



## Debate

*The debate is the common form of conversation in the public domain. Many people believe that the truth is born from a clash of opinions. “Rubbing polishes”, so the saying goes. Commonly a debate lures the participants into the exaggeration of their points of view; otherwise – so they think – their point won’t come across. That is how powerful slogans and mottos arise, like “the customer is king”, or, “who does not speak up agrees” and many others.*

*In a true debate the participants don’t only defend their own positions; they respond to the other side and help the audience to compare the pro’s and con’s. In such a way a free space is created in which the issue reveals all its relevant aspects.*

*But this space is easily lost, when the participants’ desire to persuade becomes so dominant that both sides are no longer focused on the common ground of the inquiry. In the heat of the debate one easily keeps hammering the same point, stops listening or makes assertions that might impress the audience, but are not relevant to the inquiry. The free space gets smaller and smaller; the perspective gets so narrow that only one solution seems possible. But that is exactly where we don’t want to end up in a debate. A true debate opens perspectives and shows different approaches. The following guidelines explain how to achieve that.*

### Preparation

1. The facilitator introduces and explains the thesis (for the preparation of the thesis itself, see the final section of this practical guide).
2. The group is divided (possibly at random) into proponents, opponents, jury and / or audience.
3. Both groups of debaters are given time to prepare. Each group designates spokespersons who will take turns to speak on behalf of the group. This needs to be a different person in each round.

In preparing the pro’s and con’s the following questions may be helpful:

- What is the first argument that comes to mind?
- Does it immediately make you think of a counter argument?
- About what aspects confusion could arise? What should be clarified from the beginning?

For the jury the following suggestions may be helpful:

- What is your own standpoint, before the beginning of the debate?
- Make a short list of arguments pro and con that you can think of yourself.
- Divide the roles: who pays special attention to different aspects of content and presentation?
- Be alert to what is particularly convincing to you; why is it?





### *Debate*

The debate consists of four rounds. In the round one (position + first exchange of arguments), round two (reply + interaction) and round four (conclusion) each speaker is given two minutes. The third round is a brief 'free for all' and lasts about five minutes.

In each round there is space for interruption. After the second and third round there is a three minute time-out for additional preparation and strategy. In the final round no new arguments are introduced. Both sides restrict themselves to what their main argument is, what the main difference is between them and the other side and what the common ground is.

### **Customary practice**

1. Speakers stand.
2. The speaker addresses the jury or the audience.
3. The facilitator keeps track of the time (speaking time per speaker). Halfway through speaking time and five seconds before its end he will signal the speaker.
4. Respect emotions.
5. Beware of debating tricks and sophisms:
  - disregard personal attacks, or pay back in kind;
  - thesis needs proof, insist on supporting arguments;
  - repeat your point of view patiently when you are being misrepresented.

### **Conclusion**

1. After the debate is ended, the jury is given time for brief deliberation. The jury designates the winning party on the basis of the following criteria:
  - a. refutation of the other party's arguments;
  - b. eloquence, humour, non-verbal presentation.
2. Meanwhile the debaters report how they experienced the debate.
3. The jury delivers its judgement and states its reasons.
4. All participants step out of their roles and reflect upon the debate:
  - a. which question is still so open and relevant that it needs further inquiry?
  - b. which specific example, introduced during the debate, would work well in this further inquiry?
  - c. which format from the section 'dialectic' should be chosen for this inquiry?

### *Extra: formulation of the thesis*

Prior to the debate the initiators formulate one or more theses. A thesis must get at the core of an issue. Avoid difficult wording. The thesis should be 'debatable', that is, it should be possible to argue for and against it. A *value thesis* is of the form: something is good, just, desirable (or bad, unjust, undesirable), or something is more important (better, worse) than something else. For example, 'Quality of care is more important than economic growth', or 'It is undesirable to replace physicians with nurses.' A *policy thesis* has this form: policy maker x should replace current policy y with the new policy z, or more briefly, x should do z. For





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instance, 'The organisation should reward its employees with profit dividends', or 'Care institutions should let themselves be guided by client wishes'.

You can make the thesis provocative by formulating it in such a way that it contains two contrasting concepts, as in the theses above: quality versus growth, or profit dividends rather than just salary.

