

Table Debates

OVERVIEW

Introduction

This activity helps students practice fundamental argumentation skills in a format that actively involves all students. The Table Debates format employs the terms and conceptual approach threading through the resources designed and used by Argument-Centered Education. The activity can also lead into an argumentative essay to follow shortly thereafter, in that students rehearse their arguments, refutation of counter-arguments, and evaluation of competing positions.

The Table Debates project can take about three 50-minute periods to prepare and conduct.

Procedure and Method

1. The Table Debates project begins with the instructor dividing the class into groups of four. Argument-Centered Education generally recommends using heterogeneous ability grouping when grouping students, but the instructor should use the method that will, in their judgment, result in peak learning outcomes.
2. Each group should be divided into two teams: one team that will argue in favor – i.e., on the affirmative – of the debatable issue, and one team that will argue against – i.e., on the negative – of the debatable issue. Their overall positions should be clear based on what side they are on of the debatable issue.
3. To begin argument preparation, each team should be given three Argument Builder forms – one for each student and an extra one for their team. (If these can be distributed electronically, so much the better: each team can be sent the document to save as many times as needed.) The instructor should model an argument built for each side on a debatable issue, showing the students the argumentative standard that they will be measured against. It is often better to use a different debatable issue, to ensure that students do not copy the model in their arguments.
4. Students should re-read their texts and review their annotation or evidence itemization documents. They should each build up from what they believe is the best evidenced two arguments that support their overall position. Then, after having been given an adequate period to develop their own argumentative ideas, they should discuss with their teammate the arguments they have built, what evidence they've used to support the arguments, and their arguments' reasoning. They



should decide on two arguments that they will use in the Table Debates themselves. They can of course build the best combination of arguments from components constructed by each teammate.

5. Teams should exchange their team Argument Builder Forms so that each team has their opponent's two case arguments. They should use those to complete their Rebuttal Builder Forms, constructing 2 – 3 rebuttal arguments against each of their opponent's two arguments. Ideally, the instructor will collect the team Argument Builders and Rebuttal Builders and formatively assess them, providing feedback and suggestions for revision.
6. When the period of preparation of arguments and rebuttals has concluded, one group of two opposing teams should be selected to perform a teaching model. These two teams should conduct a Table Debate, using the format provided. The teaching model performance should be conducted in full, unless there are any glaring misunderstandings of the format. The teaching model should be flowed by the instructor on a projector, using the Table Debates Flow Sheet.
7. After the teaching model is complete, the instructor should analyze it, commenting on points of strength and identifying deficiencies. Any complexities uncovered in the modeled argumentation should be explicated. As always, we recommend that the instructor follow the guidelines provided by the Argument-Centered Education Key Components.
8. To implement the actual Table Debates, the instructor should distribute copies of the Table Debates flow sheet to each student. The instructor should tell the students to put their name and period on each of their sheets, and tell the students that she will be collecting the flow sheets at the conclusion of the activity.
9. Then the instructor should announce that students should begin with the arguments that make up the affirmative case. This segment of the Table Debates should take 3 minutes. A period of cross-examination follows the first case. Cross-examination is a 2-minute period of questioning of the case speaker, done by the rebuttal speaker from the other side. After cross-examination comes the negative case, which comprises the second team's two arguments. This case, too, is 3 minutes. Then a 2-minute cross-examination of the negative case speaker by the rebuttalist from the affirmative team. The instructor should be keeping time for these speeches and announcing to the class when one speech should end and the next speech should begin.
10. The rebuttal stage of the Table Debates should then begin. Each rebuttal is 2 minutes. The negative rebuttal is first, and it should address both of the arguments in the affirmative case. Rebuttal arguments must use the 'refutation construct,' which is the formulation of argument-response in which the speaker first refers to the argument from the other side to be refuted ("They say . . ."), followed by refutation of this argument ("But we say . . ."). The affirmative rebuttal is also 2 minutes. The affirmative rebuttal has a more complex job than the negative rebuttal. The affirmative rebuttal must respond to the two contentions in the negative case, but it must also refute the negative rebuttal arguments to the affirmative case. Looking at the flow sheets, it must make



arguments on both ‘flows.’ Note that the flow sheets themselves build in this responsibility – in fact, all speech responsibilities – with labeled columns.

11. Next is the argument evaluation stage. In this stage, each side gives a 2.5-minute closing statement. This speech should select one of its original arguments and respond to the rebuttal arguments, by evaluating the competing claims in a manner that, though it might make some concessions to the other side, ultimately favors and defends the original argument. Likewise, the speech must try to mitigate the force of the other side’s arguments, on their flow sheet, by responding to and refuting their opponent’s most recent rebutting points. The closing statement’s argumentation on the opponent’s flow should also evaluate the competing evidence and claims, analyzing them in favor of the speaker’s side. The sequencing of the closing statement’s coverage of the two cases can vary, though it often begins with the opponent’s case, and ends on one’s own case – ending on a high note, on the argument that ultimately the speaker feels most confident in.

12. Throughout the Table Debates, each student should be taking careful notes (in competitive academic debate, this is called *flowing*) throughout the full debate, on the flow sheets for both cases. Students must also note their own arguments on their flow sheets. Speakers use their flow sheets as notes for their speech, so they typically flow their arguments in advance of their speech.

13. If time allows, after the Table Debates have concluded the instructor should ask the tables how their debates went, asking for the best argumentation development on a single argument from each table. In answering, groups should articulate the contention – including claim, evidence, and reasoning – the rebuttal arguments, and the argument evaluation done on that one argument. The instructor should consider doing comparative analysis of these examples of Table Debates argument.

14. Students should turn in their flow sheets on their way out of class, as part of the instructor’s formative assessment of their work. Additionally, collecting flow sheets will help ensure that each student is accountable for staying engaged throughout the project.

15. The instructor should consider assigning a summative assessment: an argumentative essay in which each student argues for their position, addresses the counter-arguments, and improves in each section on the arguments made in the Table Debates.