



# Should school be a place for debate?

## GETTING ORIENTED

The weekly passage describes the Civil Right Movement in the United States. Here is some information that might be helpful to students less familiar with this history.

### Civil Rights Movement (1955-1965)



In the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans faced great discrimination or unjust treatment for no reason other than their skin color. For example, they were forced to

use “black-only” bathrooms or sit at the back of the bus. Tired of being mistreated, African Americans worked together to fight for the same social and political rights as other Americans. These rights included the right to vote, the right to own property in a neighborhood of their choosing, and the right to be treated equally regardless of their skin color. They organized meetings, rallies, marches, and boycotts in an effort to fight against discrimination. As a result of their hard work, the government passed laws to protect the freedoms and political rights of African Americans.

### Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-1956)



In the 1950s, African Americans were forced to sit at the back of the bus because of their skin color, even when there were empty seats in the front. In those days, if the front seats were full and a white passenger

needed a seat, the law required African Americans to give their seats to white passengers.

In December 1955, a civil rights activist from Montgomery, Alabama named Rosa Parks insisted on staying in her seat instead of giving it to a white passenger. Ms. Parks was arrested and forced to pay a fine because she refused to follow the bus driver’s orders. This arrest outraged other African Americans, who then decided that they would boycott—or deliberately choose not to ride—

the bus until the laws were changed. They walked, biked, or carpooled instead.

The boycott was effective. It got the government’s attention and caused the Supreme Court to rule in November 1956 that segregation on a bus was unconstitutional or against the law. The law went into effect in December and ended the boycott.

### Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968)



Martin Luther King, Jr. was a preacher and leader of the African American community. He was passionate about civil rights and inspired many people—blacks, whites, and others—to fight for equality through non-violent means such as boycotts, marches, and rallies. He was one of the most prominent leaders

of the Civil Rights Movement. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 for his work. Dr. King was a gifted speaker and used his speaking ability to unite people and paint a vision for peace and equality among all peoples. His most famous speech is “I Have a Dream” (August 28, 1963), which Dr. King gave in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., in front of thousands of people. This speech described a nation in which people would “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character,” a nation where “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

Dr. King was tragically shot and killed on April 4, 1968 by an escaped prison convict named James Earl Ray. In spite of his death, Dr. King’s activism continues to influence and inspire many Americans today.



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## EVIDENCE AND PERSPECTIVES

	<i>Some may have this view:</i>	<i>But others may think:</i>
<b>Students</b>	Yes. Students like to talk when they are in school. If students can discuss a debate topic, they will be more interested in the topic and learn more. They will learn what their classmates think. They will practice giving their opinions on the spot. They will have fun with debates.	No. Students may not know enough English to participate. The more talkative students will talk more, and the quiet students will be less likely to add their opinions. This imbalance will make the debate uneven. Students may not have fun with debates if the discussion gets too loud and chaotic.
<b>Teachers</b>	Yes. Teachers want students to explain all sides of an issue. They want their students to hear each other's opinions. They want their students to practice thinking and speaking on their feet. They want their students to be active in their own learning.	No. If students debate in schools, teachers may not have enough time to teach everything students need for the state exams. Teachers may not be able to control the classroom debate. Things could get out of hand. Teachers may not be able to control who talks. Some students will talk more than others.
<b>Parents</b>	Yes. Parents want their kids to learn to argue for what is important to them. Parents want kids to practice thinking and speaking on their feet. Parents want kids to develop strong debate skills for their future jobs.	No. Parents want their kids to learn the right information from teachers. They do not want the debate to get out of control and have only one side represented. They want kids to hear from all sides. This kind of balanced discussion might not be possible in a debate among students because they may not know enough information.
<b>Principals</b>	Yes. Principals want students to care about what they are learning. They want their students to be interested in school and excited about class. This interest and excitement makes everyone have more positive feelings about school.	No. Principals might not want classrooms to get too loud. They want students to learn as much as they can in class and will be concerned that some information may be left out. They do not want classes to be about students' opinions alone. They want the teachers to teach.
<b>Future Employers</b>	Yes. Future employers want workers who can understand both sides of an issue. They want workers who can think and speak on their feet. They want workers who can think critically.	No. Future employers want workers who have learned a lot of facts from school. They want workers to have basic skills needed for job—not just debate skills. They want their workers to follow instructions without having to debate them.

A three-year study (published by the U.S. Department of Education) of 140 elementary classrooms with high concentrations of poor children found that students whose teachers emphasized “meaning and understanding” were far more successful than those who received basic-skills instruction. The researchers concluded by decisively rejecting “schooling for the children of poverty . . . [that] emphasizes basic skills, sequential curricula, and tight control of instruction by the teacher” (Kohn 2011).

“As ineffective as rote learning might be for learning complex and meaningful information, it might be an effective strategy for learning . . . material such as arithmetic facts, spelling words, or a memorized script” (Driscoll 2005).

### Additional Information for Teachers

“Poor Teaching for Poor Children . . . in the Name of Reform”

By Alfie Kohn

*Education Week*, April 2011

<http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/edweek/poor.htm>

“In Defense of Memorization”

By Michael Knox Beran

*City Journal*, Summer 2004

[http://www.city-journal.org/html/14\\_3\\_defense\\_memorization.html](http://www.city-journal.org/html/14_3_defense_memorization.html)



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## ANNOTATIONS FOR TEACHERS

### Features of Academic Text: *Explicit indicators of multiple views on a topic*

*Students are used to reading stories that contain multiple perspectives and can usually figure out the viewpoints of different characters based on what they say, do, or think.*

*In non-fiction texts, writers explicitly state different viewpoints. While this may seem easier, many students struggle with some of the words and phrases used when discussing multiple perspectives. Some examples are highlighted for you here.*

In room 207, Mr. Smith is teaching his students about the Civil Rights Movement. He asks the students questions such as, “Who were the Freedom Riders?” or “What year was the Montgomery Bus Boycott?” It is easy for students to find the answers in their textbooks. Mr. Smith tells the students whether they are right or wrong. On Friday, they will have a quiz about these facts.

In room 209, Ms. Miles is also teaching about the Civil Rights Movement. She asks her students, “Is peaceful protest the best way to make things change for the better?” The students have a **debate**. **Some think** Martin Luther King was right to tell protesters to avoid violence. **Others believe that** sometimes violence is necessary when people will not listen calmly about what is reasonable. They ask Ms. Miles for the right answer, but she says there is no right answer.

**Some people believe that** kids in school should only learn about facts. These people think students should get information from their textbooks or teacher and memorize it. That way, **some argue**, everybody will learn the same things and they can all do well on tests.

**Other people think** debates can be hard because there are no right answers. Sometimes everybody learns different things from a debate. Because of this, teachers may have difficulty deciding what kinds of test questions will help them find out what

students have learned. Debates also take a lot of time. Teachers who have debates may not be able to cover as many topics in class. Then, students may not learn all of the facts in the textbook.

However, debates may help students understand why the facts they learn in school are important. We live in a democracy, where everyone needs to know how to form and **justify** opinions in order to make decisions. Students will not always have a teacher or a textbook to give the right answers, so young people need to learn to think for themselves. Each person has a unique **perspective** defined by his or her knowledge, experience, and attitudes. Even teachers and textbook authors have their own perspectives. Through a classroom debate, students hear their classmates’ opinions. Students justify their opinions based on their own experiences or evidence from texts. Sometimes, hearing from classmates who disagree with them makes students learn about their own **biases** and understand a problem in a new way. Hearing classmates’ perspectives during a debate can help students understand the complexity of many important issues. Whether it is better to have teachers teach from the text or to have students engage in debates is a continuing **controversy** in education.

What do you think? Should students learn only facts in school? Or should debates be an important part of their education?



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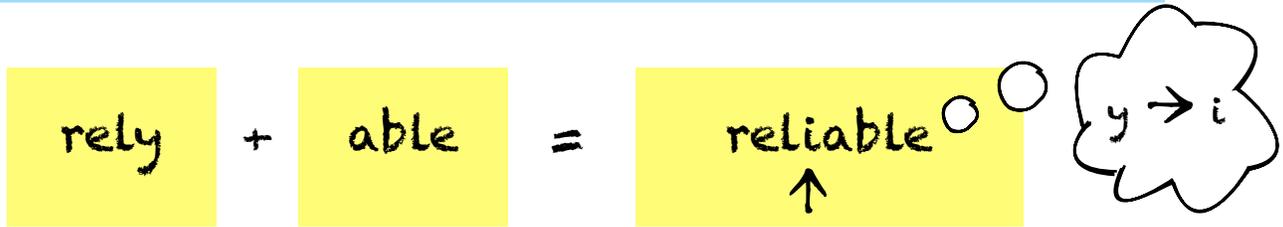
## GENERATING WORDS

### Building Adjectives from Verbs

**What is a verb?** A verb is a word that shows the action in a sentence. Sometimes the action is silent or goes on in someone's head. Example: "Do you *understand* what I am saying?"

**What is an adjective?** An adjective is a word that describes something or someone. Example: That is an *understandable* idea. Understandable describes the idea. The idea is easy to understand.

When added to a verb, the suffix /able/ means that the action is possible. Many verbs can be turned into adjectives by adding *able*. If the verb has an *e* at the end of it, we usually drop the *e* before adding *able*. If the verb ends in *y*, we usually change the *y* to *i* before adding *able*.



Change these verbs to adjectives:

- rely \_\_\_\_\_
- justify \_\_\_\_\_
- amplify \_\_\_\_\_
- reason \_\_\_\_\_
- understand \_\_\_\_\_
- question \_\_\_\_\_
- debate \_\_\_\_\_
- argue \_\_\_\_\_
- believe \_\_\_\_\_

**Discuss the following questions with your partner:**

What are some *debatable* topics that you would like to discuss with your class?

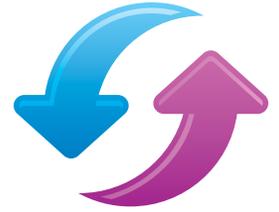
Some *debatable* topics that I would like to discuss include \_\_\_\_\_.

Sometimes friends ask us for a favor. What is an example of a *reasonable* favor? What is an example of an *unreasonable* favor?

A *reasonable* favor would be \_\_\_\_\_; whereas \_\_\_\_\_ is an *unreasonable* favor.

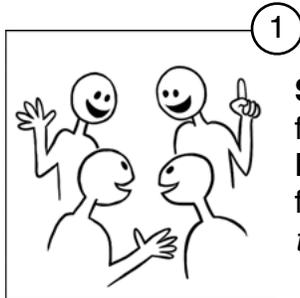
What are the characteristics of a *reliable* friend?

- ▶ Did you change the *y* to *i* before you added the suffix?
- ▶ Did you drop the *e* before you added the suffix?



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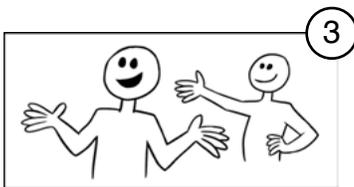
## DEVELOPING DISCUSSIONS



**Step One:** In a group of four, brainstorm as many **PRO** and **CON** arguments for the topic: *Debates in the classroom.*

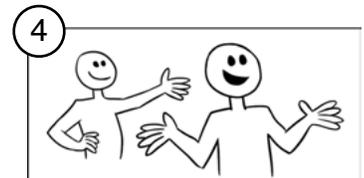


**Step Two:** All group members memorize the list of **PROs** and **CONs.**



**Step Three:** Divide the groups of four into pairs and have a discussion by doing the following:

1. One partner is the “director;” the other is the “actor.”
2. The director claps and says, “Debates in the classroom: **PRO!**”
3. The actor explains the **PRO** reasons for having a debate in the classroom. The actor gives a reason or two.
4. The director claps and says “**CON!**” and the actor uses a transition like “*however...*,” “*on the other hand...*,” or “*then again...*,” and gives a reason or two for not having debates in the classroom.
5. The director claps again and says “**PRO!**” and the actor uses a different transition and gives more pro reasons. Repeat.
6. When finished, the director paraphrases what he or she heard and tries to guess which side the actor is really on.



**Step Four:** Switch roles and repeat process.

### What the **ACTOR** might say:

- One reason for having debates is...
- Another reason is...
- Additionally, debates in the classroom are positive (negative) because...
- However, on the other hand...
- A reason for not having debates in the classroom is...
- Furthermore, we should not use classroom time for debates because...

### What the **DIRECTOR** might say:

- Pro! or Con!
- What I heard you say is...
- I believe you said...
- Correct me if I’m wrong, but I thought I heard you say...
- Based on what I heard, I think that you really believe that...