



A. Analysing the motion & identifying key issues

Information and Activity Plans for School Debaters

INTRODUCTION

When thinking of 'debating' the first things that usually spring to mind are often:

- Argument
- Speech writing
- Giving a speech
- Thinking on your feet
- Answering questions
- The idea of a 'chaired' discussion
- The idea of two opposing sides

However, a key part of debating is the analysis of the motion; identifying where it may come from and what it means, defining key words within the motion, examining possible arguments, and establishing where you might need to look for further information.

If you are entering competitive debating tournaments this area is especially important. For example, The Law Society of Scotland Donald Dewar Memorial Debating Tournament specifically weights content at 60%, while speaking skill and style accounts for 40% of the final speaker mark.

This section provides three exercises to help develop skills in this area.



Activity A1 – Brainstorming motions

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the session students should be able to:

- Effectively identify a large number of possible arguments for and against a motion
- Confidently contribute ideas to a group discussion
- Explain why generating a volume of idea is important

Resources Required

- Ideally a large pack of post-it notes – or flipchart, overhead or some other medium where the outcomes can be kept (for activity A2)
- Writing materials
- Optional – a printed sheet/poster of the motion to be brainstormed
- Optional – a printed sheet/poster of the rules below

Introduction

This session is aimed at getting everyone talking and offering ideas, and can be run with groups who have never been involved in debating before. It is really a simple 'brainstorming' session focussing on debate motions. The fact that a large number of ideas should be generated gives the group a sense of achievement and the outcome (a list of arguments and the reasons why such a list is useful) can be built on in later sessions.

Running the Activity

PART 1

The rules of this activity should be clearly explained to participants at the start:

1. Explain that you will be providing a 'motion' and that they have to identify argument 'for' and 'against'
2. The idea is to get as many suggestions as possible – so the number of ideas is far more important than how 'strong' any particular argument is
3. Some arguments may overlap, or be developments on others, again this is fine as the emphasis at this stage is on quantity
4. All the positive arguments will be collected, and then all those against the 'motion'



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5. The group will sit in a circle and each person has to give a point in turn, you can say pass if you have run out of ideas to contribute
6. There will be a chance at the end to add additional ideas to either list
7. The ideas will be recorded

Depending on how confident your group is you may also wish to use add following rule:

8. Each person should stand up to offer their suggestion

PART 2

Ask the students:

Why is the generation of lots of ideas important?

See how many responses they can come up with, the suggestions might include:

- To create a list of ideas for your side of the motion
- To create a list of ideas as to what the other side may come up with
- To create a list of possible questions you could ask the other side
- To create a list of possible questions that you might be asked by the other side
- To be able to identify what common themes might arise in lots of separate arguments (costs? better alternatives to achieve same aim? affecting one group of people more than another?)
- To get a 'sense' of the type of debate this is – are most of the arguments: moral? ethical? political? economic?



GENERAL

- The 'round robin' way of doing this works best as it gives everyone an equal chance to contribute, and means less experienced people get a chance to raise their arguments
- If you can use a large pack of post-it notes to record each individual argument, under headings on a flipchart or blackboard, then these can be reused in session A2
- It is important at the start of the session to ensure that everyone understands the motions being used
- The motions that work best are very wide topics, for which there are lots of simple arguments which everyone can contribute something on

Here are some motions that work well for this session:

- This house believes the war in Iraq is wrong
- This house believes drivers should pay per mile
- This house believes in the introduction of mandatory identity cards
- This house believes Charles should become king

The session can be run once, with a single topic, before moving on to other activities but works better if you do three to four motions at once. This increases the chances of everyone contributing and places the emphasis on this as an important part of skills development.

Assessing Progress

- Has each student contributed at least some ideas?
- Were they confident standing up in front of their peers?
- Could they explain why brainstorming lots of ideas was important?



Finishing Up

To close the session emphasise to the students:

- The importance of being able to spot all the angles in a debate
- The reasons having a list is useful
- That the lists will be retained and you will build on them in the next session

Variations

You can vary the above format in a number of ways:

- Have groups brainstorm separately, awarding a prize for the group with the most ideas
- Move round the group asking for 'for' and 'against' arguments alternately – rather than doing one side of the motion at a time
- Let the students brainstorm in pairs for set period before allowing them to share their ideas with the bigger group and examining which argument every pair developed, and which only some groups identified



Activity A2 – Choosing the best arguments

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the session students should be able to:

- Identify 'stronger' and 'weaker' arguments, and prioritise them accordingly
- Identify what arguments are hardest to counter
- Identify the potential questions that may be raised with each chosen argument

Resources Required

- Results of brainstorming from activity A1
- Optional – the results transferred onto sets of post-it notes
- A ball of string, blue tack, scissors
- Ideally a flipchart, overhead or some other medium where the outcomes can be kept
- Writing materials

Introduction

The first activity was based on the principles of quantity over quality, trying to identify every possible argument for any given motion. This session reverses that, placing the emphasis on identifying the highest quality arguments, most likely to persuade judges and audience of the case being made, and win the debate!

Running the Activity

PART 1 – Ranking

1. This session works best if each argument from Activity A1 is available on an individual post-it note and students have an area of wall, or a large table surface to work on.
2. This exercise can be done with all students working together, two groups each working with two different motions, or four groups working with a single motion each.
3. Giving them the arguments for the motions in session A1 in turn ask them to rank the 'Proposition' arguments in order of how strong/convincing they are (strongest at the top). Ask them to leave space on the work surface to later rank 'Opposition' arguments alongside each motion
4. Ask them to do the same for the 'Opposition' arguments



Your should now have four pairs of ranked lists

5. Ask the students to explain why they chose their top five arguments as the strongest – trying to ensure everyone gets an opportunity to contribute.

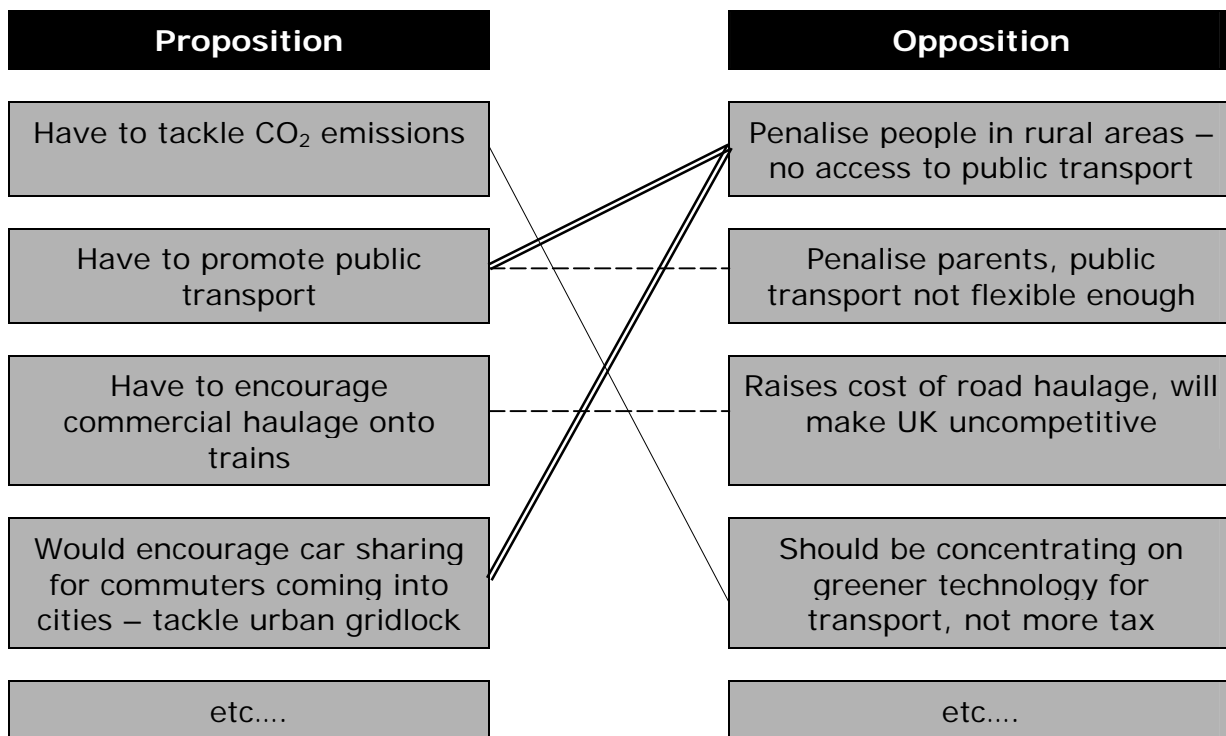
PART 2 – Rebuttal

6. Explain that in debating it is as important to be able to rebut (counter) the arguments of the other side, as it is to be able to set out your own case.
7. The groups have already developed two sets of arguments. Ask them to work down their list of 'proposition' arguments – and identify which arguments from the 'opposition' might counter the proposition arguments. There will not always be a complete match, or one opposition argument might counter two different proposition arguments, but you are looking for arguments that at least help rebut a section for the proposed issue.
8. Ask the groups to link up their arguments with string and blue tack to create a visual map of the different arguments and how they may link up within a debate.

See example overleaf...



For example, using the motion - *This house believes drivers should pay per mile:*



This should give you a map of how arguments might link up during the course of a real debate, and again emphasis why thinking about both sides of the motion is important in preparing for a debate. A 'map' such as this can be used to help respond to argument and questions (points of information) within a debate.

PART 3 – Hard Cases

You may have some arguments left over which are not connected by string to any opposites.

Why is this? Can the group think of any counter to these arguments? What makes certain types of argument very hard to counter? What strategies might you use to deal with such an argument?



Assessing Progress

- Are the arguments ranked in an appropriate order?
- Have the students appropriately linked the arguments?

Finishing Up

To close the session emphasise to the students:

- The importance of being able to identify the strongest arguments – especially in a formal debate where you only have a limited period of time to set out your case
- The importance of being able to identify how your arguments may be countered – and having responses prepared
- That in a deliberately chosen motion for a debating tournament it is likely there will be strong arguments on both sides of the motion, so preparation to counter these is important

Variations

You can vary the above format in a number of ways:

- This session can also be run with simple paper lists divided into two columns, which are then numbered and linking lines drawn.
- Another variation is to not allow discussion during the ranking of the post-it notes and the connection of arguments using string. This places the emphasis on body language and group consensus – rather than perhaps who in the group is best at leading an argument. Allow the group to keep moving the post-it notes/links until they are all happy. Although one might think that the movement could go on indefinitely, groups usually quickly develop consensus.



Activity A3 – Analysing motions in more detail

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the session students should be able to:

- Analyse the key themes of a motion
- Be able to effectively define a motion

Resources Required

- Copies of the 'Motion Analysis' worksheet
- Ideally a flipchart, overhead or some other medium where the outcomes can be kept
- Writing materials

Introduction

The two initial activities (A1 and A2) have comprised basic brainstorming and prioritisation. This session starts to add a little more complexity, looking at how you actually go about 'breaking down' and analysing a motion to ensure you develop a workable and sustainable definition.

Running the Activity

PART 1

This section is designed to encourage students to analysis a motion in more detail.

The first round motion of the Society's competition in November 2005 was:

This House would make the incitement of religious hatred illegal

Divide the students into pairs and ask them to work through the questions on the worksheet.

Once they have completed the questions discuss their responses.



MOTION ANALYSIS - WORKSHEET

This House would make the incitement of religious hatred illegal

Analysing the motion?

1. Why was this motion relevant in November 2005? Why is it relevant now?
2. Might it 'mean' something different in Northern Ireland to what it 'means' in the rest of the UK?
3. What are the background issues that are underpinning this motion?
4. What are the key words/phrases in this motion, what do they mean? (incitement? hatred? religious hatred?)
5. What 'limits' might you place on the definition (for example, would it be reasonable to discuss this only in a UK context? Or a 'developed countries' context)
6. Do you need to define the word 'make'? (are you going to pass laws? police and enforce those laws?)

Who would be affected by the motion?

7. How might the motion affect individuals?
8. How might the motion affect different sections of Society?
9. How might the motion affect business organisations?
10. How might the motion affect government and justice?

Analysing the wider context?

These are harder questions, and you will not be able to answer them all at this stage:

11. Do any of the political parties have a view on this?
12. What about other key organisations (United Nations, European Union, Equality Commissions, etc.)?
13. Is there a Human Rights issue? (freedom of worship?)



Assessing Progress

- Has each student contributed at least some ideas?
- Did they identify how motions often link to news events / current politics?
- What was their general knowledge like of the issues surrounding this motion?
- Could they identify and define key words such as 'incitement'?
- Could they identify practical 'limits' (perhaps defining the motion as applying to the UK, applying to all major recognised religions, and relating to deliberate acts based on religious hatred)
- Did they identify that making 'religious hatred' illegal is very hard (you would need a mind police) but that you could make 'acts' of religious hatred illegal? However, that you would then need to propose a workable definition of 'acts'.
- Did they identify that any law might be defined to apply to all, but that there was likely to be a disproportionate effect on certain groups (for instance, Muslims).
- What was their general knowledge like of wider organisations and issues?

Finishing Up

To close the session emphasise to the students:

- The importance of analysing elements of a motion
- The importance of analysing the context of a motion
- The importance of clearly and correctly defining a motion

Variations

You can vary the above format in a number of ways:

- Each question on the worksheet can be used as a group discussion point
- The worksheet can be issued as 'homework', with written responses requested
- The students can be given access to the internet during preparation to help them identify answers.
- The student can be given the questions whilst the teacher leaves the room, which can make the students more relaxed about starting to develop their answers