

DEBATE GUIDE: RESOURCE 13

Debate Skills Drills and Warm-ups

In full-fledged formats, debate can be overwhelming if you have not yet built up your spontaneous speaking and argumentation skills.

Drills and warm-ups can help you keep sharp and focus on specific debate-related skills. While many of these warm-ups are designed to be done in groups or pairs, it is possible to practice on your own with slight variations. For adults trying to improve their debate skills for the workplace, these activities work best if you can find someone to help you at home (otherwise, use the variation for individuals).

In classrooms or debate practices, these activities are designed to be short 10-12 minute exercises before going into a more involved debate or discussion. If time is limited, it is also possible to not do a debate at all and just do one or two of these exercises with more repetitions, followed by a debrief discussion about what everyone felt like they improved.

| Warm-up Activity | Goals and Variations |
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| <p>Wordsmith</p> <p>In a circle, have one person state an argumentative claim in a complete sentence with reasoning. For instance, “Schools should increase funding for mental health services because dealing with stress helps students do better academically.” The next person in the circle then restates the claim, but with fewer words. The next person builds on the new version but with more powerful words (i.e. “Schools are responsible for students’ mental health to prevent academic failure.”) Repeat until the claim is concise with powerful words and then have someone start a new claim.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Construct more concise and powerful claims.• In pairs, you can just go back and forth to practice.• By yourself, you will have to talk to yourself (which is still okay!), stating a claim and then whittling it down to fewer words with a more powerful impact. You can also do this in writing, but it is more difficult out loud, so it’s worth doing (even if it is a little weird). |
| <p>Justify It</p> <p>One person says that a certain statement is true (they don’t have to believe it), such as “Gorillas would make great pets.” The other person has to respond by saying why this statement is true, such as “Totally! Gorillas can help you reach things up high and they always have bananas, which are a great source of potassium.” Switch roles with new statements each time.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practice giving warrants and reasons for your arguments. For more difficulty, you can increase the number of reasons you have to give.• This is a hard activity by yourself, but you can put statements on index cards and draw them out of a hat. |
| <p>Devil’s Advocate</p> <p>This is similar to “Justify It”, except that after one person makes a statement, the other person responds on the other side with an opposing statement, starting with “To play devil’s advocate...” For instance, if one person said “Gorillas would make great pets”, the other person would say, “To play devil’s advocate, gorillas would not make great pets because they are wild and unpredictable and could pose a great deal of danger.”</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practice coming up with counter-arguments off the top of your head.• Similarly, this activity can be done individually by putting statements on index cards and responding to them as you draw them out of a hat. |



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| <p>Pulled from the Headlines Find a random news article from your favorite periodical -- this can be serious but can also easily be from a tabloid magazine. Skim the article and then summarize it out loud to someone in 1 minute without any preparation. The summary should be intriguing as well as clear and to the point.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practice summarizing content out loud.• By yourself, practice this exercise by audio recording your summary and listening back. You get used to the sound of your voice and improve your work. |
| <p>Take Action Write 10 “problems” on 10 index cards, one problem per card. These can be societal problems (i.e. “There are too many homeless people in the Bay Area.”) or light, ordinary problems (i.e. “The living room is too cold.”). Shuffle the deck and draw a problem card and then set the timer for 1 minute while you suggest a course of action and why you think it will work to solve the problem.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practice justifying proposals and plans for action.• This activity works as well in any size group without any variation, including by yourself. |
| <p>Blow up the Balloon In a circle or small group, one person makes an statement (i.e. “Traffic in the Bay Area is at an all-time high.”). The next person adds on by saying, “which leads to...” and the next person adds on by saying, “which leads to...” Each result should be increasingly bigger and more impactful to “blow up the balloon”.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practice stating short and long term impacts.• By yourself, you can practice by listing as many impacts as you can following a statement, before getting ridiculous (or “popping the balloon”). |
| <p>Talking Code Have someone discuss 2-3 arguments about any simple prompt (i.e. “Spring is better than summer.”). Listeners take notes using as few full, real words as possible -- the goal is to try use abbreviations, symbols, and codes to represent ideas.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practice fast note-taking.• This activity can be done easily in pairs, but can also be in a whole group. By yourself, you can do the same thing by taking notes on a podcast, newscast, or YouTube video. |
| <p>Quick Outlines Give everyone a topic and set a timer for 4 minutes for them to silently outline 2-3 arguments on both sides. Repeat with a new topic, but this time set a timer for 3 minutes to outline both sides. Keep repeating with new topics, but reduce the outline preparation time each time.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practice quick outlining skills and avoiding perfectionism.• This activity can be done in any size group or in pairs. By yourself, you will need to prepare index cards with debate topics and set the timer for yourself. |

