



Conducting a debate in the history classroom

A debate is a discussion or structured contest about an issue or a resolution.

OPTION # ONE

Formal debate (source: <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca>):

A formal debate involves two sides: one supporting a resolution and one opposing it. Such a debate is bound by rules previously agreed upon. Debates may be judged in order to declare a winning side.

Structure for a formal debate:

A formal debate usually involves three groups:

- one supporting a resolution (affirmative team)
- one opposing the resolution (opposing team)
- those who are judging the quality of the evidence and arguments and the performance in the debate.

The affirmative and opposing teams usually consist of three members each, while the teacher, a nominated group of students or the whole class can facilitate the judging.

In addition to the three specific groups, there may an audience made up of class members not involved in the formal debate. A specific resolution is developed and rules for the debate are established.

Debate Preparation:

- Develop the resolution to be debated.
- Organise the teams.
- Establish the rules of the debate, including timelines.
- Research the topic and prepare logical arguments.
- Gather supporting evidence and examples for position taken.
- Anticipate counter arguments and prepare rebuttals.
- Team members plan order and content of speaking in debate.
- Prepare room for debate.
- Establish expectations, if any, for assessment of debate.

Post-debate Discussion and Assessment

When the formal debate is finished, allow time for debriefing and discussion. Members of the audience should be given an opportunity to ask questions and to contribute their own thoughts and opinions on the arguments presented. Members of the debate teams may also wish to reflect on their performance and seek feedback from the audience, including the teacher.

An excellent source to help your class prepare for and conduct a formal debate can be found at <http://www.dav.com.au/resources/>

This site discusses speaker roles, definitions, team lines, 'matter/ method and manner, and scoring – among other aspects.

OPTION # TWO

Informal debate

(source: <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/four-corners>)

'Four Corners' debate

Four-Corners Debate is a non-threatening activity that allows students to discuss controversial topics. The activity requires students to show their position on a specific statement ('strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree') by standing in a particular corner of the room. This activity elicits the participation of all students by requiring everyone to take a position. By drawing out students' opinions on a topic they are about to study, it can be a useful warm-up activity. By asking them to apply what they have learned when outlining arguments, it can be an effective follow-up activity. A 'Four Corners' debate can also be used as a pre-writing activity to elicit arguments and evidence prior to essay writing. Best of all, 'Four Corners' debates encourages students to listening to, and respect, another person's point of view.

Procedure

Step one: Preparation

Label the four corners of the room with signs reading: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. Generate a list of controversial statements related to the material being studied.

Step two: Introduce Statements

Distribute statements and give students the opportunity to respond to them in writing. Teachers can provide students with a **graphic organiser or worksheet** (see below) that requires students to mark their opinion ('strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree'), and then provide a brief explanation.

Step three: Four Corners Discussion

After students have considered their personal response to the statements, read one of the statements aloud, and ask students to move to the corner of the room that best represents their opinion. Once students are in their places, ask for volunteers to justify their position. When doing so, they should refer to evidence from history, especially from material they learned in the unit of work, as well as other relevant information from their own experiences. Encourage students to switch corners if someone presents an idea that causes a change of mind. After a representative from each corner has defended his or her position, you can allow students to question each other's evidence and ideas. Before beginning the discussion, remind students about norms for having a respectful, open discussion of ideas.

Step four: Reflection

Students can reflect in their journals about how the activity changed or reinforced their original opinion. Some of their views may have strengthened by the addition of new evidence and arguments, while others may have changed altogether. It is quite possible that some students will be more confused or uncertain about their views after the four corners debate. While uncertainty can feel uncomfortable, it is an important part of the understanding process, and represents the authentic wrestling with moral questions that have no clear right or wrong answers. To clarify ideas shared during the discussion, you can chart the main for and against arguments on the board as a whole-class activity.



'Four corner' debate

Name: _____

<p>STRONGLY AGREE</p>	<p>STRONGLY DISAGREE</p>
<p>Topic/contention</p>	
<p>AGREE</p>	<p>DISAGREE</p>

