Want to try Debate in *your* class?

What is Debate?

In a classroom debate, a proposition is stated and students make arguments for or against it. Students must research and prepare arguments to participate in the debate effectively, they are required to think on their feet to respond to the opposing side's counterarguments, and they benefit from hearing a range of perspectives on an issue.

Debate At-a-glance	
Prep	• Break students into two groups—*For* and *Against* the proposition • Assign or let students choose roles in the debate • Be explicit about the sources or types of evidence you want students to use to support their claims
During	• Introduce the activity • Monitor participation
After	• Open up the debate for comments from all students • Have students vote to indicate which side presented the most convincing argument

Prep

Break students into two groups—*For* and *Against* the proposition:

- Students either choose or are assigned to argue a particular side in the debate.
- It may present an extra challenge, but it can be a positive learning experience for students to argue on the side of the debate they don't actually believe in. Some instructors flip a coin and let the winning team decide whether they will argue in favor of or against the proposition.

Assign or let students choose roles in the debate:

- Possible roles include: opening speaker, rebuttal speaker, concluding speaker, researcher, organizer, debate moderator, leader, and speech composer
- Depending on the size of the groups, students may take on more than one role

Be explicit about the sources or types of evidence you want students to use to support their claims:

- Possible sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, books and manuscripts, magazines and newspaper articles, websites, and interviews with experts on the topic.
- Tell students they should avoid or limit claims based on personal experience or opinion, and explain why these are considered less valid sources of information in a debate.

During

Introduce the activity:

There are countless variations of the exact format of debates but, traditionally, debates follow the basic format described by Keller, Whittaker, and Burk (2001):

A formal proposition is written on the board (e.g., "Affirmative action policies should be banned"). The proposition may be written as a question (e.g., "Should affirmative action policies be banned?")

- Pro position (5 minutes)
- Rebuttal (3 minutes)
- Con position (5 minutes)
- Rebuttal (3 minutes)
- Teams question each other (5 minutes/team)
- Closing statements (3 minutes/team)

Monitor Participation:

- Particularly if a student is filling the moderator role (and thus keeping track of time), you can keep track of students' contributions to make sure that everyone participates

After

Open up the debate for comments from all students:

- After each side has presented their concluding arguments, you may want to let the rest of the class weigh in, ask questions, or present new evidence

Have students vote to indicate which side presented the most convincing argument:

- Ask students to raise their hands in favor of the arguments made by the *For* or *Against* sides. You may want to ask if anyone's mind has been changed by the debate—ask them to share what changed their thinking.

Reference:

Keller, T., Whittaker, J., & Burke, T. (2001). Student debates in policy courses: promoting police practice skills and knowledge through active learning. *Journal of Social Work, 37*(2), 343–55.