



## HOW TO DEBATE

**Debate with upper elementary and middle school gifted students can be as informal as a “crossfire”, to a formal debate that requires a specific format, time regulations and mediators. Whatever method you choose will depend on the issue involved, your students, time constraints and the depth of analysis you want your students to reach.**

**“Crossfire”** – This is the most informal method of debate and should occur in an informal seating arrangement such as a circle where no one participant is viewed as more important than anyone else. Each participant may voice his/her opinions about an issue and there may be as many viewpoints as there are participants. Students may challenge the views of others at any time and no formal method of delivery is necessary except no one is permitted to interrupt when someone else is speaking. This open “discussion/polite argument” may continue as long as the participants have relevant opinions or as long as time permits. “Crossfires” may occur impromptu as issues “pop up” in the classroom or they may be planned in advance.

**Debates** – Debates are more formal than “crossfires” and usually are planned in advance. Students know what the issue will be at least a few days to a week ahead of time and they also know what side of the issue they will be defending. Students are to use the time prior to the debate to research the issue and to gather facts and statistics that will help support their opinions and beliefs. They may also research the issue to help gain insight to the viewpoints other students might express during the debate. This research will help prepare students for the debate’s rebuttal. Below are two possible formats for a formal debate. Both require **mediators** as organizers of the debate.

### Debate Format # 1

Statements are given in this order:

First Affirmative Constructive  
 First Negative Constructive  
 Second Affirmative Constructive  
 Second Negative Constructive  
 Brief Recess  
 First Negative Rebuttal  
 First Affirmative Defense  
 First Affirmative Rebuttal  
 First Negative Defense  
 Second Negative Rebuttal  
 Second Affirmative Defense  
 Second Affirmative Rebuttal  
 Second Negative Defense

### Debate Format # 2

Statements are given in this order:

First Affirmative Constructive  
 Second Affirmative Constructive  
 First Negative Constructive  
 Second Negative Constructive  
 Brief Recess  
 First Negative Rebuttal  
 First Affirmative Defense  
 Second Negative Rebuttal  
 Second Affirmative Defense  
 First Affirmative Rebuttal  
 First Negative Defense  
 Second Affirmative Rebuttal  
 Second Negative Defense



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Other helpful points to consider while doing debates with gifted elementary and middle schools students are:

- Allow **two minutes** for each constructive statement. Students on the same side of an issue may help their teammates by adding onto statements as long as there is time remaining on the clock
- Allow **one minute** for each rebuttal statement. Students on the same side of an issue may help their teammates by adding onto rebuttal statements as long as there is time remaining on the clock
- Allow **one minute** for each defense statement. Students on the same side of an issue may help their teammates by adding onto defense statements as long as there is time remaining on the clock. **Defense is optional during any debate. Debates my end with the rebuttal statements without either side having a chance to build their statements up again.**
- **Mediators** are the student organizers of each debate. It is best to have an odd number of mediators so they will not end with a tie when deciding the winning side of the debate. Three is a good number of mediators, one is the timekeeper, one is the note-taker and one keeps everyone on task and directs each student when it is his/her time to speak. Mediators should be able to repeat and clarify statements when asked to do so by the debaters. Mediators decide the outcome of the debate after the debate is over. They determine the winning side and they must be able to describe specifically which statements may have strengthened one side and which statements weakened the other side.
- **Debaters** are the students who are responsible for making the constructive, the rebuttal and the defense statements during the debate. Good debaters research the issue before the debate and have identified their opinions and beliefs about an issue. They also have resources, facts and statistics available to use during the debate to help support their point of view.
- **Affirmative Constructive Statements** are supported by facts, statistics, evidence and logical analysis. They may summarize the problem and state possible resolutions. They should show why the **status quo must be changed** and they should illustrate why an alternative plan is better. A description of an alternative plan should include who would oversee the new plan, should state the actions needed and should show how these actions would be funded. The Affirmative Constructive Statements should show how it has been harmful to maintain the status quo and they should show how the proposed resolution(s) would eliminate the current problem.
- **Negative Constructive Statements** do not support change from the status quo and they should attack the evidence stated in the Affirmative Constructive Statements with evidence, facts and statistics of their own. They need to discredit resolutions proposed by



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the affirmative side and point out disadvantages of the new plan. They need to build a case that supports the status quo.

- **Rebuttal Statements** attack specific points of each of the Constructive Statements of the opposing side. They may introduce new evidence but cannot introduce new arguments.
- **Defense Statements** simply rebuild the original statements after the rebuttal has tried to discredit them. No new arguments are permitted during the defense; only clarification of the Constructive Statements is permitted during the defense. **Often, the Defense is eliminated during debates and the Rebuttal Statements are the last to be heard.**
- To eliminate **frustration** and **stress** ask for volunteers to be your first debaters. Others may be mediators until the process of debating becomes more familiar to your students. Help your students with the research and help them to decide which pieces of evidence help to support their side and opinions. Evaluate both the debaters and mediators with immediate feedback after each debate is over. Videotaping is an excellent way for students to watch themselves and to improve on their debating skills. Provide lots of practice before using debate as a formal grade. If using debate as a grade, make sure students clearly know what you expect from each debater and mediator if they expect an “A”.
- Choose topics that students are interested in and care about and/or are relevant to current local, state, national and/or world issues. Allow students to choose the topics for debates when appropriate.
- Inform parents of the topics for your debates and ask for parental permission prior to a debate if you feel the issue might be more controversial than parents would prefer for their children. Use teacher discretion and avoid issues that you are certain will upset certain students. There are plenty of topics to debate without getting into issues that are certain to cause disapproval.

**. A manageable debate usually includes only two Affirmative and two Negative Constructive Statements, however more are permissible as long as the debaters and mediators can keep everything straight. Two many statements on both sides usually cause repetition and confusion.**

Swicord, Barbara. “Debating With Gifted Fifth and Sixth Graders – Telling It Like It Was, Is, And Could Be”. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 1984, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 127-129.