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**Debate Forums Debate Forums Deb**

***Tired of heated discussions that get nowhere? Tired of misinformation getting mixed into half-truths and spewing out confusion and resentment? Why not create a forum for civil and respectful exchange of viewpoints and information, a way to get dependable information and intelligent arguments into the air, an opportunity to elevate the discourse on the hottest topics facing your campus?***

**“Debate Forums” is a COMPASS program offering guidelines and resources to help you break open the “conservative/liberal” lockboxes on intellectual exchange and give your fellow students a chance to hear the truth and make informed personal decisions about the key issues of our day.**

Debate Forums can take four different forms, depending on the particular objective chosen by the organizers:

1. Oxford Style Debates
2. Team Debates
3. Panel Discussions
4. Round Table Discussions

A detailed description of the format, advantages, and disadvantages of each forum follows.

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## **Oxford Style Debate**

### **Format:**

- Two individuals, either experts or students who have prepared their positions beforehand, defend opposite sides of a clearly defined proposition. Each participant has a 10 minute opening statement, two five minute rebuttals, 20 minutes to take questions from the audience, and a 10 minute closing statement. Each individual is allowed two minutes of preparation before their rebuttals and before their closing statements. The whole debate therefore takes under two hours.
- Two votes on the proposition, one taken before and one after the debate, measures the direct effect of the debate.
- A well-balanced, congenial, intelligent moderator introduces the debate and the participants, keeps the time, directs the questions, and guides the whole event. This can either be a student or, preferably, a faculty member who is respected and liked by most students.

### **Advantages:**

- This format works well when the issue is inherently focused, and the need is to have the viewpoints clarified for those in attendance; it is a great opportunity to get the facts straight and to get all the arguments presented clearly.
- It is especially effective if the presenters are real experts on the issue, since it provides an opportunity both for lengthy explanation and for clarification through exchange and questions.

### **Disadvantages:**

- This kind of debates rarely changes minds right away.
- The debaters can tend to distort the issue in order to win the approval of the audience, e.g. using personal attacks (ad hominem) as arguments, inflating statistics, or covering up particular cases. If this happens, the whole debate can backfire, and the attendees merely become more emotionally entrenched in their original positions.

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## **Team Debates**

### ***Format:***

- Two teams of two people (experts or students, or a team of an expert and a student) take opposite sides on clearly defined proposition. Each team presents a 15-minute opening statement, two 10-minute rebuttals, and an 10-minute closing statement. Each team is allowed two minutes of preparation before their rebuttals and before their closing statements. The whole debate therefore takes under two hours.
- Before the closing statements, there is a 20-minute period in which audience members can contribute comments on the arguments made by the debaters, although they may not ask them direct questions.
- Two votes on the proposition, one taken before and one after the debate, measures the direct effect of the debate.
- A well-balanced, congenial, intelligent moderator introduces the debate and the participants, keeps the time, directs the comments, and guides the whole event. This can either be a student or, preferably, a faculty member who is respected and liked by most students.

### ***Advantages:***

- This format has similar advantages to those of the Oxford style debate
- It also tends to minimize personal attacks and distorted arguments.
- It is an excellent way to engage different student groups in constructive exchange, since the teams can be made up of two students from groups that have strong disagreements.

### ***Disadvantages:***

- Again, it rarely changes the minds of the audience right away.
- The issues will not be covered quite as thoroughly as the Oxford debates, since the team members tend to overlap, making the same points in different ways multiple times.

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## **Panel Discussion**

### **Format:**

- A panel of no less than three and no more than five experts is assembled to address a particular question. Each expert is informed beforehand as to who the other experts will be, and as to which angle of the question they are expected to address. The experts are chosen so that the entire panel presents a complete view of the issues implied by the question.
- Each expert is expected to make an initial 10-20 minute presentation (depending on the number of experts), give 2-3 minute responses to questions from the audience asked during a 30 minute period after the original presentations, and finish with a 3-5 concluding commentary if they so desire.
- A well-balanced, congenial, intelligent moderator keeps the time, directs the questions, and guides the whole event. This can either be a student or, preferably, a faculty member who is respected and liked by most students.

### **Advantages:**

- This format is less confrontational than the Oxford or team style.
- It is also less focused, so it effectively addresses new and open-ended issues.

### **Disadvantages:**

- Because it is less confrontational, it can draw a smaller crowd, unless the panelists are particularly interesting and high profile.
- The topic is not usually addressed systematically, since so many different perspectives are presented; a good moderator, however, gather all the different strands together.

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## Round Table Discussion

### **Format:**

- Someone presents (reads) their paper/essay (8-12 pages) on a particular topic to a small group of no more than 15 people, or simply makes a summary presentation of the argument or issue, then a moderator leads a discussion of the paper/presentation that addresses the following points (this can also be done with an article or editorial that has appeared in the campus newspaper or some other periodical):
  - o Clarification of the points made by the paper
  - o Comments on the line of argument made by the paper (agree, disagree, etc.)
  - o Comments on the style of the paper
  - o Comments on related issues
- The paper can be one written by an expert or by a student.
- A well-balanced, congenial, intelligent moderator keeps the time, directs the questions, and guides the whole event. This can either be a student or, preferably, a faculty member who is respected and liked by most students.

### **Advantages:**

- This format allows a complex line of argument to be followed and examined in great detail. It brings multiple minds into concentrated focus on one particular logical analysis, enabling that analysis to be thoroughly scrutinized and challenging those minds to stretch their analytical capabilities.
- It can generate deeper understanding of particular ideas and lead to new intellectual discoveries; it serves as a powerful catalyst for intellectual growth.
- It provides a forum by which serious research and reflection expand its range of influence.
- It can take place in a variety of settings, from a living room to a seminar room, from a picnic table to a private room in a café or restaurant.

### **Disadvantages:**

- If all the participants are not on the same intellectual level, participation can easily be lopsided.

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- It usually stirs up only limited interest.
- Writing the paper/essay is no small task.
- It directly impacts only a small number of individuals.
- If used imprudently, it can unwittingly foster sterile intellectualism and intellectual pride.

### **Some General Tips on Debate Forums:**

- Serve refreshments after the event and invite the audience members and participants to partake.
- Be sure that the participants prepare their position well and are sufficiently informed about the point of view of the opposing party, the characteristics of the expected audience, and the format of the debate.
- Choose and prepare the moderator.
- Be creative in promoting the debate: don't just depend on emails or posters – promotion should be person-to-person as well, and spurred on proactively, e.g. letters to the editor on the issue of an upcoming debate, interviews on the campus radio station, talking it up in dorms and among friends, even in classes.
- Have a classy set-up as much as possible: a nice room with professional tables, lecterns, podiums, chairs instead of floor or couch seating sound system, posters; if the setting is classy, it will help elevate and civilize the discussion. However, if this is not available, do not let it discourage you from having a debate.
- Make sure that COMPASS students prepare themselves to be able to discuss the issue during the interactive parts of the forum and during the informal discussion over refreshments afterwards. The debate will raise the issues, but people will be affected by personal follow up in informal discussions afterwards.
- Personally invite students who hold different views than you: why preach only to the choir?

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