

SETTING UP A DEBATE CLUB

Guide for primary school teachers

A debate club gives pupils of all abilities a fun way of developing their oracy skills. You can use a range of activities to help pupils with their critical thinking and communication. Debate clubs also help pupils to become more informed about the world around them.



What do I need?

Debate clubs don't require lots of resources. You can run a successful club at lunchtime or after school.

Checklist:

A space to debate in

For many activities, you'll need a clear space where students can move around, as well as some desks for writing speech notes: a 'horseshoe' or u-shaped set up is often best. Whilst your club is small, this can easily be accommodated in a classroom – once you've got more than ~30 students you might need a bigger room!

Pens and paper

Of course, pupils could bring their own. Index cards for speech notes can add a nice sense of occasion for special debates.

A list of topics for debates or activities

You can find a list below, or on the ESU's website (esu.org). As your club progresses, pupils can suggest topics that they're interested in, or you can select topics that tie in with what they're learning.

Stopwatches to time speeches

As pupils gain experience, they will need to practice fitting their ideas into a time limit. Phones/computers can be used, but dedicated stopwatches can reduce distractions.

My first session

A brand new club should strike a balance between short activities that give everyone a chance to speak and participate, and full debate formats that may require week-by-week turn-taking. Try the plan below, or use the activities at esu.org/esuresources to make a plan of your own.

A quick 30-minute plan

Group size: 4–30 **Classroom set up:** a clear space for pupils to move around **Time:** 30 minutes

Introduction (5 minutes)

- Welcome the students and introduce the debate club – give students an opportunity to discuss debate events from their own experience – when have they needed to argue and be persuasive?

Warm-up activity – Stranded on a desert island (10 minutes)

- Students form pairs. Set the scene – we are all going on holiday. Pupils should select on thing that they would pack, and tell their partner.
- We are all going to travel by boat. We are on a ship in the middle of a big ocean when suddenly there is a huge storm and the boat sinks. Disaster! Luckily, we can see a desert island nearby. We must swim to safety.
- In pairs, pupils should choose one of their two items to save and bring to the island, where we will have to survive until we are rescued.
- Ask a few pairs to feedback to the group.

First debate: Where do you stand? (10 minutes)

Allocate one side of the room as the 'agree' side and the other as the 'disagree' side. Call out a topic (e.g. 'Cats are better than dogs') and ask pupils to move to the side of the room that corresponds to their belief. Anyone who is unsure should remain in the middle. Once students have chosen a side, ask them to explain why they have chosen that side. You may wish to have them discuss this with others standing near them before feeding back to the whole class. Students who are neutral can also explain why they have taken that position, or act as 'judges', moving once they have been persuaded by either side.

Topics for your debate club

Formal debates always start 'This house...', as if they were taking place in the Houses of Parliament. Here, topics are presented in that format as well as in ordinary language:

- **This house believes that cats are better than dogs.** Are cats better than dogs?
- **This house would ban school uniform.** Should everyone have to wear school uniform?
- **This house would ban fast food shops.** Should we close all the fast food shops?
- **This house believes no one under the age of 10 should have a mobile phone.** Should under-10s have mobile phones?

More support

Sign up to the ESU Discover Debating Programme, a comprehensive package of debating lesson plans, CPD for teachers and mentor support which creates a sustainable culture of confident communicators in your school. Details at esu.org/our-work/discover-debating. Find more resources on the ESU website esu.org/esuresources