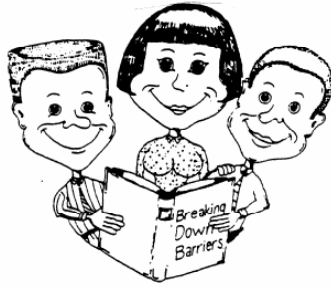


Breaking Down Barriers: How to Debate



SAMPLE OF THE BASICS SECTION

Written by Jim Hanson with Brian Simmonds, Jeff Shaw and Ross Richendfer

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Debate



What is Debate?

Controversial Issues

Have you ever heard someone say you should not discuss certain issues such as religion and politics? You are not likely to hear that in an academic debate because debaters are willing to discuss nearly any issue.

Some people still have a difficult time talking about some issues, especially when the issue directly affects their lives. A common comment I have heard is, "I get very emotional when I debate certain issues." Probably at the top of the list of these issues is abortion. Abortion is a tough issue to discuss, but it needs to be discussed, as do many other issues, including the tough ones.

When you debate these issues, remember that people have different viewpoints and you should respect those viewpoints. Be sensitive to how others feel, keep an open mind, and remember that you debate to discuss the issues. Don't use debate to attack people and their feelings. Instead, respect people's strong opinions because it shows they care.

You can discuss the toughest and most important issues if you are sensitive enough. That is what makes debate such a special activity.

Be nice in your debates

While you do want to be assertive in your debates, avoid attacking your opponents. Comments like "they are stupid" and "that's the dumbest argument I've ever heard" just hurt feelings and provoke angry responses. Keep the focus on the issues as the vast majority of debaters do. You'll enjoy your debates more, make more friends, and you'll learn more.

What is your opinion about the death penalty? What about sending American troops into other nations? How about affirmative action? When I first joined my school's debate team, I had opinions about these and many other issues but I had no idea what academic debate was. I had seen two presidential candidates debate and I had certainly been in many "debates" with my friends, parents, brother, and sister. But, I did not know what academic debate was or what happened in a debate.

I quickly found out when I went to a tournament and watched another school eat our senior debaters alive. I wanted to stand up and defend my team. I am glad I did not. No doubt I would have become our opponent's dessert. But I vowed during that debate to work my hardest to be a good debater. I wanted to be able to express my ideas and to defend them convincingly.

If you have a similar interest in becoming a better advocate, debate is the activity for you. In this chapter, I will introduce you to academic debate. I will discuss what debate is, why debating is a good idea, the issues that you debate, the affirmative and negative side of the issues, and what happens in a debate.



Two debaters speaking their mind about an important issue.

WHAT IS DEBATE?

I imagine you have had arguments with other people. You have probably argued about what movie to see with your friends, about whether it is your turn to do the dishes with your brother or sister, and about what the best video game is with anyone that disagreed with you. These arguments are like debates, but they usually differ in an important way. The difference is that **DEBATE** occurs when **TWO SIDES ATTEMPT TO PERSUADE ANOTHER PERSON THAT THEIR POSITION ON AN ISSUE IS MORE CONVINCING**. So, if you and your brother tried to convince each other to do the dishes, you were arguing. But, if both of you tried to convince your parents who should do the dishes, you were debating.

Academic debate probably takes on a more formal role than debates you have had with your brother in front of your parents. **IN ACADEMIC DEBATE, TWO SIDES ARGUE AN ISSUE IN FRONT OF A JUDGE OR JUDGES**. For example, one debate team might argue that we should increase sex education in schools against another team that argues schools should not deal with this subject. A judge watches the debate and makes a decision in favor of the side that he or she believes made more convincing arguments.



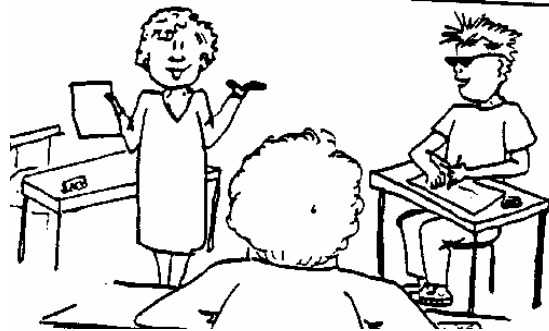
Debaters take positions on many issues.

Why do I have to debate both sides of the topic?

This question is one that President Theodore Roosevelt asked when he called academic debate a moral perversion because people sometimes take positions with which they disagree. Debaters will agree that it is a bit strange to finish one debate and then go right into another and argue virtually the complete opposite position. But academic debate's purpose is not to encourage you to repeat what you already think about an issue. Debate makes you argue both sides of an issue and in doing so, helps you learn why each side believes what it does. Arguing both sides will help you make an even stronger case for your position because now you will know the other side's arguments and how to defeat them. Plus, you might actually change your mind. This "moral perversion" will make you more open minded and a better advocate.



These two debaters get quite heated about an issue they are debating.



An affirmative speaker tries to convince the judge while her opponent, the negative debater, takes notes.

WHY DEBATE?

Debate is a fantastic activity that will prepare you for a life of success in many ways. I know it has helped me to think more systematically, to speak better, and to have a deeper appreciation of the issues that confront our world. I strongly believe that debate can benefit you as well. Debate will make you a better speaker. You will organize and present ideas in a credible manner. Debate will sharpen your critical thinking skills, skills that a Carnegie Foundation study concluded are some of the most important students can develop.

Scholars Ronald Matlon and Thompson Briggers have demonstrated the benefit of these skills in a series of articles. Both documented that disproportionately large numbers of successful business, political, and legal leaders are former debaters. Included in the most notable of this group are former president John F. Kennedy, news journalist Jane Pauley, actress Justine Bateman, and famous legal scholar Laurence Tribe. I can attest to Matlon and Briggers' findings because I am proud to have coached a Columbia Law School honors student, a Rhodes Scholar, and a doctorate in the renowned department of Astronomy at the University of Arizona. Someday you may join this group of respected people.

Even if you do not, debate is still a fun and educational activity. You get the opportunity to engage in an intellectually challenging discussion of ideas you and other smart people have. You develop skills that will make you a more effective advocate. And, perhaps most important, you develop a lasting group of friends who share your interests.

THE ISSUES YOU DEBATE

I hope I have made a convincing case for debate because it really is a tremendous activity. Debate provides a forum for discussing important and interesting issues like tougher sentences on violent criminals, tighter restrictions on logging trees, and the legalization of marijuana. The issues that you debate depend on the topic that debate teams choose. The topic that you debate is called a resolution. A RESOLUTION IS THE TOPIC OF DEBATE, A STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF A STAND ON AN ISSUE. Examples of resolutions include, "Resolved: That the United States government should substantially change its foreign policy toward the People's Republic of China," and "Resolved: That security from terrorist attacks is more important than civil liberties." You debate a topic for one month, two months, or the entire year.

THE AFFIRMATIVE AND NEGATIVE SIDE

When you debate these resolutions, you will argue them from two

Quiz Yourself

Which side is affirmative and which is the negative? Choose whether the following points affirm, negate or are irrelevant to the topic. "Resolved:

1. That the death penalty should be made illegal in the United States."
- The death penalty deters criminals from committing crimes.
2. With the death penalty, innocent people may be executed.
3. For crimes like murder, death is an appropriate punishment.
4. Hanging, the electric chair and the firing squad are all examples of the death penalty.
5. The death penalty is more likely to be used against disadvantaged groups, like minorities and the poor.

ANSWERS:

- 1) negate
- 2) affirm
- 3) negate
- 4) probably irrelevant
- 5) affirm

Don't be cynical Mike

Think twice before you begin arguing with everyone in sight. There is a time to debate and there is a time to discuss. When you talk with a friend or your parents, that is not a time to debate. Sure, you can use many of the skills that you learn in debate, but with friends and parents, you should try to discuss. Focus more on sharing ideas rather than harshly advocating your position.



Don't be a pouty Mike.

Don't debate every time you talk to someone. Argue when you disagree, but try to keep a focus on discussing issues. Don't nitpick and attack your friends. And I hope that you'll carry this attitude into your debates as well by not attacking your opponents in debates. Use debate as a vehicle to understand ideas and to resolve problems rather than creating them.

sides, the affirmative and the negative. THE AFFIRMATIVE (one team) SUPPORTS THE RESOLUTION. THE NEGATIVE (the other team) REJECTS THE AFFIRMATIVE POSITION. Affirmatives argued on a U.S. policy toward China resolution that we should restrict trade with China to protest the Chinese government's abuse of human rights. Negatives responded that these changes would be costly, would harm our relations with other countries, and were unnecessary because the current policy toward China was fine. On a resolution, "Resolved: That human rights promotion is a more important foreign policy goal than economic trade promotion," the affirmative would support human rights promotion over economic trade, the negative would argue that economic trade is more important.

WHAT HAPPENS IN A DEBATE?

In a debate, you and the other team argue to persuade your judge. During the debate you present your position, attack your opponent's position, and defend your position against your opponent's attacks. As you argue, your goal is to persuade the judge. You are not arguing to convince yourself or your coach; nor are you arguing to a supernatural being who immediately thinks your arguments are correct and logical. You are arguing to convince your judge, and your arguments are only as good as your judge thinks they are. So, even if you think your argument is supported by a strong reason, your judge may disagree. As a result, you need to present appealing arguments. APPEALING ARGUMENTS ARE ARGUMENTS THAT YOUR JUDGE BELIEVES ARE GOOD ARGUMENTS. For example, I once argued in a debate that increasing technology transfers to "third world countries" was harmful because the transfers mostly went to the rich and exacerbated the gap between rich and poor. My judge listened carefully but wrote on his ballot that he felt this was not a strong enough reason to vote for me. I thought my reasoning was sound, but he did not.

My argument might very well be "sound" in the sense that many experts agree that technology can exacerbate the rich-poor gap. But, when you debate you attempt to convince the judge in front of you, not yourself, not a different group of experts, and not a perfect judge who makes exactly the right decision. You have the right to expect that your judges will listen to your arguments, that they will not be biased in favor of one team, and that they will try to make the best decision that they can. However, that does not mean that your judge will make the decision you want, nor does it mean that your judge will be convinced by your arguments, especially when your opponents are trying to convince him or her to reject your arguments.



When you make your arguments in your debates, always be thinking of how your judge will react. Focus on persuading your judge with appealing arguments.

You have the obligation to present an appealing argument. To

Why do I have to support a side of the topic with which I don't agree?

In academic debate you will have an opportunity to support your choice, but you usually are required to take the opposing side as well. So, in one debate, you might support the topic, the next you will be against it. This might seem a bit odd, but this process assures that debate can occur. If debaters did not argue both sides of the topic, it would be very difficult to have debates. Students might drive miles to another school, sit down to begin to debate, and then discover that there was nothing to debate because both sides agreed on the key issues. What a waste of time! By debating both sides you learn to appreciate both sides of an issue. In fact, you might even change your mind on issues that you debate. I know I changed my mind on many issues that I debated.

What about tournaments?

If you participate on your school's team, you'll go to tournaments at other schools. Most High School tournaments are held on Friday and Saturday, or Saturday and Sunday. Most College tournaments are held on Friday through Sunday or Saturday through Monday. At the tournament, you'll compete in 4 to 8 debate rounds plus elimination rounds for those who qualify based on their win-loss record.

What will I learn in this book?

You'll learn, step-by-step, how to debate. First, you'll prepare a case and present it. Second, you'll learn how to refute and rebuild arguments and you'll practice these skills. Third, you'll practice question and answer techniques and engage in a "mini-debate." Then, you'll move on to more advanced skills where you'll learn even more!

make my technology argument appealing, I needed to address the reason that the judge felt it was weak. I think I needed to demonstrate that increasing the rich-poor gap would cause serious harm. When you present arguments, consider how your judge will respond. Adjust your arguments so that they will be appealing. This is a difficult task because there are so many different judges. But, most judges are reasonable people just like you, and you can appeal to them with arguments you think are sound. If judges do not find your arguments appealing, then change them.

As you learn many debate skills, keep "appealing arguments" in mind. In the coming chapters, you will learn how to research, construct arguments and cases, present, attack, and defend cases, and ask and answer questions about arguments. As you learn these skills, your goal should be to consider how to make your arguments consistently appealing to judges. If you do this, you will be the kind of debater that can convince judges and win debates.



This debater is proud of her accomplishments. You will be too, even if you don't win trophies.

CONCLUSION

If you have decided to learn how to debate, my hat is off to you. You will discuss many interesting issues. You will improve your ability to speak, think, organize, research, and write. And I think you will enjoy debate. I know I have ever since I first joined my high school team, competed in college, and now coach.

