

Guidelines for **Hot Topic** Presentations & Argumentative Discussions

A. Outline of a Short Presentation to Prompt a Hot Topic Discussion:

1. First, describe the focal problem or issue in *one-to-three sentences*.
2. Then, provide just enough background information to show the scope, nature &/or urgency of the problem.
3. Next, list and briefly preview the “stock issues” that usually arise when the hot topic is debated publicly.
4. Finally, preview a relevant list of questions or topic areas to be debated/discussed by the class.

B. After the Short Presentation, Ask Questions that:

- Key into the audience’s shared knowledge
- Do not call for yes or no answers
- Ask for more specific information than “What do you think?”
- Move from easier aspects of the issue to harder aspects
- Move from describing argumentative positions, to analyzing them, to making the best argument for a position.

C. Three Classic Question-Set Options for Prompting Good Discussion:

1. **Believing then Doubting** (or Doubting then Believing): The session leader asks group members, first, to share what they find believable, persuasive &/or illuminating in a stated debate stance—and to explain why with examples and analysis. The session leader encourages *all* participants to add to this “believing” side of the discussion. Next, the session leader asks participants to share what they find doubtful, possibly wrong, inadequate, or poorly reasoned—again, with examples & analysis. This pattern should be repeated for other stances in the debate. Participants could then explain if their own stance has changed (or not) due to the in-class discussion.
2. **Before & After**: This is standard debate-team protocol, but adjusted to include the audience:
 - As in standard debate, two teams will debate a proposition, with one team supporting the proposition and one opposing it. Each team has a chance to (1) make an opening statement for their stance; (2) then each has a chance to critique the opposing position; (3) then each makes a closing statement. Monitoring the time allowed for each element is crucial.
 - In this adjusted model, a vote is taken *before* the debate, to assess the audience’s pro-con stance regarding the proposition, and one is taken *after* the debate, to assess the degree of change. In addition, in the time period just before the closing statements, audience members should ask questions of the debaters.
 - To make room for discussion in this model, a believing-doubting component for audience members could be added at the end, before or after the final vote.
 - Obviously, to be successful class members must agree ahead of time to play a role: pro, con, moderator, timer, audience members.
3. **Rhetorical question scheme – select from the following questions:**
 - *Reasoning & evidence*: How would you summarize X’s line of reasoning (summary)? Can you add other crucial elements, evidence, or examples to this stance?
 - *Parts of the whole*: What are the basic elements of X’s side of the argument? Are there crucial elements that are ignored, over-emphasized or wrong? Are there elements between opponents that are, in fact, similar?

- *Comparisons*: Are persuasive comparisons cited in X's position? Are there similar events or circumstances that should be brought to bear? Have false comparisons been made?
- *Definitions & Classification*: Are there core concepts or loaded words or phrases that need better definition or that are wrongly defined or misunderstood? Are there other broad categories of events or circumstances in which this problem should be seen?
- *Underlying assumptions*: What are the unstated underlying assumptions driving the debate? These are usually value statements (good, bad, right, wrong). Do you agree or disagree with these assumptions and values? Should these assumptions be made more prominent?
- *Causality*: What chain of events is being argued here? What chain of consequences? Are these being stated accurately and fairly? What has been overlooked in that chain? If the problem is to be solved, what causal element must be addressed?
- *Solutions, proposals for action*: Does the proposal for action address the most important causal elements? Does the proposal seem workable or are there alternative solutions that might be more workable, cheaper, less ambitious but sufficient?

During the Discussion

During the discussion the Session Leader should help participants

- Give substantive answers and dig deeper
- Stay on topic
- Listen respectfully and make room for all participants

Phrases for helping participants to dig deeper:

- "Tell us more about that (so others can follow your thinking)?"
- "How did you come to decide that?"
- "Can you (anyone) share some evidence or examples?"
- "Can anyone add to this line of thinking?"
- "Would anyone share an example or personal story?"
- "Does this remind you (anyone) of similar cause, event, or issue?"
- "These words seem very inflammatory. Are there better words to use—or not?"
- "Does the solution being proposed really solve the problem, or not?"

Phrases for staying on topic & drawing others into the conversation:

- "Interesting! Let's finish discussing ---, then we'll consider your point about . . ."
- "Bob has just argued that ---. Can anyone else add to that response with an example (or story)?"
- "The question under discussion is . . . Is there another way to pull apart the problem?"
- "How about looking more closely at . . .?"
- "Even if you do agree, what might be another perspective on . . .?"
- "Let's give others a chance to weigh in on this."
- "I see that we have come to a very difficult point in this discussion. Let's pause and discuss the issue in small groups of two (or three), and then compare our thoughts."
- "Before we have whole group discussion, there are three specific questions to address in small groups of two (or three), and then let's compare our thoughts."