50 Debate Prompts for Kids

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Ready, Read, Debate!

Debating teaches students how to investigate new ideas and develop critical thinking skills, and opens their minds to different viewpoints.

Using Debates in the Classroom

Once considered the stuff of elite high schools, debates are finding their way into classrooms at all grade levels. And for good reason. The debating process teaches students how to investigate new ideas, helps them develop critical thinking skills, and opens their minds to different viewpoints.

Basically, when working with students, there are five steps to the debating process that you will want to reinforce and model. Those steps are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gather</th>
<th>Gather information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explore</td>
<td>Explore all sides of an issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form</td>
<td>Form an initial opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defend</td>
<td>Defend the position in a debate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refine</td>
<td>Refine opinion through knowledge gained in the debate</td>
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Not an Argument

Unfortunately, many of us confuse debating with arguing. And no wonder! Our most public displays of debate—political debates—are rarely an exchange of ideas for the purpose of refining one’s thinking. Ideally, debating is an open-minded, intelligent way to explore a world filled with diverse viewpoints.

In the classroom, you can best instruct about this type of debate by regularly modeling it, making sure to demonstrate your willingness to change your opinions as you gather new information. For a simple debate exercise, you can complete the five-step process in minutes. A more elaborate or complex debate may extend for weeks.
The Reading Connection

Of course in this book you will find many debates which will spark new ideas and challenge existing viewpoints. But before you even consult the pages in this book, you can help students better prepare for debating just by turning to the books they are reading... or have read long ago.

As a warm-up, bring out the children’s classic, *Make Way for Ducklings*. (Yes, even your sophisticated middle-schoolers will see the debating value of this picture book when you are finished.) Read the book aloud to students to refresh their memory of the tale. Then introduce the debate question, “Should Mike have stopped the traffic to let the ducklings cross the street?”

Instead of having students immediately vote yes or no, focus on exploring the different sides of this question. (NOTE: It is extremely important for you to show that you are always more interested in the process of forming an opinion than you are in the opinion itself.) Why might someone say that Mike was right? Why might others think he was wrong? Have students revisit the story to seek further information and clarification. Were there stop signs or traffic lights on the street? How fast were the cars going? Were there, in fact, many cars on the street?

Point out to students that they can look to most of the books they are reading independently for good debate questions. And by the middle grades, students are capable of taking each step to a deeper level.

Use as an example the book *Spirit Quest* by Susan Sharpe. In this book, a young Native American boy discovers more about his rich ancestry. Within the book there are tons of debatable issues. But a real-world debate topic (which is found later in this book) is “Should sports teams drop Native American names?” This debate takes on a whole new significance when viewed through the eyes of William—the protagonist in *Spirit Quest*.

Just Imagine

Critical thinking, thoughtful discussion, and informed, flexible opinions. What a great process to teach students. What a great literacy skill to give our future community leaders!
Using This Book

There are many ways that you can use the debates in this book. Students can read them independently, or you can use them for a whole-class discussion or as shared reading. Here are a few suggestions:

Whole-Class Discussion

You may simply pass out a debate and ask students to read the debate issue—both sides—and then discuss in class. However, for a richer experience you may want to preview the debate topic by just reading the title aloud. Then students can fill out the first part of the Before and After graphic organizer found on page 13. This will allow students to see how their opinion might change as they gather more information.

Shared Reading

Remember that you, the teacher, are the most valuable resource for modeling how one goes about forming an opinion. To best do this, pass out a copy of a debate to each student. As you read the debate to the students, use several “think alouds” to show how your opinion is forming. Interjecting comments such as “Oh, I never thought of that.” Or “That’s something I never thought of before.” This shows that you are an active, engaged reader.

Independent and/or Paired Reading

There are times when you may want your students to work on the debates independently. This option allows students to practice their opinion-forming skills and strategies from time to time. In paired readings students can work together (in pairs) to help each other through the opinion-forming process. In either case, you may wish to have them express their points of view in one or more of the following ways:

- **Discussion:** Tell students to be prepared to share their opinion about the topic.
- **Writing:** Debates naturally act as prompts for students to craft a written point of view. Encourage students to clearly identify the reasons that have helped them form their own opinion.
- **Consider Other Viewpoints:** A higher-order thinking response occurs when students state the opinion of someone else—not their own. For example, encourage students to think about what the opinion of the concert organizer might be regarding moshing, or what the emergency room doctor’s opinion might be regarding the mandatory skateboard helmet laws.
- **Finding More Information:** Some debates will naturally lend themselves to further research. Assign some debate topics with this task in mind.
Learning New Words

You may come across some new words as you read this debate. Put each new word in the graphic organizer below and fill in the information for each word. (Be sure to include all words you see in boldface type.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debate Topic:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Word</strong></td>
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Sometimes people change their minds—or opinions. Does this ever happen to you, too? Use the graphic organizer below to keep track of how your opinion either changes or stays the same. Here’s what you do:

2. When you have finished reading the debate, fill in Part 2: After.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debate Topic:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part 1:</strong> Before reading this debate, these are my thoughts and opinions about the topic:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part 2:</strong> After reading this debate, this is how my opinion has gotten stronger:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part 3:</strong> After reading this debate, this is how my opinion has changed:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>