

Debate



There are many ways of setting up classroom debates. The more experienced your students are with debate, the less structure you need to provide. Here is a basic overview with possible variations to help you get started.

Procedure:

1. Give students the debate topic, and assign groups of three to each side (larger groups are likely to result in students who do not get a chance to speak).
2. Allow students to meet with their groups briefly to refine their arguments. Inform students that someone in each group will be asked to make a brief opening statement for their side.
3. Arrange 2 sets of three desks/chairs in front of the room, facing the rest of the students.
4. If you want, select a student to be the recorder. S/he will record positives and negatives mentioned by both sides on the board.
5. Flip a coin or use some other method to randomly select a side to make the first opening statement. Give a time limit (1-2 minutes), and ask another student to watch the clock. After the first group goes, the second group gets an opportunity to make their opening statement.
6. After the opening statements, group members can speak freely, though they should be reminded to show each other respect. A reasonable time limit should be set for this portion.
7. At the end, each group should briefly summarize their main arguments. This should not be done by the same individual that gave the opening statement.

Tips:

1. Since multiple debates will be necessary for all students to participate, consider selecting topics at the beginning of a term and asking students to sign up for a debate. If all students are debating the same topic, then later groups have an advantage, because they have heard the arguments of other students.
2. Alternatively, one unit may lend itself to several different debate topics.
3. If students are not participating equally, consider a rule that all students must speak once before someone can speak twice.

Variations:

1. Rather than assigning students to pro/con sides, ask them to take on roles of interested parties. In a debate about human rights, for example, you may want to have students representing different countries. In a debate about environmental policy, students could represent different businesses, lobbying groups, or even animals or plants.
At a lower level, in a debate about food sold in the cafeteria, students could represent parents, cafeteria staff, the school nurse and students.
2. Depending on the topic, level of students, and maturity of the class, allowing students to pick their own sides may be more motivating. Make sure, however, that the sides are represented equally in the formal debate.
3. To encourage students to think critically and pay attention to each other's arguments, have students switch sides halfway through (i.e., students begin by arguing the pro side, then switch after 5 minutes to argue the con side).
4. Assign sides several days in advance and allow students to collect research to support their positions.

To keep the class focused:

5. Ask students not participating in the debate to write summaries of the different arguments.