

# Using Debate Assignments

Proponents of debate across the curriculum argue that students respond to debate because it encourages them to think about the ways that they structure and present their arguments and pushes them to think more critically about others' comments. For more information about research on debate in the classroom, see Bellon, 2000 and Goodwin, 2003 (cited at the end of this document). The purpose of this handout is to introduce some ideas about using debate in the classroom.

## Here are a few suggestions for debate activities:

You might design a **structured whole-class debates** using the following guidelines (sample assignment write-up):

### Outline of the assignment for one type of in-class debate:

1. The class will determine the topic for the debate.
2. It is your responsibility to do some informal research into this topic and to determine your stance on the issue.
3. We will begin the debate with a speech from the advocate side. We will then go back and forth between the sides.
4. Although speakers do not formally need to be recognized, you will need to be considerate of other speakers. In other words, let them finish before you respond.
5. All speakers should be given an equal opportunity to speak. Please do not monopolize the speaking time.
6. I will act as the moderator. If I feel that you need some direction, I will step in. Otherwise, I will let the debate continue uninterrupted.

### Outline of the assignment for an alternative type of in-class debate:

1. The topic for the debate will be: "Resolved: That capital punishment is justified." *[Give them a specifically worded topic. In this case, the students decided that this would be an interesting topic.]*
2. Like last time, I expect that you will do some research for the topic. You may want to split up the responsibilities among your group.
3. We will follow the following rules for the debate:
  - a. We will loosely follow parliamentary procedure.
  - b. I will act as the moderator--recognizing speakers and enforcing guidelines.
  - c. The debate will begin with a 5-minute speech from each side. This speech should be presented by only one person (although everyone should contribute to writing the speech).
  - d. The debate will then be open to the floor. I will go from side to side recognizing speakers.
  - e. To be recognized, you will need to raise your hand.
  - f. Each speaker will be given 2 minutes per speech.
- g. There will be points of information. In other words, you can interrupt a speaker to clarify something. You cannot ask the question until you are recognized by the speaker, however. In order to be recognized, you must raise your hand and say, "Point of information." Speakers do not necessarily have to recognize the questioners.
  - h. There will also be points of order. If you feel that rules are being broken, you can ask the moderator to step in. In order to raise a point of order, you must raise your hand and say, "Point of order."
  - i. The debate will end with 3-minute speeches from each side. One person should be prepared to summarize the debate.

You might choose to have **one-on-one debates** between students. In that case, it might work best to follow a structure such as:

6 minute affirmative opening statement (this also means that students can turn in a written assignment—either a complete outline or a manuscript)  
3 minute questioning by the negative  
7 minute negative opening statement  
3 minute cross-examination by the negative  
4 minute rebuttal by the affirmative  
6 minute rebuttal by the negative  
3 minute closing by the affirmative

**Alternative one-on-one assignment:**

Remember that we will use the following time limits: 5 minute affirmative constructive, 2 minute cross-examination by the negative, 6 minute negative constructive, 2 minute cross-examination by the affirmative, 5 minute rebuttal by the affirmative, 5 minute rebuttal by the negative, 2 minute rebuttal by the affirmative. Both debaters will be given a total of 4 minutes to prepare during the debate. The preparation time can be taken between speeches. The debater will need to let the time keeper know that they are taking preparation time.

**What will I be looking for?** You will need to have a case written (typed) for both the affirmative side and the negative side. You will turn in a copy of your cases on the day that you debate. Your cases should include solid logic and support material. Try to use the information that we have learned throughout the semester to construct the cases. I will also collect your “flows” (notes from the debate) after the round.

**And another alternative:**

4 minute opening statement from the affirmative  
4 minute opening from the negative  
6 minute clash between the two (back and forth between sides, can impose time limit on statements)  
3 minute break for preparation for closing statements (where there should be clash—response to arguments presented in opening statements and clash period)  
3 minute negative closing statement  
3 minute affirmative closing statement  
*[You can also build in a time for the audience to question/rebut the debaters]*

You might also consider using **team debate**. Students respond well to team debates because they know that they can work with another person to build a case and speech anxiety nerves are quieted a bit. (The following assignment is based on an article by Kimberly Powell [1998] in *Selections from The Speech Communication Teacher 1994-1996*)

Use the following structure:

2 minute affirmative opening statement  
2 minute negative opening statement  
12 minute clash—back and forth—one at a time—can limit to one statement on each side  
2 minute negative closing statement  
2 minute affirmative closing statement

1. Divide the class up into groups of 4. You may have to ask someone to do more than one debate. If that is the case, I find that I get more volunteers if I offer to give them the higher of the two grades.
2. Choose a topic and write a proposition statement. The statement needs to be worded defini-

tively (“Gay marriage should be allowed”) so that students can clearly take sides. You should also think about whether you want the debate to focus on a value debate (“should”) or a policy debate (particular plans of action).

3. Have the students choose sides in each of the groups. They may have a hard time defending one side. It will help to explain to them that they are debating for the sake of debating and that the audience will know that they may not agree with the position that they have taken. It’s also helpful to remind them that they will have a firmer grasp of the arguments of the opposition.
4. Research. Decide on how many sources that they need, what kinds of sources they can use, how they will use them in debates.
5. Based on their research, students will prepare their opening and closing statements. Each team will need to decide who is preparing the opening and closing remarks. You can either have them prepare outlines or manuscripts.
6. During the debate, it works well to have students stand during their statements and sit during the clash. You might want to set the room up so that the two tables face each other.
7. You may also want to set some ground rules such as: use sources when you are making claims, don’t raise your voice, don’t attack each other except on the issues, etc.

### **For further reading:**

- Bellon, J. (2000). A research-based justification for debate across the curriculum. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 36, 161-175.
- Goodwin, J. (2003). Students’ perspectives on debate exercises in content area classes. *Communication Education*, 52, 157-163.

## **Debate Grading Suggestions**

Grades largely depend upon your assignment requirements, so these are just examples of some grading guidelines.

### **For a whole class debate:**

1. Participation: I want to see you actively participating in the debate--proposing and refuting arguments (5%)
2. Delivery: Effective use of public speaking skills to communicate your message. I will also judge your ability to have a controlled debate. In other words, the way that you handle yourself in the debate will impact upon your delivery grade (15%)
3. Logic: Use of well supported arguments (20%)
4. Support Material: This can mean informal, personal examples, hypothetical examples, statistics, testimony, etc. While I do want to see that you researched the topic, not all support material has to come from an outside source (30%)
5. Refutation: Direct responses to the opposite side’s arguments (30%)

### **A second whole-class debate:**

1. Questions: I want to see you ask direct questions of the other side. Be prepared to raise points of information. The questions should be relevant to the debate. (5%)
2. Delivery: Once again, I will look for your skills as a public speaker. Make sure that you present your arguments clearly and effectively. (15%)
3. Logic: I will be looking for the use of well-developed arguments. (20%)
4. Support Material: Once again, I want to see that you have researched the topic. Not all support material has to come from outside sources, however. You may also use personal examples, hypothetical examples, etc. (30%)
5. Refutation: I want to see direct responses to the opposite side. Make sure that you answer their arguments. In other words, don’t just prepare a speech ahead of time. I will want you to directly discuss the arguments being presented in the debate. (30%)

### **For one-on-one debates:**

1. Case construction: I want to make sure that you have put some time and thought into the case. I should see a strong, well-supported argument presented in constructives. (40%)
2. Support Material: I want to see evidence that the resolution was well researched—on both sides of the issue. Make sure that you use your support material during the debates. (20%)

3. Refutation: I want to see direct clash in the debate. In other words, do not ignore the opponent's arguments—directly refute them. (30%)

4. Delivery: As always, I want to make sure that you present your arguments clearly and effectively. There are some delivery rules that you will break in debate, however. For example, during cross-examination, it is better that you not face your opponent. You may also depend on the manuscript of your case for the constructive speeches. Most delivery rules still apply, however. (10%)

**For persuasive speeches:**

Your grade will be determined based on the following distribution:

Oral Presentation of Solid Argument	40%
Oral Use of Support Material	30%
Delivery	20%
Outline	10%

**More general information about grading guidelines:**

You might want to be more specific about what you are looking for in a speech. If that is the case, you can pick and choose from the following list:

**General:**

- Topic selection
  - Purpose is clear
  - Appropriate for audience
  - Appropriate for assignment
- Audience adaptation
  - Persona
  - Tone
  - Who is target audience?
- Outline (or other written component)
  - Follows correct guidelines
  - Easy to follow
  - Followed in speech

**Introduction:**

- Attention getter
- Introduce topic
- Establish credibility
- Central idea

**Body:**

- Main pt. statements
- Clearly organized
- Sources used
  - Credible
  - Correct number
  - Cited appropriately (oral and written)
- Topic well explained
- Transitions

**Conclusion:**

- Summary
- Strong closer

**Delivery:**

- Eye contact
- Vocal variety
- Movement
- Vocal fillers

**Visual aid:**

**The University of Southern Mississippi  
Speaking Center  
[www.usm.edu/speakingcenter](http://www.usm.edu/speakingcenter)**