



Grade 6 Sample Lesson Debate

Before the Debate

1. **Review the history** that led up to the writing of the constitution of the country your class is studying and the actualization of independence. Revisit struggles and injustices that occurred that may have had an impact on the writing of parts of that Constitution (particularly the preamble and the rights section.) You may do this as a whole class discussion or break students up into small groups with each group focusing on a particular part of the constitution. They should use their notes and/or the informational texts. Ask groups to share their thoughts with the class.
2. **Introduce the constitution** to the class. You may show a printed copy, but it would be preferable to project it so that students can see it more easily. It's not necessary to give each student a copy of the entire constitution, it is simply too long and students will not read the entire document. Share some highlights with them – when it was written, how is it structured, where the rights are located, the types of rights identified, the number of amendments, the length of the document, similarities to other constitutions, and anything else that might be of interest to your students.
3. **Read the preamble** together as a class. Give each student a copy and use your close reading strategies to help students make sense of the preamble. Some of the preambles are too long for every student to read in their entirety. Either present a portion to the whole class or divide the preamble up among groups and have students jigsaw their understanding. It's not so important that students read every word, but it is important that they understand the message in the preamble and the passion that so often accompanies it. They can be incredibly powerful statements with beautiful language (that has been translated into English.)

4. **Identify either a First or Fourth Amendment comparable right** from the constitution. Provide copies to students and after reading it, discuss its similarity to and difference from either the First or Fourth Amendment. Use the [Constitution Center tool](#) to compare the actual language. Ask students why they think this right is included in another constitution. Why is it important? Why do people need this write and why is it written into the constitution? There must be other rights that are important that aren't written into constitutions.
5. **Share a right that is included in the constitution of the country you are studying, but not in the U.S. Constitution** with your students. This right will be the focus of your debate. Students will debate about whether to amend the U.S. Constitution by adding this right. Some of the suggested rights are longer than others and you may choose to have students debate just a portion.

Why debate?

Classroom debates offer students the opportunity to learn and practice valuable skills. Because they will be working in teams, they will have to figure out how to work well together. Before they begin their research, they will read and discuss the proposed amendment and brainstorm arguments that may help their side. As they are conducting research, they will be encountering new vocabulary, targeting main ideas and summarizing the relevant information. They will be writing persuasively to support an opinion. Through this process, they will become stronger readers and skilled writers.

During the course of the debate itself, students will practice communication skills and become more confident public speakers. They may feel passionate about their particular topic and will learn to express their arguments both assertively and respectfully. Expressing passionate arguments is encouraged, even if the passion for the argument isn't authentic. Each part of the debate process provides significant opportunities for students to learn and practice essential skills.

1. **Ask your students**
 - What is a debate?
 - Why do people debate?
 - Where do we see debates? (You can share clips of debates with students or ask them to watch a debate for homework)
 - What are some things people debate about?

2. **Read the proposed amendment** again and as a class, discuss the language, the intent, the pros and cons. It's perfectly fine for students to end this discussion with remaining questions or some uncertainty, because the questions and/or uncertainty may drive their arguments. As students become more adept debaters, you may elect to have them do this initial discussion in small groups as opposed to as a class.
3. **Ask students to vote** using the included ballots. The first vote is called the pre-vote and occurs after the amendment has been introduced. In order to vote, the students must understand the language in the amendment. Additionally, the class discussion should also help them to form opinions. Make sure that students write their names on their ballots. This makes it easy to track how students voted for discussion purposes, in particular after the post-debate vote to see if any students changed their mind. If results of the pre-vote are kept secret until after the post-debate vote, students will be less likely to be swayed by the majority in creating their arguments and participating in the post-vote.
4. **Article V of the U.S. Constitution** describes the [method for amending the Constitution](#). In order to make sound decisions, students should know that it's not a simple task to amend the Constitution. If time permits, ask students why they think it's hard to add amendments.

What is the structure?

The debate structure is quite flexible depending on the number of students in your class and their comfort level and ability. Ideally, every student should have a speaking role, but that may not work well in your class, at least initially. Teams should have a minimum of three speaking roles, but you may have more than one student in each role.

- Student 1: **Opening Statement**
- Student 2: **Argument**
- Student 3: **Closing Statement**

If a team has multiple arguments, a different person could present each one. The challenge is making the sides even. If you choose to have non-speaking roles, students may do research or come up with counter arguments.

In the debate materials, you will find templates for each of the three student roles. There are two sides, one is the **Proponents** and the other is the **Opponents**. Talk with your students about what these words mean and then ask them how the two sides feel about the proposed amendment. There is a third possible side as well. This side is called the **Partial-Proponents**. This group is generally in favor of the proposed amendment, but would make one or more changes to the proposed language. This is probably not a side that you will include in your first debate and you may not include it all year. But it's an option when it seems appropriate for your class. At the end of two-sided debate, you may simply ask the students as a class to draft a preferable version of the amendment. The post-debate vote could include the third option

1. **Choose sides and roles** Students may choose sides and roles, you may assign them, or they can be assigned randomly. Students will be working cooperatively, and you may want to design groups that will work well together. Or instead, part of the experience may be encouraging students to learn how to work cooperatively with any team.
2. **Research and prepare arguments** Allow time for your students to research their side's arguments. Ask them to find facts that support their point of view. This type of research will not be easy for middle school students. In order to direct their research and make it more efficient, you may provide resources for them. Alternatively, students can interview teachers or other adults to gain their perspective. It shouldn't be as hard for students to compose arguments for the proponents, but the opponent arguments won't come so naturally and that is where students will likely need the most assistance.
3. **Taking Notes** Students should use three sources to find three facts to support their side's opinion. All team members will participate in the research. Students should keep track of their sources. When they have completed their research, they will discuss the facts they found and use them to come up with at least one strong argument. The facts will also be used to develop the opening and closing statements.

What are the Rules?

When it's time for the debate, you or another adult will be the moderator. The most important part of the moderator's role is to keep the debate moving along according to schedule. Decide ahead of time how much time each participant will have (2-5 minutes is sufficient) and whether or not students will have notes during the debate. A note-card with points is preferable to either a written speech or no notes at all.

1. **During the debate**, all students should observe the following rules:
 - Listen carefully

- Be respectful and supportive
- Speak only when it's your turn
- Speak slowly, loudly, and clearly
- Represent your side to the very best of your ability

2. **The order of the speakers** during the debate is as follows:

- **Opening Statement**, Proponent Team
- **Opening Statement**, Partial Proponent Team (if participating)
- **Opening Statement**, Opponent Team
- **Argument**, Proponent Team
- **Argument**, Partial Proponent Team (if participating)
- **Argument**, Opponent Team
- **Closing Statement**, Proponent Team
- **Closing Statement**, Partial Proponent Team (if participating)
- **Closing Statement**, Opponent Team

Let's try it!

Now that you have introduced the proposed amendment, discussed it as a class, and held a pre-debate vote, your students are ready to get started. They know which side they represent, what their role is, and which group they are in.

1. **Ask students to join their groups.** Once within their groups, they will
 - Meet the team
 - Read the amendment
 - Discuss together
 - Learn the individual roles
 - Discuss some more
 - Write their parts
2. **It's time to practice**, once all of the parts have been written. Ideally students will practice enough so that they can speak with just some notes.
3. **Ask students to respect the rules** during the debate. Post them so they are visible to everyone if necessary. You may give students the opportunity to express agreement by snapping, knocking on their desks, or making a silent knock in the air.

Post-Debate

1. **Ask students to complete post-debate ballots** and share the results when the voting is over. Also share the pre-debate results if you haven't yet.
2. **Ask students to explain** why they changed their mind, if any did after the debate.

3. **Discuss the debate as a class** and ask students what worked and what didn't. Students can propose changes for the next debate.
4. **What are the next steps?** Did the class vote to amend the U.S. Constitution? If so, what can they do to begin the process?