

Middle School Public Debate Program

Introduction to Debate

© 2002 John Meany and Kate Shuster

We all engage in argument every day, on a variety of issues. Sometimes we are the people making the arguments. You may argue with your friends over what movie to see, with your parents about adjusting your curfew, or with your employer about getting a raise. At other times, you are part of the *audience* for arguments that try to persuade you to believe a certain thing or to take a particular action. You may not realize it, but you spend the majority of every day surrounded by arguments:

“I need a hall pass.”

“The Red Sox will win the World Series this year.”

“We should order a pizza.”

All of these are arguments. When you think of the word *argument*, you probably think of its negative use. We often characterize confrontations as *arguments*, saying things like: “Don’t argue with me,” or “I don’t want to get into an argument about this.” While these phrases use one sense of the word argument, another way to think about an argument is simply as an *attempt to convince an audience about some idea*. We make arguments about the world in order to *persuade* an audience to adopt a specific point of view about something. When you say, “I need a hall pass,” you are most likely trying to persuade your teacher to allow you to leave the classroom for some reason. When you say, “We should order a pizza,” you may be trying to convince your friends or family to have a specific kind of meal. Arguments can also be about facts or predictions, as in the case of the above claim about the Red Sox. It is not necessarily true that the Red Sox will win the World Series this year. Thus, when you claim that they will, you are making an argument by trying to convince a listener that your point of view is correct.

We make arguments to persuade other people to take our side on a particular issue. What are some arguments you might make in everyday situations? What kinds of arguments might you make to your friends? How about to your parents or guardians? What kinds of arguments might you make to your teachers?

Just as we make arguments to others, they also make arguments to us. Most of your day, whether you realize it or not, is spent being an audience to the arguments of others. What are some of the arguments you hear from your teachers, siblings, or parents?

You consume arguments, just as you consume products like toothpaste and video games. We are used to thinking of ourselves as consumers of goods and services, but we may not think of ourselves as consumers of information and argument. Yet we are constantly bombarded by arguments in the form of advertisements. All advertisements are arguments because they try, however indirectly, to persuade you to take a course of action – to buy their product.

Arguments are the driving force of everything from science to politics. A scientific hypothesis is a kind of argument that must be proven, through testing or other kinds of

experimentation and research. Public policies are made and continued on the basis of argument. Public transportation, such as buses and subway systems, didn't just come into being by accident. Public transportation exists because someone (or, more likely, a group of someones) decided that it would be a good idea to have a bus system and made persuasive arguments for funding and maintaining mass transit. Elementary schools have recesses or play breaks because teachers or educators made arguments that those policies would be a good idea for elementary school children.

As you can see, argument is serious business. It is your business, because you navigate your life and your social relationships with others by convincing them of your opinions or being convinced by theirs. In democratic societies, argument is critical to politics. Citizens or their elected representatives argue all the time about how to best make policy that represents the interests of the people. These conditions mean that those who do not know how to make effective arguments are often left behind or left out, because they cannot advocate on behalf of their interests or the interests of their family, co-workers, or other groups to which they might belong. If you learn how to argue effectively and persuasively, you will be able to overcome these obstacles and become a participating citizen in the global culture of argument.

The purpose of a course in debate is to become better at the business of argument. Everyone knows how to argue, but few people know how to argue well. As you study the practice of debate, you will become more competent at making arguments as well as listening critically to the arguments of others. Both skills are necessary for success in debate and life. In this chapter, you will learn some basic debate skills and practice developing those skills using several different exercises.

What Makes a Debate?

Debating can be formal or informal, written or oral, and heated or relaxed. The exchange of ideas and opinions is, of course, as old as language itself and has taken many forms throughout human history. Organized and informal debate occurs all over the world and plays an important role in just about every human society. Students study and engage in debate in Sierra Leone, Indonesia, Mongolia, Japan, Romania, Chile, Korea, Mexico, Ireland, and the Ukraine, just to name a few countries. By studying debate, you are joining a global community engaged in one of humanity's oldest pursuits. So don't worry – you're in good company.

While millions of people all over the world enjoy a good debate, they do not all debate in the same way, in the same format, or even in the same language. Most debates have a few characteristics in common:

- Participating debaters try to persuade a third-party audience or judge.
- Debates are usually on a fixed topic or proposition.

When we argue with our friends or parents, we are usually trying to convince them of our viewpoint, and vice versa. We say that someone wins an argument when they convince the other side to agree with their viewpoint. Debate does not work this way. One important way that debate is different from simple argument is that in a debate, you are not trying to convince your opponent or opponents that you are right. Rather, you are trying to convince some third party who is watching the debate. This third party is usually an audience, but it might also be a judge or a panel of judges who have been specially assigned the job of deciding the winner of a debating contest.

Both public and competitive debates are normally on a fixed topic or proposition. The topic might be vague or imprecise, such as “school safety” or “television.” The topic might also suggest a direction for the debate, such as “School safety should be improved,” or “Television should be abolished.” The function of a topic for debate is to constrain the issues that will be debated – generally, judges and audiences expect that debaters will stick to the assigned topic. Debate topics usually deal with issues in controversy. These can be international issues like global warming or local issues like scheduling or dress codes at your school. One of the great things about debate is that once you learn **how** to debate, you can debate about any given topic.

What is an Argument?

Arguments are the most basic building blocks of debate. Understanding what makes arguments work distinguishes successful debaters from their less successful colleagues, and creates advantages for even the most experienced debaters. Debate is not the same thing as argument. Debate is a place for the presentation of many and various arguments, all of which can serve functions throughout the course of a debate. Of course, in debate as in life, not all arguments are created equally. That is, some are more successful than others. The question for debaters is how to make successful arguments and how to make these successful arguments work in debates.

Often, arguments are not successful because they are incomplete. It is important to remember that an argument is different from a simple *assertion*. An assertion is, most simply, an statement that something is so:

- “The death penalty is justified.”
- “Hyacinths are better than roses.”
- “The USA should eliminate its nuclear arsenal.”
- “Economic growth is more important than environmental protection.”

Most topics that you will debate will be simple claims about the world. They may take the form of propositions of fact, value, or policy, or of any combination of these. In everyday situations, many people mistake simple assertions for arguments. This error leads to debates not unlike those had by children: “Is too.” “Is not.” “Is too.” “Is not...”

Simply speaking, all arguments have three basic components: A-R-E: **Assertion, Reasoning, and Evidence**. Arguments have an assertion, which is simply a statement that something is so. Arguments also have *reasoning*, which is the reason why the assertion is valid. Reasoning is the “because” part of an argument. Finally, arguments have *evidence* – the proof of the reasoning. All three components are necessary for complete arguments. A novice debater might simply offer assertions to prove her point:

“The death penalty is justified.”

A more sophisticated debater knows that her argument will be more persuasive with reasoning:

“The death penalty is justified because it reduces crime.”

Better yet is the technique of the advanced debater, who offers proof to cement the credibility of her argument:

“The death penalty is justified because it reduces crime. Credible university studies conducted across the nation strongly point to this effect.”

If this argument “works” (is persuasive), it will be in part because it plays on the audience’s assumption that policies that reduce crime are good. It may also be persuasive because the data is credible, or from a credible source.