

## 1.2 Role Playing Debate

*This activity introduces students to basic public speaking skills and to understanding multiple perspectives in debate. In role-play debates, students take on a particular role and make arguments from this perspective. Role-play debates can be designed to address a range of political issues, from the local to the international. Students can assume the role of a local politician, a member of Congress, a delegate to the United Nations, or a member of a community-based organization with a particular political agenda. This activity can be used as an introduction to debate, or it can be adapted to include research or used in a history or English classroom.*

### Objectives

By the end of this activity, each student will:

- deliver or participate in the preparation of one impromptu speech.
- be introduced to basic argumentation and persuasive speaking skills.

### Time Allotment

One class period (or more).

### Materials and Preparation

Create a short description of role-playing scenario related to the topic to hand out to each student. For example, a role-playing debate scenario might be a public forum in which community groups discuss the need to end racial profiling in the local police department. The description should clearly state the issue at hand and offer some context about the issue.

Decide on a format for the activity, including speech times and opportunities for floor speeches and questioning.

Create role descriptions to hand out to students in the class. Each student should have an individual role, but some students will have a role of their own (i.e. the mayor) and some students will have the same role as a few other students (i.e. members of community group x). In a town-hall style debate about racial profiling, some roles might include:

1. The mother of a black man who was randomly stopped by police and shot dead when the conflict escalated;
2. A national representative of the Fraternal Order of Policemen;
3. A white policewoman who lives in the suburbs and works in a high-crime city;
4. A community based black and Latino organization with a history of struggling for racial and economic justice through direct action;
5. Representative of a largely white moderate liberal organization named the Center for Community Policing;
6. A mayor interested in "urban renewal" and attracting the white middle class back to the city.



## Method

Pass out a description of the scenario and read it aloud to the class. Then, hand out the role descriptions randomly to the students.

Students with the same role should work together in groups to develop a 2-3 minute speech on the issue at hand, and select a spokesperson to present it to the class. Students who have a unique roles should work independently to develop a speech. Allow 5-10 minutes for students to prepare their speeches. Instruct students to develop speeches that reflect the perspectives and interests of the role students have been assigned.

After the preparation time has elapsed, begin the public debate. The teacher, or a designated student, should preside over the role-play debate, recognize speakers, and maintain order. Each representative should deliver a speech. After each speech, give the class 1 minute to question the speaker. After each representative has spoken, you may want to open the debate to additional floor speeches, or give each group a chance to give closing remarks.

To conclude the activity, you can have a vote by a show of hands on the issue. After the vote, have a class discussion about what happened in the scenario, including a discussion of what interests were at work and what types of arguments were most persuasive to what interest groups.

Variations: The town-hall format works well for role-play debates because you can use an issue that is relevant to your school's community and community groups that your students might be familiar with. You can also design role-play mock trials, have a mock congress on a particular state or national bill, a mock United Nations debate over an international treaty, etc.

You can increase the rigor of this activity by giving out roles and advance and requiring that students research the positions they take and prepare formal presentations.