
Responsible Debate
Learning Resources

Worksheet 6

RSE **YOUNG**
ACADEMY
OF SCOTLAND



Principle 9

How shared purpose
affects debate

In Part I of this worksheet, you will learn about Principle 9 of the Young Academy of Scotland's Charter for Responsible Debate. In Part II, you will consider some case studies and apply what you have learned from this and previous worksheets. Specifically, you will:

- 1 learn about strategies to identify **common ground** and **shared purpose**
- 2 apply lessons from worksheets 2 – 5 and work through case studies to cement your understanding of Responsible Debate.

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!

Part 1: Principle 9: Seek to identify common ground and shared purpose



READ ALOUD: In worksheet 5, we learned the importance of humility and reflexive critical openness for inclusive debate. Equally important for inclusive debate is the ability to find common ground and shared purpose. In this worksheet, we will learn what common ground and shared purpose are, and how to achieve them in debate.

Finding common ground and shared purpose often involves identifying ways our **needs** can overlap or at least be compatible.

What are needs?

We all have needs. Some are basic needs, such as the need for food and rest, and others are psychological needs, such as the need to be understood and loved.

Our fundamental **needs** often converge, although they show up as different **interests** and **positions**. Here is an example of how different people might have the same basic needs but different interests and positions:

Position: Fossil fuels should not be banned	OR	Fossil fuels should be banned
Interest: My job relies on the oil industry		We are facing climate catastrophe
Need: A secure future		A secure future
Position: We should fight until we win		We should disarm and negotiate
Interest: Direct experience of war		Direct experience of war
Need: Peace		Peace

Sometimes, it is difficult for us to express our needs and interests because we confuse these with the positions taken based on them. In a conflict, being clear about what exactly people's needs and interests are (and how they might converge with other people's needs and interests), before voicing positions and adopting strategies to pursue them, can help us to identify common ground and shared purpose, even when our positions differ.¹

What is the difference between needs/interests and positions/strategies?

Needs and interests are different from the positions that we take and the strategies that we adopt to try to satisfy them.

Needs and interests themselves do not command any specific actions or necessitate any specific position.

In contrast, positions are the **points of view** we take on an issue; and strategies are the **specific actions** that someone takes in order to pursue an interest or fulfil a need.

Strategies may take the form of making requests, expressing desires, judgements and criticisms, or offering solutions.²

- E.g. Georgia needs to feel loved. Because of this she has an interest in her parents **understanding and trusting her**, including when she does not follow their advice. Her strategy to pursue this interest may take the form of **accusing** her parents of being too controlling, or it could involve **writing them a letter** about how she feels.



SOLO EXERCISE: Take a moment to reflect on your personal experience. Recall a time when you had a certain need and interest, such as the need for more support with some difficult work or the need to be liked by your friends. Describe your need and the strategy or action that you took to fulfil that need.

My need was:

The strategy/action that I took to fulfil the need was:

**Reflect on how successful or not your strategy/action was.
Could you have taken a different action that might have been more effective?
Might your action have been counterproductive?**



Sometimes our strategies and actions are counter-productive in addressing our interests and needs.

For instance, if Georgia ends up arguing with her parents after accusing them of being too controlling, there is a risk that she will feel less loved and less understood by them, not more.

Another example might be extreme climate change campaigning. Some activists take drastic, even criminal action, such as throwing soup on famous works of art or blocking roads. Their **position** is that current climate change is catastrophic for our planet, and they are **interested** in drawing more attention to this. However, their **strategy** and **actions** sometimes result in people being less sympathetic to their cause, not more; as a result, they sometimes achieve **the opposite** of what they want.

In cases like this, the reason for the action (the activists' worries about climate change and the need for a sustainable solution to climate change) can get forgotten in discussion of the rights and wrongs of the strategy.

If this happens, it can be helpful to **refocus discussion on the needs** at the root of the debate – the purpose of the action. When we do this, we can often find **common ground**, even when we disagree in our positions and strategy for addressing those needs.



READ ALOUD: Just as we struggle to express our own needs at times, others experience similar difficulties. Learning how to recognise someone's needs, even when they are not explicitly expressed, helps to find common ground.



A step-by-step guide to how to recognise someone's needs

Recall a disagreement you had with one of your friends about what to do in a difficult situation – for instance, whether or not to report some cyber bullying to a parent/teacher, or what the spending limit on your group's Secret Santa should be.

Work through the following steps for yourself.

- 1 Ask yourself whether you can identify what your friend's needs were.
- 2 If you think that their needs were unclear to you, do a bit of guesswork based on the opinion that they have expressed.
- 3 Also think about how you would check with them to be sure you have got it right.
- 4 Think about what difference it would make to your view of their position or action if you knew more about their needs. How might understanding their needs better change the way the disagreement goes?
- 5 Does this exercise help you think about how you might communicate your own needs (not just your position or strategy) in future? If so, how?

Top tips:

- Listen carefully and empathetically when your friend is speaking (Remember what we learned in worksheet 4!)
- Avoid accusatory language throughout the communicative process
- Check in regularly with your friend about how they are feeling
- Practice (It takes time to learn to identify others' fundamental needs!)³



READ ALOUD: Identifying shared purpose involves exploring how our interests, positions and strategies might be **compatible** even when they are different. It is about recognising the **common ground** that underlies disagreements and how that relates to each other's needs.



GROUP EXERCISE: Consider the following scenario and answer the questions.

Imagine that you and another friend are organising a surprise birthday celebration for your best friend, Anna. Unfortunately, you two have different ideas about what to do.

Your position: "We should get Anna the headphones that she really wants. We can all chip in!"

Your friend's position: "We should take Anna out for dinner at a fancy restaurant instead!"

1 Are these ideas compatible? Why, or why not?

2 What might be some challenges to implementing both ideas?

3 What is the shared goal here, between you and your friends? How does that relate to what each of your friends needs in the situation?

4 With consideration of the shared goal and individual needs, can you think of a way to overcome the challenges? Describe your proposed solution.





READ ALOUD: Debates and conflicts in real life are often more complicated than planning a surprise birthday celebration (as we will see in Part II of this worksheet). But what we have considered in the above scenario is helpful for identifying common ground and shared purpose. Initially conflicting positions and strategies may be made compatible by reflecting on what is (or might be) already compatible, namely our needs and interests.

Part 2: Case Studies



READ ALOUD: Debates in real life, especially when they revolve around contentious issues, are often complex and tricky to navigate. We might find ourselves caught between different needs, interests and positions.

In this exercise, we will practice applying what we have learned to scenarios that we might encounter in real life. Remember: there is no single right answer in any situation. All we are trying to do is find better ways of resolving tricky debates. To help with this, here is a reminder of the 9 principles of the Responsible Debate Charter. Keep them in mind when trying out the exercises below, and make a note of which principles are particularly relevant or helpful for each!

Informed

- 1 Aim for accuracy, and base your contributions on evidence and experience.
- 2 Talk to people with different beliefs, experiences, perspectives and backgrounds.
- 3 Be honest in how you communicate, and speak with conviction for what you believe.

Respectful

- 4 Listen carefully, open-mindedly, and with empathy.
- 5 Use emotional language judiciously, avoiding disrespectful or inflammatory language.
- 6 Show appreciation for good points made by others, acknowledging when they change your mind.

Inclusive

- 7 Communicate in ways that unite rather than divide.
- 8 Try to address imbalances in power, knowledge and accessibility.
- 9 Seek to identify common ground and shared purpose.



GROUP EXERCISE: Consider the following scenarios. Work in groups, and complete the activity for each scenario.



Take your time to work through each scenario. Don't rush it. Remember to take breaks in between!

Scenario 1: Travel destination

It is almost half term. Your family is deciding where to go for a holiday. You and your sister would like to visit a different country, but that requires taking a flight. Your parents point out that it wouldn't be environmentally friendly to fly. They suggest that you go somewhere accessible by train. In response, your sister points out that your parents often fly for work, and suggests that this year they should cut down on work flights so that you can all fly somewhere new together on holiday. Your parents reply that their work flights are necessary but that taking flights for leisure activities is not. Everyone's position seems reasonable; how can you resolve the disagreement?

- 1 Within your group, see if you can identify what the needs, interests and positions of the parents are, and compare them with the needs, interests and positions of the children/siblings. Does this help you to find any common ground?**

Parents' needs:

Parents' interests:

Parents' positions:

Siblings' needs:

Siblings' interests:

Siblings' positions:

- 2 Try to identify some shared purpose in this scenario. Do you notice any convergent needs? If so, what are they? Would you say these people have any shared goal?
- 3 What strategies or actions might make this debate go badly, and why?

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- 4 If they were going to continue this discussion by using the Charter for Responsible Debate, which three principles would you recommend they prioritise, and why?

Principle:

Why?

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Principle:

Why?

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Principle:

Why?

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Scenario 2: **Birthday party**

You would like to invite some friends over for a birthday party, but your parents have reservations about your having a party at home, especially because they cannot be around. They express concerns about safety. You try to reassure them that there is nothing to worry about, but your parents seem unconvinced. You begin to feel frustrated, and accuse your parents of being overly controlling.

1 Are there any principles from the YAS Charter for Responsible Debate that you are not following in this scenario? Identify one of them. Explain why you think it is not being followed.

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2 What are some things you could do to follow the principle(s) from the charter that you have identified? Describe **three possible actions.**

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2

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3

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3 If you had to find some common ground between your position and your parents, what might it be? Can you identify **three** possible areas?

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 In this debate, the party either goes ahead or it does not. Can you imagine what both scenarios will feel like for the two sets of people involved? How could this debate be resolved so that even the 'losers' feel that they have gained something? Discuss this challenge within your group, and write down **three** suggestions:

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____



Scenario 3: Affirmative action for university admission

You are preparing for university entrance exams with your friends. Your friend, Rory, seems stressed out, as he did not perform as well as he wanted in his prelim exams. He remarks that universities should use affirmative action to admit boys, given that on average, girls are more likely to go to university than boys.⁴ Your other friend, Izzy, finds the suggestion problematic. She responds that allowing this kind of affirmative action would perpetuate gender inequality in the long run. You sense increasing tension.

- 1 How might the conversation go between Rory and Izzy, if they do not pay attention to the principles for Responsible Debate? Discuss and write a short dialogue between Rory and Izzy.

Rory: Universities should use affirmative action to admit boys.

Izzy: Really? Why?

(Write out the dialogue below.)

Rory:

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Izzy:

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Rory:

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Izzy:

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Rory:

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Izzy:

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2 What are Rory's interest and position? What do you think is Rory's need, given his interest and position?

3 What are Izzy's interest and position? What do you think is Izzy's need, given her interest and position?



4 Do you think Rory's position may be compatible with Izzy's? If so, how? If not, why? Can you identify a common goal or shared purpose between them?

Remember that Rory and Izzy do not need to fully agree with each other for their positions to be compatible and for them to have a shared purpose!

5 Think back to the dialogue you wrote. Which of the principles of the charter were they not following? And which principles might be particularly helpful in this scenario?

Principles they were not following:

Principles that might be helpful for this scenario:



Scenario 4: Football strips in school

Your school has decided to ban football t-shirts/strips on non-uniform days. One of your classmates is strongly against this rule. A staunch supporter of a major football club, they are upset that they are not allowed to express an important part of their identity.

You offer some reasons for why the ban might be a good idea. For example, there is often strong rivalry between supporters of different football teams. Banning football t-shirts/strips might help to minimise tension and fights related to football rivalry in school. Your classmate disagrees and argues that most football supporters are not combative and it is not fair to punish the many for the problems caused by a few.

1 What are the needs of the people on either side of the debate?

Four horizontal dashed lines for writing.

2 Which principles of the Charter for Responsible Debate could help people on both sides better understand the needs, interests and positions of each other?

Six horizontal dashed lines for writing.



3 How exactly might you apply these principles to the conversation in practice, if you were continuing the discussion? And which do you think will be harder or easier to apply than others?

Strategies for applying principles:

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Challenges in applying principles:

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4 In most schools, some members of the school community (e.g. teachers) have more power than others. How might that affect the way the debate goes? And what can be done to address power imbalances and give everyone a say?

What kinds of power imbalance might be at play in this scenario?

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How might they affect the way the debate goes?

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What can be done, if anything, to address them?

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Scenario 5: Consuming fast fashion

You stumble upon the comment section of an online discussion of fast fashion. Some participants criticise others for purchasing items from fast fashion brands, such as Shein and Temu. They point out that fast fashion is bad for the environment (e.g. producing a large amount of carbon and generating other waste). Many fast fashion brands also exploit their employees (e.g. paying below minimum wage, or using other exploitative labour practices). As a result, some participants in the discussion argue that we should boycott fast fashion brands.

Others respond that people shouldn't be criticised for what they choose to wear. They point out that fast fashion is ubiquitous and cheap, which means that it is much more accessible for most people. Moreover, we encounter far more fast fashion options than sustainable ones in most places where normal people shop for clothes. So, perhaps we shouldn't hold individuals accountable for purchasing fast fashion items given that they do not have much control over what is easily available and affordable.

- 1 What are the two positions on fast fashion, as outlined above? Summarise each position in one sentence.

Position 1:

Position 2:

- 2 Do you think that the two positions are compatible in any way? Can you identify any needs, interests or goals that are shared by both sides? If so, what are they?



3 Consider which side of the argument you would be on and why, and then consider what strategies you could adopt to persuade others of your position.

Position:

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Strategies:

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4 If your goal is not simply to 'win' the argument but rather to promote an open-minded, inclusive debate about the issue that tries to find common ground and shared purpose, which principles of the charter would be most useful for this scenario and why?

Principles:

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Why?:

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READ ALOUD: The key to finding common ground and shared purpose is recognising that our fundamental needs often converge. This allows for the possibility of adopting strategies that are compatible with one another, even when our interests and positions differ.

In worksheet 3, we have:

- ✓ Reflected on the differences between needs, interests, and positions.
- ✓ Seen that we can often find common ground between people's needs even when their interests and positions are very different.
- ✓ Explored the relationship between interests/positions and actions/strategies.
- ✓ Seen that our actions and strategies in debate can sometimes be counterproductive in pursuing our needs, and reflected on how we can avoid this.
- ✓ Considered some real-world scenarios that help us think through when and how to apply different principles in the YAS Charter for Responsible Debate.

Over to you: What do you think?

- > Do you feel more confident about exploring people's needs, interests and positions when you find yourself disagreeing with them in future?
- > Do you feel confident about applying different principles from the YAS Charter for Responsible Debate in your own discussions? (practice makes perfect!)
- > Will you recommend the YAS Charter for Responsible Debate to others?
- > What difference do you think more responsible debate can make to the world we live in?

Final Takeaway

How we debate contentious issues – like climate change, gender equality and freedom of speech – will make all the difference to how we address them. Getting better at responsible debate is a vital step in making our world fairer, safer and more peaceful for all. You can be Responsible Debate advocates by modelling the lessons you have learnt in these worksheets and encouraging others to think and talk about what responsible debate involves!

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.

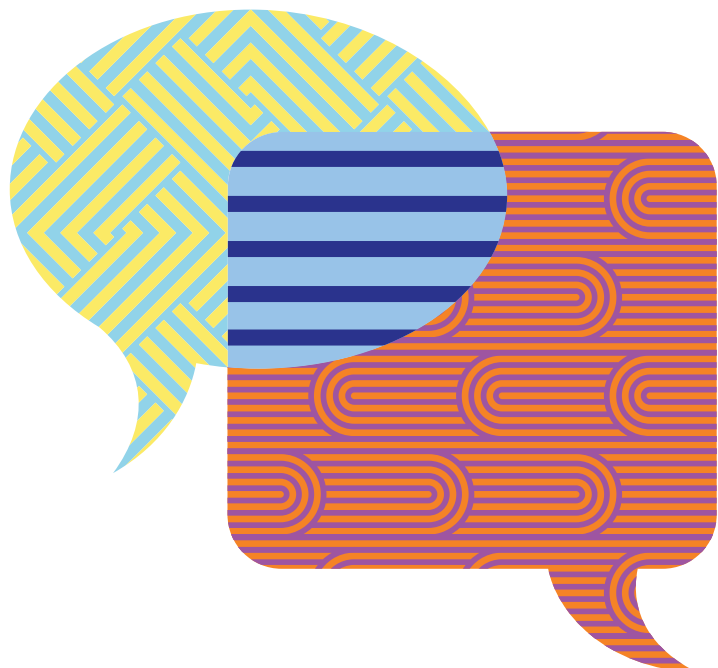
The Young Academy of Scotland's Charter for Responsible Debate: www.responsibledebate.org and <https://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/our-challenges/exchange/charter-for-responsible-debate/>

Rosenberg, M. B. (2015). *Nonviolent communication: a language of life*. PuddleDancer Press.

The Guardian. (2017, August 28). *University gender gap at record high as 30,000 more women accepted*. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/aug/28/university-gender-gap-at-record-high-as-30000-more-women-accepted#:~:text=That%20means%2018%2Dyear%2Dold,they%20were%2031%25%20more%20likely.>

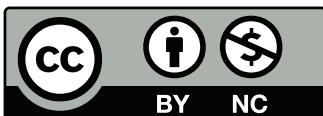
Notes

- 1 Mediators Hanna Dushkova and Vitalii Diakov drew our attention to the difference between needs, interests and positions at an experimental collaborative debate in 2024: <https://vpp.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2024/05/13/collaborative-debate/>.
- 2 Rosenberg (2015), p. 165.
- 3 These are adapted from Rosenberg (2015), p. 164–168.
- 4 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/aug/28/university-gender-gap-at-record-high-as-30000-more-women-accepted#:~:text=That%20means%2018%2Dyear%2Dold,they%20were%2031%25%20more%20likely.>





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