INCUBATE
IN THE CLASSROOM

bring the power of debate into your classroom

incubatedebate.org

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How to bring Incubate Debate into your classroom

The history of debate is deeply rooted in American tradition, from the impassioned arguments at the Constitutional Convention to the spirited discussions on the Senate floor. Debate isn't just an activity; it's a symbol of our democratic ideals, a testament to the power of the spoken word, and a reflection of the shared commitment to intellectual growth and civic responsibility.

Facilitating productive debates in your classroom will deepen student engagement, foster civil discourse, and boost subject matter comprehension. In lieu of assigning an essay, quiz, group project, or even an exam to your students, consider hosting an engaging, in-class debate and complementary post-debate discussion.

Bringing debate to your classroom is simple: take subjects from your existing classroom curriculum (e.g. prompts you might assign for an essay) easily turn them into a straightforward, concise debate topic, and then announce the 15-minute in-class debates based on classroom material. The debate format is Roundtable, a freeform debate format where students are welcome to ask questions, take polls, and deliver arguments, so long as they do not use notes, stay seated, and treat one another with civility and respect. Roundtable is the most real-world debate format to ever exist: it emulates the everyday conversations that your students are already having, whether they be at the dinner table with family or over lunch with friends. With Roundtable, debate is easy to learn but hard to master. It’s accessible, yet rigorous, offering you a powerful teaching tool with a low-barrier to entry.

Hosting a debate in your classroom

Hosting a debate only requires four things:

1. **Topic**: What specifically will your students be debating?
2. **Sides**: On what sides will your students be debating?
3. **Research**: How will your students develop arguments for their side of the debate?
4. **Arguments**: How will your students turn their research into arguments?

To hold a debate in class, simply take the subject you are already covering with your students and pose a thought-provoking question (also called the “topic") to your students for them to debate and use existing classroom materials to build arguments.

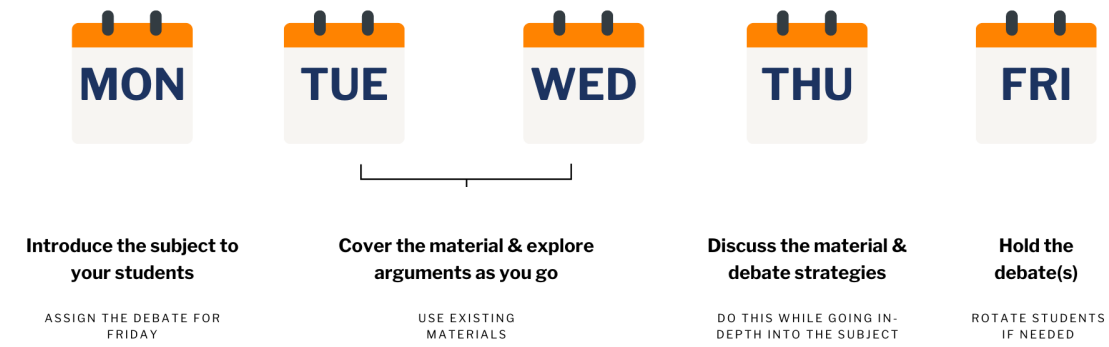
We recommend introducing it to your class gradually so they can build foundational debating skills.

- Start with a low-stakes topic
    - Introducing debate to your students with a low-stakes, engaging topic (see page 16) will help them build foundational skills in debate with a topic they are knowledgeable about and can easily develop arguments about.

- Start with shorter rounds
    - A Roundtable round is typically about 20 minutes (see page 6), but we recommend starting at 5 minutes to introduce it to your students. As you and your students get comfortable, you can work your way up to 20 minutes.
    -
- Start with fewer students
    - A competitive Roundtable round typically has 6-8 competitors (see page 6)—instead, start with 5 or 6 students in the round. Once your students get comfortable, work your way up to 8 students per round.

Once your students are comfortable with the format, introduce a more complex topic that you’re already covering in class. For example, if you are covering the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 one week, on Monday you might start covering the material with your students. On Wednesday, once you have laid the foundation for the subject, pose a debate topic to your students. In

this example, we will use “Was it necessary to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end the war?” Spend Wednesday and Thursday going more into the content using existing materials (i.e. textbook, worksheets, etc.). On Friday, hold the debate(s) in your class.



Phrasing a debate topic

Phrasing a topic for a debate is slightly different from phrasing a topic for an essay prompt or a written exam. There are four criteria for a debate topic:

1. **Engaging**
   The topic should capture your students’ attention and get them thinking enthusiastically immediately

2. **Two-sided**
   The topic should have rational arguments on both sides.

3. **Clear and concise**
   For an efficient and effective debate, the topic should be short and to the point.

4. **Close-ended**
   To make for a debate with two clear sides, the topic should be close-ended, meaning it has very clear for/against sides.

   Optional: Phrased to standards

You can frame these questions around your state's standards, an additional benefit for teachers keen on demonstrating how debate fully aligns with your state's objectives

Topic Examples

✓ Were the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki necessary to end World War II?
The verbiage of this topic is specific and clear.

✗ Should we have bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki?
This question is too vague and pulls students in too many directions (morality, necessity, etc.).

✓ Should the U.S. ban single-use plastics?
This question is two-sided, close-ended, and simple. There is no need for additional detail.

✗ Why should single-use plastics be banned?
This question has implicit bias with the word 'why," automatically assuming that they should be banned.

Adjusting for class size

A class of any size can bring Roundtable into their classroom. Arranging your class into several groups of 6-8 students will allow every student a chance to debate in a Roundtable round.

While one group is debating, the other students in the class take notes on the lively debate before them and are invited to participate in a post-debate, classwide, teacher-led discussion on which of the arguments they just saw were most persuasive and why. The post-debate discussion also helps students prepare for the debate themselves: they see how it works, then discuss winning arguments with the class, and receive valuable teacher input from you and what strategies worked and which could use improvement.

Regardless of how you group your students, every student in your class will be involved as a debater, a post-debate discussant, and through the optional exit ticket opportunities laid out below.

The Format

Roundtable

Students are debating almost every day, but most would never even know it. These everyday debates might include the best way to go about a group project, why they deserve an allowance, and which national issues are most urgent for their generation. Real-world debates like these are conversational and might not even feel like a debate, but they clearly are for a simple reason: these everyday conversational debates represent the clash of two or more opposing viewpoints

Roundtable teaches students how to debate in a real-world setting, where they learn strategies to assert themselves, confidently express their opinions, and quickly respond to counter arguments.

Rather than standing alone before a classroom of their peers, students are sitting together in a group, and it looks and feels like a conversation rather than a high-stakes, intimidating debate.

Roundtable Guidelines:

In Roundtable, 5-8 students sit in a semicircle for a 20-minute open, freeform debate, where students are free to take polls, ask questions, and deliver and respond to arguments at any time. You can adjust this to match your students' level—for example, starting with just 5 students for 5 minutes, 7 students for 10 minutes, and so on.

The Three Rules of Roundtable:

1. No standing up
   Students must stay seated the entire time.
2. No notes
   Students may not use any printed or written materials.
3. Golden Rule
   Students must remain civil and treat one another with respect.

Roundtable Strategies

- **Two ears, one mouth:** Students should listen twice as much as they speak. It is important that the focus is on listening to others before sharing their thoughts to understand different viewpoints and respond to other arguments effectively.

- **Invite others to speak:** Actively encouraging others to contribute to the debate, particularly those who haven't spoken much, demonstrates leadership and civility. It helps ensure that every student at the Roundtable shares their arguments and perspective and makes for a civil debate. We encourage teachers to award students extra points on their debate performance (aka “civility points”) to reward and incentivize

- **Lead, do not overpower:** Typically after a few in-class debates, an unofficial leader emerges. It is important that he/she contribute to the discussion, steering the conversation when necessary. However, monopolizing the conversation can be off-putting and can turn the debate into a monologue instead of respectful clash of opposing viewpoints. It is helpful for any leader to aim for a balance of leading effectively while also creating space for others' inputs.

Fundamentals of Debate

The Ingredients of an Argument: Claim, Warrant, Impact

Now that you have a topic and content for your students, how do you help your students turn their knowledge into debate-ready arguments?

To effectively communicate an argument, it is important to know the proper structure: Claim, Warrant, Impact (CWI). CWI is the foundation of an argument: a clear claim gives direction; a solid warrant lends credibility; and a big-picture impact drives it home.

When building an argument, it is important to remind your students that there is no such thing as a perfect argument. Every argument has its flaws, and it's impossible to build a flawless argument.

Strategies in building an argument:

- **Explain it to a 6-year-old:** Albert Einstein once said, "If you can't explain it to a six-year-old, you do not understand it yourself." A student truly understands their argument or the topic when they can explain it clearly and simply enough for a 6-year-old to grasp.

- **Specificity Builds Credibility:** Students should be as detailed in their arguments as possible. Specific information and examples enhance the credibility of arguments and make them stronger and more convincing.

- **Correlation Does Not Equal Causation:** Students should recognize that just because two things occur together does not mean one caused the other. Understanding this distinction is crucial for drawing valid conclusions during the debate.

Claim: What are you trying to prove?

The claim is a brief statement of the argument a student is making (think of a thesis statement).

As the first sentence of an argument, it is important that claims are clear, concise, and specific to set the stage for a logical and convincing argument.

Claims can typically be divided into two parts: the position and the reason. The position prefaces the claim by stating what side this argument is for, and the reason is a simplification of the argument itself.

Examples of a poor claim:

- "Phones should be banned in classrooms."
  This is simply stating the position.

- "Phones should be banned in classrooms because it's important for the next generation of leaders."
  This claim is too strong to start off an argument and too vague to prove. A statement like this should be saved for the impact.

- "Phones are bad for kids."
  This claim is not specific to the topic.

Warrant: Why is your claim true?

The warrant is the evidence and logical reasoning that lends an argument credibility. It can consist of sound statistics, historical examples, information from the textbook and other reputable sources, and more. A warrant in a debate is what gives a student credibility; without it, it is impossible to prove that the argument is valid.

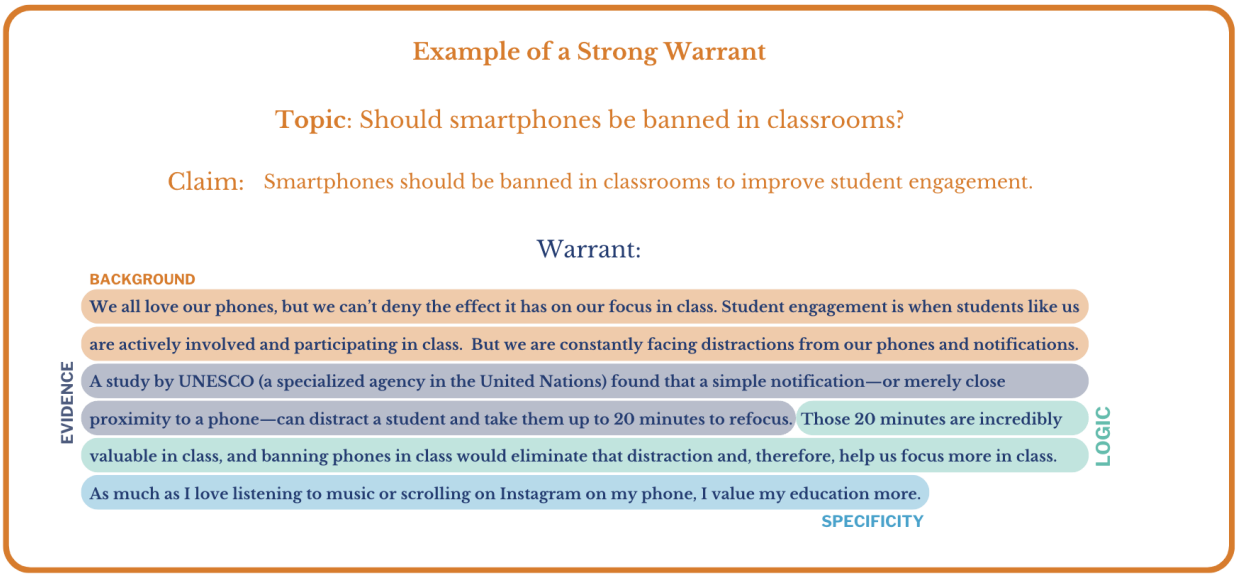
Strong warrants include (in order of how the students relays them)

- **Background Information:** It is important that students define terms and lay the foundation for their argument, presenting their argument as if their peers have no prior knowledge of the topic. This ensures that the argument is clear and comprehensible, avoiding any potential misunderstandings.

- **Evidence:** Evidence is necessary to prove an argument. It can come in the form of sound statistics, historical examples, textbook content, and more.

- **Logic:** Evidence is necessary but not sufficient on its own. Students must demonstrate why their evidence is relevant to their argument. *Example: when citing a study that shows that cell phone use makes teens anxious, our logic requires students to connect the study's conclusion (cell phones distract teens) with their argument (cell phones prevent students from focusing at school).*

- **Concluding Sentence**: It's helpful for a warrant to wrap up with a sentence that brings it back to the claim. This sentence also acts as a good transition into the impact.



Examples of poor warrants:

- "Phones are distracting and make it difficult for students to focus in class. "
  This warrant is short, vague, and does not provide a step-by-step explanation of causation.

- "Studies show that after being distracted by a phone, it can take up to 20 minutes for students to refocus. The 2021 Common Sense Census also revealed that 43% of 8-to-12-year-olds own smartphones, and research by UNESCO found that the presence of phones leads to a decrease in academic performance. Furthermore, schools in Belgium and Spain saw improved learning outcomes after banning smartphones, with underperforming students benefiting the most. Moreover, smartphones contribute to distractions during class discussions and reduce participation."
  This warrant has too much evidence and is difficult to follow. While it may sound credible, it lacks logical reasoning.

- "Smartphones are bad for kids' brains and should be banned."
  This is not relevant to the topic or the claim.

Impact: Why should we care?

The impact of an argument is arguably the most important ingredient. Without the impact, an argument holds no significance. The impact ties the argument together and shows the real-world consequences of the argument being made.

Questions for students to consider when brainstorming an impact:

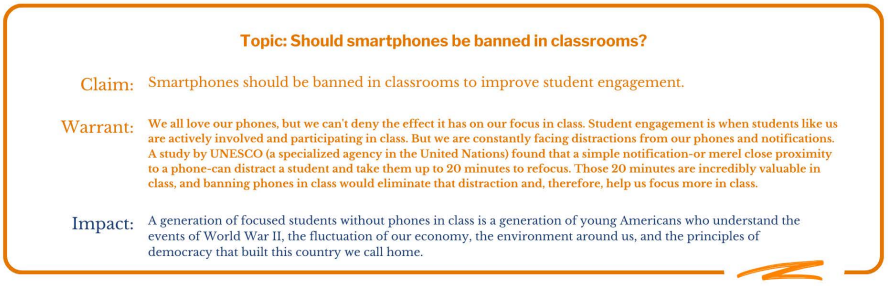
- Who would be impacted? Would they be impacted in a negative or positive way?
- How can I *show* the impact, rather than *tell* it?
- How can I make my peers and audience *feel* the consequences?

Strong impacts include:

- **Humanization:** By painting a picture and tapping into emotions, students humanize their argument, making it not just a logical conclusion, but a call to action that resonates on a personal level.

- **The Big Picture:** It's important for students to broaden their horizons and consider the longer-term and bigger-picture impacts of the argument, positive or negative.

Example of a strong impact:



Topic: Should smartphones be banned in classrooms?

Claim: Smartphones should be banned in classrooms to improve student engagement.

Warrant: We all love our phones, but we can't deny the effect it has on our focus in class. Student engagement is when students like us are actively involved and participating in class. But we are constantly facing distractions from our phones and notifications. A study by UNESCO (a specialized agency in the United Nations) found that a simple notification-or merel close proximity to a phone-can distract a student and take them up to 20 minutes to refocus. Those 20 minutes are incredibly valuable in class, and banning phones in class would eliminate that distraction and, therefore, help us focus more in class.

Impact: A generation of focused students without phones in class is a generation of young Americans who understand the events of World War II, the fluctuation of our economy, the environment around us, and the principles of democracy that built this country we call home.

Examples of poor impacts:

- "To conclude, phones should be banned so students can focus on their education"
  This impact simply reiterates the claim without painting a big-picture image.

- "Phones should be banned because they help students make 4.0 GPAs and will save our nation's future."
  While this impact is indeed big picture, it's not believable and too extreme.

- "Banning phones would help keep students in line."
  This impact is completely unrelated to the claim about student engagement.

Refutation

Debate is the clash of opposing viewpoints, not the mere existence of opposing viewpointsThrough refutation, debate becomes alive: refutation is the act of countering or debunking opposing arguments.
It is not enough to make compelling arguments; students must also be able to analyze and respond to arguments made by other students—in real time Effective refutation demonstrates a clear understanding of a topic, showcases a student's ability to think critically, and reinforces the strength of a student's own position.

There are two main types of refutation: **refuting validity and refuting significance.**

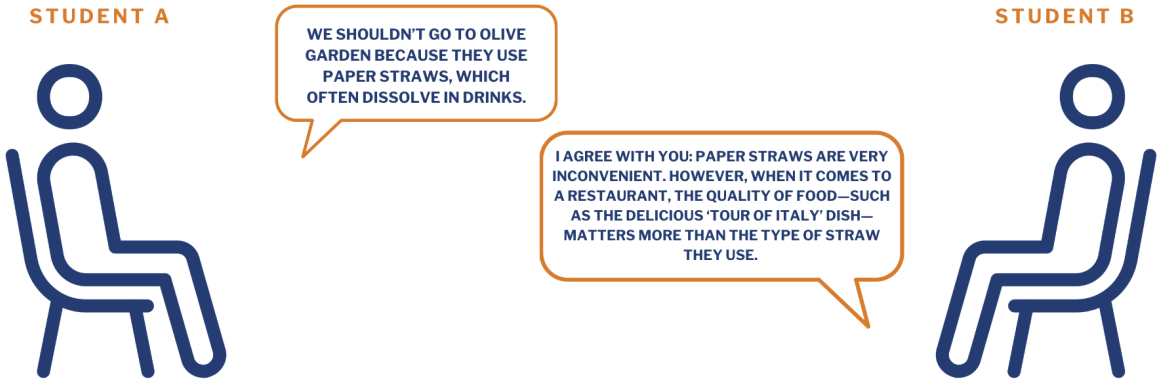
Refuting validity is providing another argument or statement factually incorrect. This is not common, as students typically do not make up false statements. In the event that a student does make a false statement, it is important that the other students disprove it and hold one another accountable.

Refuting significance is more common than refuting validity. This is when two students each make factually accurate arguments, yet one is more significant than the other. It is the responsibility of the student with the more significant argument to point this out, arguing that their argument matters more in the debate.

When a student is refuting another, it is important that they understand the **art of conceding**.

As students enter the real world, they will learn the importance of conceding ground in a conversation to win the other person over. When refuting the significance of another argument, it is ineffective to blatantly state that it is wrong; rather, students should acknowledge that the other person was right about some things to find common ground. This shows that the student is able to concede a little ground for the sake of advancing the debate.

Example of Refutation



Body Language

Body language is a powerful form of nonverbal communication that plays a crucial role in our daily interactions. It includes facial expressions, posture, hand gestures, eye contact, and more. Sitting up straight and holding eye contact with peers while speaking is more effective, displays more confidence, and is more respectful than slouching and looking at the floor while speaking.

Good body language becomes a habit with practice, but there are a few key elements to good body language that students should consider:

- **Eye contact:** Eye contact is arguably the most important factor in effective delivery because it captures the attention of the other students, shows that the student knows the content without relying on notes, and makes the argument more impactful to the audience.

- **Posture:** For students who are able, sitting up straight shows confidence, engagement, and professionalism. On the other hand, slouching or leaning back suggests indifference and lack of confidence.

- **Gesturing**: Using hand gestures can add emphasis and clarity to a speech, making the message more dynamic and engaging. However, it is important to avoid dramatic or excessive hand gestures, which can be distracting. Students should use natural, expressive hand movements that emphasize certain statements.

- **Facial expressions:** Facial expressions play a crucial role in reinforcing the message being communicated. A confident, composed expression not only aligns with the tone of the speech but also helps show sincerity and credibility, while inconsistent or negative expressions can undermine the message and even convey disrespect.

Vocal Delivery

Delivery is crucial in a debate because it determines how an argument will be received. It can include volume, pace, inflection, language. The right body language will capture everyone's attention and lend credibility.

Some key elements of delivery are the following:

- **Inflection**: Inflection is how the pitch of a student's voice changes when they speak; it can make an argument more interesting and keep everyone engaged. Raising the pitch slightly when asking a question or lowering it to emphasize a serious point can make an argument very powerful.

- **Pauses**: Deliberate pauses are a great strategy to allow ideas to sink in and give others time to process information. It is important, however, for students to remember not to pause for too long, lest another student interrupt them.

- **Volume**: To ensure that every person in the classroom can hear their arguments, students should be sure to speak at a volume that can be heard from the back of the classroom.

- **Pacing**: To ensure that an argument is easy to follow, students should speak at a pace that is easy to understand.

- **Language**: An easily forgotten yet crucial element of delivery, language ensures that a student is speaking in an accessible manner that others can understand. This can include avoiding jargon and using simpler or fewer words to communicate a powerful message.

Appendix

Rubric

Use this rubric to assess students after a debate.

	5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Adequate	2 Needs Improvement
Explanation	Provides thorough and insightful explanations that demonstrate deep understanding of the topic. Connects ideas logically with clear reasoning. Effectively connects the argument with a big-picture impact.	Provides clear and logical explanations that show a solid understanding of the topic. Attempts to connect the argument with an impact, but lacks big-picture emphasis.	Explanations are somewhat clear but may lack depth or thoroughness. Logical connections between ideas may be weak or incomplete. Little to no impact.	Explanations are unclear, confusing, or illogical. Does not show a clear understanding of the topic or of the argument.
Evidence	Uses high-quality, relevant, and varied evidence to thoroughly support arguments. Thoroughly connects the evidence to the argument, emphasizing its relevance. Uses the significance of the evidence to leverage arguments against counterarguments.	Provides relevant evidence to support arguments and shows understanding but may not fully explore its significance over counterarguments. Provides an explanation of the evidence's relevance and impact but not thoroughly or deeply.	Uses evidence that is somewhat relevant or only partially supports the argument. Does not fully understand or explain the significance of the evidence. Briefly mentions the evidence's significance, but does not leverage it over counterarguments.	Provides little or no evidence, or the evidence used is irrelevant. Does not understand the significance or context of the evidence.
Refutation	Identifies and thoroughly disproves/negates counterarguments with clear, logical reasoning. Demonstrates deep understanding of opposing views and effectively dismantles them using evidence.	Identifies and refutes counterarguments, though may not fully explore them. Uses logical reasoning and evidence to address opposing views.	Attempts to refute counterarguments but may do so weakly or superficially. Reasoning and evidence may be incomplete or only partially effective.	Refutation was unclear, unconvincing, or absent, weakening the overall argument. Refutation given lacked logical reasoning or evidence.
Delivery	Communicates with confidence and appropriate volume and tone. Maintains strong eye contact and uses effective/respectful body language. Effectively employs rhetorical techniques (e.g., repetition, emphasis). Delivers arguments in an accessible and concise way.	Communicates clearly with mostly appropriate volume and tone. Makes some eye contact and uses reasonable body language. Tries to enhance arguments using rhetorical techniques. Delivers accessible arguments but occasionally with jargon or unclear phrases.	Communication is somewhat clear but with issues in volume or tone. Somewhat inconsistent/ disrespectful body language. Uses ineffective rhetorical techniques. Lacks confidence or appears unprepared at times. Delivery contains jargon or unclear phrasing.	Communication is unclear, with significant issues in volume and tone. Little to no eye contact or ineffective or rude body language. No use of rhetorical techniques. Appears unprepared, nervous, or unprofessional. Delivery contains lots of jargon and unclear phrasing.
Engagement	**Actively listens and engages with peers without dominating the debate. Asks insightful questions that deepen the discussion. Encourages and supports others' participation.**	**Listens to peers and engages with their arguments through questions or comments. Contributes to the discussion but may not significantly advance the conversation. Generally respects others' speaking time.**	**Engages with peers but in a limited or superficial way. Engagement is inconsistent or lacks depth.** **Or** **Slightly dominates the conversation, but does not excessively interrupt others.**	**Shows little to no engagement with peers. Contributes minimally or not at all to the discussion.** **Or** **Dominates the conversation. Interrupts, dismisses, or fails to listen to others.**
Civility	**Always allows another student to speak. Shows understanding of different perspectives.**	**Generally respectful in discourse, with few lapses. Respects others but does not make efforts to maintain civility.**	**Occasionally lacks civility or respect. Unnecessarily interrupts others or rudely responds to arguments.**	**Disrespectful or uncivil behavior Uses ad hominem attacks against peers. Often interrupts others and rudely responds to arguments.**

Sample topics

Starter/low-stakes topics

- Should technology be allowed at the dinner table during family meals?
- Is it more beneficial for families to spend time together outdoors, like picnics and hikes, than indoors with activities like movie nights?
- Should parents help their children with homework?

US History

- Did the first or second Industrial Revolution have a greater impact on the U.S. economy?
    - Florida state standard SS.912.A.3.3 “Compare the first and second Industrial Revolutions in the United States.”

- Did the U.S. fight communism effectively during the Vietnam War?
    - Florida state standard: SS.912.A.6.14 “Analyze causes, course, and consequences of the Vietnam War.”

- Should the US have dropped the atomic bombs on Japan?
    - Florida state standard SS.912.A.6.6 “Analyze the use of atomic weapons during World War II and the aftermath of the bombings.”

American Government

Should states be allowed to refuse enforcement of federal laws they deem unconstitutional?

- California state standard 12.10 Students formulate questions about and defend their analyses of tensions within our constitutional democracy and the importance of maintaining a balance between the following concepts: majority rule and individual rights; liberty and equality; state and national authority in a federal system; civil disobedience and the rule of law; freedom of the press and the right to a fair trial; the relationship of religion and government.

Should convicted felons regain their right to vote after fully serving their sentences?

- California state standard 12.2.4: "Understand the obligations of civic mindedness, including voting, being informed on civic issues, volunteering and performing public service."

- Is freedom of speech the most essential principle for maintaining a free society?
    - California state standard 12.3 “Students evaluate and take and defend positions on what the fundamental values and principles of civil society are (i.e., the autonomous sphere of voluntary personal, social, and economic relations that are not part of government), their interdependence, and the meaning and importance of those values and principles for a free society.”

Environmental Science

- Is it more important to conserve water or energy for future sustainability?
    - Texas state standard: 112.37(c)(12)(A) "Understand how human activities impact renewable and nonrenewable resources, including water and energy."

- Should single-use plastics be banned to protect the environment?
    - Texas state standard: 112.37(c)(7)(A) "Analyze and evaluate the effects of human activities, including habitat destruction, introduction of invasive species, overharvesting, and pollution."

- Is it realistic for the U.S. to have a goal to reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050?
    - Texas state standard: 112.37(c)(7)(A) - "Analyze and evaluate the effects of human activities, including air and water pollution."

Economics

- Is a market economy necessary for a successful democracy?
    - Colorado state standard 2.1: "Analyze the relationships between supply, demand, and price in a market economy."
- Should the Federal Reserve raise or lower interest rates right now?
    - Colorado state standard 3.1: "Analyze how inflation, deflation, and unemployment affect different groups."

- Should the government regulate prices on essential goods (food, gas, etc.)?

- Colorado state standard 2.2: "Explain how government policies influence the allocation of resources in a market economy."

Exit Ticket

Two straightforward exit ticket opportunities for your students:

Exit Opportunity A: Ask students to write 3-4 sentences answering the question, “which side won the debate today and why?”

Exit Opportunity B: Ask students to write out their own CWI (“Claim Warrant Impact”) for one argument on each side of the debate. One sentence each for Claim, Warrant, and Impact.

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