



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# Discussion Tools: Debates

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## Description

A description of how debates, the ethics bowl, and other formats can be used to promote active learning in research ethics.

## Body

Introduction

[What is Research Ethics](#)

[Why Teach Research Ethics](#)

[Evaluation](#)

Topics

[Overview](#)

[Animal Subjects](#)

**Authorship**

**Biosecurity**

**Collaboration**

**Conflicts of Interest**

**Data Management**

**Human Subjects**

**Mentoring**

**Peer Review**

**Publication**

**Research Misconduct**

**Social Responsibility**

**Stem Cell Research**

**Whistleblowing**

**Educational Settings**

Descriptions of educational settings, including in the classroom, and in research contexts.

**Discussion Tools**

**Case Studies**

**Debates**

**Literature**

**Textbooks**

**Videos**

## Other Discussion Tools

### About the RCREC

Information about the [history and authors](#) of the Resources for Research Ethics Collection

## **Debates**

The principle of using a debate format to address ethical challenges is to encourage participants to not only formulate their own views, but to better understand opposing viewpoints. The key to meeting these goals is to assign individuals or groups to the position that they will be asked to defend, rather than to allow them to choose their position in advance. The format and context for such debates can be highly structured (e.g., the Ethics Bowl competitions of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics) or informally organized on an ad hoc basis during class discussion (e.g, asking two students immovably engaged in a discussion to each take on the responsibility of articulating the views of their opponent). Other students in the class, or faculty participants, can serve as moderators or arbiters and make a final decision about which side was more persuasive and why.

Here's a specific example of how a debate could be constructed for a class of at least 4 and up to 25-30 students:

1. Clearly define the question to be debated. For example: "Scientists should get involved in public debates about science." Then take a class vote (how many agree? how many disagree?)
2. Divide the class into 4 groups. Groups 1 and 2 will be assigned to find or develop evidence and arguments that agree with this statement; Groups 3 and 4 will be assigned to find or develop evidence and arguments that disagree with this statement; all groups will be given 10 mins to search the Internet and/or come up with arguments independently.
3. When all groups are ready, chosen representatives of Groups 1 and 3 will speak first to lay out their arguments, respectively, for and against the topic (5 mins each). During these presentations, groups 2 and 4 will be responsible for listening for the arguments presented and constructing a response to key points. Next a representative of Group 4 will note key arguments from Group 1 and give evidence and arguments disagreeing with the Group 1 position; finally,

- a representative of Group 2 will note key arguments from Group 3 and give evidence and arguments disagreeing with the Group 3 position. (3-4 mins each)
4. Conclude by asking for a show of hands for how many people changed their vote based on the debate? This could be followed with a discussion about why and why not people changed their votes.
  5. The discussion leader or course instructor should conclude the exercise with a summary of not only the key points, but also a reflection on the strengths and challenges of the debate format as --possibly-- illustrated in this exercise.

## Resources

- [A Guide to the Ethics Bowl Format](#), Illinois Institute of Technology, Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions
- [Ethics Bowl in the Classroom](#), National High School Ethics Bowl
- [Classroom Debates](#), A collection of resources

## Notes

The Resources for Research Ethics Education site was originally developed and maintained by Dr. Michael Kalichman, Director of the Research Ethics Program at the University of California San Diego. The site was transferred to the Online Ethics Center in 2021 with the permission of the author.

## Rights

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## Resource Type

Instructor Materials

## Parent Collection

Resources for Research Ethics Education

## Topics

Teaching Ethics

## Discipline(s)

Research Ethics  
Teaching Ethics in STEM