

# DEBATE SKILLS

## Curriculum Unit

**GRADES 6–10 | 3-WEEK UNIT | 15 LESSONS**

From Argument Structure to Formal Debate  
Claims, Evidence, Rebuttals & Presentation Skills  
Includes Graphic Organizers, Rubrics & Topic Bank

**UM Printables**

# Curriculum Overview & Pacing Guide

This 3-week unit walks students through the foundational skills of academic debate, culminating in a full-class formal debate. The unit is structured for 45-50 minute class periods.

| Week | Focus                                                        | Lessons       |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| 1    | Foundations of Argument: Claims, Evidence, and Reasoning     | Lessons 1–5   |
| 2    | Refutation & Presentation: Rebuttals, Rhetoric, and Delivery | Lessons 6–10  |
| 3    | The Formal Debate: Research, Preparation, and Live Debate    | Lessons 11–15 |

## Unit Scope & Sequence:

- Lesson 1:** Introduction to Civil Discourse & Debate
- Lesson 2:** Crafting a Strong Claim
- Lesson 3:** Sourcing & Evaluating Evidence
- Lesson 4:** The CER Framework (Claim, Evidence, Reasoning)
- Lesson 5:** Building a Complete Argument
- Lesson 6:** Introduction to Rebuttal & Counter-arguments
- Lesson 7:** Researching the Opposition
- Lesson 8:** Rhetoric: Ethos, Pathos, Logos
- Lesson 9:** Speech Structure & Signposting
- Lesson 10:** Vocal Delivery & Body Language
- Lesson 11:** Topic Selection & Team Research
- Lesson 12:** Drafting Arguments & Rebuttals (Prep Day)
- Lesson 13:** Rehearsal & Peer Feedback
- Lesson 14:** Formal Debate Day 1
- Lesson 15:** Formal Debate Day 2 & Unit Reflection

## Lesson 1: Introduction to Civil Discourse & Debate

Duration: 45 mins

**Objective:** Students will define debate, distinguish it from arguing, and understand the importance of civil discourse and active listening.

### Materials Needed:

Whiteboard/chart paper, Sticky notes (2 per student), Projector

---

### Direct Instruction & Modeling

1. **Hook:** Ask students: 'What is the difference between a fight and a debate?' Have them write their thoughts on a sticky note and post it on the board.
2. **Define Debate:** Explain that a debate is a structured argument where two sides present evidence to support opposing viewpoints. Emphasize that debate is not about 'winning' through volume, but through logic and evidence.
3. **Civil Discourse:** Introduce the concept of civil discourse—respectful, reasoned discussion. Create a class anchor chart of 'Debate Do's and Don'ts' (e.g., Do: Attack the idea, not the person. Don't: Interrupt or use insults).
4. **Active Listening:** Teach students that good debaters are excellent listeners. Introduce the phrase: 'I hear you saying... however...'

---

### Guided & Independent Practice

1. **Mini-Debate:** Present a low-stakes, fun topic (e.g., 'Hot dogs are sandwiches' or 'Pineapple belongs on pizza').
2. Divide the class into two sides. Give them 3 minutes to discuss their points with their side.
3. Conduct a 5-minute informal debate. Enforce the 'Debate Do's' anchor chart strictly.
4. **Reflection:** Have students write one thing the opposing side said that was a good point on a second sticky note.

---

### Closure & Assessment

Collect the sticky notes. Ask students to share one good point they heard from the opposition. Reiterate that acknowledging the other side's strength is the mark of a great debater.

## Lesson 2: Crafting a Strong Claim

Duration: 45 mins

**Objective:** Students will differentiate between strong, debatable claims and weak statements of fact, and practice writing precise claims.

### Materials Needed:

Chart paper, Claim Sorting Cards (Teacher-created: 10 cards with statements, some facts, some strong claims, some weak claims)

---

### Direct Instruction & Modeling

1. **Review:** Remind students that a debate starts with a position or claim.
2. **Define Claim:** A claim is a statement that is arguable, specific, and takes a clear stance. It is NOT a fact (which can be proven true) or a preference (which cannot be argued with logic).
3. **Examples:**
  - *Fact:* Water boils at 100°C. (Not debatable)
  - *Preference:* Pizza is the best food. (Cannot be logically debated)
  - *Claim:* The school cafeteria should offer vegetarian options daily. (Arguable and specific)
4. **Formula:** Introduce the formula: **Topic + Stance + Reason = Strong Claim.**

---

### Guided & Independent Practice

1. **Sorting Activity:** In small groups, give students the Claim Sorting Cards. They must categorize them into 'Fact,' 'Preference,' or 'Strong Claim.'
2. Review the sorting as a class, discussing why certain cards are not strong claims.
3. **Claim Writing:** Write 3 broad topics on the board (e.g., Social Media, Homework, School Uniforms). Have students write one strong, debatable claim for each topic using the formula.

---

### Closure & Assessment

Have students share their claims for one of the topics. The class will give a 'thumbs up' if it is a strong claim, or offer suggestions to make it more specific/arguable if it is weak.

## Lesson 3: Sourcing & Evaluating Evidence

Duration: 45 mins

**Objective: Students will identify the three types of evidence (Statistical, Anecdotal, Expert Testimony) and evaluate evidence for credibility and relevance.**

### Materials Needed:

Printed snippets of evidence (varying quality, some credible, some clearly biased/fake), Evaluating Evidence Checklist (created on board)

---

### Direct Instruction & Modeling

1. **Hook:** Ask: 'If I tell you aliens are real because my cousin saw one, do you believe me? Why or why not?' Discuss the importance of evidence quality.
2. **Types of Evidence:** Teach the three pillars:
  - *Statistical/Data:* Numbers, percentages, facts from studies.
  - *Expert Testimony:* Quotes from professionals in the field.
  - *Anecdotal:* Personal stories (note: weakest form of evidence alone, but good for pathos).
3. **Evaluating Evidence:** Introduce the CRAAP test (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose) simplified for middle/high school: Is it recent? Is it from an expert? Is it biased?

---

### Guided & Independent Practice

1. **Evidence Sort:** In pairs, give students the printed evidence snippets for a specific claim (e.g., 'Video games improve cognitive function').
2. Students must sort the snippets from strongest evidence to weakest evidence, justifying their ranking based on the evaluation criteria.
3. Pairs share their top piece of evidence and explain why it is the most credible.

---

### Closure & Assessment

Exit Ticket: Provide one piece of weak evidence on the board. Students must write down one reason why it is not a reliable piece of evidence for a formal debate.

## Lesson 4: The CER Framework (Claim, Evidence, Reasoning) duration: 45 mins

**Objective:** Students will construct a structured argument using the Claim, Evidence, Reasoning (CER) framework, focusing on the critical 'reasoning' bridge.

### Materials Needed:

Whiteboard, CER Graphic Organizer (Teacher-created for later use, draw on board today), Highlighters

---

### Direct Instruction & Modeling

1. **Review:** Ask students: 'If I make a claim and throw a statistic at you, are you automatically convinced?' Discuss why evidence alone isn't enough—it needs explanation.
2. **Introduce CER:** Explain the three parts:
  - *Claim:* What I think.
  - *Evidence:* How I prove it (data, quotes).
  - *Reasoning:* WHY the evidence proves the claim. This is the logical bridge.
3. **Modeling:** Use a simple example: Claim: 'Our school should switch to a 4-day school week.' Evidence: 'Studies show a 4-day week reduces student absences by 20%.' Reasoning: 'When students are present more consistently, they miss less instruction, which directly improves academic outcomes. Therefore, reducing absences by 20% justifies the schedule change.'

---

### Guided & Independent Practice

1. **Guided Practice:** Provide the class with a Claim and Evidence, but leave the Reasoning blank. (e.g., Claim: 'Recess is essential for middle schoolers.' Evidence: 'The CDC recommends 60 minutes of physical activity daily for adolescents.') Have students write the reasoning bridge independently.
2. Share out 3-4 different reasoning examples. Evaluate them as a class: Does it logically connect the evidence to the claim?
3. **Independent Practice:** Give students a new topic. They must write a complete CER paragraph.

---

### Closure & Assessment

Collect the CER paragraphs as an exit ticket to assess understanding of the 'reasoning bridge' before moving to full argument construction.

## Lesson 5: Building a Complete Argument

Duration: 45 mins

**Objective:** Students will organize multiple pieces of evidence into a cohesive, structured opening argument using an outline format.

### Materials Needed:

Argument Structure Graphic Organizer (to be created in resource), Projector, Notebooks

---

### Direct Instruction & Modeling

1. **Hook:** Explain that a single CER is a great paragraph, but a debate speech needs to be a fortress. A fortress needs more than one pillar.
2. **Argument Structure:** Teach the anatomy of an opening argument:
  - *Hook:* Engage the audience (question, startling statistic).
  - *Claim:* State the team's position clearly.
  - *Contentions (Sub-points):* 2-3 distinct reasons supporting the claim.
  - *Evidence & Reasoning:* Back up EACH contention with CER.
  - *Impact/Conclusion:* Why does this matter? What happens if we don't adopt your view?
3. **Modeling:** Show a sample outline for a debate topic (e.g., 'Banning single-use plastics'). Highlight how the contentions are distinct (Economic impact vs. Environmental necessity).

---

### Guided & Independent Practice

1. **Outlining:** Assign a practice topic (e.g., 'Students should be required to do community service to graduate').
2. Have students use the Argument Structure Graphic Organizer to outline their speech. They must have at least TWO contentions, each with its own CER.
3. **Peer Review:** Partners trade outlines. Partners check: Is the claim debatable? Are the contentions distinct? Is the reasoning logical?

---

### Closure & Assessment

Students choose one contention from their outline to share aloud with the class. The class evaluates the strength of the evidence and reasoning.

## Lesson 6: Introduction to Rebuttal & Counter-arguments

Duration: 45 mins

**Objective:** Students will define counter-argument and draft a basic rebuttal using the 4-step 'They Say, I Say' framework.

### Materials Needed:

Whiteboard, Rebuttal Sentence Stems handout (written on board), 'They Say, I Say' worksheets

### Direct Instruction & Modeling

1. **Introduction:** Explain that a debate is not just two ships passing in the night; they must clash. Introduce 'Rebuttal'—the act of disproving or weakening the opponent's argument.
2. **4-Step Rebuttal Framework:**
  - Step 1: *Acknowledge* ('*They say...*'): State the opponent's point fairly.
  - Step 2: *Refute* ('*However, I argue...*'): State your counter-point.
  - Step 3: *Evidence* ('*Because...*'): Provide your proof.
  - Step 4: *Impact* ('*Therefore...*'): Conclude why your point outweighs theirs.
3. **Modeling:** Model this with a fun topic. Opponent: 'Dogs are the best pets because they protect you.' Rebuttal: 'They say dogs are best for protection. However, I argue cats are better pets because they provide low-stress companionship. Studies show purring lowers blood pressure. Therefore, cats provide a more consistent health benefit.'

### Guided & Independent Practice

1. **Guided Rebuttal:** Write 3 common arguments for a topic on the board (e.g., 'School uniforms reduce bullying').
2. Have students pick one argument and write a 4-step rebuttal using the framework.
3. Share out and critique. Common mistake to watch for: Students who skip Step 1 (acknowledging the opponent) and just state their own point. Emphasize that you must address what the other side said directly.

### Closure & Assessment

Exit Ticket: Why is it important to acknowledge your opponent's point (Step 1) before refuting it? (Answer: It shows you are listening, makes you look more credible, and forces you to actually address their strongest points).