

THE LANGUAGE OF DEBATE

Supporting Opinions with Informational Reasoning

PART EIGHT

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The language of debate—over personal issues as well as controversial topics in the news—is everywhere. At home, in school, and in the workplace; at social and political events; and especially on talk or current event shows on radio and TV and online, people are always telling their opinions and feelings on various subjects—sometimes to convince others of the “rightness” of their positions but more often just to “vent” their anger, display their knowledge or intelligence, or make a strong or even overpowering impression on others. Unfortunately, most of this talk is just that—talk without a constructive goal or intention. It’s largely wasted energy.

But what if we really *do* want to take part in debate about controversial subjects for positive purposes? What if our goals really *are* to learn and evaluate reasons for other people’s views or to “work on” our own positions by talking them out with others? And what if we really *do* care about bringing others around to *our* perspectives in areas that we’ve thought about a lot? Some of us like to discuss controversial situations—especially moral dilemmas—for two reasons: *to clarify our own values* and *to help others to think logically toward constructive solutions*.

What are some ways we could do this? Here’s some advice on how to participate efficiently and effectively in discussion about meaningful issues.



Effective debate—productive discussion of “hot” (currently controversial) issues—requires thoughtful, thorough preparation, probably including online print and audio research.

1. IT'S IMPORTANT TO BE DISCUSSING *THE SAME QUESTION OR ISSUE*. If we're not *clearly* talking about the same thing, we're likely to "talk past" one another instead of communicating. If we ignore others' points in order to express our own responses to *different* questions, listeners may "tune us out" in order to get on with the debate. It may even be necessary to *clarify* the topic of discussion—perhaps with questions like "On exactly which point do we disagree?" or "What question is at issue at the moment?"
2. WE CAN *START* WITH OUR CONCLUSIONS AND FOLLOW UP WITH OUR REASONS. Although some people prefer *inductive* reasoning—beginning with details and using logic to build up to a conclusion, most listeners understand a *deductive* presentation more easily. It may be most effective to *begin* with a clear, brief, general statement of opinion and *then* support it with relevant detail—*reasons, proof, objective facts, examples*, and other information.¹
3. WE SHOULD FOCUS ON *ONE POINT* AT A TIME and not confuse the issue with irrelevant info or reactions. Even if everything we say is objectively true, it won't have a positive effect unless the audience can answer the question "so what?" for themselves as they listen. In debate or controversial discussion, there should be a clear reason for everything we say. Otherwise, listeners will be asking "Why is he/she saying this?" instead of following our reasoning.

Where can we hear examples of "Debate Speech" or discussion of significant or controversial issues?

- EVERYDAY CONVERSATIONS at home, school, work, and in the community: discussions about personal or local issues and current topics in the news
- MEETINGS OF SPECIAL-INTEREST GROUPS: unions, political parties, Neighborhood Watch groups, Town-Halls, and others
- TELEVISION AND RADIO: talk shows and discussions of controversial issues on "news interview" shows; late night variety series; regular programming on cable networks; satire/comedy routines
- ONLINE: podcasts, screencasts, mobile broadcasts, video, audio, blogs, etc.



In a class debate, each speaker on each "side" or team can present a *different argument*—one major supporting point for the group's view of the issue.

4. THE PRESENTATION OF A POINT OF VIEW SHOULD BE *ORGANIZED* so that listeners can follow the logic. At least in our heads, we should have an "outline" of our speech—in which at least 3 reasons or examples follow each main-point statement. This format should be immediately clear as we speak.
5. If a point or part of our argument is more than a few sentences, WE SHOULD SUMMARIZE it right away or at the end of the presentation. Many listeners forget much of what they've heard soon after a speaker stops talking—and most people forget even the main points after a few hours. Therefore, to get a presentation to "stick," it helps to *summarize* it briefly—in a somewhat different way—during and at the end of the talk.

NOTES: ¹ If you've taken a high school or college academic writing course, you're probably familiar with this advice. In North American school and business culture, it's most common to present issues in a direct, step-by-step way—beginning with the main idea, supplying plenty of "supporting detail" for those points, and ending with a summarizing statement. Clear organization is crucial to the success of this method of communicating.

SAMPLE SPEECH 8

FORM: A Two-Person Debate Presentation

TOPIC: Language-Learning Methodologies



Presentation (Side) I

What is the best way to learn oral language skills? How can we improve our listening and speaking abilities without wasting time or effort? For me, the best way is the “traditional” one. I want to learn how to listen and speak effectively the same way I have learned everything else in my life—in school.

I want to hear lectures, take notes, memorize the material, and then show what I know on tests. Then I will get good grades, receive college credit for the courses I take, and get an academic degree. The degree will get me a good job and a high salary. That’s the only way I know to get what I want out of life.

So what’s the “traditional” way of learning? In my opinion, it begins with the instructor or professor. First of all, the teacher has to organize the course. He or she has to create a detailed course outline and hand it out to students the first day of class. It should contain all the assignments, with their due dates, and information about the tests and grades. Then we will know exactly what to do in the course and when to do it.

Second, the instructor needs to be a good lecturer. He or she should prepare each day’s lecture in advance. The lecture should have a clear purpose—with an introduction, lots of details, and a conclusion. The lecturer should speak clearly and slowly and make sure that all the students understand. We should be taking notes on everything the instructor says.

Then we should be tested on what we know. It might help to have a quiz every class period or every week on all the new material.

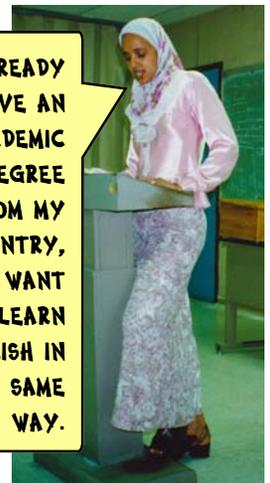
Third, the instructor should reward us with good grades when we learn the material and “punish” us with bad grades when we don’t do the work. That will give us the motivation to succeed.

Personally, I don’t believe in “cooperative learning” methods because my classmates don’t know any more about the subject than I do. I find it a waste of time to meet in groups, discuss issues, and pretend we’re trying to help one another. The world of work and business is a world of competition, not “caring cooperation.” I want to learn to do everything *better* than the “other guys” so I can get the best-paying jobs. And I can’t do that if I’m expected to tell other students the answers and help them get good grades on tests. Also, all this “group learning” seems like cheating to me. Individual learning and work is the only thing that counts. What I manage to do with the help of other students is irrelevant to real performance.

Finally, what should we be learning in oral language skills courses? In my view, that’s entirely up to the instructor or professor. From years of teaching experience, he or she knows best. And the instructor is the only person who knows how to teach us this material. All we should be expected to do is exactly what he or she says.

To sum up, in all learning—including oral language skills—the *traditional* methods are the ones to use. For me, learning to listen and speak is a matter of following the teacher’s instructions and memorizing what he or she tells me.

I ALREADY HAVE AN ACADEMIC DEGREE FROM MY COUNTRY, AND I WANT TO LEARN ENGLISH IN THE SAME WAY.



Presentation (Side) 2

As I understand it, the issue we are debating today is how to most efficiently and effectively improve our oral language skills. I don't have a lot of time and money for my education, so I need to learn quickly and get good results right away. I have to be able to understand what other people are telling me and communicate my feelings, thoughts, and opinions. In other words, for me the best way to learn is the "non-traditional" one—to use the most modern technologies and methods available. I want to know which learning techniques are supported by recent learning research. Then I need to figure out which language acquisition styles work best for me and *apply* those methods—not to memorizing information but to improving my language skills. In other words, I want to use any methods that work. For me, results are the only thing that counts.

So what do we know about learning styles so far? Well, we know that there are different kinds of intelligence—like verbal, logical, spatial, kinesthetic (movement), musical, interpersonal, and a few others. Some people learn mostly through words or logical analysis, but more people learn visually, through movement, and through their relationships with others. In my case, for example, I know I have a hard time paying close attention to long, boring lectures, even if I take detailed notes. Then I forget what I've heard—often right after the lecture. I'm not much better at studying a textbook with a lot of theory. To learn a language skill, what I really need is advice on what to *do*—and then lots of practice—with feedback (correction, suggestions, etc.). In other words, I want to know what steps to follow and then follow them. If I make mistakes, I plan to improve the next time. And if I master a topic or skill, I want to move on to the next one.

So what about cooperative learning activities—working in groups to complete tasks with a purpose? I like these methods because they keep me busy and involved.

I'm never bored because I always have to *do* something—like understand someone else's meaning or figure something out or give my input to the group process and the task. I can tell I'm learning the most when I help other people, and they give me a lot of useful information and advice too. Anyway, isn't cooperation the key to success in the business world? Learning in groups isn't cheating—it's real-life teamwork! It's not just a technique for me—it's a language-learning goal.

Quizzes and final exams are O.K. because some people need grades to get academic credit, I guess. But it seems to me that "objective tests"—like fill-in-the blank or multiple choice—are a waste of time. I'd rather take "performance tests" that show I've really mastered the principles of the course. For instance, in an oral language-skills course, I want to spend my time and energy learning how to listen effectively. I'd like to hear and get help in understanding radio and TV shows and real-life language—on topics relevant to *my* life and interests. Then I want to have real conversations, solve problems through discussion and logical thinking, get the point of and give short speeches, debate "hot" issues, and things like that. I also want help in assessing how I did so I can get better and better—until I reach my goals.

To summarize, I want to learn how to learn better—more quickly, more easily, and with the best results possible. I'd like to sample various listening and speaking techniques until I find the ones that work best for my own learning styles. I'd like the opportunity to take responsibility for getting results—and the tools—the best information, advice, techniques available—to be successful in my efforts. And I want immediate feedback, so that I can learn how to succeed on my own.

I DON'T CARE ABOUT GRADES OR CREDITS. I JUST WANT TO DO ANYTHING THAT GETS RESULTS—EVEN IF I HAVE TO PLAY SILLY GAMES LIKE THIS ONE.



COMPREHENSION CHECK: Did you get the main points of the two sides of the issue “How to Best Acquire or Improve Language Skills”? Then answer these questions *completely*—but in as few words as possible:

1. The speaker on one side of the issue argues that “The best way to acquire oral language skills is to use traditional academic teaching and learning methods.” What arguments does she give to support her point of view?
2. The speaker on the other side of the issue believes that new or “non-traditional” techniques are more efficient or effective in language learning. What points does he present to support this view?
3. Which speaker makes the stronger argument? Why do you think so?
4. What is *your* answer to the question “How can we most efficiently and effectively improve our oral language skills?” (Begin your answer with a statement of opinion. Then support your perspective with at least 3 reasons or other relevant details.)

In some debates, there’s time for “rebuttal.” The speakers on each side get a chance to refute their opponents’ arguments by trying to prove them wrong. After you hear these additional arguments, you may want to change or add to your answers to the four questions above.



SO MY OPPONENT DOESN'T BELIEVE IN TRADITIONAL TEACHING METHODS—LIKE LECTURES, MEMORIZATION, AND EXAMS. BUT WITHOUT THESE TOOLS, HOW ARE PEOPLE MOTIVATED TO LEARN? MOST STUDENTS DON'T WANT TO PUT IN THE TIME AND EFFORT TO LEARN JUST FOR THE SAKE OF LEARNING. WE NEED DISCIPLINE! WE WANT ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS—LIKE GRADES, CREDITS, AND DEGREES. WE WANT TO COMPETE WITH OUR CLASSMATES—TO SHOW WE'RE THE BEST. MOST LEARNERS PREFER STRICT, DEMANDING TEACHERS THAT TAKE CHARGE OF THE CLASSROOM. WHEN TEACHERS USE “MODERN” TECHNIQUES LIKE COOPERATIVE LEARNING TASKS, TV AND RADIO, OR GAMES, A LOT OF STUDENTS THINK THEY CAN JUST PLAY AROUND. THEY JUST WASTE THEIR TIME—AND MINE, TOO. I WANT TO *GET TO THE POINT* IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM—NOT HAVE FUN OR COMMUNICATE WITH MY CLASSMATES, WHO KNOW A LOT LESS ENGLISH THAN I DO.

SO YOU PREFER “TRADITIONAL” CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES, DO YOU? WELL, IF THESE METHODS REALLY WORK, WHY ARE THERE SO MANY PROBLEMS IN AMERICAN EDUCATION TODAY? THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE THAT CAN'T EVEN FUNCTION ON THE SIMPLEST JOBS—HOW CAN THEY DO THEIR PART IN THE MODERN TECHNOLOGICAL WORLD? TIMES CHANGE. STUDENTS CHANGE. THE NEEDS OF BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY CHANGE. EDUCATION HAS TO CHANGE TOO!

NO MATTER WHAT THEIR AGE, STUDENTS AREN'T REALLY MOTIVATED BY A BORING, IRRELEVANT “TEACHER-CENTERED” CLASSROOM STYLE. WE ALL WANT EDUCATION THAT FITS OUR INTERESTS AND NEEDS. *OF COURSE*, WE WANT TO RELAX AND ENJOY OURSELVES, BUT MOST OF ALL, WE WANT METHODS AND TECHNIQUES THAT WORK—THAT PRODUCE RESULTS IN THE REAL WORLD.



ORAL PRACTICE 8

FORM: Team "Debates"

TOPIC: *Issues in Education*



INSTRUCTIONS: People are always talking about "current issues," subjects that come up because of something they've found texted in social media, seen on TV, heard on radio, or experienced at school or work or in daily life.

Often, these topics are interesting because they're related to background, experience, values, conflicts over ideas of right and wrong, or "moral dilemmas." Why is there so much to say about such issues? Because there are *at least two sides*—and *many valid reasons* to support each perspective. To practice presenting opinions (points of view) with supporting details in an informal "debate" format, follow these steps:

1. First, choose a debate topic and a question to answer. Here and on the next two pages are some examples to choose from—all on the topic of (higher) education. Or you can choose another subject and ask your own productive debate question¹.

A **Responsibility for Learning:**
In a high-school or college speech course, who has more responsibility for student achievement—(1) the instructor or (2) the learners? Why?

B **Teaching and Learning Methods:**
Which methodologies (techniques & activities) are more effective in oral language-skills acquisition: *traditional* ones (lectures and tests) or *student-centered, cooperative* ones? Why?

C **Cheating?**
Is it "cheating" (a barrier to honest individual achievement) for students to meet to do homework assignments? To help one another on "cooperative learning tasks?" To take tests together?

D **"Free Speech" in Education**
Should instructors and students be allowed to express opinions freely in the interest of "academic freedom?" Or are there limits on "free speech" in high schools and higher education?

NOTES: ¹ Of course, education isn't the *only* current area of controversy. In choosing debate topics, consider the whole group's interests. Some possibilities are *personal or family relationships, gender roles, ethnic conflict or tolerance; politics, government, law, crime, violence, guns; health, self-improvement, work, business; the media; science, technology; religion;* and many others. In any area, the best "debate questions" have *two* "main-idea responses" only: either "yes" or "no"—or a choice between two alternatives.

E The Goals of Education

What should the main goal of high-school, college, or professional education be: to prepare learners to *make a good living* in a high-tech world or to produce well-rounded, cultured, critically-thinking *citizens*?

F Racial and Ethnic Conflicts

Yes or no? Is it the responsibility of schools (public and private) to teach racial & ethnic tolerance or understanding? Should “multicultural studies” be part of the official—or informal—curriculum?

G Problems in Education

What’s the greatest problem facing public education today? (EXAMPLES of possible answers: *violence & drugs; influence of the media; student irresponsibility; lack of parental involvement; ineffective teaching methods; underbudgeting or misuse of funding.*)

H Bilingual Education

Yes or no? Should government continue (or resume) funding *bilingual education* programs—teaching *non-native* speakers of English school subjects (math, social studies, science, etc.) in two languages (their native language + English)?

I Back-to-Basics Curriculum?

Should public schools or colleges concentrate on the *basics of language* (reading & writing) and *math* or continue to offer choices of courses in *art, music, physical education, home economics, counseling, ethnic history, etc.*?

J Public Vs. Private Education:

Which is more effective in cost and results—*public education* (funded by tax money and influenced by government) or *private education* (paid for by religious organizations, parents/students, and/or contributions)?

K The Quality of Education

Are our schools and colleges more or less effective than they were in the past? In what ways? (Talk also about private—and higher—education.)

L “Recruitment” in Higher Education

Yes or No? Should colleges and universities “recruit” (go out and find) the best professors (and pay them more) and the “best” students—those likely to achieve the most? Why or why not?

M Affirmative Action?

Yes or No? Should colleges or universities give preferences in admissions to members of certain economic classes or racial or ethnic groups? Why or why not?

N Requirements for Admission

What should college admission policies be based on? (EXAMPLES of possible answers: *school grades; test scores; awards; activities, racial or ethnic balance; religion; proven “ability to benefit” [assessed by entrance exams]; ability of students or parents to pay high tuition fees; contributions to foundations; bribery.*)

2. Now divide the class into two groups of equal size—"debate teams" on opposite sides of the issue.² The participants of each group receive cards that list some common arguments for their perspective.³ Each speaker prepares to present a different point or a number of related points that support that group's opinion statement.
3. For each debate, display the two opposing opinion statements on a board or screen. In turn, each "team" presents its assertions in an organized way. There are two possibilities: either all the speakers on one side present "their case," followed by the presenters on the other side, or each speaker from one team alternates with a speaker from the other side. (Perhaps there should be a "moderator" to introduce each speaker in order and summarize his/her points.)
4. The next step depends on the size of the class or whole group:
 - If the whole class is involved in one debate, *speakers* from one team become *listeners* for the other side, and vice versa. Listeners take notes on any points they want to "rebut" (dispute or argue against). After the "first round" of the debate—as soon as all speakers have presented their prepared arguments—the "rebuttal" can begin. Set a time limit for each additional speaker's comments and questions, and make sure that each person has had one chance to speak before allowing people to talk a second time. Finally, ask members of both teams if the debate has changed their mind on the issue. If it has, those people should change sides. The "winner" of the debate is the team that receives the most "new members" or followers.
 - If there's going to be more than one debate, there's an audience for presentations of *both* sides of each issue. Therefore, the "rebuttal" period can include comments and questions from the audience. At the end of each debate, the audience decides which side has "won." (Which side has presented the more convincing arguments in the more organized, persuasive manner? Or how many listeners *now* agree with each team's viewpoint?)



NOTES: ² If the class is large, you may want to debate more than one topic or question. For each debate, there should be 3 to 6 people on each "team" or side of the issue.

³ If you decide to make sets of paired "Argument Cards" for this activity, you can collect information (*supporting reasons* for opposing viewpoints) from many sources—like newspaper editorials, magazine articles, media presentations of controversial topics, booklets, texts on various current issues, and online sources. For each pairing, list common *arguments* for *both* sides of an issue.

⁴ Here are some examples of opposing opinion statements, based on some of the questions from page 98:
 A. "In a speech course, the instructor bears most of the responsibility for student success." vs. "In a speech course, every student must take responsibility for his or her achievement."
 C. "Cooperative learning" is really just teacher-approved cheating, ineffective in higher education. vs. "Cooperative learning is one of the most efficient and effective language-learning methodologies."
 D. "In an academic setting, "free speech" for both professors and students is essential to the educational process." vs. "There must be limits to "free speech" everywhere, including institutes and academies of higher education."