

## *Curriculum Corner: The Teacher's Toolbox*

# Public Forum in the Classroom: A Bridge from Traditional Public Speaking to Debate

by Adam J. Jacobi

The last two “Curriculum Corner” columns have focused on a more theoretical approach to unit planning, so this month will feature a more practical approach. While my advice here is geared toward daily, 52-minute class periods, most of these methods also can be tailored to extra-curricular training for Public Forum.

In the broad field communication course I taught, I followed the unit on research methodology with a unit on argumentation, where Public Forum serves as the centerpiece for performance assessment. This is a perfect example of Backward Design, because in order to construct arguments, students must understand the basic tenets of logic and reasoning and the structure for debate and refutation. It is also a great early semester presentation exercise, because it allows students to have a partner near them as they present, which really helps ease students out of the unnerving mindset of public speaking.

Teenagers love to argue! Teachers can introduce this unit by brainstorming arguments we hear and make routinely, such as favorite brands of products or viewpoints on issues – particularly issues relevant to the school and lives of the students. Ask students to write down a statement defending a position on any subject, supported with reasons. Travel up and down each row of

desks, asking students to share their statements. Invite dissent, and viola! An instantaneous exchange erupts. Wrapping up the introduction to the unit can be a brainstorm of practical applications of debate in the real world (courtrooms, lobbyists, think tanks, etc.).

### **Instruction**

Initial instruction on debate often centers on Stephen Toulmin’s model of argumentation, herein referred to as “CWI” as in “claim, warrant, impact.” The claim is a specific position statement, which is supported by evidence (Toulmin’s term of art is “data”) that is relevantly connected back to the claim by a warrant statement. The specific claim is then qualified by an impact statement, or “so what” that explains its pertinence to the overall position on the topic/issue at hand. Teachers should prepare several examples of arguments that follow the CWI structure to share with the class, as well as seeking some from the students.

Then review approaches to organizing information, i.e., outlining, and stress the importance of making sure there is a logical arrangement to information.

Next, discuss refuting (deconstructing) opposing arguments and rebutting (rebuilding) arguments attacked by the opposition. Introduce the concept of flowing, or following

the lines of argument in a debate by taking detailed notes in an organized, shorthand manner, to make sure that both holistically and specifically, arguments are responded to. Finally, watch videos of sample rounds, asking students to practice flowing. The first time, stop and start the video, modeling what to flow, and asking students to contribute what they were able to hear, until they are weaned off this guidance. Even though a Public Forum debate is only about a half hour, this process should take more than one class period, to allow ample time to capture the arguments, as well as holistically debrief the debate.

Show a second sample round, running the video all the way through, and then collect the flow worksheets as an in-class assignment, grading the completeness and accuracy of what was flowed, so students get feedback on how well they’ve mastered this process. If you don’t take shortcuts with the initial stop-and-start sample, the students’ accuracy is better for the continuous sample.

Show a third sample round, distributing a flow worksheet and a judge ballot. This time, students should turn in the flow and the ballot, voting for the team that debated better, and justifying their decision. Grade the ballots for completeness and thoroughness of rationale.

## Assigning Teams

Assigning partners or groups is a perpetual quandary for teachers. Create a list of relevant topics, drawing from past NFL topics. Early in the unit, administer a survey to students, asking them to rank their interest in the topics, and also to share how strongly they agree or disagree with an issue (helpful for determining how motivated they will be on a particular topic). Then “tabulate” these surveys – and recruit a student assistant to help.

This approach to assigning teams garners enthusiasm and contentment with the assigned topic and partner, because the students have a common relationship through the topic. For odd numbers of students, allow students who you think can handle it to work alone as a “maverick” or allow students to work with two different partners for extra credit.

## Preparation

Give the students a class period to orient themselves to their partners, to brainstorm arguments, and to start researching, if they’re ready. This works well in a computer lab or with a mobile laptop lab, because students can either work at desks/tables, or on computers. If you use past NFL topics, students will sometimes find old evidence books online, but remind them that the evidence in those books is often outdated, and they should be more imaginative in their research. You may allow students to synthesize that information with what they’ve found on their own, but they should print a bibliography of sources they’ve found during “prep days,” so they’re accountable for productive time.

Earmark three to four days for research and case construction. Since students work at a variety of paces (some take the work home,

while others don’t have resources at home or need more guidance), it allows you to share more time among the class. Encourage students who finish early to practice their constructive case in the corridor, and then offer them a few points of extra credit to present first (provided the opposing team is ready). This motivates opposing teams to help each other prepare, which results in their knowing both sides much better!

## Presentation

Everyone must be ready to debate by the first day of presentations, although you can welcome volunteers. They may put off for a one-letter grade deduction (as if they turned in work late). This way, the entire class isn’t affected as much by absences, since you can call for two teams who you know are all accounted for (knowing in advance when field trips or athletic events will pull students out is helpful). Allow students to present alone as a maverick if their partners continue to be absent. The make-up assignment is to turn in a ten-page research paper on the topic.

For each debate, students who aren’t presenting must flow and complete a ballot. After each debate, debrief the points raised and discuss other directions the debate could have gone in. For fun, also tally up the ballots and announce who “won,” just before class ends.

At the end of the semester, students consistently report how much they enjoyed this unit, and it often results in students joining the debate team the next season. In many cases, students reflect that this experience whets their appetite to learn more about what’s happening in the world around them, to become more civically engaged.

## Materials

For a complete collection of handouts and worksheets, visit the Public Forum section at [www.teachingdebate.org](http://www.teachingdebate.org). Some of the materials correspond with the chapters on “Supporting Your Views” and “Logic and Reasoning” in *Glencoe Speech*, which includes a section on Public Forum in its 2009 edition.

The NFL offers a variety of video and audio recorded final rounds of debate at its online store, [www.nflonline.org/OnlineStore](http://www.nflonline.org/OnlineStore).

## Bibliography

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# Public Forum Debate: Sample Flow

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Pro Case	Con Response to Pro Case	Con Case	Pro Response to Con Case
Claim 1:  Warrants (Proof):  Impact (So What):		Claim 1:  Warrants (Proof):  Impact (So What):	
Claim 2:  Warrants (Proof):  Impact (So What):		Claim 2:  Warrants (Proof):  Impact (So What):	
Claim 3:  Warrants (Proof):  Impact (So What):		Claim 3:  Warrants (Proof):  Impact (So What):	