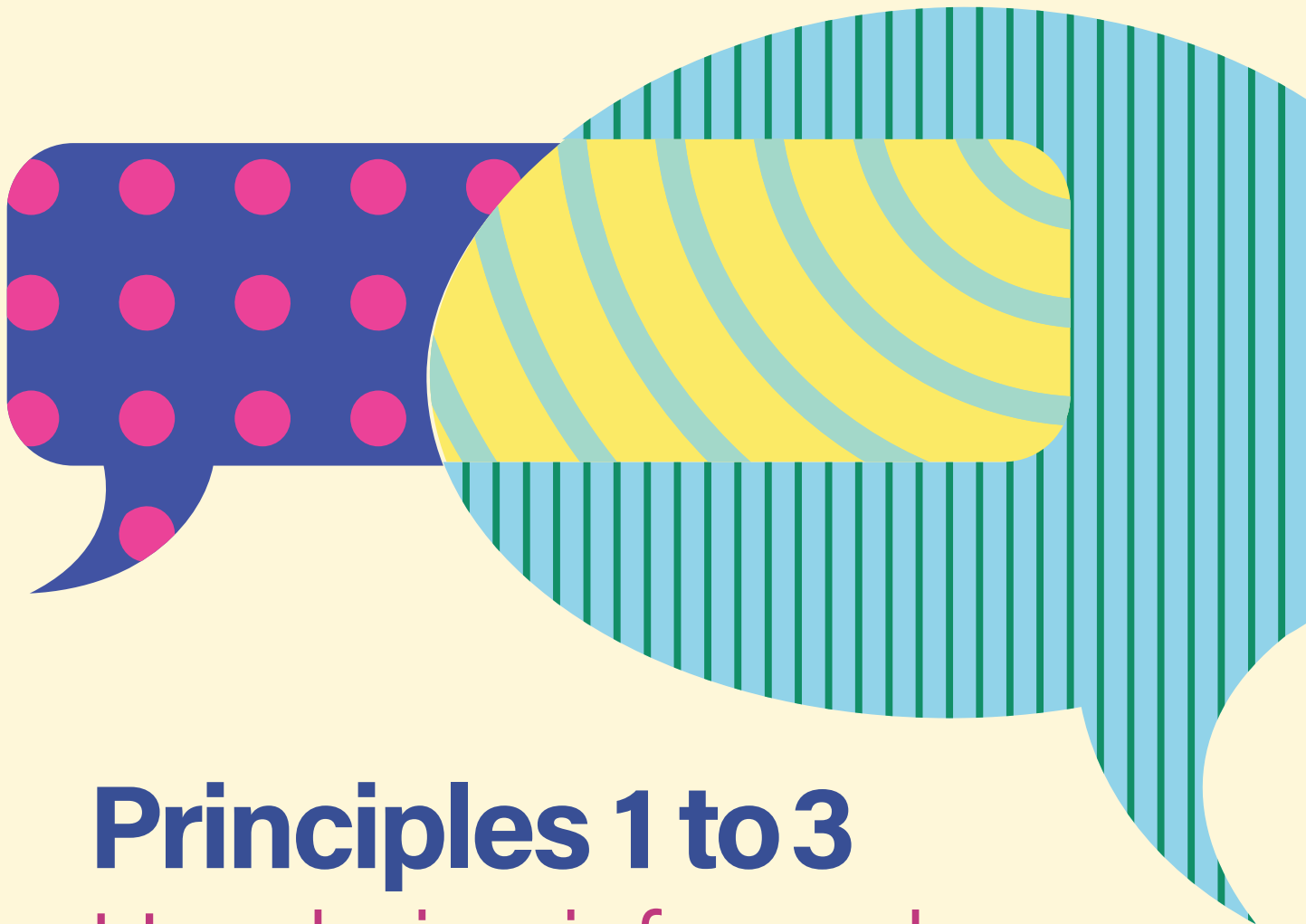

Responsible Debate
Learning Resources

Worksheet 3

RSE **YOUNG
ACADEMY**
OF SCOTLAND



Principles 1 to 3

How being informed
affects debate

In this worksheet, you are going to start learning about the specific principles of the Young Academy of Scotland Charter for Responsible Debate. The first three principles are about **being informed**. You will learn about:

- 1 **accuracy, evidence, and experience,**
- 2 the importance of **diverse perspectives,** and
- 3 why it matters to communicate with **honesty** and **conviction.**

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!

Principle 1: Aim for accuracy, and base your contributions on evidence and experience



READ ALOUD: Part of debating responsibly and effectively requires us to be well-informed. But, to know your stuff, you need good quality information! This is what principle 1 is about: seeking **accurate information** that is both **evidence-based** and **experience-based.**



GROUP EXERCISE: Here are some potential research strategies.¹ Choose whether A or B would be more effective for finding good quality information.

- | | | | | |
|---|----------------------------|--|----------------------------|--|
| 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> A | Rely on a single source | <input type="checkbox"/> B | Rely on multiple sources |
| 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> A | Focus on the content and not where it comes from | <input type="checkbox"/> B | Take note of where the research comes from and who the authors are |
| 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> A | Find evidence for what you believe about the topic | <input type="checkbox"/> B | Find evidence about the topic |



READ ALOUD: Generally speaking, the Bs are better research strategies. Here's why:

- 1 With only one source, there is no way to **cross-check** the information, so you should try to access **more than one source**. ❖ Ask yourself: do these sources reinforce or contradict each other? Do I need to seek out more sources to understand better?
- 2 Sometimes authors have a particular **agenda** that they are pushing, which is why you should try to check for **conflicts of interest** if possible. ❖ E.g.: you might be wary of fossil fuel companies spreading information that downplays the impacts of climate change.
- 3 We more readily believe information that confirms the deeply held beliefs tied to our identity. But remember what you learned in worksheet 2 about **motivated reasoning** and **strategies for tackling bias**! ❖ Ask yourself: am I pre-judging the facts before I know them?



GROUP EXERCISE: Here are some further strategies that might sound good at first but should be used with care. Fit the missing words into the sentences where they belong:

snap-judgements misinformation clickbait

- > **Reading headlines:** It's good to know what's in the news, but particularly with online sources, beware of _____. Media outlets rely on the revenues from clicks and have to compete with one another to earn more.² Read articles all the way through!
- > **Judging based on looks:** We often make _____ based on things like font, advertising, and pictures.³ But they don't bear directly on the content itself!
- > **Judging based on shares:** While crowd verification can be powerful, the mere number of times a piece of information has been shared does not indicate its quality.⁴ _____ spreads like wildfire!



READ ALOUD: Clearly, the amount, quality, and kind of information out there **varies widely**, especially on the **internet**. But there are different kinds of 'bad' information: we need to be able to spot and tell the difference between **misinformation** and **disinformation**.⁵

Do you know the difference?

Misinformation

misleading information that is spread **without the intention to mislead**.
Still, it can be very damaging.

E.g., A lot of misleading or false information in the early days of COVID-19 was shared by people trying to help one another.

Disinformation

misleading information spread to **intentionally mislead**. This is similarly damaging.

E.g., Dictators in the 20th century altered photographs of their enemies to discredit them; now, in the 21st century, we have deepfakes and social media! Watch out...



GROUP EXERCISE: What advice would you give to someone **doing their own research for the first time**? Imagine talking to a younger student preparing to debate a difficult topic – is there anything we have not mentioned yet that they need to know?

Write down your group's tips...



READ ALOUD: Now we have some strategies for **avoiding dodgy information** in the process of **becoming informed about a topic**. But is being informed only about research?



GROUP EXERCISE: How much do you agree with the following statements:

1 Being informed means doing lots of **research** on a topic (i.e., **studying it**).

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree



2 Being informed means having lots of **experience** on a topic (i.e., experiencing **what it's like**).

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree



3 Research tells you **more** about a topic than experience does (i.e., research provides **better information**).

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree



READ ALOUD: Often, more 'academic' research and information is prioritised over experience and who counts as an **expert**. But it is important to also recognise the importance of **experience** to get a well-rounded understanding of a particular topic.





GROUP EXERCISE: In the examples below, choose who counts as being well-informed. *(You can pick more than one, but you all need to agree!)*

1 On the topic of public health policy for a particular illness, **who is well-informed?**

- Doctors
- Politicians
- People with that illness
- People without that illness

2 On the topic of a universal basic income policy, **who is well-informed?**

- A person between jobs living on state benefits
- A person with stable employment and good career prospects
- A social worker dealing with several unemployment cases
- An economist or statistician analysing huge samples of data
- A political representative from a high-income constituency
- A political representative from a low-income constituency



Principle 2: Talk to people with different beliefs, experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds



GROUP EXERCISE: When it comes to finding out different beliefs, experiences and perspectives on the topic you are debating, just **how much diversity is best?**

All very different

All very similar



READ ALOUD: Finding common ground is a beautiful thing, and it is vital for building relationships with people. But it is **possible to have too much common ground**, especially among a team of people preparing for a debate! When everyone agrees with everyone about an issue, it is easy to feel a **false sense of confidence** and **forget about other perspectives**.



GROUP EXERCISE: Let's practise this with a real topic. Imagine that you are preparing for a debate on **immigration policy**, but in each scenario the **composition of the group** is different. Do you think this will shape the group's approach in some way? Explain your answers.

<p>Scenario 1: Everyone in the group was born in the local country.</p>	
<p>Scenario 2: Everyone in the group immigrated to the local country.</p>	
<p>Scenario 3: There is a mix of both in the group.</p>	



READ ALOUD: The group in scenario 3 is more likely to come to a **well-rounded view** because of the contributions from **members with different experiences** of immigration and border politics. Here are two further **positive outcomes of diversity** in social life in general:

- **Finding things in common:** Talking to others, even people we disagree with, can reveal common ground that was not known before. This helps to put a human face to 'the other side'
 - ❖ E.g., You disagree with someone on climate protest tactics but both really love nature!
- **Respecting reasons:** Instead of assuming the other group is just plain wrong, you talk to them and gain insight into the reasons why they hold their views (and vice versa).
 - ❖ E.g., Religious teaching about the value of life shaping views about abortion.





WARNING!

The benefits of diversity only apply **if all are able to contribute meaningfully**. To illustrate, go back to the example of the previous exercise: there is **no guarantee** that the group in scenario 3 will **listen** to one another. And in fact, the voices of refugees in particular are largely **excluded** from immigration policy-making in many countries.

... We will explore **listening** in worksheet 4 and **inclusion** more in worksheet 5.



GROUP EXERCISE: Clearly, the **difference that diversity makes** is huge, which is why it is prioritised as a principle of responsible debate. Yet, this is easier said than done. Have a look at the following **barriers** and examples. Can you think of **strategies** to overcome them?

Barrier	Example	Strategy
Epistemic bubbles: You don't know anyone with a different experience of a particular topic, and all the information accessible to you confirms your viewpoint.	<i>A remote town where very little news comes from outside. Online version: a closed Facebook group.</i>	
Echo chambers: ⁷ You have learned from your community that any information that comes from outside is not to be trusted, no matter the evidence.	<i>Online trolls that seek out views that are different to theirs and actively work to discredit them to their own followers.</i>	
Sampling bias: You are unaware that the research you rely on is based on data drawn from a very homogeneous (non-diverse) sample population.	<i>Medical studies that only use white male college-age students in clinical trials but publish results as if they apply to all.</i>	
Silencing: Certain groups' voices are rarely heard in your society because they are marginalised. So, even if you look for their testimonies, they are hard to find.	<i>Consultations on city and transport planning that leave out people with access and mobility requirements due to disability or age.</i>	



READ ALOUD: Remember this: To find out what you don't know or are under-estimating, don't just talk to people with the same experiences as you; also **talk to people with *different* ones.**

Life hack: if a complex topic seems straightforward, there is a good chance you are missing something and could learn from others.

Principle 3: **Be honest in how you communicate, and speak with conviction for what you believe**



GROUP EXERCISE: Imagine finding yourself in a society where **nobody believes anybody** is honest.

Describe how you think that society would function in a single sentence.

Imagine finding yourself in a situation where nobody believes you are honest.

Describe how you think that would feel in a single sentence.



READ ALOUD: To live together **peacefully**, we need to be able to **trust** that **others are telling the truth.**⁸ And **we need others to believe us** in return!⁹ This is what makes honesty one of those rare things that **transcends cultural differences:** all peoples consider it a human value.



GROUP EXERCISE: How much do you agree with the following statements:

1 In a **debate or argument**, being honest is important.

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

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

2 In a **debate or argument**, winning by any means necessary is important.

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

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





READ ALOUD: The best-case scenario is when **speaking the truth is also the winning strategy** in a debate or argument. Yet sometimes, in highly competitive contexts, winning takes over as the goal. This is the **opposite of being responsible**, and it can also have pretty wild and dangerous **consequences...**



GROUP EXERCISE: Imagine an **extreme situation** where people are debating about plant-based diets and the conclusion is this: vegetarianism should be a criminal offence. **How could they get to that conclusion?!** Come up with examples of how people in this debate could have used **dishonest** or **manipulative reasoning** (the first one has been done for you). Get creative!

General form of dishonesty and/or manipulation	Example in the 'criminalisation of vegetarianism' case
<p>Leaving out anything that does not support the argument and exaggerating everything that does</p>	<p><i>The only data provided is of the number of people convicted for breaking the law that also happen to be vegetarian.</i></p>
<p>Lying (presenting information as if it is the truth while knowing that it is false)</p>	
<p>Using highly sensational or emotive language</p>	
<p>Altering the quantitative data to fit the argument (e.g., saying 65% when the findings were 40%, or vice versa)</p>	
<p>Bullshitting¹⁰ (manipulating bits of information without concern for their truth or falsehood, but rather simply to achieve the speaker's desired outcome*)</p>	



Did you know that some philosophers analyse bullshitting?
And no, it is not the same as lying!





READ ALOUD: Sometimes, being honest requires **admitting that you do not know**, instead of trying to fudge an answer. In such moments, **honesty** and **epistemic humility** go hand-in-hand. Why? Because epistemic humility is more about **getting it right** than about **being right**. The difference is **subtle but vital**.

Do you know what epistemic humility is?

'Epistemic' is a word that refers to **knowledge**. When we demonstrate epistemic humility, we are being **humble about what we know**. We focus on **getting our understanding right** by being **open** to learning more and being **willing** to see things from others' perspectives.¹¹

- To an epistemically humble person, getting something 'wrong' is a **learning opportunity**, not a threat to their identity.
- The opposite is an **epistemically arrogant** person who always assumes they are smartest person in the room and are **quick to go on the defensive** when challenged.



GROUP EXERCISE: What's so important about this difference between **getting it right** versus **being right**? Look at each of the pairs of characteristics below and decide which one they fit with.

Getting it right

Being right

The focus is on the **topic**

E.g.: "I **study** financial markets"

Implies an **ongoing process** (of learning)

The right answer feels **pretty good**...

...And the wrong answer feels **somewhat bad**

Outcome: you seek **accurate** information whose **truth speaks for itself**

Getting it right

Being right

The focus is on **identity**

E.g.: "I **am** a financial markets expert"

Implies a **fixed state** (of being)

The right answer feels **very good**...

...But the wrong answer feels **very bad**

Outcome: you seek **winning** information **whether or not it is true**



READ ALOUD: The positive **characteristics, practices and attitudes** in the left-hand column sum up the importance of **honesty and epistemic humility**. The final point we will look at in this worksheet is closely related: **conviction**. Conviction is about the relationship between our beliefs and how we **communicate them to the world**.



GROUP EXERCISE: Think about a time you heard somebody **speaking with conviction**. *What did that look like and sound like, and what effect did it have on you?*



SOLO EXERCISE: What topics could **you** speak about with conviction?



READ ALOUD: People who **strongly believe something to be true** tend to be better able to **speak with conviction** about it. Why is that? It might take some practise to get your presentation skills right, but **convictions are things you believe firmly to be true**.

Are we in a post-truth age?

Some have worried that we live in a **'post-truth' age**, and that people no longer care about the truth. But studies show that **people continue to care about the truth**. They just don't trust certain sources of information because those sources have become discredited in their eyes (⋮ remember what you learned above about echo chambers!).

So, if there is indeed a crisis, it a crisis of **trust** rather than a crisis of **truth**.





GROUP EXERCISE: Do you think it is possible to be **epistemically humble** and **full of conviction** at the same time?

- No, they are mutually exclusive.
- Yes, humility and conviction can go together.



READ ALOUD: How **humility and conviction can go together** is a deep and interesting question.¹³ But we have already hinted at an answer: by **basing your convictions** on the things you **strive to get right**, not on things you are **obsessed with being right** about! Speaking with conviction is not simply about speaking persuasively; it is about clearly and even passionately communicating your honestly held views – while staying open-minded and willing to learn. The world is an infinitely complex place, and there is **always more to understand**. Be curious about your own convictions!

Wrap up principles 1–3



READ ALOUD: So, in summary, the relationship between informed and responsible debate is very close. **Responsible debate is informed!** However, being informed is **so much more than just gathering information**: it requires prioritising accuracy, seeking diverse views from diverse people and sources, and communicating honestly, humbly, and with open-minded conviction.

Conclusion

In worksheet 3, we have:

- ✓ Learned about principle 1: the importance of accurate information and evidence.
- ✓ Learned about principle 2: the importance of talking to others about their experiences – both as part of good research practice, but also to forge human connections across disagreements, and ultimately to include more diverse voices into society.
- ✓ Learned about principle 3: the importance of honesty and conviction in debate.

In the next worksheet in this series, on the principles of Respectful Debate, we cover **listening, using language carefully, and the importance of appreciating good points made by others.**

Resources for you to explore further

If you'd like to find out more, here are some links to explore with your team, and you can also look up any of the references in the worksheet – these are listed for you below.

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/our-challenges/exchange/charter-for-responsible-debate/>

The **European Digital Media Observatory**, which is an EU-wide platform to combat disinformation, offers five fact-checking tips: <https://ec.europa.eu/research-and-innovation/en/horizon-magazine/five-fact-checking-tips-disinformation-experts>

The Reuters/Oxford research series, **Trust in the News**, on how different users in four different countries navigate, trust, and distrust, online news media: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/trust-news-project>

The **Zoe Predict Studies**, an example of technology- and citizen-driven research that counters the history of sampling bias in medicine and food science to create a more diverse and accurate perspective on human health: <https://joinzoe.com/why-zoe>

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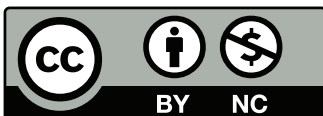
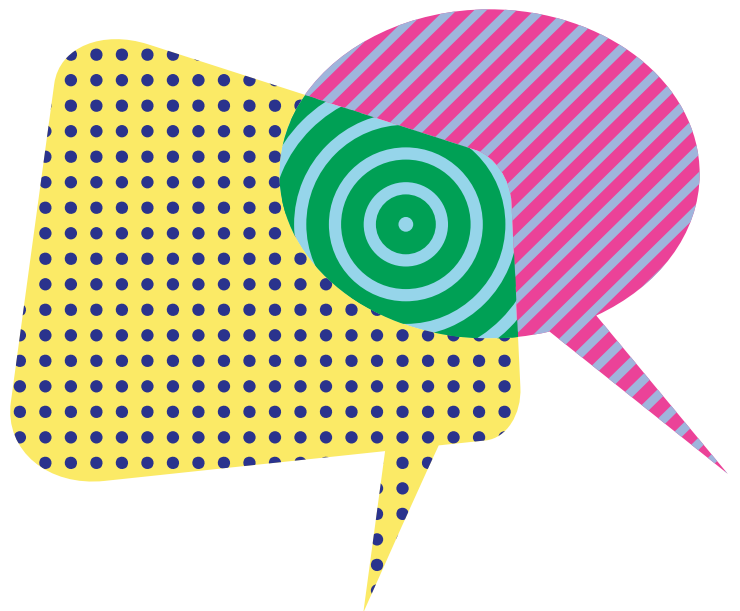
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