

DEBATE GUIDE: RESOURCE 1

Debate: Listening Like a Leader

Debate to Develop Empathy



Debate and argumentation offers leaders a chance to explore both sides of a complex issue and engage with controversial topics in a structured, facilitated format. By practicing debate, leaders utilize a multitude of public speaking skills such as argument development, spontaneous critical thinking, questioning, and synthesizing central areas of clash. The ability to support arguments with research and analysis and evaluate other people's information on the spot is critical to effective civic and political participation in democracy. At the same time, the word "debate" or "argumentation" often deters people who would rather not engage in an activity that feels like fighting or confrontation. In the classroom, debate can feel too competitive or too challenging to facilitate in a large group. Avoiding clash, however, avoids an opportunity to learn how to appreciate the multiple sides of an issue and ultimately develop empathy for diverse viewpoints. (For more information, see "Using Debate to Navigate Difference" later on in this guide.) The resources in this guide can help make debate less scary to do and to facilitate!

Principles of Persuasion

There are many protocols and formats for debate, which differ based on the number of participants involved, the type of topic, and the goal of the discussion (e.g. exploring philosophical tensions, arguing about policy decisions, or generally discussing why something is better than something else). Regardless of format, however, debate is ultimately about persuasion, which comes down to appealing to your audience through different methods. Much has been written about the Greek philosopher Aristotle's modes of persuasion, which detail the techniques that

speakers can use to appeal to their audiences. As a brief overview, these modes include:

- **Ethos:** Appealing to your audience by making them trust you, establishing your personal credibility, sounding fair, and demonstrating your personal expertise.
- **Logos:** Appealing to your audience through logic, reasoning, facts and statistics, historical examples, strong hypothetical examples, or analogies.
- **Pathos:** Appealing to your audience by inciting their emotions and using powerful language that inspires strong feelings of excitement, pity, or anger.

An effective debater is able to use all three modes of persuasion, which develops connection with an audience and promotes effective leadership. What makes debate unique is that you also have to interact with others, which means that persuasion also depends on anticipating and reacting to how other people might use these modes. Anticipating or "preempting" arguments requires you to put yourself in the shoes of the other side and genuinely try to understand what they might say and how they might say it. As a learning tool, this can be a powerful way to develop the capacity to adapt and customize your ideas to communicate more effectively.

Promoting Listening Through Debate

Debate is exciting to people who enjoy the thrill of spontaneous speaking and thinking on their feet; less so for people who prefer to prepare everything. Rest assured that effective debate actually requires both the skill of careful preparation and research in addition to the ability to respond in the moment. Teaching debate involves an understanding and awareness of student strengths and targeted practice to address areas that might be more challenging. (For more information, see "Getting Debate Started: For Educators and Facilitators", or "Small Steps for Educators: Debate in the Classroom", or "How to Run a Debate Practice", later on in this guide.)

Regardless of your area of comfort, one of the most important skills in debate is the ability to listen carefully and strategically. In debate, listening involves:

- Making sure you actually understand the other person's argument
- Digesting the main point of the other person's argument
- Coming up with clarifying questions to solidify your understanding

- Selective note-taking on the distinct ideas mentioned by the other person
- Knowing when the other person is just repeating something said before
- Mentally drawing connections to your own arguments
- Making choices about where you might focus your upcoming responses

When done effectively, debate can help you listen like a leader, meaning that you are taking the time to deeply appreciate and understand what the other person is saying before coming up with what you are going to say next. The challenge is to be able to identify what is really important to the other person while also drawing connections to your own ideas. For those who like to be prepared, it helps to come into the debate with a general understanding of the core issues involved in the topic and where potential areas of clash might be. Preparation also involves a great deal of practice on how to listen, even under conditions that are stressful.

The Final Takeaway

Debate is one of the most technical forms of public speaking because it involves direct interactions with others, a mix of prepared and spontaneous speaking, and persuasive argumentation skills. Even if you are not part of a formal debate team, it is still valuable to practice thinking on your feet. While not all leaders have to engage in formal debates, the activity itself can build the capacity to understand diverse perspectives, listen deeply, and develop a sense of empathy that will help you communicate more effectively.

