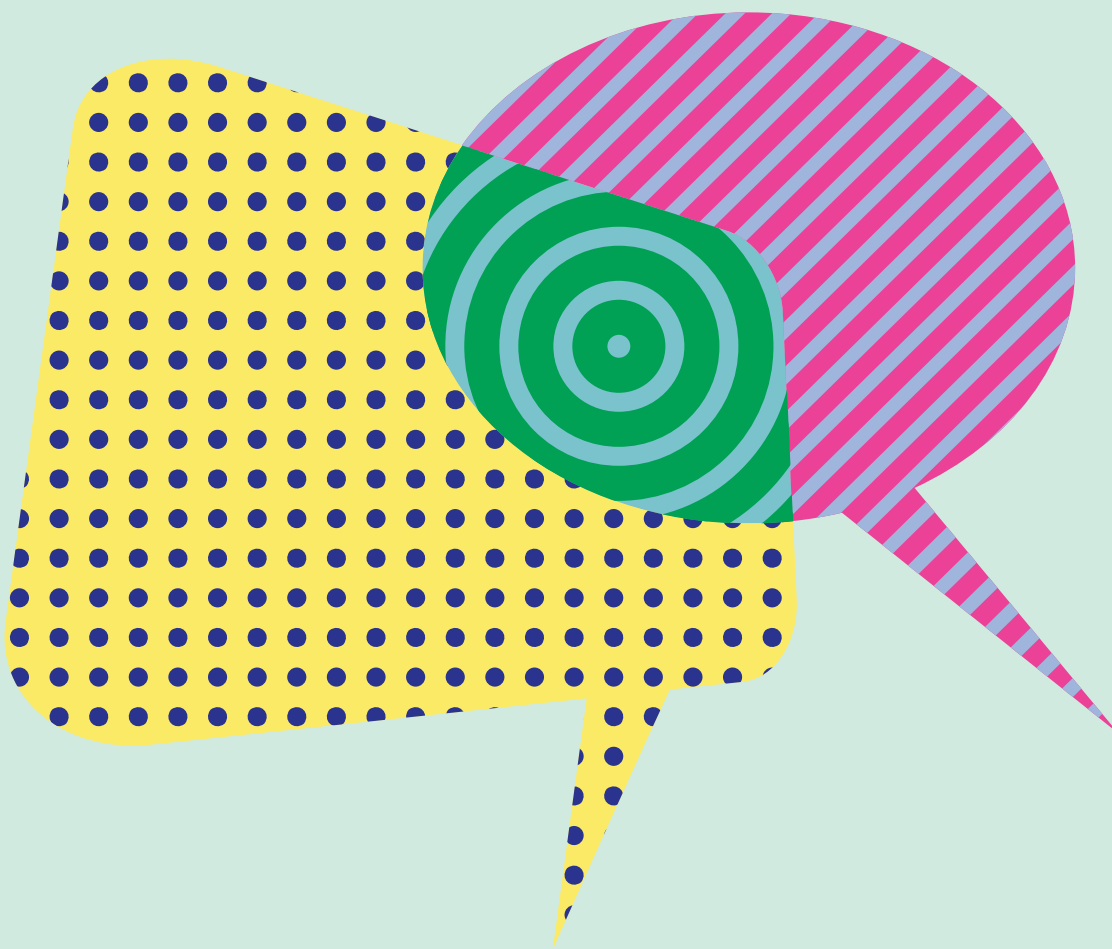


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Responsible Debate  
Learning Resources

Worksheet 1

RSE **YOUNG**  
**ACADEMY**  
OF SCOTLAND



**What is the purpose  
of debate?**

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**This is the first of a series of worksheets intended to teach you about discussing contentious ideas with common purpose, which is one way of thinking about debate.**

These worksheets are inspired by the Young Academy of Scotland's **Charter for Responsible Debate**. In this introductory worksheet, we're going to explore some of the reasons why we debate.

You'll learn how different motivations can lead to different styles of debate, and how some styles are better than others! This will help you to debate better and more responsibly.

#### How to use this worksheet:



This icon indicates where someone **reads the text aloud** and the others follow along.



This icon indicates a **group exercise** where you **discuss** and **write something down**.



This icon indicates a **solo exercise** where you do some **thinking** and **writing** alone.

#### Remember:

- ✓ Keep connecting what you read with experiences from **your own life**.
- ✓ **Share your thoughts** with your group. This is **not** passive, individual, or silent!



**READ ALOUD:** Before we begin, spend a few minutes with your group discussing examples of good, productive debates that you have seen or taken part in. They don't have to be perfect, but what distinguishes these from examples of unproductive or pointless debates?

Keep these examples in mind as you complete this worksheet; we will ask you to reflect on them as you learn new things.

## Introduction

Some debates are **adversarial**. In these kinds of debates, the substance of the topic tends to be reduced to just two opposing perspectives – usually **for and against** some proposition – and participants try to defeat the perspective of their opponents and thereby ‘win’ the debate.

You’ve probably seen a lot of this; modern debating competitions tend to use this adversarial approach, and parliamentary debates are often similar, with speakers from different political parties trying to defeat and even humiliate one another in front of an audience. You might be able to think of examples of adversarial debate in your own lives too – perhaps at school or at home!

However, not all types of debate are adversarial, and defeating one’s opponent is not the only goal of debate. In fact, there are many different reasons why we debate with each other; some are adversarial, but others can be more **collaborative**.



**GROUP EXERCISE:** Below is a list of some aims we might have when we debate somebody.<sup>1</sup> Please tick all the ones that apply to the examples of good, productive debate that you thought of earlier. Can you think of any other aims of debate? If so, you can fill in the blanks:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accommodate conflicting points of view       | <input type="checkbox"/> Reach a compromise in a relationship |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Find a proof of something, or refute a proof | <input type="checkbox"/> Resolve conflict                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Get the best out of a situation for oneself  | <input type="checkbox"/> Reveal where you stand on something  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grow knowledge                               | <input type="checkbox"/> Spread knowledge                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Humiliate opponent in the eyes of onlookers  | <input type="checkbox"/> Work out a policy                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Influence or reach a decision                | <input type="checkbox"/> _____                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Make a deal                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> _____                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Make people believe something you don’t      | <input type="checkbox"/> _____                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Persuade others                              | <input type="checkbox"/> _____                                |

You may have noticed that one debate can have many goals, and your goals in a debate can also change while you’re having it. Even so, you probably didn’t tick ‘humiliate your opponent’ or ‘make people believe something you don’t’. Philosophers have names for debates that involve those kinds of behaviours. When participants in a debate are trying to humiliate their opponents in the eyes of onlookers, we say that their debate is **eristic**. And when someone is arguing for a view that they do not believe in, perhaps because they stand to gain personally from others believing it, we call that **sophistry**. Although eristics and sophistry are not **always** detrimental to the quality of debate, they often are. Political debate is often eristic and full of sophistry. We think that there are more responsible ways to debate.

In these worksheets, we’re usually going to be focusing on debates that take place between people who disagree but who want or need to work together. This is not always the case when we’re debating; sometimes the people we’re debating with are acting in **bad faith**, and sometimes we can simply **agree to disagree**. We’ll discuss this more in later worksheets.

For now, let's approach the task of figuring out how to debate responsibly as a challenge to collective action within a group of people who have shared aspirations, such as growing knowledge, working out a policy, resolving conflict, and so on.



**SOLO EXERCISE:** Can you come up with an example you have come across of each of the following?

- > A debater aiming at humiliation
- > A debater who doesn't believe what another speaker is saying
- > A debater debating in bad faith

## Fighting politicians

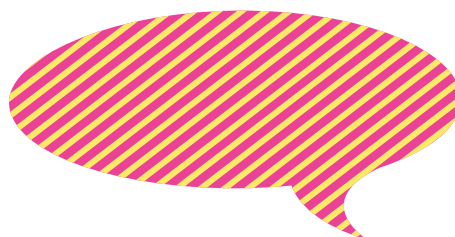
**In the Westminster Parliament, the government and opposition benches are set at a distance of two sword-lengths from each other.<sup>2</sup>**

**Talk about adversarial! Largely owing to the extent of British colonialism, the norms and conventions of the British parliamentary model are common around the world.<sup>3</sup>**

## What's so Bad about Adversarial Debate?

There is no denying that some disagreements are adversarial. And, in fact, it is not *always* a bad thing when they are. For example, we often come to a better understanding of our own beliefs when we have to defend them in strong opposition to someone else's! This can be a powerful way of clarifying our own convictions to ourselves, and even sharpens our understanding of them. However, when adversarial aspects of debate take precedence over all others, a few bad things can happen:

- > **Nuance gets lost.** When trying to present material in the most convincing form possible, we often over-simplify things. The grey areas, or points for further exploration outside of the *for/against* binary, remain under-acknowledged.
- > **The disagreement gets personal.** The debate becomes less about the merits of the opponents' arguments, and more about the opponents themselves.
- > **Tunnel vision takes over.** Focusing only on winning the particular debate can mean that the broader implications of the topics are forgotten. This is especially problematic in cases where the topic being debated is high-stakes or concerns vulnerable groups.
- > **Any agreement is framed as conceding.** When the only options are *for* or *against* some proposition, and participants have built a case for one and not the other, they are strongly discouraged from recognising any merits in the other side's argument. Instead, they are incentivised to **double down**, even in the face of excellent arguments against their position.





**SOLO EXERCISE:** Philosophers have noticed that the dominant model of debate in our society is adversarial.<sup>4</sup> Can you think of any further drawbacks to strongly adversarial debate?

*Write your reflections here.*

Have you ever noticed how often we use metaphors of combat, fighting, or domination when we talk about debating?



**GROUP EXERCISE:** To illustrate this, can you match the words on the right to the blanks in the sentences on the left, to reveal the metaphors of combat being used?

"This point will \_\_\_\_\_ their argument."

"That's a good line of \_\_\_\_\_."

"We had better \_\_\_\_\_ their argument with this point."

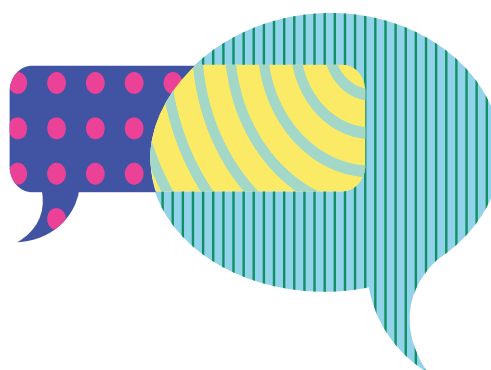
"It's time to \_\_\_\_\_ their argument."

"They were really \_\_\_\_\_ for our side."

"They tried to \_\_\_\_\_ their argument, but they were \_\_\_\_\_."

**shoot down**  
**destroy**  
**defeated**  
**crush**  
**attack**  
**defend**  
**gunning**

These phrases probably sound familiar. Yet the bullet points above give us reason to worry about the dominance of this adversarial way of approaching debate. To help us move beyond adversarial debate, and towards non-adversarial forms of debate that avoid these problems, it will help us to think about what benefits we might get from debate. Let's do that now.



## The Benefits of Debate

We encountered some of the benefits of debate when we were thinking about the goals of debate above. Debate benefits us by helping us to achieve goals like understanding data, spreading knowledge, making decisions, and so on. But there are other benefits too.

### 1 Debating to test and maintain the quality of our beliefs

Regular and ongoing public debate is a productive way to make sure that our convictions continue to stand the scrutiny of other people. Without regular 'testing' of our beliefs in conversation with others who see things differently, we may forget why we believe them in the first place or fail to update them in light of new information. In fact, it is likely that we have little initial control when we first form some of our beliefs (during early childhood), so extra effort is required to reflect on them critically. Responsible debate offers opportunity for such reflection.

### 2 Debating as part of a healthy democracy

Democracy comes in many forms. Deliberative democracy is a form in which the public are regularly involved in lots of debate (or 'deliberation') about policies that affect their lives. People ask questions and law-makers must give reasons for their decisions, which people can further query. The point is not to defeat anybody; the emphasis is rather on inviting diverse views, accountability, and ongoing feedback. Indeed, deliberative democracy requires far more engagement from the electorate than simply showing up to vote every few years.

In principle, deliberative democracy comes with a few special benefits: it promotes the legitimacy of collective decisions, encourages perspectives and policies that serve the public, promotes mutually respectful processes of decision-making, and provides a channel for quick feedback if a policy is going awry.<sup>5</sup>

### 3 Debating as improving ourselves and the community

One of the most widely-accepted benefits of participating in a debate is that it improves individual cognition.<sup>6</sup> In a debate, participants are undergoing self-improvement, by having to focus their thoughts, structure their arguments, and express themselves as clearly as possible. That is why it is considered a desirable skill to have in the job market.<sup>7</sup>

**Notice, though, two further dimensions.**

- 4 It is never 'just' a cognitive exercise, but one that requires emotional intelligence too. Head **and** heart are required to get a thorough understanding of any topic that affects people's lives. This involves respect and empathy!
- 5 The improvement does not take place in individual isolation. On the contrary, we learn in collaboration with others: our teammates, **and** those who take a different view. Debating can therefore be a form of community building.

**SOLO EXERCISE:**

Identify as many benefits of debate as you can in each of the following examples:

- > **Citizens' Assemblies:** This real-world example of deliberative democracy is being tested in many countries. A group of representative participants are called up – much like jury duty – to learn about, debate upon, and make suggestions regarding a particular matter. This form of engagement is highly prized in the climate movement, for example, to compensate for the perceived lack of response from government.

**Benefits** ❖❖❖

- > **Monastic debate:** Some debate practices in monastic universities in Tibet have remained virtually unchanged since the 12th century. Taking place daily over many hours, debating is a perpetual mode of learning in this context, rather than a standalone activity. Students are trained in logic and are cautioned against being motivated by a desire to win. Instead, understanding is the goal.<sup>8</sup>

**Benefits** ❖❖❖

- > **Ideal science:** While it doesn't always work like this in practice, ideal theories of the development of scientific knowledge often portray science as a non-adversarial debate among a network of inquirers.<sup>9</sup> Ideally, scientists are led to beliefs by evidence, and are constantly reading new research by others. In principle, then, they are always willing to update their views in pursuit of truth. Of course, the way that science is actually practiced is much messier than this, but it is interesting that this ideal approach is a form of non-adversarial debate!

**Benefits** ❖❖❖

The Young Academy of Scotland's **Report on the Charter for Responsible Debate** contains a number of articles written by experts on the positive role of debate in society, including why it is particularly necessary to (re)cultivate it at this moment in history. You may enjoy reading some of the articles.



**READ ALOUD:** Notice that many of these benefits are benefits for more than just the so-called 'winners' of debates. Many are not **zero-sum**, which means it is not the case that when one person benefits, others lose out. And many benefits are public goods, which means one person using them does not stop others using them, and one cannot be prevented from using them without paying for them. Given that so many of these benefits are **not** zero-sum and **are** public goods, it is natural to pursue them with a more collaborative approach to debate.



**GROUP EXERCISE:** To wrap up this section, let's repeat the matching exercise, only this time look for less combative metaphors for describing debate:

light   clarify   bridge   appreciate   foundations   common ground

"This could build a \_\_\_\_\_ between the different views."

"Their argument sheds new \_\_\_\_\_ on the topic."

"We are laying the \_\_\_\_\_ to better understand the issues."

"The debate helped me to \_\_\_\_\_ another point of view."

"We still disagree, but the discussion helped me to \_\_\_\_\_ my position."

"Debate is inevitable, but \_\_\_\_\_ is possible."

The language we use matters, and there are already the words available for talking about debate as a collaborative, generative, or illuminating activity, instead of one that always involves winners and losers.





## Towards Responsible Debate

So, in summary, the purpose of more responsible approaches to debate is to benefit both individuals and society. How might it achieve this? In brief, responsible approaches to debate encourage a productive tension between different views, rather than prioritizing conflict, over-simplification, and insensitivity. Even while they disagree, sometimes passionately, responsible debates remember the common purposes we share in discussing contentious with each other. We will be exploring responsible debate in detail through the rest of these worksheets.

- In **worksheet 2**, we will explore how our **identities** affect debate both detrimentally and beneficially. Keeping these factors in mind can help us to remain focused on shared ideals and common purposes, while pursuing productive disagreements.
- In **worksheet 3**, we will explore the importance of being **informed** when debating issues with other people. This is important not for the purpose of winning over an audience but for the goal of better shared understanding of things.
- In **worksheet 4**, we will explore the role of **respect** in achieving the ideals of responsible debate. Even when we disagree with each other and think we'll never find common ground, there are still more and less respectful ways to listen and talk to others. These can help in the pursuit of common purpose, but they shouldn't be used as weapons for shutting down disagreement.
- In **worksheet 5**, we will explore strategies and benefits of **inclusive** debate. Often disagreements are based not just on what people say but on who has and who has not been included in prior discussions of the relevant issues.
- Finally, in **worksheet 6**, we'll consider a number of case studies highlighting the challenges of using debate to **seek common ground and shared purpose**. These provide an opportunity to discuss concepts and strategies learned in the preceding worksheets.

## Conclusion

In this introductory worksheet, we have:

- ✓ Reflected on some of the drawbacks of strongly adversarial approaches to debate, and compared them with some of the benefits of collaborative approaches.
- ✓ Explored ways in which debate can have a positive role for the individual *and* for society.
- ✓ Seen that many of the benefits we want to get from debating are communal.
- ✓ Started to think about the interesting opportunities and challenges that emerge from a closer look at different types of debate.

## Over to you: What do you think about debate?



**GROUP EXERCISE:** We have only managed to touch on general themes regarding debate in this introductory worksheet. Now it's your turn to think about and discuss some of the details. In your group, can you settle on a degree of agreement with the following statements? If you don't all agree at first, then debate the matter! These are controversial topics and, as with many generalisations, even the ones we strongly agree with might have exceptions.

### 1 A person's main aim in debate should not be to defeat an opponent

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

### 2 When debating, it is not important to believe the argument you are making

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

### 3 Everything can and should be debated

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

### 4 Responsible debate improves society

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

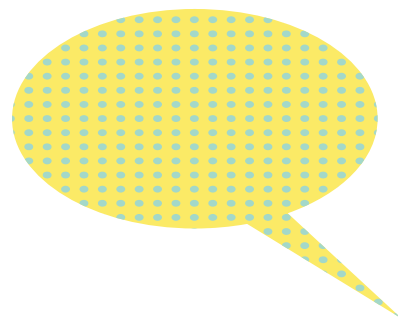
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

### 5 Anyone and everyone should debate

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---



## Resources for you to explore further

If the information in this worksheet was of interest to you and you'd like to find out more, here are some links to explore with your team:

The Charter for Responsible Debate from the Young Academy of Scotland, in which the principles discussed throughout this course are outlined: <https://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Debate-Charter-Report-FINAL-Web.pdf>

The report from Scotland's Climate Assembly, held from November 2021 to March 2022: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-climate-assembly-research-report-process-impact-assembly-member-experience/>

Explore, an interactive website exploring the nuance of "Big Questions": <https://explore.org/>

Traditions of the UK Parliament: <https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/customs/>

'Town Meetings' in Vermont in the US, where town citizens become active legislators for one day a year: <https://www.rumblestripvermont.com/episodes/2021/02/town-meeting>

## References

- 1 This list comes from Walton, D. and Krabbe, E.C.W. (1995) *Commitment in Dialogue*, Albany: SUNY Press, p.66.
- 2 UK Parliament (n.d.). "Rules and Traditions of Parliament" Available here: <https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/customs/> [Accessed April 2022]
- 3 Kumarasingham, H. (2013). "Exporting Executive Accountability? Westminster Legacies of Executive Power", *Parliamentary Affairs*, Volume 66, Issue 3, pp. 579–596.
- 4 Cohen, D. H. (2015). "Missed opportunities in argument evaluation." In: F. van Eemeren and B.J. Garssen, (Eds.), *Reflections on Theoretical Issues in Argumentation Theory* (New York: Springer) pp. 121-130. Chrisman, M. (2022). "Discursive Integrity and the Principles of Responsible Debate." In *Journal of Social and Ethical Philosophy*, Volume 22, No. 22.
- 5 Gutmann, Amy, and Thompson, Dennis. (2004) *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Princeton: Princeton University Press: pp.10-12.
- 6 Bailin, Sharon and Battersby, Mark, (2016) "DAMed If You Do; DAMed If You Don't: Cohen's "Missed Opportunities"" *OSSA Conference Archive*. 90.
- 7 Breger, Beth. (2000) "Overview of the Urban Debate Program." *Rostrum*, 75, no. 4, 14.
- 8 Liberman, Kenneth (1992). "Philosophical Debate in the Tibetan Academy", *The Tibet Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 36-67.
- 9 Walton, D. and Krabbe, E.C.W. (1995) *Commitment in Dialogue*, Albany: SUNY Press.





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