

Debates

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Module Overview:

1. Developing a proposition, argument and counter-argument
2. Inductive and Deductive Reasoning
3. Debate Structure

Video 1: Developing a proposition, argument and counter-argument

A debate is a formal public discussion on a particular topic or topics in which opposing arguments are presented. The debate could be between two or more individuals, for example candidates for president, or between advocates and opponents of a proposed law, for example in the US Congress or at a town hall meeting. Many colleges have debate teams or clubs that compete against teams from other schools. The word *debate* comes into English from Old French and ultimately from Latin. While the original literal meaning was “to beat down” or “fight off” an enemy, the word came to have a much kinder and gentler sense: “to argue against” someone. Although students from some cultures may hesitate to participate in a debate because they prefer to avoid confrontation, it is important to remember that the purpose of the debate is not to fight, but to reach the truth by discussing and considering all the sides of an issue.

A debate is an excellent way to develop the analytical and critical thinking skills you need to be a persuasive writer. Because you need to advocate strongly for a specific position and to do so within strict time limits, you have to prepare your arguments in advance and to express yourself clearly, forcefully, and concisely. Since you will typically be working as a team, you need to divide your argument into logical, coherent segments. The opposing team will be presenting an argument that is the opposite of yours, so you must anticipate and be ready to respond effectively to counterarguments. All of these are skills that you would also apply to your writing.

After completing selected readings on a given topic, the class will brainstorm and agree on a *proposition* for the debate. A proposition is a single sentence that makes a strong claim in the form of an affirmative statement. (Think about how you use a thesis statement or claim in the introduction to an argument-and-analysis essay to let the reader know exactly what you intend to prove in the body of your paper.) The affirmative, or *pro*, side will argue in favor of the proposition, while the negative, or *con*, side will argue against it.

Let's look at the following example on computer use:

- The author, Nicholas Carr, while admitting that he relies on a computer for his work and frequently uses the Internet, observes that both he and many of his friends who are well-educated researchers find it harder to concentrate and to read serious literature, a problem that he blames squarely on the Internet. "HAL and Me" (pp. 563-569)

We can see that the *topic* is the impact of computers and the Internet on our minds. However, if we simply write "The impact of computers and the Internet on our minds," that is insufficient, since it is just a topic, not a claim. Likewise, "What is the impact of computers and the Internet on our minds?" is not an acceptable proposition, as it is a question, rather than an assertion.

A better proposition would be, "Computers and the Internet help make us more intelligent." The pro side would argue in favor of this proposition, while the con side would argue against it.

The article contains both points of argument and counterargument. A member of the pro team could adopt and adapt the ideas from the pro argument to emphasize the benefits of the Internet. He or she could also anticipate and try to disarm the con team's possible use of the counterargument. A member of the con side might do the opposite. When planning a debate on an academic text, you should be able to pull examples of both argument and counterargument from the text itself.

Video 2: Inductive and Deductive Reasoning

In a debate, as in an academic essay, your job is to look at evidence (e.g. facts, data, examples, quotes from sources) and to evaluate that evidence using some form of reasoning in order to prove a specific claim (a proposition or thesis statement) by using logical arguments. Two of the most effective types of reasoning are *inductive* and *deductive* reasoning.

With inductive reasoning, your pattern of thinking moves from the specific to the general: you observe what could be thought of as multiple isolated events; notice that they have similar characteristics; and combine the evidence from these events to reach a larger conclusion. For example, in "HAL and Me," Carr notices that his ability to concentrate has diminished, and he attributes this to his increased use of the Internet. However, this is just one individual example. In support of his theory, Carr quotes a variety of well-educated people, including bloggers who are journalists, researchers, and doctoral students. He finds that they observe the same troubling phenomenon in themselves. Thus, by using inductive reasoning (collecting a series of distinct examples), Carr arrives at the conclusion that the Internet harms our ability to think as clearly as we once did.

In deductive reasoning, you show how the connections between accepted or established ideas (premises) lead to a necessary conclusion. In other words, if A is true; and B has a logical relationship with A that is true; then we can conclude that C is also true. For example:

Premise A: All new media (such as the printing press, radio, and television) reshape the way that the human brain processes information.

Premise B: The Internet is a new medium.

Conclusion: It is entirely natural for the Internet to reshape the way that we process information.

Depending on what point you are trying to make or rebut, you may decide to use inductive or deductive reasoning.

In a debate, just as in writing, it is vital to identify the source of any idea that you use, and to state clearly to what extent you agree or disagree with it. Specialized academic text, such as *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, include templates for summarizing and quoting; responding by agreeing, disagreeing, or partially agreeing while also partially disagreeing; anticipating and responding to a counterargument; etc. You can apply many of these writing templates to public speaking as well, both when discussing written sources and when interacting with the opposing debate team.

Here are a few examples, referring to the excerpts given above:

Pro side:

Although I concede, as Carr argues, that the Internet can affect our ability to concentrate, I still insist that this is a small price to pay for access to the enormous amount of information available in one place: on Google. (cf. They Say/I Say 64-65: Templates for Agreeing and Disagreeing Simultaneously)

Con side:

But you can't have it both ways: On the one hand, you agree wholeheartedly with Pringle and Thompson that the Internet is a tremendous boon. On the other hand, you minimize the negative effects that Carr worries about so much. (cf. They Say/I Say 60: Templates for Disagreeing, with Reasons)

As the authors of *They Say/I Say* emphasize, in a classroom setting it is important to pay close attention to what other students are saying so that you can respond appropriately and effectively. (Taking notes while your debate opponents are speaking is a valuable tool.) They advise that you “Frame your comments as a response to something that has already been said” (164), and that you name the person to whom you are replying, e.g.:

I take your point, Julia, that the Internet has started to reshape the way we process information. Still, don't you think exactly the same thing happened with every previous technology, from the printing press to radio and television?

If you want to introduce a new topic that has not yet been raised in the debate, it is important to indicate explicitly that you are doing this:

So far, Emily, you have been focusing on the material benefits of the Internet. But isn't the real issue here the harm that the Internet does to real human beings, to their interpersonal relationships? (cf. They Say/I Say 165)

Video 3: Debate Structure

Once you have the topic and the proposition, you and your classmates will be divided into two teams of equal size, with the instructor as moderator and timekeeper. Each member of each team should have an opportunity to participate in the debate, by making a statement, asking questions, or responding to questions from the other team. You will need to work both on your own and together with teammates to determine how to divide up the various facets of the topic and to decide who is responsible for what tasks.

Tips for Effective Debating

- Prepare an interesting, informative, and engaging point, discussion, argument, analysis, or question on your specific part of the debate topic.
- Focus only on the most relevant, interesting, and important aspects of the topic
- Practice so you can cover the material in one- or two-minutes.
- Communicate your points clearly, informatively, assertively, and concisely.
- Use appropriate volume, tempo, phrasing, pausing, body language, eye contact.
- Do not read from a prepared text; instead you may refer to notes on index cards.

Debate Etiquette

When you participate in a debate – just as when you write an academic essay – your main goal is to persuade your audience that your perspective is the correct one. You can achieve this by using a combination of methods and materials: data, quotes from sources, anecdotal evidence, appeals to logic, emotional arguments, etc. You should feel free to express your point of view as forcefully as you need to, as long as you show courtesy and respect for your opponents and your audience. Focus on the facts of the case, and avoid anything that might sound disrespectful. Remember that this is an academic setting, so you will be evaluated on the persuasiveness of your ideas

References

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