

## SETTING UP A DEBATE CLUB

A debate club gives students of all abilities a fun way of developing their oracy skills. You can use different activities to help students with their critical thinking and confident communication. The club could also help students to become more informed about political and global affairs, or provide a venue for students to train for debate competitions with local school, or at a national level.

Most existing schools debate clubs rely on older students to help to organise the club, or to advise the younger students. If you're starting a new club, you can quickly involve students by asking them to suggest topics for discussion, do research and give presentations on areas they are interested in, recruiting other students to the club and giving feedback on their favourite club activities.

## MY FIRST SESSION

#### **Recruiting students**

### **Assemblies**

Holding debates in assemblies can be a great way to get students involved in debating - inviting in students from a local university; pitching pupils against teachers or asking students to vote for topics in advance can all help you to drum up interest.

## Spreading the word

Once you've got a core group of a few interested students, involve them in the advertisement of the club. Students can make posters, give announcements and spread the word about the activities of your club.

### Form-time activities

Finding some time in the school day to give everyone a chance to take part in some introductory activities can be a great way to find unexpected faces for your debate club.



### WHAT DO I NEED?

Debate clubs don't require lots of special resources. All you really need is at least four enthusiastic students to take part: at the start of your club, you may find a small group of around sixteen easiest to manage. Later on, as your club grows, students can help to organise or judge activities and debates, making it easier to run a club for larger numbers of students.

### CHECKLIST

- A classroom to debate in: ideally the club will take place in the same place each week, so students always know where to go. For many activities, you'll need a clear space where students can move around, as well as some desks for writing speech notes: a "horseshoe" or u-shaped set up is often best.
- Pens and paper (of course, students could bring their own!) - index cards for speech notes can add a nice sense of occasion for special debates
- A list of topics for debates or activities: you can find a list below, or search online
- Stopwatches to time speeches: most students can use their phones to time speeches, but dedicated stopwatches can reduce distractions



## MY FIRST SESSION

#### What to do

A brand new club should strike a balance between short activities that give everyone a chance to speak and participate, and full debate formats that may require week-by-week turn-taking. Try one of these plans, or use the activities to make a plan of your own.

# A QUICK 30 MINUTE PLAN

Having only thirty minutes will limit the kinds of debates your club can take part in. For example, a debate in the ESU Schools Mace format, with two speakers on each team, typically takes 45 minutes. However, students can still take part in lots of great debate activities.



Group size: 4-30



Classroom set up: a clear space for students to move around



Time: 30 minutes

### Introduction (10 minutes)

### Welcome the students and introduce the debating club

Motivate students by highlighting key events throughout the year – perhaps you hope to end the term with a show debate in assembly, a competition in school, or a trip to a local rival or politics/debate themed location.

Give students an opportunity to discuss debate-events from their own experience – perhaps they have seen some political debates on TV, seen a show debate at school, or been to a local school or university to watch some debates. Link this experience to the goals of the club.

## Warm-up activity (5 minutes)

## Stranded on a desert island

Students form pairs.

Set the scene: we are all going on holiday. Students should select one thing that they would pack, and tell their partner.

We are going to travel by boat. We are on a ship in the middle of a big ocean when suddenly there is a huge storm and the boat sinks. Disaster! Luckily, we can see a desert island nearby. We must swim to safety.

In pairs, students should choose one of their two items to save and bring to the island, where we will have to survive until we are rescued.

Ask a few pairs to feed back to the group. Remark on "because..." statements: we are making arguments here!

#### First debate (10 minutes)

Alley debate / Balloon debate for < 6 students (plans below)

#### Plenary (5 minutes)

Conclude the session by congratulating students on their first debate, and explaining what is planned for the next week.

## **TOP TIPS**

Remember to plan topics for the alley debate, or themes for the balloon debate in advance. Both plans have a list of example topics that you could use.

Some students may need prompts or sentence starters to help them out. For many activities, students can work in pairs to generate reasons using: Why? Because...

Practise using Why? Because... with simple statements, e.g. "My cat is a great pet. Why? Because..."

If you have a large group of students, some activities may get very noisy, with lots of pairs talking at once. Try clapping a call and response rhythm to regain their attention - practise it first though!





## MY FIRST SESSION

## AN HOUR-LONG PLAN

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Group size: 4-30



Classroom set up: a clear space for students to move around



Time: 1 hour

### Introduction (10 minutes)

### Welcome the students and introduce the debating club

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Give students an opportunity to discuss debate-events from their own experience - perhaps they have seen some political debates on TV, seen a show debate at school, or been to a local school or university to watch some debates. Link this experience to the goals of the club.

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In pairs, students should choose one of their two items to save and bring to the island, where we will have to survive until we are rescued.

Ask a few pairs to feed back to the group. Remark on "because..." statements: we are making arguments here!

Pairs should now combine to form groups of four. Again, they should select only one item and prepare a short statement to the whole group explaining why they chose this item.

## First arguments (15 minutes)

Where do you stand (plans below)

### First debate (15 minutes)

Alley debate / Balloon debate for <6 students (plans below)

#### Plenary (10 minutes)

Conclude the session by congratulating students on their first debate, and recapping essential principles of debate: make arguments using "because..."; listen to your opponents and defend your side of the debate.

Explain what is planned for the next week.

## **TOP TIPS**

Remember to plan topics for the alley debate, or themes for the balloon debate in advance. Both plans have a list of example topics that you could use.

Some students may need prompts or sentence starters to help them out. For many activities, students can work in pairs to generate reasons using: Why? Because...

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# **ALLEY DEBATE**

# Learning objectives:

To be able to structure an argument using a point & explanation.

Understand that debates have a for/against structure.

# Introduction: (5 minutes)

Recap the need for justifying opinions. Use the 'Why? Because...' prompt to reinforce this. Introduce the vocabulary of 'Point + Explanation', linking them to 'Why? Because...'

The students should form two lines of equal length, facing each other (an easy way to ensure the lines are equal is to ask everyone to high-five the person opposite them, and adjust as needed).

Explain that one line is "for" the statement they will be given; the other is "against". You aren't allowed to change lines!

# The Alley Debate (5 minutes)

Give the students a topic for the debate. Explain they now have 1 minute to think about a short statement in defense of their side of the debate. It should have a **point** and an **explanation**. Demonstrate with an example if needed.

Starting with the "for" team, ask each student in turn to give their argument, alternating between "for" and "against" until you reach the end of the alley.

If you have time for another topic, this time, ask students to reply to the person who spoke before them, before giving their argument.

"They said... but I disagree because... My own argument is..."

### **ESU RESOURCES:**

One or two topics to debate

#### Other resources:

Pens and paper

Time: 5 – 10 minutes per debate

Group size: up to 30

### **KEY VOCABULARY:**

Point – A short sentence that explains why you support/oppose a topic

Explanation – How and why your point is true.

## **DIFFERENTIATION:**

For less able students you can provide some suggested points that they can provide explanations for.

Students can work in pairs to generate arguments before the debate.

## **HINTS & TIPS:**

## Suggested topics:

Should everyone have a pet in their home?

Should we have to wear school uniforms?

Should people take part in violent sports like boxing?

Do celebrities make good role models?

Should your parents be able to secretly check what you are doing on the internet?





# **BALLOON DEBATE**

# Learning objective:

To be able to structure an argument using a point & explanation.

# Introduction: (5 minutes)

Recap the need for justifying opinions. Use the 'Why? Because...' prompt to reinforce this. Introduce the vocabulary of 'Point + Explanation', linking them to 'Why? Because...'

# Balloon debate (5-10 minutes)

4-6 volunteers should come to the front of the class/find a clear space.

Each one should choose a person that they will play during this game. You may want to restrict them using a theme, e.g. "famous people from history" or "characters from Harry Potter".

Now set the scene: all these people are in a balloon, but unfortunately it is leaking. To save ourselves, we will have to throw someone overboard!

Each student will now give a 30 second explanation of why their character should be allowed to stay in the balloon, using a **point** and an **explanation**.

After these arguments, the rest of the group should vote on one person to throw from the balloon.

This should be repeated until only one person remains in the balloon.

## **ESU RESOURCES:**

Theme for the balloon debate (if you're using one)

#### Other resources:

A clear space in the classroom

Time: 10-15 minutes

Group size: up to 30

### **KEY VOCABULARY:**

Point – A short sentence that explains why you support/oppose a topic

Explanation – How and why your point is true.

#### **HINTS & TIPS:**

**Mix things up** with some different rounds. Instead of defending their own character, students could **respond** to another character's defense.

"You argued that... but I disagree because..."

**Keep large groups involved** by including rounds where people outside the balloon offer defenses of the characters, or ask questions to everyone in the balloon.

#### **Themes**

Characters from a book the class is reading

Famous scientists

People from a historical period the class is studying



# WHERE DO YOU STAND?

# Learning objective:

To be able to structure an argument using a point & explanation.

# Introduction: (5 minutes)

Recap the need for justifying opinions. Use the 'Why? Because...' prompt to reinforce this. Introduce the vocabulary of 'Point + Explanation', linking them to 'Why? Because...'

Students should form a line in the middle of the room.

Assign one end of the room as "For" and the other as "Against". Students are currently standing "on the fence", where you are neither for nor against.

# Where do you stand? (10 - 20 minutes)

Give the students a topic. If they agree, they should move towards "for"; if they disagree they should move towards "against". The more strongly they feel, the more they should move.

Give students 30 seconds to ask someone standing near them why they chose to stand there.

Ask a few students to explain to the group why they are for or against, using a **point** and an **explanation**.

After each student has spoken, ask the whole class to take one step towards for or against to show whether they were convinced. Make this accountable by following up, asking students why they moved one way or the other.

Keep the discussion fresh by introducing new topics when needed.

### **ESU RESOURCES:**

List of topics

## Other resources:

A clear space where students can move around.

Time: 15-25 minutes

Group size: up to 30

#### **KEY VOCABULARY:**

Point – A short sentence that explains why you support/oppose a topic

Explanation – How and why your point is true.

### **HINTS & TIPS:**

Encourage listening by asking students to comment directly on arguments other people have made. "Do you agree with X? Why?" "X said... why did/didn't that affect where you are standing?"

Encourage development of more complex ideas by asking students to build on each other's contributions.

"X said... can someone who agrees add an example of that?" "X said... would anyone like to add to their explanation?"

Add challenge by swapping "for" and "against", and asking students to defend the opposite of what they believe.



## **NEXT STEPS**

School debate clubs are run in different ways around the UK, to reflect different goals and interests. However, there are a few things that most clubs do, which are listed below. How quickly you want to introduce these elements is up to you: it depends on the age, interests and prior experience of your students.

### Regularly use the same debate format

Using the same debate format each time you debate means that you don't need to spend lots of time explaining the rules, speaking order or length of speeches. Students can also get used to the role they need to play, and are then more able to concentrate on the quality of their arguments.

Using an established debate format also makes it easier for you to take part in competitions, or to link up with schools in your area for friendly competitions.

#### Do some research before debates

Taking part in debates often encourages students to develop their general knowledge, as well as interest in current affairs. Many students will be motivated to look up interesting topics on the internet, or read newspapers or magazines, and a club is a great place for students to share their research and enthusiasm.

### Encouraging research:

- Ask a student or group of students to research a topic of interest and
  present it to the club. For example, a student may research the political
  situation in another part of the world; the workings of the UK justice
  system; an international organisation like the UN or WTO, etc. When your
  club is more established, or following a competition, the students could
  create a list of topics they would like to know more about, and divide the
  research amongst themselves.
- Use a mixture of 'short preparation' and 'long preparation'. Some clubs and competitions like to use 'short preparation' debates, where students hear the topic/motion as little as fifteen minutes before debating it. This encourages quick, creative thinking. Other clubs and competitions like to use 'long preparation' debates, where students can have days or weeks to research the topic using the library or internet, and prepare their speeches in advance.

### Take part in competitive debates

Competitive debates are a fun way to keep students in your club motivated, and ensure that the strongest debaters are continually challenged. You may want to have a school debate tournament, or challenge a local school to a friendly competition. Your school could enter a team into the ESU Schools Mace competition or to a competition run by a local university. For more information on these competitions, please contact the ESU, or go to www.esu.org

### TOP TIPS

Getting older students involved in coaching or judging younger students helps everyone to develop new skills. You could involve other local schools or universities in mentoring partnerships.

Debating in primary schools offers fewer chances for students to lead their own clubs. However, younger students can still learn to chair and time debates.

The ESU provides training programmes for students and CPD for teachers as part of our Discover Your Voice programme. To find out more, go to www.esu.org.

If students find preparing for debates challenging, try discussing arguments as a teacher-led group before dividing into teams to write individual notes before the debate.

Students can also play the role of journalists reporting on the debate, and follow up on debates with written work exploring the topic.







## **TOPICS AND MOTIONS**

In competitive debates, the topic being discussed is often called the **motion**. Often, it will start "This House...", referring to the House of Commons: in the UK debating tradition, debates at competitions often take place between one team playing the role of the **government**, and defending the motion, and another team who plays the role of the **opposition**.

For example, in the motion, "This House would ban gambling", the team who is 'for' the motion is playing the role of a government who wants to ban gambling. The team who is 'against' the motion is playing the role of an opposition party who does not want to ban gambling.

In your debate club, you can introduce students to this terminology, or alternatively, you can give students a statement that they can either be 'for' or 'against'. The motions below are written in both forms.

#### **TRY THESE TOPICS**

This House would ban junk food from schools

Should we have any junk food, like chips or chocolate, in our schools?

This House would abolish the monarchy Should we still have a monarchy?

This House would punish parents for crimes committed by their children If a child gets into trouble, should their parent be punished as well?

This House believes that celebrities should receive harsher punishments than ordinary people Should celebrities get harsher punishments than ordinary people?

This House would require the media to display, promote and report women's sport equally to men's sport ls it right that men's sport has more time on TV than women's sport?

This House believes that children should have to do chores to earn pocket money Should you have to do chores to earn your pocket money?

This House would make it illegal for anyone in a company to earn more than 20 times that of their lowest paid worker.

Should some people in a company earn more than 20 times what other people earn?

This House would ban non-essential cosmetic surgery
Should we allow people to get cosmetic surgery when they don't need it?

This House would ban zoos
Should we close all the zoos?

