

The Great Mini-Debate

LEVEL: Upper Intermediate or Advanced

TIME REQUIRED: 50 minutes

GOALS: To present an oral argument using evidence; to use functional language related to agreeing, disagreeing, and showing contrasting opinions

MATERIALS: Blackboard and chalk, or whiteboard and markers; paper and pencils or pens; a timing device

PREPARATION:

Choose a debate theme and create a set of debate topics related to the theme. Select topics that people are likely to have strong but differing opinions about. Each topic set should contain three to five related topics. A topic set for the theme of mobile technology is shown here:

Debate Theme: Mobile Technology
Topic Set
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It should not be illegal to talk on a handheld mobile device while driving motor vehicles. • Students should be able to use their mobile devices during English class. • It is better to read books, news, and magazines on mobile devices than on paper. • Constantly using mobile devices keeps people from interacting with people around them and experiencing day-to-day life. • Today it is essential that all teens have a mobile communications device.

Additional topic sets are provided at the end of this activity. Use one of these topic sets or develop a set related to your curriculum or to your students’ interests.

PROCEDURE:

1. Ask students if they have ever participated in a debate or if they have seen a debate in person or on television. Ask volunteers to share their opinions about what makes someone a good debater. (Answers may include “uses examples/evidence/facts to support an argument”; “is polite to debate opponents”; “listens to opponents and makes counterarguments”; “stays calm”; etc.) Write students’ contributions on the board and elicit or suggest other qualities to include in the list.
2. Tell students that a debate participant’s goal is to make a convincing yet respectful argument. Explain that debaters must be skillful at agreeing, disagreeing, and contrasting opinions. Draw a chart on the board and elicit examples of the language used in each of the three categories; the Functional Language Chart is an example of what a completed chart might look like.
3. Tell students they are going to complete an exercise to prepare for two debates and that everyone will participate in the debates. Divide the class in half to make Group 1 and Group 2. (If you have a class with more than 50 students, consider creating four groups instead of two, and then adapt the procedure accordingly.) Select a student—or ask for a volunteer—in each group to serve as the group leader.

4. Write the debate theme and associated topics on the board from the topic set that you selected or developed. Ask each group to vote on the topic they most want to debate; the two groups should choose different topics from the set. Give the groups two minutes to vote; ask the group leaders to count the votes and report the outcome. If both groups voted for the same topic, Group 2 can use its second choice.
5. Designate the left side of the classroom as “I agree completely” and the right side of the room as “I don’t agree at all.” Have both groups stand up and each form a line in which students place themselves according to how strongly they agree or disagree with their group’s debate prompt.
6. Divide each group’s line in half to form debate teams of equal size (it is okay to have an extra person on one team if you have an odd number of students). For each topic, the side on the left is the “For” team, and the side on the right is the “Against” team.
7. Have teams sit together in different areas of the room to prepare for the debate. Direct students’ attention to the list of “good debater” qualities on the board and remind them that good debaters use evidence and examples, not just opinions, to support their arguments. Tell teams, “You will have 20 minutes to work together as a team to prepare for the debate. The time will be divided into three distinct segments:
 - Ten minutes to brainstorm evidence (information, facts, examples, and

anecdotes) to support your debate position

- Five minutes to discuss your brainstormed list and identify the strongest pieces of evidence
- Five minutes to discuss possible arguments the opposing team might make and how to counter those arguments.

Team leaders will guide the brainstorming session and discussions, making sure that everyone has a chance to share his or her thoughts.”

As you explain the process, write the allocated time and goal for each stage of the team discussions on the board. Tell all students to make notes during the team discussions for use later in the activity because everyone will have to argue the team’s position.

8. Let teams begin working. Monitor teams as they work, keep time for each phase, and make sure teams focus their discussions on the appropriate goal for each phase.
9. Ask all students to stand up and bring their notes with them. Tell the opposing teams for each topic to form two lines facing each other. There will be four lines in all: Topic 1 Team “For” faces Topic 1 Team “Against,” and Topic 2 Team “For” faces Topic 2 Team “Against.” Explain that these are “debate lines,” and ask students to stand so they directly face one person from the opposing side.

Functional Language Chart

Agreeing	Disagreeing	Contrasting opinions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I (absolutely) agree. • I agree completely. • On the whole, I agree. • I see your point. • You have a point there. • I couldn’t agree more. • I see what you mean. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I’m sorry, but I can’t agree with that. • I’m afraid I disagree. • That’s not how I see it (the situation). • I don’t entirely agree. • The facts don’t support that position. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, but on the other hand ... • That may be; however ... • I see your point, but ... • You raise an interesting point; however, ... • I agree to an extent, but ... • Perhaps, but don’t you think ... ?

- 10.** Tell students they will debate by using the evidence and counterarguments they developed during the team discussions. Explain that, at your signal, everyone will individually debate with the opponent across the line for one minute. (Advanced classes could debate for two minutes.) The person in the “For” line speaks first. After a minute, you will tell students to “Switch!” The “For” line will move one position to the left, with the person in the first position moving around to the end of the line, to align with a new opponent in the “Against” line, and another one-minute debate will begin. In the second mini-debate round, the “Against” team member speaks first. (Notes: 1. If one student has no partner, have the last two students in a line work as partners who move in the line together. 2. The class might get quite noisy—students are engaged and practicing speaking! Remind students to use “inside voices” if the volume becomes too loud.)
- 11.** If you feel it is necessary, model the one-minute debate process with a student. Remind students to take turns speaking during the debates. Tell students they can refer to the Functional Language Chart as well as their team discussion notes, if needed.
- 12.** Begin the one-on-one debates. Have the “For” team members speak first. Keep time and monitor student progress.
- 13.** After several rounds, bring the class back together. Ask teams to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of each other’s arguments. Review any problematic or challenging language points, such as grammar and pragmatics topics, based on observed student performance. You can also ask students whether they found the debate easier after the first round (possibly because they had a chance to practice making their arguments) or whether it became more difficult (possibly because their opponents had a chance to practice making their arguments, too).

Additional Debate Topic Sets

Debate Theme: Video Games
Topic Set
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People learn to solve real-world problems by playing video games. • Playing video games makes young people more likely to commit violent acts. • Playing video games causes people to be “loners” who don’t interact well with others. • Video games are a waste of time with no social or educational value. • Playing video games can help students learn English.

Debate Theme: Breakfast
Topic Set
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. • Students who eat breakfast perform better academically during the school day. • Most Western breakfast foods are less healthy and nutritious than breakfast foods in our country. • People should not drink caffeinated beverages like coffee or tea at breakfast. • (Insert a local breakfast dish) is the best thing to eat for breakfast.

Debate Theme: Digital Communication and Social Media
Topic Set
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media platforms are mostly used for trivial (unimportant) purposes. • Texting is better than email or handwritten letters. • The benefit of easily sharing information via social media outweighs the potential damage to personal privacy. • Social media should be used in educational settings and can contribute to learning. • Our reliance on texting has damaged our ability to have important face-to-face conversations (e.g., making apologies, congratulating someone, saying thank you).

Additional Debate Topic Sets

Debate Theme: Pets
Topic Set
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cats make better pets than dogs.• People should be allowed to bring well-behaved pets in stores and restaurants.• It is important for a child to have a pet because it encourages children to be responsible.• Pets should be kept outside of our homes.• Snakes, hamsters, and other unusual pets give us as much love as dogs and cats.

Debate Theme: Visiting My City (or My Country)
Topic Set
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The best season to visit my city is spring.• The best restaurant in my city is (insert a popular local restaurant).• The most important historical figure to know about when visiting my city is (insert the name of a famous local person).• The site every tourist visiting my city must see first is (insert the name of a famous local site).

Debate Theme: The Environment
Topic Set
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People who don't bring their own reusable bags to the store should have to pay a fee.• Recycling at home (separating glass, paper, and other recyclables from trash) should be mandatory for everyone.• The government should devote less taxpayer money to environmental programs; individuals, charities, and other local organizations should have more of the responsibility to keep our streets and public spaces clean.• Development and economic goals are more important than environmental protection goals.

EXTENSION: TIMED PANEL DEBATES

Depending on your class length, you can complete this extension activity in the same class period as

the debate lines, or you can complete the panel debates in a subsequent class period. After all students complete several rotations in the debate line, ask each team to select four to six volunteers to represent their team in two traditional panel debates. Provide examples, as needed, for each step as you explain the following:

1. For the first topic, the Group 1 “For” team will have two minutes to present an opening argument, and then the Group 1 “Against” team will have two minutes to do the same. Give the volunteer representatives and their teammates about ten minutes to review their notes and prepare their opening arguments.
2. Each team should make notes on the opposing team’s opening argument so they can make specific counterarguments during the next step.
3. The Group 1 “For” team will then have two minutes to present counterarguments addressing points their opponents made, and the Group 1 “Against” team will have two minutes to do the same. One member on each team should close with a brief restatement of their group’s main argument.
4. The two Group 2 teams addressing the other debate topic will be the audience. Audience members should make notes on the performing teams’ arguments and counterarguments and then vote on who made the strongest case for their team’s position.
5. Next, the Group 2 teams will debate their topic following the steps above while the Group 1 teams serve as the audience evaluating the performance.

This activity was written by **Heather Benucci**, an EFL teacher, teacher trainer, and materials development specialist. She has led virtual professional-development programs for EFL teachers in over 100 countries and has worked face-to-face with teachers and students in Russia, Korea, England, and the United States.