, which would not require intensive preparation. However, a separate only mockdebates session is recommended for the participants to get used to the format and try the roles of both a debater and judge. A separate debate session might last up to 2 hours and can also be organized online.

Using various technological and education tools:

Things like Kahoot or Mentimeter, might make the training session more interactive and engaging. It is especially recommended to use such tools when organizing an online debate training session.

Breaks:

Are essential when conducting a 4-hour or longer training session. It is recommended that the session include at least two short coffee-breaks of about 10-20 minutes long, and preferably a lunch break of 45 minutes.



DEBATE NOT ARGUE

How to create a balanced debate

Gathering arguments:

The participants should draw from a variety of sources and include different types of information like statistics, expert testimonies, anecdotes etc.



The arguments should be formed from a collection of different sources and arguments as merely pigeoning the work of others will weaken the arguments. One should give careful consideration to the type of sources and their origin. It is important that the sources are independently fact checked and/or come from a reputable source.

Finding sources that might counteract your points can also be useful as this will help you prepare for possible rebuttals to your arguments.

Debate Fallacies:

Not every argument is a valid argument. Knowing these debate fallacies will not only help participants avoid these mistakes in their own plea but also help them point them out when the opposition uses them.

Ad Hominem/Personal attack:

Don't focus on people's personal choices, this does not nullify the content of the argument itself.

"You say you are against hunting but you eat meat yourself"

Don't use derogatory attacks purely based on someone's being or identity.

"This is something an 18 year old girl wouldn't know"

Wrongfully appointed authority:

Only quote people who have authority relevant to the debate, not every scientist/professor etc. knows something about every subject.

Personal experiences with the subject do not equate to having relevant knowledge about it.

Ad populum:

Using an argument popular with the audience when speaking to them is only relevant if what is being claimed is proven in another way.



Strawman argument:

A strawman argument is when you attack a twisted or wrongly contextualized argument of the opposition rather than actually reacting to the argument itself.

"You are saying cancer research is more important than HIV research, so you are saying HIV research isn't important"

Circular reasoning:

Using circular reasoning means you fall back on the same argument but with different words.

"God exists because the bible says so and what the bible says is true because it was written by God"

Emotional manipulation:

Using arguments that awaken pity or empathy with the audience without the argument itself having any strong content to it.

Shifting the burden of proof:

Claiming that because the contrary can't be proven it must be true.

"There is no other explanation for the strange lights seen in the sky so therefore it must be aliens"

Finding skilled and impartial jury members:

It is very important that the chosen jury members have relevant knowledge of the subject at hand as well as the debate judgment criteria. The jury should be able to judge the teams' arguments independently of their personal beliefs and should preferably not have any personal relationship with any of the participants.

DEBATE NOT ARGUE

Judging and evaluating a debate

The main components of a good debate:

- It is based on a controversial and relevant topic;
- It has a well-formulated debate question (statement) with a great deal of pros and cons;
- It features a well drafted proposal by the participating debaters;
- There is strong interaction and involvement of all participating debaters;
- The debaters possess a good knowledge of the topic and provide valid and well-founded arguments;
- The debaters are fluent, eloquent and are able to lead the discussion.

These characteristics can be applied to virtually every debate format there is. However how a debate is evaluated and judged is very different depending on which debate format is being used. **Here are some guidelines to a debate assessment of a four-people (2 on pro and 2 on con side) basic debate format.**

Debate Assessment (2 pro/2 contra basic debate format)

The Jury:

The jury decides how good the debate was and how well the participants debated. It usually consists of five judges (could also be less) including a timekeeper. The judges should ideally have some experience in debating and must be familiar with the debate format being used. They evaluate the contribution of each individual to the success of the debate as a whole. To ensure impartiality judges should not know debaters personally and preferably should come from different surroundings (country, city, university, school etc.). During the debate the jury sits before the debaters and takes notes. It does not interfere in the debate.

Jury tasks:

- Listen carefully to the debate
- Evaluate the performance of each participant, preferably according to the criteria.
- Publicly evaluate the performance of a participant. The evaluation should be brief and precise, e.g. two good things and one bad.

The timekeeper:

They should keep the time according to the rules and take a note of each participant's speaking time. The timekeeper usually uses a bell or holds up signs to notify the participants about their remaining time, when they need to wrap up, and when the speaking time is up.



Assesment criteria:

1. Subject matter knowledge;
2. Wealth of expression;
3. Ability to lead a discussion;
4. Persuasiveness.

If debaters debate in teams then the criterion of (5.) Dialogue is also taken into consideration.

Note: the level of knowledge of the language being used is not taken into consideration in the evaluation.

The judges are asked to assess the extent to which each speaker meets these four criteria and the extent to which each individual has contributed to the success of the debate. As a result, each debater learns what strengths he or she has shown and what he or she can improve.

If there is a tie between the scores in a decisive debate then usually a debater which has scored better in the Ability to lead a discussion wins. If the scores in the mentioned criterion are even, then the fate is decided by the commission of the jury/ies.

Below we will show how to allocate the points in each of the criteria.

1. Subject Matter Knowledge

How well does the speaker know the issue?

Subject matter knowledge describes the ability to accurately answer factual questions.

- Knowledge of the current situation (facts, problems, previous regulation)
- Knowledge of evaluation perspectives (moral, political, legal)
 - Correctness and relevance of information
- Accuracy of information (data, facts, definitions, quotations)

5 Points

Excellently prepared, has everything ready, detailed knowledge and understanding of the issue

4 Points

Precisely informed, knows all important aspects

3 Points

Well informed, knows the most important facts

2 Points

Rather informed, some parts correct

1 Point

Barely knows the subject, many things wrong

0 Points

Does not know anything, only false statements



2. Wealth of expression

How well does the speaker express what they mean?

Wealth of expression illustrates the ability to express oneself linguistically and verbally - in all dimensions of linguistic expression: verbal, vocal and nonverbal.

- Fluent presentation (opening and closing rounds)
 - Clear structure & appropriate pauses
- Comprehensible sentence structure, proper choice of words, appropriate phrases
 - Clarity and catchiness of the formulation
 - Vivid gestures, facial and vocal expression
 - Clear pronunciation

5 Points

Always appropriate, catchy and original

4 Points

Clear, illustrative and vivid

3 Points

Understandable and fluent

2 Points

Somewhat understandable

1 Point

Barely understandable

0 Points

Totally incomprehensible

3. Ability to lead a discussion

How well does the speaker respond to the others?

Ability to lead a discussion describes the competence of the speakers to engage in the conversation.

- Listening and letting others conclude (no inappropriate interruptions)
 - Respond to the previous speakers (explicit, precise, correct)
 - Willingness to give way when better arguments are made
 - Taking into account the results

5 Points

listens very carefully, asks questions, shows an overview, responds to the thoughts of others

4 Points

listens well, interacts well with the others

3 Points

sometimes listens well, usually considers the others

2 Points

listens most of the time, sometimes responds to others

1 Point

does not listen much, barely talks to the conversation partners

0 Points

does not listen at all, does not participate in the conversation

4. Persuasiveness

How well does the speaker justify what they say?

Persuasiveness is the ability to argue in such a way that the listener is willing to consider the speaker's position as reasonable and agree with it.

- Justification (not merely a statement) of the own position
 - Justification logically consistent (conclusiveness)
 - Justification on common grounds (plausibility)
- Importance and weighing of the arguments presented
- Attention paid to the essential factors in the course of the debate

5 Points

justified persuasively in every respect, attention paid to the essential factors in the course of the debate

4 Points

everything well justified, reasons well weighted

3 Points

partly weak, partly good reasons

2 Points

Position partially justified, many reasons rather weak

1 Point

almost only statements, position hardly justified

0 Points

Position completely unclear, no justification

5. Dialogue

How well do the team members work together?

(only used when a debate happens between two teams)

- How does the speaker compose themselves towards the other team and their own team members?
 - How well do the team members cooperate?
- Does each team member get about the same amount of speaking time?
 - Is the speaker empathic and respectful?

5 Points

Works as a cohesive team member, takes up enough speaking time but not too much, and is very respectful and empathetic towards everyone involved

4 Points

Works well with others but might be a bit under or overbearing at times

3 Points

Tries to work with others but does not always know their place and tone in the conversation very well

2 Points

The speaker often talks out of line or barely talks at all

1 Point

Creates conflict and does not seem very willing to cooperate in their team or with the opposition

0 Points

The debater is abrasive and does not respect the other candidates or their speaking time