

PoliticsUK: The National Debate

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Setting up a 'Debating Society' in Your Community/College/School/University or Online

Many schools, colleges and universities have debating societies that allow students to practise debate. Debating is a great skill which helps you analyse what others are saying, implying or omitting when communicating. It encourages viewpoints from all sides, increases self-confidence and without a doubt improves your communication skills, including public speaking. Also remember that even when you have left education you can and should still retain these skills - as citizens in one of the worlds oldest democracies it is crucial that you retain an ability to understand what others are deciding on your behalf.

Debating societies are not just for students; they are for communities and social groups too. Facebook and other online services provide a forums for this, but face to face groups are important too.

A Debating Society greatly benefits from some input from a member of staff acting as debate coach. The purpose of a debate coach is to ensure that the committee and participants adhere to the rules of debate. This stops things getting too heated and the debate becoming a free for all with no direction or outcome. Issues will vary on a sliding scale, along with the enthusiasm and capability of the debaters and their interest in the subject matter. Always keep subjects interesting and relevant to the people who attend. By all means push the boundaries of subject matter, but not in such a way as to alienate your debating community.

The coach or a committee member needs to find a location for the group. If it is a physical group which meets locally, a room or community hall is suitable. Online debate venues are easier to organise as there literally thousands of free online facilities. *(This document will eventually contain links to the best)*. Physical meeting groups will also need free online facilities to allow their community to meet online anyway if possible. It will help all feel part of the group and integrate them better. It will also allow all to share material on current and future debates in an easier way.

Key ideas for debate groups

Student Debates:

- Students: Hold debates at lunch time, break periods or after lessons on subjects that interest the students in the society.
- Create a PolSoc (Political Debating Society - give it a better name :)
- Enter national competitions, such as the ESU Mace. You can get details of the many competitions open to school age pupils by going to www.britishdebate.com and clicking on Tournament Calendar.
- Get in touch with other student debating societies and network. Share best practices and ask about current events and news. Keep the society fresh.
- Arrange to debate against the nearest local student group.

Community Debates:

- Scan the local paper for stories or issues that affect your community.
- Do a questionnaire for people on what they would like to see debated.
- Invite representatives of community groups to attend or to speak.
- Send a press release to your local paper on debates and their results.

Online Debates:

- Set up a website and/or social networking group.
- Make the site look interesting and dynamic in design.
- Make sure you can add links and photographs.
- Invite guest bloggers/writers to submit stories for debate regularly.
- Keep an online calendar of forthcoming debates.
- Post rules of membership and submission to the site.
- Appoint a moderator/s to check the website for unwanted posts.

Tips to gain a membership

It may take a while for your society to get up and running. Don't be discouraged; it takes time to get a group/society established. The most pressing problem that new societies have is drumming up interest in the school/college/university. Here are some ideas:

- Set up a debate committee.
- Come up with a publicity campaign.
- Attend the freshers' fairs.
- Make your society welcoming to new members.
- Choose the venue carefully – is it warm and inviting?
- Do you need refreshments?
- How interesting is the subject matter of your debates?
- Make a student website (always, and with a forum)
- Make marketing material ie. posters etc. depending on funding.
- Talk about the society to everyone! Engage as many people as you can.
- Create a society newsletter to put on school/college/university website.
- Have your debates put into an institute diary or on official newsboards.
- Start a school vote on a school issue and get everyone involved.
- Try controversial motions on subjects of interest – check with teachers before advertising a particularly controversial issue. You need them to work with you.
- If possible get the student council involved.
- Select a committee member to act as official communicator with teachers.
- Get feedback from students after each debate has been held.
- Make sure as many people as possible get the chance to be heard.
- Establish a date and time for regular meetings that is practical and popular.

Debate Group/Society Structure

Your society can have whatever structure feels appropriate. Most have a small group of pupils in charge of organising debates, and a larger group of pupils who will attend debates to speak, participate in the floor debate, and attend as the audience.

The selected committee (i.e. the inner group) is responsible for picking motions to debate, finding speakers for debates, and organising a time and place for debates to happen. They usually have regular meetings to agree on all this. While it is usually desirable for pupils to have much input into organisation as possible, it is important that the Committee liaises with the teacher responsible for debating. Sometimes a Committee will allocate roles so that the work is split between people according to their talents. A good committee recognises the strengths and weaknesses of its members and works with them for a common aim.

The following roles might be useful, but you might not need to use them all and others may be appropriate.

CHAIRPERSON

- Should be calm, discreet, neutral and popular with committee and people.
- Chairs the committee meetings and lets all sides have their say.
- Ultimately in charge and responsible for the success of the society.
- Represents the society to organisations and people.
- Handles personnel problems.

SECRETARY

- Should have good written skills and good organisational ability.
- Communicates with competition organisers.
- Communicates with local schools to arrange friendly debates.
- Keeps record of contacts for competitions and local schools.
- Takes and records minutes of meetings and debates if necessary.
- Arranges the next date of committee meeting.

PUBLICITY OFFICER

- Should be a good communicator and marketeer, enthusiastic and literate.
- Makes and displays posters and flyers for advertising debates.
- Writes press releases for local papers.
- Keeps a record/database of useful contacts for future debates.
- Creates fundraising drives for the society/group

TREASURER

- Should be thorough, honest, reliable and numerate.
- Establishes budget for administration, publicity, fundraising and general costs.
- Keeps a clear and easy to understand record of all debating expenses.
- Writes a report on costs for each committee meeting.

Useful Links:

Information to be added