

# The Instructional Use of Argument Across the Curriculum

## **This We Believe Characteristics**

- High expectations for all members of the learning community
- Students and teachers engaged in active learning
- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity

By Elizabeth A. Martens

As a speech and debate teacher at the middle school level, I am frequently asked by peers how they might use debate in their own respective classrooms. “We’d like to debate whether the United States should have joined the United Nations” or “Is there a way to argue the pros and cons of genetic cloning in one class period?” “What format do we use?” “How long does it take?”

Debate is not only manageable in the classroom, it is also an effective and enjoyable learning activity. Debate in the content area classroom serves a dual purpose: students are exposed to a process that facilitates critical thinking and analytical skills, and debate serves as a device for authenticating and deepening subject area knowledge. Facts become related to ideas, which are then used as a springboard for gathering and organizing additional relevant information and making new connections. Issues that are controversial (open to more than one interpretation or position that can be taken) tend to attract student interest and investment. The dialectical discourse involved in arguing a position improves speaking and listening skills and promotes a broader and greater depth of understanding.

Some students as young as fifth grade can see two sides to an issue, and many are ready to tackle the reasoning process required to build and sustain an argument. Teaching argument skills offers students a way to organize their thinking so that it becomes productive, visibly moving toward a purpose. Debate for young adolescents is not only developmentally appropriate, but timely in another sense—this age

group loves to argue! At a time when so many middle school students feel awkward and embarrassed about walking into a room, they can be amazingly open to entering into an argument. Debate gives these young people a meaningful “voice”—a way to interact with and to feel a part of the bigger (adult) world around them. Most significantly, it builds both the voice and the skills to enable the developing young person to begin to make sense out of his or her place in the world through the consideration of differing points of view.

Debate also allows for the application of content area knowledge to issues of student interest. For example, a debate on the issue of whether or not the use of atomic weapons was justified in World War II



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By presenting affirmative and negative arguments, these students helped classmates think about the controversial issue of euthanasia.

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provides a meaningful accompaniment to an American history unit on the United States' role in World War II. On a more general level, debate provides questioning and organizational skills that carry over into learning across the curriculum. These higher-level thinking skills are particularly useful for strengthening students' listening and writing skills. Good debaters learn how to "think on their feet" by quickly identifying issues and organizing responses in their heads—the same skills used in the formulation of a written response to an essay question.

The following is not so much a step-by-step description of "how to debate" as an overview of the basic elements and concepts that are helpful in implementing informal debate in the classroom. The use of an occasional classroom debate can be as simple or as complicated as the teacher wants to make it—and the point is that it should be left up to the teacher to select a format that is practical for his or her classroom. Not every concept or procedure outlined here is necessary for holding a successful classroom debate, and there are many concepts and procedures that have not been included.

Most debating that goes on at the middle school level in the speech and debate classroom is not competitive but consists of informal debating, in which the primary focus is on development of an argument. Learning how to develop an argument is something that most students would rather "just do" without being asked to think about it. Although the concept of argument is most effectively understood through practice, it is still a good idea to introduce the concept before beginning a debate and to revisit the concept occasionally during the course of the debate.

## The Concept of Argument

Argument, simply defined, is the offering of reasons and evidence in support of a conclusion (Weston, 2000). Argument can be used for different purposes. In philosophical discourse, a form of argument used in philosophical discussion, argument is used to move closer to the essential truths about concepts such as "truth," "justice," or "beauty." The purpose of *philosophical discourse* is to bring the parties closer to an understanding of the nature of the issue before them.

In debate, on the other hand, argument is used to prove a point and to persuade someone to adopt one position over another. Whether argument is used for purposes of discourse or debate, students need to understand that *argument always involves the use of reasons and the process of reasoning*. The

difference arises in the purposes for which the argument is used.

This distinction in purpose is important in any classroom where much of the learning takes place through class discussion. There are many times in speech and debate class when the process of brainstorming about a particular issue should begin with an exploration of the underlying philosophical

Figure 1  
RAD Discourse Procedures

**"Radical" (adj.):** [<L. "radix," of, or from, the root]; going to the foundation or root of something; getting to the basic facts, causes, principles, problems, solutions... (The Radical Academy (2006), <http://radicalacademy.com>).

- Step 1** The question, idea, or issue to be argued will be stated as clearly and simply as possible, and written for all to see.
- Step 2** Discourse will begin by attempting to **define the big terms** contained in the question/idea/issue. For example, whether we are dealing with the concept of "goodness" all by itself or the question "What does it mean to live the good life?" we would need to start by defining what is meant by the term "good." Since people have been trying to define what they mean by "good" for a very long time, we are not looking for a definitive definition as much as a working definition that lets us know we are all on the same page.
- Step 3** Next we will **identify the main issue presented** and come up with **three related sub-issues** central to exploring the main issue. If the question is "Is it ever O.K. to lie?" we might identify the main issue as having something to do with moral considerations—we are asking whether it is ever ethical (morally acceptable) to lie. One related issue might be whether truth or falsity depends on circumstances, or is absolute. A second issue might concern the effects of truth and falsity on others. A third issue could explore whether and why truth matters to us at all.
- Step 4** Once we have specified the issues to be discussed, then we can begin to **formulate questions and statements relevant to those issues**. **Relevant questions and statements** should be based on experience, evidence, or understood principles that directly relate to the issue under discussion. They should be reasonable—meaning they are based on good reasons.

To keep things flowing, your statement or question should always try to respond to and relate to the statement just made by someone else. You can respond to someone else's statement in one of two ways, by either:

- agreeing with the statement and building upon it by giving new reasons in support of your agreement; or
- by disagreeing with the statement and giving specific reasons and evidence for your disagreement, or by revealing errors in logic or reasoning.

- Step 5** The discourse will conclude when participants can **agree on some aspect of the issue or can clearly identify points of disagreement**. Alternatively, the discourse might conclude because everyone is tired of the topic and has a headache. The latter should not be considered failure as much as an acknowledgment that some issues are just bigger than we are on a particular afternoon!

issues. Likewise, in my English class, the study of literature would be incomplete without a careful consideration of the philosophical issues raised in the work. For example, when reading *To Kill A Mockingbird*, we begin by clearly defining what we mean by “prejudice.” In addition to understanding the word’s denotative and connotative meanings, students are asked to distinguish “prejudice” from related terms such as “bigotry” and “racism.” The students’ ability to use the word “prejudice” properly depends on their ability to compare and contrast it with similar but different terms—a form of reasoning used in both discourse and debate.

A student handout explaining philosophical discourse and tips for effective arguing are offered in Figures 1 & 2.

### Argument in debate

When introducing the concept of argument for purposes of debate, it is helpful to begin by identifying the three parts of an argument. In its publication *Speak Out! Debate and Public Speaking in the Middle Grades*, the Middle School Public Debate Program (n.d.) uses the acronym ARE (assertion, reason, evidence) to explain the parts of an argument and their role in development of the argument (Shuster & Meany, 2005).

Figure 2  
Things to Remember When You Argue

- Try to avoid stating your opinion unless you can back it up with reasons other than “because I think so.” Mere opinions give us nothing to build upon or really argue against. If I try to argue against your opinion it is like arguing against you personally, which gets us nowhere.
- Reasons should be reasonable. The reasons that you put forward to build or defend your position on an issue are your weapons. Make them strong and safe from attack by remembering that your reasons must (a) be relevant to the issue being discussed, (b) be related to available evidence or experience, and (c) take into consideration different points of view.
- Just how reasonable your reasons are can be determined by standards commonly applied to philosophical argument. These standards include clarity, accuracy, relevance, logic, precision, justifiability, significance, depth, and breadth.
- As you develop your reasons and relate them to other reasons, you are engaging in the process of reasoning. Sometimes you might reason deductively, arguing that the conclusion follows necessarily from the particular examples given. Other times you might reason inductively, arguing that if we can draw a conclusion from observations about something of a certain kind, then we can draw a conclusion about remaining things of that kind. At all times you want to make use of inference rather than mere assumption. Inference is when you can conclude based on good reasons that something is true in light of something else’s being or seeming to be true. Assumption is when you just take for granted or presuppose that something may be true.

**The assertion.** The assertion begins the argument with a statement that claims something is true but does not, in and of itself, provide reasons or evidence to support the claim of truth. Examples of assertions include:

- Global warming is an immediate threat to our well-being.
- The U.S. should not have invaded Iraq.
- Truth is to be valued over intent.

**The reasons and reasoning process.** The assertion begins the argument, and the process of reasoning develops the argument. Schuster & Meany (2005) described this as the “because” part of an argument. The assertion is made, but it needs a “because” to prove its truth or merit. The reason for the “because” should be relevant, or directly related, to the assertion in such a way that *the reason gives rise to an inference* that the assertion is true or justified. *Inference* occurs when one can conclude that something is true in light of something else’s being true or seeming to be true.

Example: The death penalty should be eliminated because innocent people are put to death.

The reasoning process refers to the way that the evidence is interpreted, and reasons are used and put together to infer a conclusion (Zarefsky, 2001). Listing the reasons for an assertion is not sufficient; you need to tie them together in a way that strengthens the inference to be made.

**Assertion + Reason + Reasoning = Argument**

I use the idea of “links in a chain” to explain the abstract concept of reasoning to students. The most commonly used “links” or types of reasoning are reasoning by example, causal reasoning, and costs and benefits analysis.

1. **Reasoning by example** (or reasoning from generalization). In reasoning by example, one or more examples from a group are examined, and then a conclusion is drawn about the group. The conclusion is based on similarities found among the examples, or parts, of the group.

Examples:

- Middle school students who perform some form of community service tend to be more empathetic to the general needs and concerns of others.
- Middle school students who perform some form of community service tend to be more likely to undertake leadership roles in community affairs.
- **Therefore**, community service plays a valuable role in the education and development of middle school students.

2. **Reasoning by analogy.** With this type of reasoning, you infer that when two or more things, events, or ideas are alike in some ways, they will be alike in other ways. Reasoning by analogy requires that you show that what was true in one situation will probably be true in a similar situation (Schuster & Meany, 2005). Analogies compare people, historical times and places, governments, conflicts, laws, and ideas to find significant similarities or distinctions in the comparisons. Keep in mind that analogies are particularly vulnerable to attack based on relevant distinctions (in addition to the similarities) that can be made in a given comparison.

Examples:

- The war in Vietnam could not be won because the U.S. sought to impose democracy onto a dissimilar and unstable political and military culture.
  - In the current war in Iraq, the U.S. seeks to impose democracy onto a dissimilar and unstable political and military culture.
  - **Therefore**, it is not likely that the U.S. will succeed with its military and political goals in Iraq.
3. **Causal reasoning.** Causal reasoning is used to show a cause and effect relationship between two things.

Examples:

- Reading a paper aloud during the editing process enables a student to more readily detect forgotten words and awkward phrases.

Figure 3  
Student Research Sites

[www.nytimes.com/learning/students/index.html](http://www.nytimes.com/learning/students/index.html)  
[www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/kidspost/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/kidspost/)  
[www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/)  
[www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)  
[www.newseum.org/index.htm](http://www.newseum.org/index.htm)  
[www.timeforkids.com/TFK/index.html](http://www.timeforkids.com/TFK/index.html)  
[news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/](http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/)  
[www.headlinespot.com/for/kids/](http://www.headlinespot.com/for/kids/)  
[www.cnnstudentsnews.cnn.com/fyi/index.html](http://www.cnnstudentsnews.cnn.com/fyi/index.html)  
[teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/news.index.asp](http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/news.index.asp)  
[www.publicagenda.org/sitemap.htm](http://www.publicagenda.org/sitemap.htm)  
[www.urbandebate.org/resources/](http://www.urbandebate.org/resources/)  
[www.policy.com/issues/](http://www.policy.com/issues/)  
[www.debating.het/flynn/colmmain.htm](http://www.debating.het/flynn/colmmain.htm)  
[ncpa.org/sid/](http://ncpa.org/sid/)  
[discovery.com](http://discovery.com)

Philosophy Resources:  
[www.epistemelinks.com](http://www.epistemelinks.com)  
[www.fred.net/tzaka/phil.html](http://www.fred.net/tzaka/phil.html)  
[radicalacademy.com](http://radicalacademy.com)

- Reading a paper aloud during the editing process helps a student more readily recognize the need for reorganization of thoughts and ideas.
  - **Therefore**, the practice of reading papers aloud during the editing process is beneficial and should be encouraged.
4. **Costs and benefits reasoning** is a practical way to weigh the relative merits of an option or proposed course of action. The costs (e.g., harmful consequences, inefficiencies, economic costs, time and resource allotment) are weighed against the benefits (e.g., desirable consequences, efficiency gained, economic gain). Costs and benefits analysis uses causal reasoning to weigh the good and bad consequences/effects of a proposed course of action.

Examples:

- Our prison system is inadequate due to overcrowding and high recidivism rates among nonviolent offenders.
- Efforts to rehabilitate nonviolent offenders would reduce prison overcrowding and high recidivism rates.
- The associated costs of rehabilitation may prove less expensive than the costs of incarceration and building of new facilities.

- *Therefore*, the benefits of rehabilitation outweigh the associated costs of rehabilitation programs.

**Evidence.** Reasons require evidence to support them. Evidence in support of a reason provides information that strengthens the inference to be made by making the reason more believable. The quality and relevance of the evidence determines the weight that will be given to the reason. Evidence takes the general forms of facts, expert opinions, and statistics (Bauer, 1999). Middle school students do not need to engage in extensive research prior to a debate, but they should be able to distinguish between facts, opinions, and statistics and begin the process of “weighing” the quality and strength of the evidence. (See Figure 3 for a list of helpful student research sites.)

Assertion + Reason and Evidence + Reasoning = Argument

## Informal Debate

Once students have an understanding of the role of argument in debate, they are ready to engage in informal debating. In debate, the issue must present a controversy, the resolution of which requires that two opposing positions be taken. If the issue does not pose a controversy, then it is not “debatable.” The dialectical contrast of two opposing views causes the argument to progress toward the adoption of one position over the other. In debate, the reasoning process is used to persuade.

Informal debating can take many forms and is distinguished from formal competitive debate formats (such as cross-examination debate or policy debate) because of its lack of complex and rigid procedures. Many competitive debating associations and clubs maintain Web sites with detailed information regarding formats (See Figure 4 for a partial listing of debate resource sites.). Informal debating in a middle school classroom tends to take on adapted forms of the more user-friendly formats of parliamentary and public forum debate.

## Choosing topics

Choose two-sided meaningful topics/issues from which two legitimate and clearly differing positions can be taken. It is also helpful to select topics that can be broken down easily into two to three main or related ideas. A list of commonly debated topics appropriate for the middle school level is offered in Figure 5.

Figure 4  
Teacher Debate Resources

<p><b>General Debate:</b>  <a href="http://www.idebate.org/main/home.asp">www.idebate.org/main/home.asp</a> (International Debate Education Association)  <a href="http://www.middledebate.com/">www.middledebate.com/</a> (Middle School Public Debate Program)  <a href="http://www.debateamerica.org">www.debateamerica.org</a> (Debate America)  <a href="http://uvm.edu/default.html">uvm.edu/default.html</a> (Debate Central)  <a href="http://www.urbandebate.org">www.urbandebate.org</a> (National Association of Urban Debate Leagues)  <a href="http://nflonline.org">nflonline.org</a> (National Junior Forensic League)</p> <p><b>Cross Examination Debate:</b>  <a href="http://cedadebate.org">cedadebate.org</a> (Cross Examination Debate Association)  <a href="http://www.net-benefit.com">www.net-benefit.com</a> (Net Benefit)</p> <p><b>Public Forum Debate:</b>  <a href="http://www.hsdebate.com/">www.hsdebate.com/</a> (Public Forum Debate League)</p> <p><b>Parliamentary Debate:</b>  <a href="http://cas.bethel.edu/dept/comm/npda/index.html">cas.bethel.edu/dept/comm/npda/index.html</a>  (National Parliamentary Debate Association)  <a href="http://www.wcdebate.com/lparli/29basics.htm">www.wcdebate.com/lparli/29basics.htm</a></p>
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## Parties

Since the issue has two sides, there are two parties to every debate: the “pro” side that argues in favor of the proposition/motion/resolution and the “con” side that argues against it. Members (“Speakers”) on the pro side are generally referred to as “the Affirmative,” while speakers on the con side are called “the Negative.”

Different debate formats use different numbers of speakers on each side. The order in which the speakers speak determines the speaker’s role. The Schuster and Meany (2005) format uses three speakers on each side—the first two speakers on each side handle the constructive speeches, the third speakers handle rebuttal. The number and roles of the speakers can be expanded as needed, but more than five speakers on each side can be cumbersome.

There are various ways to get around the numbers problem in classrooms containing more than 10 students. The number of students addressing the constructive and rebuttal speeches can be increased, a speaker can be added to handle cross-examination, or a speaker can be added to give a summary speech. Alternatively, several topics can be debated using different speakers.

## The resolution

In debate, the issue to be debated is called the proposition, motion, or resolution. This is the subject or topic of the argument, which has been restated in a particular form. I refer to the proposition/motion/resolution as the “resolution,” because it is easy for students to remember due to the form that

Figure 5  
Possible Topics for Middle School Debating

<p><b>Policy Issues:</b>          Nepal should close Mt. Everest to climbing.          The City of Austin should allow the homeless to sleep on the streets.          The government should regulate the Internet.          Parents should not buy toy guns for their children.          Middle school students should have access to soda and vending machines at school.          Animals should not be used to test new products.          Student athletes should be required to make good grades to play sports.          School newspapers should be censored.          Schools should require all students to wear school uniforms.          All students should be required to do community service to graduate.          The United States has a moral duty to be the world's police force.          Teenagers should be allowed to serve on juries of their peers.          The government should pay for all qualified candidates to go to college.          Criminals should be rehabilitated, not punished.          The death penalty should be abolished.          Education should be a privilege, not a right.          Economic growth should be sacrificed for the good of the environment.          Recycling should be required by law.          The United States should build a wall to fight illegal immigration along its borders.</p>	<p>The minimum wage should be significantly increased.          The United States should make it easier for illegal citizens to become U.S. citizens.          The federal government should pay for stem cell research.          The federal government should not legislate morality.</p> <p><b>Value Issues:</b>          Reward is more effective than punishment.          It is better to live on a deserted island than a global village.          The greatest good is that which is good for the greatest number.          Dictatorship is better than weak democracy.          Morality is dead.          Modern technology is more foe than friend.          Self-interest promotes the public good.          The Internet shuts down human interaction.          Justice is a myth.          Mediocrity has become the standard in America.          War is never justified.          Basic medical care is a privilege, not a right.          It is justifiable to steal from the rich and give to the poor.          Professional athletes are overpaid.</p>
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a resolution takes. For example, if the topic of the debate was school uniforms, the resolution might be stated as: “*Resolved*, that all middle school students should be required to wear uniforms.” The important thing to remember when drafting the resolution is to clearly state the issue in its simplest terms.

Resolutions fall into three distinct categories or types, depending on the nature of the issue: fact, policy, and value.

**Fact Resolutions:** A fact resolution asserts a matter that can be determined as a matter of fact. The indictment in a criminal trial is a form of a fact resolution; the determination as to the guilt or innocence of the defendant will be decided as a matter of fact. The resolution “*Resolved*, that capital punishment has reduced violent crimes,” can largely be determined as a matter of fact. Fact resolutions could be particularly useful in a science classroom (“*Resolved*, that monkeys are more highly evolved than dolphins”) as a fun and meaningful way for students to gather information and present their findings.

**Policy Resolutions:** Policy resolutions call for a change in the *status quo*, for a change in policy. The *status quo* refers to the existing state of things, and is always presumed to be satisfactory. The affirmative (arguing in favor of the resolution) has the burden to prove the need for a change in the status quo. The word “should” almost always appears in a policy resolution: “*Resolved*, that the U.S. should

eliminate capital punishment,” “*Resolved*, that the student council should purchase pizza once a week for resale as a fundraising project.”

A policy resolution, by its terms, requires that certain steps be taken when arguing for or against it. Basic steps in developing a policy argument are as follows:

- Identify and define the problem (need for change).
- Suggest possible solutions.
- Select the best solution.
- Explain ways to carry out the solution (Establish that the proposed change in policy will satisfy the need.).

(Bauer, 1999)

**Value Resolutions:** Value resolutions call for the evaluation of a value inherent in the resolution. The word “should” does not appear in value resolutions, as the issue usually concerns the weighing of relative values, as opposed to changes in an existing policy. The resolution is set forth like a belief statement: “*Resolved*, that oppressive government is better than no government,” “*Resolved*, that science is of greater value to society than art,” or “*Resolved*, that the pen is mightier than the sword.” Value resolutions rely more on the logical analysis of philosophical issues than on the presentation of evidence.

## The speeches

When it is a speaker's turn to talk, he or she gives a "speech." Speeches are divided into two types: constructive and rebuttal. Constructive speeches build an argument, and rebuttal speeches refute the opposition's argument and rebuild an argument, when necessary. Both the affirmative and negative sides give constructive and rebuttal speeches.

**Constructive:** In the constructive speeches the affirmative and negative speakers give their offensive arguments. They are advancing their own arguments by making assertions and giving reasons and evidence why something is so. The first constructive speakers (for both the affirmative and negative) need to clearly define all terms central to the resolution and present the basic outline of their argument. The role of the second round of constructive speakers is to "fill in" the outlined argument with evidence and additional reasoning in support of the assertions.

**Rebuttal:** In the rebuttal speeches both sides give their defensive arguments—they respond to arguments put into play by the other side. This is called refutation. Rebuttal may involve direct refutation of arguments put forth by the other side, or the rebuilding of one's own argument that was attacked. Rebuttal speakers cannot possibly speak to every argument offered by the opposition, and, therefore, must determine the strongest aspects of the opponent's case that need refuting (or the weakest parts of their own case that need rebuilding).

**Clash:** "Clash" is not a speech but a term used to describe what happens during refutation and what is essential to a good debate. During the course of the debate, there should be direct clash (dispute on the issues) occurring between the two sides. If both sides are advancing arguments but their reasons are unrelated to each other, there is no dispute. Each side must attempt to refute the other's arguments for clash to occur.

## Format

The format is made up of the rules and procedures that govern the debate. The format can determine the form of the resolution, the number and order of speakers, and the role of each speaker. The one common factor is that the speaking order goes back and forth between the affirmative and negative. Generally the affirmative goes first with its first speaker, then the negative gets a turn with its first speaker.

The Middle School Debate Project, a program originating out of the Los Angeles area, provides a

basic format readily adaptable to most classrooms. Speaking times and the numbers of speakers can be adjusted quite easily.

## Adapted MSDP Speaker Format:

Affirmative Speaker A/Constructive speech	4 min.
Negative Speaker A/Constructive speech	4 min.
Affirmative Speaker B/Constructive speech	4 min.
Negative Speaker B/Constructive speech	4 min.
Affirmative Speaker C/Rebuttal	3 min.
Negative Speaker C/Rebuttal	3 min.

(Schuster & Meany, 2005)

Speakers cannot interrupt other speakers, but some formats, such as parliamentary debate, allow for a form of questioning during a speech called "Points of Information (POI)." POIs are questions from the opposition allowed after the first minute and before the last minute of a constructive speech. When asking a POI, the opposition stands up during a speech with one palm extended and must wait to be recognized by the person speaking. If told "No thank you" or "Not at this time," the questioner must promptly sit down (but can try again later). If the speaker accepts the POI, the questioner has no more than 15 seconds to ask the question directed at the speaker. The speaker then responds to the question during his or her remaining speaking time. Middle school students find POIs very empowering because *they* get to decide whether to accept or reject a question.

Figure 6  
Informal Debate Rubric

Name:	_____
Date:	_____
Speaker:	_____
Resolution:	_____
1-5 ("5" proficient)	
__	Presentation/oratory skills
__	Organization/clarity
__	At least two communicated contentions
__	Relevant reasons given to support contentions
__	Relevant examples, facts, other evidence given to support reasons
__	Relevant and effective Points of Information
__	Relevant and effective rebuttal
Total Points:	_____
Grade:	_____

Despite the brief speaking times, it is difficult to schedule more than two debates based on the above format in a 48-minute class period, particularly since you want to allow sufficient time following the debate for “debriefing” (see Evaluation/Judging, below). It is best to allow at least one class period for preparation time and hold the debate during the next class meeting.

**Formalities:** Students actually enjoy the formalities that accompany many debate formats. You might insist that certain parliamentary procedures be followed and that students address each other as “Mr.” or “Miss/Ms.” or “My Distinguished Opponent Ms. Smith.”

Another “formality” that is lots of fun for students is derived from the parliamentary debate practice of “heckling.” Heckling is a way for team members and the audience to respond to statements made by a speaker. “Positive” heckling, used when the speaker has made a particularly good point, involves light tapping on the tabletop or the shaking of a triumphant fist in the air. “Negative” heckling, if allowed, involves a low hiss or “thumbs down” sign.

### Evaluation/Judging

For most classroom purposes, informal debates are evaluated rather than judged. This can be disappointing to middle school students who would prefer to have a winner declared after every debate. The simple rubric contained in Figure 6 can be used to serve both purposes.

Debriefing with the class should be attempted after every debate. This is the time when students look back over the course of the debate, identify turning points and errors, and give self-evaluations. It will also be the time when everyone wants to get a last word in!

### Miscellaneous Advice

#### Brainstorming

Before students begin researching and preparing arguments, it is wise to brainstorm the issue with the entire class. While brainstorming, my students are asked to consider all applicable “related ideas” posted on a board in the classroom. The related ideas exercise is designed to get the students to consider the broad implications of a given issue. The following is the listing of related ideas posted in my classroom:

- Social (family, community, local, national, global)
- Economic (individual, local, national, global impact)
- Cultural (ethnicity, historical, value-oriented, the arts)
- Political (local, state, federal, global)
- Educational (goals, processes)
- Religious
- Moral (ethical concerns, values, individual and community, absolute and relative)
- Philosophical (related to the Big Ideas of Truth, Justice, Beauty, Goodness)

#### Always:

- Define
- Distinguish
- Find Relationships
- Compare and Contrast

If, for example, the topic of debate was the death penalty, brainstorming notes might look like this:

**Social implications** (perpetrator’s family v. victim’s family; general community and prison community interests in safety and security; state/national/global rates of execution)

**Economic implications** (costs of execution v. costs of death row; costs of appeal)

**Cultural** (history of attitudes and beliefs; breakdown of ethnicity/gender/economic background of those executed)

**Moral and religious** (value of life; concept of mercy/grace/judgment; justification for killing and State’s role)

**Philosophical** (how does this relate to our idea of justice?)

Once the topic has been broken down into its related ideas, the class lists all the questions they can think of that are relevant to the issue and related ideas. The reformulation of issues into the form of questions prepares the students for thinking



Figure 7  
Sample Flow Sheet

Resolution: \_\_\_\_\_

Legend:  
 A/C—Affirmative constructive speech    N/C—Negative constructive speech    A/R—Affirmative rebuttal speech    N/R—Affirmative rebuttal speech

	A/C	N/C	A/C	A/C	A/R	N/R
Spkr (A)1						
Spkr (N)1						
Spkr (A)2						
Spkr (N)2						
Spkr (A)3						
Spkr (N)3						

dialectically in assertion and response format. Sample questions follow:

- What rights does the victim’s family have in seeking final resolution/retribution?
- What are the costs of incarceration for life compared with costs of death row and execution?
- When has the U.S. abolished the death penalty in the past and why?
- Does the death penalty appear to be applied unjustly or unfairly? (Are innocent people put to death/how often, is the penalty applied to any racial or ethnic group disproportionately?)
- Is it moral to kill another human being, even when that individual has killed another?

**Determine Contentions**

Once related issues and questions have been identified, the students are ready to organize the related ideas and questions into “contentions” for the affirmative (pro) and negative (con) sides. Contentions are the statements of the evidence, the main reasons given by each side for its position. The affirmative should always come up with its own list of negative contentions, and likewise for the negative side. Students need to be constantly

reminded that *you cannot have a “point” until you have explored the “counterpoint!”*

Most of the informal debating in my classroom is “impromptu,” in the sense that speeches are not written out in advance. Students should, however, be prepared with an outline of main contentions and supporting evidence. I prefer impromptu argument for the beginning debater because it helps students learn to think and argue on their feet, feel free to add to outlines, and be ready to adjust or adapt arguments, depending on how the argument is proceeding.

**Keeping the Debate Going/Listening and Note-taking**

In my experience, the most difficult parts of informal debate for middle school students are learning how to listen to other speakers and learning how to take effective notes during the course of the debate. Listening and note-taking are essential to the dialectical progression of a debate.

*Listening:* This age group has so much to say that it can be extremely painful for them to have to give up the floor or otherwise listen when someone else has the floor. It is agonizing for them to have to keep quiet and not respond immediately to the opposition. It is during the course of all of this angst that they inevitably forget to listen to the other side’s argument. A clash fails to occur, and the debate is over without ever really going anywhere. Everyone

has had a chance to say their piece, but no one has responded to what has been said. During the debriefing period following the debate, it is helpful for the teacher to point out the exact contentions that were never addressed.

**Note-taking:** It comes as no surprise that this age group does not want to take notes any more than they want to listen to others speak. Encouraging (or requiring) note-taking in debate does help facilitate listening and is necessary for the development of the argument. Note-taking enables the debater to address specific arguments/evidence *and* stay aware of the flow or progress of the arguments. An example of a simplified debate flow-sheet suitable for middle school students is shown in Figure 7. A legend for the abbreviations used is found at the top, and the columns used for note-taking are determined by speaker order (three speakers per side) and type of speech (affirmative or negative). Main points made by each speaker are noted under the appropriate column.

## Final Thought

Given a classroom of excited middle school students, their desire to be a part of the world around them, and their willingness to make themselves heard, it really does just take an issue to get a classroom debate started. Since the issues can be found in the subject matter being taught, and the “rules” of

debate can be adapted to fit your classroom, there is no reason not to let the debate begin.

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Middle Grades Education Researchers

## Call for Proposals

NMSA Research Advisory Board Poster Session

The NMSA Research Advisory Board will sponsor the NMSA Research Poster Session at the 34th Annual NMSA Conference in Houston, TX, November 8–10, 2007. This poster session highlights research that addresses issues in middle grades education conducted by beginning and emergent researchers and scholars.

We invite assistant professors and doctoral, specialist, and master’s level researchers to submit proposals about their research in middle level education. The Research Advisory Board selects the top 10 proposals for presentation at the conference.

### Submission Guidelines

To submit a proposal, send the following by **June 30, 2007**.

Cover page that includes:

- Name
- Institution
- Title of research paper
- Research topic and/or questions addressed by the study
- Contact information (address, phone number, and E-mail address)
- Abstract (maximum of 250 words)

Note: Research papers of accepted proposals are due September 1, 2007. Papers need to follow APA 5th edition style guidelines and range from 15 to 25 pages.

Please direct questions and submit completed proposal to:  
Dr. Penny Bishop, University of Vermont  
[penny.bishop@uvm.edu](mailto:penny.bishop@uvm.edu)

Notification of proposal acceptance: **August 1, 2007**