



# Civil Discourse In The Classroom

## CHAPTER 1

# Civil Discourse In The Classroom And Beyond

A supporter of Thomas Jefferson once called John Adams “a hideously hermaphroditical character.” Former Treasury secretary Alexander Hamilton called Vice President Aaron Burr “bankrupt by redemption except by the plunder of his country,” an attack so heinous that the men dueled, and Hamilton died.

Go through the nation’s history, and the noise and heat in public political discourse have always been there, rising with the cycles of economic distress, immigration and cultural upheaval.

– Ann Gerhart (*The Washington Post*, “In Today’s Viral World, Who Keeps a Civil Tongue?” October 11, 2009. Online at [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com))

## A New Age of Incivility?

We live in a climate ripe for noise: Media outlets and 24-hour news cycles mean that everyone with access to a computer has access to a megaphone to broadcast their views. Never before in human history has an opinion had the opportunity to reach so many so quickly regardless of its accuracy or appropriateness.

Of course, it’s difficult to hear anything when everyone has a megaphone. For young people trying to learn how to speak and listen, this is an especially complicated business. Compounding the situation, these young people are attempting this learning in an era when athletes routinely hurl invective at umpires, referees and other athletes; when “entertainment” is laced with verbal and physical abuse; and when political protests too often lead to physical attacks.

“The lesson learned is a dangerous one,” says Danielle Wiese Leek, assistant professor in the School of Communications at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Mich. “First, it’s anti-democratic. It’s not about learning to be exposed to a variety of perspectives in order to draw the best conclusion. It teaches young people that if they aren’t the loudest, their opinion doesn’t matter. Second, it shuts down opportunities for collaboration and innovation. Some of the best ideas that have been produced throughout human history came from people working together.”

Educators are well positioned to provide a counterweight to this loudest-is-best approach. Speaking in a classroom or school environment is not the same as speaking in the outside world. Schools and classrooms strive to be safe places where students can exchange ideas, try out opinions and receive feedback on their ideas without fear or intimidation.

Children, of course, often come to school with opinions or prejudices they have learned in their homes or from the media. This means that it is also possible for schools to become places of intolerance and fear, especially for students who voice minority opinions.

Schools must work to be sites of social transformation where teachers and young people find ways to communicate effectively.

### Toward A Civil Discourse

A number of commentators recently have suggested that a renewed emphasis on education in manners would go a long way toward improving the public discourse. But University of North Carolina Chapel Hill Assistant Professor of Rhetoric Chris Lundberg says that we should be careful about overemphasizing politeness a prerequisite for good public discourse: “There are times when a certain degree of impoliteness is called for. If we say we are only going to allow polite discourse in the public sphere, we are writing off the first group of women who wanted political suffrage, because at the time that was seen as impolite.”

This is not to say that we should not teach students to be polite to each other; on the contrary, good manners should be a staple of social education from an early age. But civil discourse requires something more than politeness. As Lundberg suggests, we can reach back into history to find another notion of “civil” on which to build a new civil discourse: “The idea of civility does not mean politeness. It originates in Cicero with the concept of the *societas civilis*. What it meant was that there are certain standards of conduct towards others and that members of the civil society should comport themselves in a way that sought the good of the city. The old concept of civility was much more explicitly political than our current notion of politeness. Speech was filtered through how it did or did not contribute to the good of the city.”

Civil discourse is discourse that supports, rather than undermines, the societal good. It demands that democratic participants respect each other, even when that respect is hard to give or to earn. Democratic societies must be societies where arguments are tolerated and encouraged, but this is not always easy. “To engage in a healthy political argument is to acknowledge the possibility that one’s own arguments could be falsified or proven wrong,” says Thomas Hollihan, professor at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of Communication. “This demands that citizens listen respectfully to the claims made by others. Name-calling, threats and bullying behaviors do not meet the demands of effective deliberation.”

### About This Curriculum

This curriculum will introduce basic tools for teaching civil discourse. It is not subject-specific; on the contrary, these tools of argumentation and discussion lend themselves to any subject in any classroom.

That said, a variety of challenges should be expected when embarking on a course of teaching civil discourse.

Young people — like *all* people — are afraid of public speaking. Classroom discussion can prove intimidating for some students. It may be useful to administer a communication skills self-assessment for students before including oral-intensive activities in a classroom. Ask students about their fears and concerns about speaking up in the classroom, and work to address those issues through individual or group work.

Intersections of race, class and gender also affect students' communication habits. This is well documented in other areas of academic life, and there is no reason that oral communication should be any different.

“There are profound cultural differences in how people argue,” says Hollihan. “These differences are so profound, in fact, that I do not think any prescriptive approach will work in all of them. Instead, I think teachers need to openly discuss these differences in a sort of ‘meta’ conversation with their students.”

Hollihan suggests having students discuss the cultural norms that shape discussions in their homes and then work outward to describing how these communication styles affect relationships with others in their extended families, friends, communities and classmates.

Some students, for example, may come from households where current events are routinely discussed. Others may have parents who never watch the news. Some students may come from homes where racial prejudices are taken as a matter of course; others may have never considered a world in which intolerance is taken seriously. Encouraging students to talk to each other means encouraging a context where it is possible, even likely, that these diverse backgrounds and expectations will create moments that may be awkward but also contain opportunity for deeper mutual understanding.

It is important to remember that the lesson of civil discourse is an ongoing one. The tools provided here can be used in any number of settings and lessons beyond their introduction and initial use. Seek ways throughout the year to return to — and refresh — these lessons. Perhaps even offer students incentives for pointing out when these tools are used in situations beyond the actual lessons.

## CHAPTER 2

# Building Blocks For Civil Discourse

On the last National Assessment of Educational Progress in writing, given in 2007, only 26 percent of 12th graders were judged to be “excellent” or “skillful” at persuasive writing, which may or may not entail making an argument. Another 34 percent were rated “sufficient,” and 27 percent generated “uneven” performances. Test-scorers rated the rest as either “insufficient” or “unsatisfactory.”

– “Researchers try to Promote Students’ Ability to Argue,”  
Education Week, 9/14/2009 (Online at [www.edweek.org](http://www.edweek.org))

## An Argument for Democracy

Democratic societies thrive on dissent, discussion and debate. Too often, however, our society provides poor role models for children (and adults) trying to learn the skills to be effective, active and responsible participants in that democratic society. On FOXNews, for example, children learn that people interrupt, talk over and insult each other when they debate issues. Flip the dial to C-SPAN, and these same children learn that “debate” is scripted and unengaging.

Young children experiment with having and voicing opinions. These are usually opinions they have overheard at home or in their communities. Public schools have the potential to expose children to multiple and diverse perspectives on a variety of issues, enriching their social and personal lives while planting the seeds for an enlivened democratic society.

Most states include speaking and listening skills as part of mandated content standards. Speaking and listening skills, however, are difficult to test, especially in a standardized and statewide manner. As a consequence, these essential skills are too often ignored at great cost to students and society.

These lessons provide a way for basic argument literacy to be integrated into any classroom. Students of all ages, backgrounds and skill levels are able to learn the basic tools for argumentation. Once they learn these tools, it becomes easier to build discussion and deliberation into daily classroom activities. Many students also find that practice in structured argument dramatically improves their ability to read and produce persuasive writing.

This chapter introduces the two most basic skills (Meany and Shuster, 2002) in the persuasive communication toolbox:

- Students will learn to turn their opinions into arguments using the ARE method of argument construction

- Students will learn how to engage the arguments of others using a process called Four-Step Refutation.

These two tools, combined with the ideas discussed in Chapter 1, will lay the groundwork for productive, reasoned and lively discussions on a variety of topics. They also will give students “training wheels” for learning how to have reasoned arguments outside the classroom.

### Ground Rules

In any class for any discussion it can be helpful to have ground rules in place. Such rules usually work best when they are generated and agreed up by the participants themselves. Under the umbrella of civil discourse, these rules might be approached as a classroom constitution of sorts — guidelines that govern their classroom discussions. After these civil discourse lessons have been completed (or at key points during the process) it might be good to revisit the ground rules to see if there are any amendments to be considered. (See Chapter 3 for more on ground rules.)

### The Parts of An Argument

Everybody has opinions about the world. Sometimes these opinions are about very basic and personal preferences, such as what flavor of ice cream is the best, or whether cats or dogs make the better pet. Other opinions are about local, regional, national or international issues. When we vote for a candidate in an election, we are expressing an opinion about who is the best person to hold an office — or, in some cases, who should *not* hold office.

One of the major tasks of education is to teach students how to form and support their opinions. Writing instruction offers the “five-paragraph essay” to encourage students to begin to formalize their ideas using the tools of thesis and support. In science and math, students learn to advance theories that can be proven or disproven. English teachers lead discussions about poems or stories where students might have multiple, differing interpretations of the work. All of these exercises teach students to form, shape and defend arguments.

There is a difference between an opinion and an argument. An opinion is an expression of preference; it does not require any support (although it is stronger *with* support). An opinion is only the first part of an argument.

### THREE PARTS OF AN ARGUMENT

A — Assertion

R — Reasoning

E — Evidence

To be complete, arguments should have three parts: an assertion, reasoning and evidence (easily remembered with the mnemonic ARE).

An **assertion** is usually a simple statement, such as “Homework is a waste of time,” “Television news is boring,” or “Tomato soup is better than grilled cheese sandwiches.” An assertion is the thesis statement or the main point of an argument.

**Reasoning** is the “because” part of an argument, as in the following examples:

- “Homework is a waste of time because it takes time away from other activities that are more important.”

- “Television news is boring because it doesn’t talk about issues that are relevant to me.”
- “Tomato soup is better than a grilled cheese sandwich because it is more nutritious.”

Reasoning can be simple or complex, but when working with students who are new to this process, the most important things to emphasize are the use of the word “because” as a cue and the need to connect the statement and the reasoning. Some reasoning will always be better than others, but for beginning students it is useful to focus on the basic skill of linking reasoning to an assertion rather than critiquing the validity of the reasoning right away.

Just as reasoning supports an assertion, **evidence** supports reasoning. There are many different kinds of evidence, ranging from expert testimony or statistics to historical or contemporary examples. As students learn the ARE framework for argumentation, it is helpful to encourage them to begin with the most basic and common form of evidence: the example. This also allows students to practice the verbal cue “for example.”

- “Homework is a waste of time because it takes time away from other activities that are more important. For example, we end up doing worksheets of math problems instead of getting outside and getting fresh air and exercise.”
- Television news is boring because it doesn’t talk about issues that are relevant to me. For example, I never see stories about the issues that kids deal with every day.”
- Tomato soup is better than a grilled cheese sandwich because it is more nutritious. For example, tomato soup contains important vitamins such as lycopene, while grilled cheese sandwiches really don’t have that much nutritional value at all.”

Teaching students the importance of evidence isn’t easy in a culture that doesn’t prioritize evidence. From influential ideas circulated on television and in news magazines to letters to the editor in smaller newspapers, evidence is in short supply. Many arguments rely on appeals to emotion rather than evidence; others simply assume that reasoning will speak for itself and there is no need for evidence.

By working to overcome that societal deficit, we also find ways to combat stereotypical beliefs. When students learn to prioritize and critically investigate the evidence for ideas, they are more likely to question stereotypes and engage in arguments based on the content of the arguments themselves rather than the character and nature of people advancing the arguments. Students learn to focus their discussion on facts rather than emotions, acquiring important skills for civil disagreement at the same time that they are building critical thinking and reasoning skills.

Here we are focusing solely on introducing the need to have evidence. This obviously sets aside the question of the quality of evidence, the source of evidence and other questions of validity. As students practice disagreement, debate and discussion, they also can be taught not just to include evidence in their arguments, but to make sure the evidence they use is solid and reliable.

## ACTIVITY

# Letters to the Editor

## Time

50 minutes (one class period), plus time for optional follow-on activities.

## Materials

- Letter to the editor, clipped from newspapers, taken from the Internet or written by the instructor. With students working in groups of two to three, the whole class can work with one letter.
- “Dear Editor” worksheet for all students.
- Overhead transparency copy of the letter to facilitate group discussion.
- OPTIONAL: One or more copies of the local daily newspaper for students to look at in groups.

## Summary

Students identify parts of arguments — using the ARE framework — by reading and evaluating letters to the editor. They identify weaknesses and strengths of letters, suggesting improvements to arguments used within the letters.

## Procedure

- Begin the exercise by reviewing ARE argument construction with the class.
- Introduce the class to the idea of writing letters to the editor. Most students are not familiar with the layout of print newspapers, so this is an opportunity to teach them the parts of a newspaper — editorials offering the opinions of the newspaper’s own editorial board; guest editorials and opinion pieces by people or organizations in the larger community; and letters to the editor from individuals.
- Discuss with the class the reasons why people might be motivated to write a letter to the editor. Discuss what might make a letter’s arguments effective or weak.
- Divide the students into groups of two or three, if they will be working in groups.
- Give each student a copy of the letter to the editor they will be analyzing, and a copy of the “Dear Editor” worksheet.
- Explain to students that they will be trying, as best they can, to fill out the worksheet and identify all the parts of the author’s argument.
- Monitor student work on the assignment. Depending on the level of student proficiency and the complexity of the letter, this should take approximately 20-30 minutes.



- Lead a discussion on the letter, using an overhead transparency to underline parts of the letter that fulfill the ARE components of the author’s argument(s).
- Discuss possible improvements to the letter, focusing on missing parts of the author’s argument.

### **Optional Follow-on Activities**

- Assign students to write a “better version” of the letter they analyzed.
- For the main activity, two letters can be used. In this version, each group works first on letter A and then swaps their analysis with a group working on letter B. This approach takes more time but allows for integration of peer editing into the exercise as well as comparison between the two letters.
- Once students have learned refutation, they can work separately or in groups to research and write responses to letters to the editor. These can be presented to the class, shared for peer editing, and/or evaluated for a writing grade based, in part, on use of ARE and Four-Step Refutation techniques. (Four-Step Refutation is outlined later in this curriculum.)
- To practice constructing arguments of their own, students can be assigned (working separately or in groups) to write letters to the editor of their local newspaper. These can be on topics of their choosing, in response to a current event, or in response to an assigned recent reading from the newspaper.

## WORKSHEET

# “Dear Editor...”

**Instructions**

You’ve been given a letter to the editor. Read it carefully and answer the following questions. Remember that you are looking for the author’s assertions as well as the reasoning and evidence that back up the author’s assertions. The author may make several arguments with different assertions, reasoning, and evidence, or there may be one major argument with several reasons and examples. If you think that reasoning or evidence is missing, please note that in the relevant section.

**1. What topic is the author writing about?**

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**2. What is the author’s main point?**

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**3. What arguments does the author make in support of their main point? Fill in the ARE for each argument. If reasoning or evidence is missing, leave that place blank on the worksheet. It is okay to paraphrase what the author says, but you should be prepared to point to a specific place in the text to support your idea.**

<b>ASSERTION</b>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<b>REASONING</b>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<b>EVIDENCE</b>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

<b>ASSERTION</b>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<b>REASONING</b>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<b>EVIDENCE</b>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

**4. What are two ways the author could have improved the letter? Be specific.**

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### Introduction to Refutation

If we want to live in a society animated by vibrant, civil conversations, it is not enough to teach students to have informed opinions. We must also teach them how to disagree with others. There is, however, a dearth of role models for civil disagreement. If we want young people to develop nonviolent conflict resolution skills, we must teach them more constructive ways to engage in disagreements.

Learning to disagree involves more skills than the simple refutation of an opposing idea. Students must learn how to speak in a measured way, how to understand which ideas are likely to be trigger points for escalation and how to choose reasonable and effective language.

Having a basic method for refutation is an important place to start. It can provide a framework and tools for the kinds of classroom debates and discussions that will prepare students for civil disagreement outside the classroom.

Start by teaching students a basic four-step method of refutation, outlined here. The method has the advantage of giving students a structure on which to hang their ideas — a structure that encourages students to substantiate their arguments without personal attacks or slurs.

### FOUR-STEP REFUTATION

**Step 1: Restate** (“They say...”)

**Step 2: Refute** (“But...”)

**Step 3: Support** (“Because...”)

**Step 4: Conclude** (“Therefore...”)

**Step 1: Restate.** The first part of refutation is for a student to restate the argument being challenged. Students should concisely and fairly summarize the opposing argument; the cue “They say...” (or “Some say...” or “Mary said...”) is helpful. Discourage students from using the second person (“You say...”) when restating arguments to avoid becoming too personal. Explain also that students do not need to restate in detail the argument they’d like to refute; a summary is fine. This has the added benefit of helping students practice summarization, a skill that is at the heart of critical thinking.

Speaker 1: “School should be year round.”

Speaker 2: “Speaker one says that school should be year round.”

**Step 2: Refute.** Here, students state their objection to a point in a simple sentence. It’s helpful to encourage students to use the verbal cue “but...” For younger students, it is sometimes helpful to use the cue “But I disagree...” for simple disagreement. This second step functions as a kind of thesis statement for the counter argument, as shown by this example:

Speaker 1: “School should be year round.”

Speaker 2: “Speaker one says that school should be year round, but school should last for only nine months.”

**Step 3: Support.** This part of refutation parallels the “RE” (reasoning and evidence) in ARE. Using the verbal cue “because,” students will try to provide examples to support their reasoning:

Speaker 1: “School should be year round.”

Speaker 2: “Speaker one says that school should be year round, but school should last for only nine months, because students need time off to do other things like play sports and go on family vacations.”

**Step 4: Conclude.** Students should attempt to wrap up their refutations with a comparison, a contrast or some kind of statement that demonstrates their ability to resolve two opposing ideas. The verbal cue “therefore” in this part of the process helps students approach the argument logically. Beginners at this process are likely to simply restate their main point; that’s very similar to the approach we see in young writers trying to learn how to write effective conclusions to short essays or paragraphs. As students become more adept, they learn how to use “therefore” more effectively in disagreements.

Speaker 1: “School should be year round.”

Speaker 2: “Speaker one says that school should be year round, but school should last for only nine months, because students need time off to do other things like play sports and go on family vacations. Therefore, year-round school is bad for students.”

## ACTIVITY

# The Assertion Jar

## Time

5 minutes. Appropriate as a writing prompt or journal activity.

## Materials

- Large glass jar or plastic container, such as a pickle jar.
- Scissors and paper for students.

## Summary

Students produce assertions on slips of paper and “stock” the classroom Assertion Jar. As a daily or occasional activity, students practice refutation skills by pulling an assertion from the jar and refuting it either orally or in writing.

## Procedure

- Begin the exercise by reviewing ARE argument construction and Four-Step Refutation with the class.
- Ask each student to take out paper and pencil. Explain that they will be helping to stock the classroom “Assertion Jar.” Tell them that they should try to come up with 5-10 (depending on age and skill level) assertions that will be approved and cut up into folded slips to be placed in the jar.
- Tell students that they will be asked to draw randomly from the jar on a regular basis for refutation practice, so it is not in their interest to produce assertions that are too difficult to refute (“The sky is blue,” for example).
- Give students 5-10 minutes to write out their assertions. Review them before giving permission to cut up for placement in the jar.
- When you review the assertions, don’t use too heavy of a hand on spelling and grammar; this is to be a fun exercise. Do suggest corrections when the assertion is illegible or incoherent, and encourage students to rewrite when appropriate.
- Pass the stocked jar around and ask each student to draw out an assertion.
- Ask students to take a minute to write out their Four-Step Refutation, and then go around the class while students stand and present their refutations.

## Optional Follow-on Activities

- If you use journals in the classroom, refutation practice makes a good daily journal entry, especially as a classroom routine so that students know to draw an assertion out of the jar on the way into the classroom. It’s a nice change from the shared daily writing prompt, and students enjoy the participatory aspect of the jar.
- Don’t forget to re-stock the jar when it’s empty!

## CHAPTER 3

# Talk It Over

Discussion doesn't just validate knowledge; it builds comprehension and community as students work together to come to new and innovative understandings of the subject matter. In addition, regular discussion helps students practice civil discourse and spirited debate in a safe and guided atmosphere. As Clark and Starr point out, "[d]iscussions are also useful as a medium for training students in communications skills and in building positive social attitudes and a sense of belongingness" (1991, p. 239). Done correctly, classroom discussion goes a long way toward establishing a cooperative learning environment that benefits all participants.

Unfortunately, many teachers struggle with having regular, productive discussions in their classrooms. As Danielle Wiese Leek notes, "we are not clear on what the role of discussion is in a classroom. Students feel like it's 'free-time' ... and there's no grade, so there's not a point in trying to do it better. It's a problem on both ends, because we don't train teachers how to grade discussion skills effectively."

One common mistake teachers make is simply counting the number of times a student talks, rather than also evaluating the quality of a student's contribution. The student who talks repeatedly while adding little to a discussion should not receive the same grade as a student who speaks only once, but whose comments take into account the ideas of others while moving the discussion forward.

These "participation" measurements also can be unfair because some students are simply more verbal than others or less shy about expressing themselves in front of their peers. This is amplified when the language of instruction is not a student's home language. Research shows that boys are more likely than girls to speak in a mixed-gender classroom and that boys are more likely to interrupt. Depending on the discussion topic, culture and class also may influence students' willingness and ability to contribute to the discussion.

All of this means that discussion, like any other educational practice, must be "scaffolded" so that students are able to participate meaningfully and to be evaluated fairly. Students must be given tools for discussion, such as ARE and Four-Step Refutation. Expectations for what constitutes effective participation must be clearly spelled out so that all students have a fair chance to succeed.

## The Discussion-Friendly Classroom

Huddleston and Rowe (2003, p.122-123) outline seven guidelines for creating a classroom that supports good discussion. As they observe, the ability to participate in informed and democratic debate is not something that all students immediately possess. But following these guidelines can go a long way to building a better classroom discussion. This section reviews and comments on their guidelines.

**1. Choose limited, achievable goals.** Rather than simply building in classroom time for students to "discuss" an issue, it is helpful to set goals for discussion. For example, discussion could be organized to seek a consensus on a course of action, or to outline the major arguments for both sides of an issue.

**2. Intersperse discussion with other activities.** Discussion is usually more productive, especially with young or beginning students, if they have time to prepare. You might give students a few days or more to prepare for a discussion, during which time they can research and outline ideas on the issues so that they will be better prepared to participate. If you prefer a more impromptu or extemporaneous approach, you might give students five or 10 minutes prior to discussion to outline their ideas with appropriate support.

**3. Establish ground rules.** Students will be more comfortable in discussion if they know what is expected and what is not allowed. It is important to involve the students when discussing the ground rules for good discussion, as in the exercise here. Once ground rules are established, they should be publicly displayed (on a poster, for example) so that students can refer to them. Of course, having rules means that they must be fairly and consistently enforced — this is one reason that it is a good idea to involve the students with the construction of the rules in the first place, so that they will be more willing to comply, and more interested in policing each other (“But we all agreed *not* to make fun of each other!”).

**4. Give everyone something to say.** Huddleston and Rowe suggest that teachers should try to structure discussion so that everyone is involved at different points, for example by having “rounds” in which everyone must make a contribution, or by dividing students up into groups of two or three before they join a big discussion. This is a way to avoid more verbal students dominating the discussion.

**5. Pay attention to classroom layout.** One of your goals as a teacher should be to encourage students to learn to respectfully and directly address each other with questions and comments, rather than addressing them to you at the front of the classroom. This will be easier when students can see and hear each other. For effective discussion, it is useful to have a classroom that can be rearranged into a horseshoe-type formation. Don’t opt out of the discussion — that is a mistake, especially when students are new and unsure of how to interact with each other — but try to minimize your physical presence. You might even consider having students take turns at moderating discussions and taking notes on the board.

**6. Build in debriefing sessions.** There are many learning opportunities available when students are allowed to reflect on what went well and what did not succeed in their discussions. Students can reflect on their own or others’ performance as participants using a standardized rubric. They can also reflect on how well the discussion achieved its set goals and suggest ideas for improvement in future discussions. Remember that this kind of “meta talk” is very important for learning as well as developing cognitive skills. Encourage students to use cues like: “Next time, let’s try...”, “The most important/least important things we talked about were...” and “More people would be included if we...”.

**7. Don’t just teach — train.** Huddleston and Rowe recommend that teachers build in explicit routines to their discussion practice so that students develop good habits. For example, you might always have five minutes of thinking before discussion starts and a reflection period at the end. Remember that we don’t just discuss for its own sake (although that is fun and important), but also as a pedagogical strategy with tremendous civic and political importance. Work on discussion skills the same way you work on writing or any other core academic skill — deliberately, repetitively and thoughtfully.



## ACTIVITY

# Ground Rules for Discussion

## Time

50 minutes, plus preparation and optional activities.

## Materials

- Large adhesive notepaper or butcher paper and markers for small group work.

## Summary

Students work to draw up a list of “ground rules” for classroom discussion through whole class and small group work.

## Procedure

- Begin the exercise by telling the students that one of your goals for the class is to help them learn to participate in discussion with each other. Tell them that they will be participating in discussions and conversations of different lengths and different purposes. Ask the class to brainstorm the characteristics of a good discussion. Write their ideas on the board, encouraging students to explain more as appropriate. It will be helpful to ask leading questions such as:
  - “What’s the difference between discussing and fighting?”
  - “Is it a good or a bad discussion when people yell? Why or why not?”
  - “Should we interrupt each other when we discuss? Why not?”
  - “Are discussions better when people have reasons and evidence to support their ideas?”
  - “When do you feel the most comfortable about expressing your opinions? When do you feel uncomfortable?”
  - “How can people show that they respect each other in discussions?”
  - “Are good discussions cooperative or competitive?”
- Once you have filled the board with content, give the “good discussion” characteristics numbers. (These numbers are for identification not ranking.)
- Tell the class that you will all be working together to create “ground rules” for classroom discussions. Break them into groups of three or four, and give each group a large adhesive note or piece of butcher paper and markers. Tell the students that their group’s job is to come up with a list of rules for discussion. Each group should come up with eight rules and write them on the paper. They should try to make sure that the rules are linked with the good discussion characteristics on the board. For example, if “no interruptions” is No. 1 on the board, then the rule “We should not interrupt each other” should have No. 1 listed after it, as well as any other identified characteristics of good discussion.

- Once all groups have finished the rules, ask each group to come to the front of the class and share its rules. After each group is done, hang the group’s paper on the wall.
- After all groups have presented, ask each student to turn in a piece of paper with the best 10 rules for discussion.
- That night, review the students’ submissions and tabulate the “top ten” rules. Feel free to modify or combine rules so that all groups feel their contribution was meaningful.
- Write the rules on a poster for permanent display in the classroom beginning the next day, and review the rules with students.
- As you begin to have more discussions, part of the reflection process should be encouraging students to consider whether the rules are effective or not, and how they might be improved.

### Optional Activities

- Depending on the age and experience of the students, it may be helpful to talk to them about effective and ineffective discussions they have had. As a “pre-think” journal exercise, it might be helpful to ask students to write about one conversation they had that was productive and one that was unproductive, explaining why each was good and bad.

### Moderating a Discussion

Effective leadership is often the difference between effective and ineffective discussion. Remember that one of the major goals of discussion is to teach students how to talk to each other. If their questions and comments are exclusively or mostly addressed to you (or to your designated moderator or discussion leader), they are not learning to talk to each other. As you plan for classroom discussions, take some time to think about your moderating role. You might also consider training a corps of student moderators so that students can develop the leadership skills associated with moderating discussions.

In general, discussion leaders should use the following broad guidelines, understanding that factors such as participant experience, nature of the topic and setting of the discussion may differ from one discussion to the next.

**1. Begin the discussion effectively and fairly.** The discussion leader is responsible for introducing the topic of the discussion and reviewing the expectations for the discussion, including the ground rules and goals for the discussion. This should include informing the participants of the allotted time for discussion. To begin the discussion, it may be useful for the moderator to deliver a provocative opening statement or pose a series of questions. The moderator should have a list of questions and facts about the issue (or, if the discussion is about a specific text, a selection of quotes from the text) to prompt discussion if it stalls.

**2. Keep the discussion moving.** Good discussion leaders try to encourage everyone to take part in the discussion. If there are participants who dominate the discussion to the exclusion of others, the moderator is responsible for trying to move the talk to other people, often by introducing new topics or points of view. Often discussions can meander into

“rabbit holes” that distract from consideration of the major issue. Effective discussion leaders recognize when this happens and work to bring the discussion back around without alienating anyone.

**3. Summarize and encourage reflection.** Discussion leaders should periodically summarize the path of the discussion to help participants get a sense of where they’ve been and what remains to be discussed. The discussion leader might ask participants questions that stimulate evaluation of their own progress, such as:

- “Are we focusing on all the parties involved in this issue?”
- “Do we need to backtrack to make sure we are really grounded in what is important?”
- Or, “What else do we need to consider to make a decision on this issue?”

**4. Keep track of time.** The moderator is responsible for timing the discussion, including informing participants about remaining time. The moderator should try to help the group use its time effectively, including saving time for closing thoughts or votes, if those are planned parts of the discussion.

**5. Summarize the discussion.** At the end of the discussion, it will help the group reflect on its progress if the moderator summarizes the course of the discussion, including major points, action items and resolutions. The moderator should pay particular attention to the lines of discussion that were wrapped up and the ones that remained open at the end of the discussion, as those latter lines will be fruitful topics for subsequent discussion.

**6. Designate a recorder.** All of these tasks can be challenging for even the most seasoned moderator. It is useful to designate someone in the class to function as a recorder during the session so that there is a set of consistent notes to reflect on. The recorder’s job is to track the most important points and decisions that feature in the discussion; taking notes will help to clarify any confusion among participants on these points as well as help the moderator to summarize what has already been said. (The recorder’s notes do not remove the need for individual students to take their own notes; individual students’ notes will be used to produce reflections on the discussion as well as support ancillary assignments or classwork on the topic.)

### Experimenting With Discussion

As you integrate discussion into your classroom, experiment with different lengths and goals. You may have a complex discussion as a culminating activity in a unit, but you might also have a simple discussion activity as a 10- to 15-minute activity where students practice agreeing and disagreeing with each other using cues such as “Yes, but...” and “Yes, and....” Like the best classroom activities, discussion is a complex undertaking that develops multiple skill sets for engaged students. It takes practice and planning, but it pays off in students’ academic and social outcomes.

## CHAPTER 4

# Teaching Controversy

Some classroom discussions are easy: comparing different mathematical proofs, assessing community service projects or weighing various interpretations of a poem. And while they may teach basic skills of civic participation and democratic engagement, these discussions may not be enough to create advanced competence in students learning to engage others on controversial issues. To build better discussions, as Hollihan says, we must learn to debate riskier issues and ideas:

“There are many obstacles to effective classroom discussion, of course, but in my opinion one of the most troublesome is the reluctance to encourage students to discuss the truly complex and vexing public issues that divide us. Certain topics are literally walled-off and considered too controversial to risk discussing in a classroom for fear that they will make some participants uncomfortable.”

Many teachers feel constrained by district-mandated pacing guides that squeeze out this kind of content, while others feel that they wouldn’t even know where to start with such a project. Still others are concerned with the controversies that might be created by including more divisive current events in their classrooms.

Fortunately, improvement can be accomplished on an incremental basis. For example, teachers can integrate current events discussion into a unit plan, using examination of current events as a way to reflect on the past (social studies, history) or as a way to teach basic literacy skills through reading, writing and speaking about nonfiction texts (language arts). Teachers can effectively use current and controversial events instruction to address a wide variety of standards and even mandated content. To do so, however, teachers must work carefully and incrementally to integrate this new approach in their classrooms.

Teachers can plan for current events instruction just as they might plan to teach a novel or any other content. Here are seven suggestions for planning to teach current or controversial events.

**1. Select an issue.** Try to choose current events that have meaningful connections to other course content. For example, if you are reading *Farewell to Manzanar*, you might consider following this with a short unit on Guantanamo Bay, encouraging students to compare and contrast the different decisions to detain individuals. Alternately, you might use materials to explore the broader issue of civil liberties in wartime, such as the materials available from *Justice Learning* ([www.justicelearning.org](http://www.justicelearning.org)).

In integrating current events instruction into your classroom, start with less controversial issues. If you are determined to teach “flashpoint” issues such as gay marriage or stem-cell research, it is best to start small so you can handle controversies as they arise in class; otherwise, these controversies may extend beyond the class, becoming issues that attract parental, administrative or even media attention. Keep in mind that you’re trying to teach students how to be effective democratic citizens, and that a good way to begin is with more manageable issues as “training wheels.”

**2. Break the issue into parts.** Consider the component parts of the issue plan. This will allow you to sequence your unit appropriately and choose materials to assist in learning key concepts. For this, it helps to think like a middle school student. There are a lot of ideas about the world that adults take for granted, but which are largely opaque to your average seventh- or eighth-grade student. Consider this example, from the World Bank Group (<http://youthink.worldbank.org/>):

“Trade allows people to buy goods and services that are not produced in their own countries. In addition, the money countries receive from exports helps determine how much they can afford to spend on imports and how much they can borrow from abroad.”

This definition is difficult to follow even for an average adult. It uses a variety of concepts, including trade, goods, services, exports and imports, without offering definitions. In addition, it assumes that students will be able to follow the relationship between exports and imports. It is just too complicated. This doesn't mean that students can't learn about world trade issues and the global economy; rather, it means that teachers need to work on sequencing and scaffolding. This process begins when you break the issue into parts. On this topic, it might be useful to build in a trade simulation or other practical example for students to demonstrate mastery of the basic unit concepts before proceeding to the more normative parts of the unit.

**3. Build a list of relevant vocabulary words associated with the issue.** Don't forget to include vocabulary instruction as part of your current events instruction, just as you would on any other instructional topic. Keep a running list from readings and research, and teach those words just as you would any other vocabulary words.

**4. Select readings that will be accessible and also challenging.** For many teachers, this is one of the hardest parts of current events instruction. You'll have to read a lot of articles, chapters and other materials in order to find readings that will represent a balanced and informed set of perspectives. But, the upside is that you'll only need a few readings (normally) to create a meaningful context for students to be able to discuss the issue.

**5. Require a culminating activity.** There should be something that students *do* with their current events information. This could be writing an informative or persuasive essay, working on a group presentation or project, engaging in roundtable discussions or debates, or any other activity that gives students the opportunity to synthesize what they've learned and discussed. Perhaps students could write letters to the editor of a newspaper stating their position on an issue, or write responses to an editorial that they read, agreeing or disagreeing with the author.

**6. Remember that persuasion occurs over time.** Schools are only one of the influences on children, especially in an era of multiple and conflicting media messages. Many teachers are disappointed when their initiation of controversial issues discussion does not diminish prejudice expressed in the hallways or produce substantial political awareness in their students. As Jonathan Silin points out, this is normal:

“[C]hildren quickly learn to provide expected, politically correct answers in the morning, and then later during the same day can be seen at lunch or on the playground displaying the very behaviors about which they strongly objected just minutes before. The only solace is knowing that we have acted authentically in

addressing tough topics, that we can always return to the chalkboard to revise our work, and that if we have fostered a community in which dialogue is continuous, then there will be many opportunities to ask new questions and prompt further conversations about the things that really matter to us” (Bank Street College of Education, 2004, p. 5).

If we have learned anything from the recent uptick in highly publicized instances of incivility and inability to engage in meaningful debate and discussion, it is that our cultural capacity for sustained and serious debate is low. We should not be surprised when this incapacity is reflected in our classrooms.

This is not a reason to suspend discussion of current events in the classroom; rather, it is a reason to continue and work to make our lessons relevant to students’ lives. Successful teachers will integrate school-based examples into their teaching and continue to teach these concepts beyond the end of the formal lesson.

**7. Debrief.** As with all activities that involve critical thinking and complex ideas, you should build in some reflective and metacognitive element for students at the conclusion of the activity. This might be the same as the culminating activity, or it could be a different assignment. Consider having students trace the development of their ideas about the subject from beginning to end; they should identify where they started, where they ended, and what the most important ideas in discussion process were for this development.

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## Civil Discourse In The Classroom

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