



## 14.2 SPAR Debates

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*This activity introduces debate and argumentation skills. SPAR stands for SPontaneous ARgumentation. As an introductory activity, it is designed to familiarize students with making arguments, asking questions about arguments, and judging the relative strength of competing arguments. The format of the exercise (quick start-up time and short speeches) allows teachers and students to build excitement about and interest in debating. The activity also creates opportunities for teachers to interject constructive comments that frame debate as a supportive, interactive, intellectual and creative form of communication. The advantages of a SPAR debate format are that it (1) reduces stress associated with debate; (2) engages students in an enjoyable, debate-related public speaking activity; (3) it provides an excellent format to hone public speaking skills (organization, delivery, etc.). The quality of SPAR debates will be much improved if the students have had some previous discussion of the process of argument invention and strategy.*

### **Time Allotment**

The time allotment will vary depending on the format of the SPAR and the number of SPAR debates you conduct. SPAR debates can be a regular feature of a class or of an after school practice. Or, you can set aside a class period or two and have every student participate in a SPAR debate.

### **Objectives**

By the end of this activity, students will:

- be introduced to many of the basic tenants of argumentation and debate.
- gain first hand experience with delivering a speech, conducting a cross examination, and preparing a rebuttal.

### **Materials and Preparation**

Before beginning the debate, write a list of possible topics on the chalkboard. Topics that could be listed include:

- Honesty is always the best policy
- Slavery still exists today
- True love really does exist
- The power of science is dangerous
- X music star is better than Y music star (you fill in the blanks)
- Violence is a necessary means to settle disputes
- Police are necessary for safety
- People should eat meat
- Creationism should be taught in schools
- Abortion should be illegal in our state
- Students should work after-school jobs
- The death penalty should be abolished in the United States
- The history textbooks in our school need serious revision



- The United States should cancel debts to the Third World
- Girls should be able to play on the boy's football (or wrestling) team
- Stories with violent content should be banned from high schools
- Music with explicit lyrics should be played on the radio without censoring certain words
- School uniforms should be made mandatory
- Animals think like humans
- The fast food industry is bad for our society
- The government should control the maximum and the minimum amount of money that each citizen earns
- Spanking is a bad form of discipline, parents should have alternatives
- Books are more fun than video games
- There are good lessons to be learned from cartoons
- School starts too early
- Suicide bombers evil
- Youth loitering laws should be overturned
- Students should obey authority
- The legal driving age should be lowered to 14
- School should last 12 months a year
- Our school should have a dress code
- Gangs provide youth with a family and a support structure
- Police in our city overstep their constitutional authority
- Our school should cut all funding for sports
- People should not be allowed to own pets
- High school students should not receive a diploma unless they pass a High Stakes Test

### Method

First, you should decide upon a format for the SPAR debate. One example of a format for a SPAR debate is as follows:

- Affirmative opening speech (90 seconds)
- Cross-examination by the negative (60 seconds)
- Negative opening speech (90 seconds)
- Cross-examination by affirmative (60 seconds)
- Affirmative closing speech (45 seconds)
- Negative closing speech (45 seconds)

You may want to select a format without cross examination, although students tend to enjoy that part of SPARing. You may also choose to shorten or lengthen these speeches or to add second rebuttal speech.

Explain the format you select to the class. When they are clear on the format, ask two teams or two debaters to step up to the front of the room. Flip a coin and have one debater call the flip. The winner of the coin flip gets the option to either:

- Select a topic for the debate from the list on the chalkboard.
- Defer selection of topic choice to their opponent and pick the side of the topic they wish to defend.



Once a topic and sides are determined, give debaters 3-5 minutes preparation time to brainstorm arguments as a pair and write them down. If you are using the SPAR debate as a whole class demonstration debate, it may work best to conduct the argument brainstorm as a whole class and write the arguments on the chalkboard. If not, simply have the students brainstorm arguments and prepare as a pair.

Conduct a SPAR debate according to the format. Decide in advance of the SPAR whether you would like student comments and questions to be fielded during or after the debate.

If you are only running one or two SPAR debates during a given class period, it may make sense to have the students prepare arguments the night before as an assignment. To do this, you should break students who will debate the following day into pairs, decide upon a topic, and assign each pair to a side of the topic. Although, assigning the topic in advance makes the debates less spontaneous.

If you are running a series of SPAR debates for an entire class period there are things you can do to ensure that the exercise runs fluidly. For instance, you may decide that at all times there be two pairs of debaters that are "on deck." This group should prepare their arguments while the preceding group debates. In this system, two pairs need to be selected initially and given five minutes to prepare arguments in a designated "preparation space." After the first SPAR debate is completed, a new pair should be invited to the front of the room to select a topic and sides, while an "on-deck" pair that has been preparing takes the stage and begins its debate.

#### Follow Up:

You may want to leave time for discussion after the SPAR debates. If so, students can be given the opportunity to discuss things about the debate process that they noticed, things they liked or disliked, things that they learned, etc. Teachers should also take the opportunity to point out examples of strong arguments and outstanding performances, and then isolate one or two main issues they want these students to work on for next time.

#### Variation:

Break the students into teams of two and tell each pair of students that they will be debating against another pair of students. Have students develop an argument area or select a resolution from the list above. For instance, they may opt to debate the resolution, "Violence is a necessary means to settle disputes." Once a group of students has selected a resolution, let the pairs of students decide side of the issue for which they would like to argue in favor. Pair them as affirmative and negative according to interests (or, according to the side of the issue that the students will learn the most defending). Give the students 5-10 minutes to prepare. Then, as a small group, let each pair of teams deliver a 60 second constructive and a 45 second rebuttal. This variation demonstrates that you can let students decide which issue they debate, that the students can select the side of the issue that they debate, that you can change speech time, and that you can eliminate cross examination. Finally, it demonstrates that students can perform SPAR debates in small groups rather than in front of the class.