

# Alternative discussion formats

BY KATHRYN WALBERT



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Class discussions often take one of two forms — either question-and-answer sessions, in which the teacher throws out questions and students answer them, or debates. Both of these formats are useful, but adding a few more ideas to your teaching repertoire can make for more variety in the classroom and provide more opportunities for engaging discussions. This edition explains how to manage discussions in the form of a public relations campaign, a trial, a talk show, or the design of monuments, memorials, and museum exhibits.

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## Alternative discussion formats



# Alternative discussion formats

New strategies for inspiring spirited class discussions!

Getting students to care about key historical issues in a social studies class or helping them engage with the lives of literary characters in an English class can be a challenge. In either case, we're asking students to step outside their own world and into a world that is foreign, into either a foggily understood past or the imagination of an author. Often, we try to help students make that leap and contribute their individual opinions and ideas through in-class discussions. Class discussions often take one of two forms — either question-and-answer sessions, in which the teacher throws out questions and students answer them, or debates. Both of these formats are useful, but adding a few more ideas to your teaching repertoire can make for more variety in the classroom and provide more opportunities for engaging discussions.

## What's wrong with the old standbys?

Question-and-answer is a time-honored format, going back to the Socratic method and no-doubt beyond, and it has its advantages. The teacher can set the terms of the discussion by coming up with thoughtful, provocative questions and can ensure broad participation by calling on reluctant students to contribute. Too often, though, this format can result in one-on-one dialogues between individual students and the teacher and little interaction among students. Also, eager well-prepared students may either dominate discussion or be frustrated when they want to participate more, but the teacher is calling on their hesitant (or unprepared) classmates. Asking questions of the class will probably always be an important and useful part of the classroom experience, but more participatory discussion strategies can ensure more classwide participation and allow students to take a more active role in deciding on the questions to be discussed.

Debates can be a great way to get students more involved in a discussion, and this strategy is already in many teachers' pedagogical toolboxes. Debates can engage students with complex material and raise difficult moral, ethical, and logical questions in the classroom. Through debate, we can help students wrestle with the important questions raised by their texts — Should the U.S. have dropped the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Was Hamlet justified in his quest to kill his father's murderer? By asking students to take on the difficult questions in history and literature, we hope to sharpen their analytical skills, deepen their understanding of the subject matter, and help them make connections between course content and broader issues like justice, morality, and

right and wrong. The formal structure of a debate can help students develop logical, disciplined arguments and participating in organized debates can help students relate to televised debates such as those leading up to presidential or gubernatorial elections.

Debates can, however, have their problems in a classroom setting. First, any activity in our classroom bag of tricks can get old and cease to engage students if overused. It's easy, when teaching a course with a variety of controversial issues worthy of intense discussion, to rely on the debate format a bit too much. Even if you only use formal debates occasionally, keep in mind that students may have done them before in other classes and may be tired of the format. Second, formal debates have specific rules and decorum associated with them — opening statements, timed rebuttals, closing statements, and other details of a debate may overwhelm students who aren't already familiar with the procedures of a formal debate. In the worst case scenario, you may wind up spending almost as much time teaching students *how* to debate as you spend debating. All of these rules and procedures can also seem stiff and stilted to students who might prefer a more spontaneous and freely interactive style of discussion.

A third potential problem with debates is that they can set up false dichotomies and unnecessary competitiveness. Because debates are usually organized as pro vs. con on a given issue, they have the potential to set up false dichotomies. Sometimes problems are more complicated than “either-or” can account for, and, in those cases, the debate format can oversimplify complex, multi-faceted issues and suppress more nuanced solutions than a pro vs. con structure can readily account for. In addition, students often view the debate as a win-or-lose proposition. While healthy competition can be a motivating part of classroom dynamics, teachers may not want every discussion to turn competitive. In some cases, students will focus on winning more than they focus on understanding the issues at hand. As a result, they may well only really learn their own “side” of the debate, just understanding the opposite view well enough to discredit and destroy and prove victorious instead of trying to understand all sides in a subtle and comprehensive way.

So while question-and-answer sessions and debates can be important tools in the classroom and very valuable ways of approaching controversial or challenging issues, there are plenty of good reasons to stock your bag of pedagogical tricks with some other strategies as well. The alternatives that follow will provide you with few novel discussion formats that accomplish some of the same pedagogical goals as question-and-answer discussions and debates, but with a bit of a different twist.

# Alternative discussion formats: The talk show

“Today on Montel — a family torn apart by adultery, treachery, and yes, even murder!” Imagine Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, Ophelia, and the ghost of Hamlet’s father on a modern talk show, each telling his or her own side of the story and engaging the others with heartfelt questions, emotional reactions and pointed accusations. A talk show format provides a contemporary twist on a class discussion, encouraging students to take on the role of literary characters or historical figures in an impassioned, in-your-face way.

Unlike formal debates, the talk show a format that many students are familiar with, whether they love talk shows or hate them, and it provides opportunities for many talk show guests to share their viewpoints, allowing you to get beyond two-sided dualism and into more complex analysis. In my experience, students often really enjoy this discussion format and interact with one another in a lively and spirited way while also learning a great deal.

## HANDOUTS FOR THE TALK SHOW DISCUSSION

- Handout for talk show host group: RTF, PDF
- Handout for talk show guest groups: RTF, PDF
- Writing prompt #1: RTF, PDF
  - Writing prompt #2: RTF, PDF
  - Writing prompt #3: RTF, PDF
  - Writing prompt #4: RTF, PDF

## Preparation

Select several key characters from a novel or several key figures or groups in a historical period or event. Divide the class up into groups with one group per character plus one extra group to serve as the “talk show host” group. Ideally, each group will have three to five students so that the groups are large enough for discussions within the group but small enough to facilitate reaching a consensus relatively quickly within each group. Explain to students that today we’ll be hosting the selected historical or literary characters on a classroom talk show.

The groups should be divided for ten to fifteen minutes of group work and instructed as follows:

### TALK SHOW HOST GROUP

You will be responsible for setting the tone of the discussion, keeping the conversation moving, and maintaining order in case things get out of hand (!). Meet as a group and:

1. Decide on a name for our class talk show and decide what kind of talk show it will be. You may choose to model the talk show after a show on television such as those

hosted by Oprah Winfrey, Maury Povich, Montel Williams, Ricki Lake, Jerry Springer, or Sharon Osbourne.

2. Think about your guests for today's episode of the show and decide on the theme for today's show.
3. Think of three questions for each of today's guests. These questions should be thought-provoking and should go beyond simple yes-or-no questions.
4. Think about the order in which you will ask guests to tell their story and decide which members of your group will ask questions to which guests. You will be responsible for asking your questions to the other groups and encouraging them to ask questions to one another.

### TALK SHOW GUEST GROUPS

You will be representing the assigned character/historical figure on today's talk show. Meet as a group and:

1. Come up with a short biography in which you will tell your story from your perspective. You may wish to include what your relationships are to the other guests on today's show.
2. Write two or three questions that you would like to ask *each* of the other guests on today's show. Keep in mind that these should be questions from *your character's* perspective. All members of your group should speak up during our talk show to reflect your group's point of view, so you may wish to decide who will ask which questions in advance.
3. Try to anticipate any questions that you think other guests might ask you, and think about how you might respond.

## Staging the talk show

After ten to fifteen minutes, have the groups reconvene. The host group can write their show title on the board and then introduce today's topic. They will then (with coaching from the instructor as needed) introduce each guest in turn and allow the guest groups to introduce themselves. From this point forward, the host group should be able to moderate the discussion, asking their own questions and encouraging each group to ask questions of the other groups. As the discussion proceeds, the instructor can encourage quieter members to participate, throw in questions of his/her own, and (if necessary) help keep the discussion flowing smoothly and keep the students on-task. This discussion period can last anywhere from twenty minutes to an entire class period, depending on when you do the preparation work and how much time you have to devote to the discussion.

## Wrap-up

After the talk-show, ask students to write about the experience, either by reflecting on the controversial issues raised in an essay or other graded assignment, or simply by writing a

short response on an index card or piece of paper before leaving the classroom. Possible short prompts might include:

- Discuss one thing you didn't know before today's discussion that you think you understand better now.
- Which talk show guest made the best arguments today and why were they so persuasive?
- What was your favorite part of today's discussion and why?
- What other guests might have been included on today's show, and how would their participation have changed the discussion?



# Alternative discussion formats: History and literature on trial

A trial format can allow students to do research, make arguments, and try to persuade one another in a disciplined way, but with a different twist. This discussion idea works best with a highly controversial topic or subject — for example, students could put the conspirators on trial for the murder of Julius Caesar after reading Shakespeare’s play, or they could put industrial leaders like Carnegie on trial, allowing a jury to decide if the industrial leader was an enemy of the working poor or a great humanitarian who revolutionized the American economy in positive ways.

## HANDOUTS FOR THE TRIAL

- Handout for prosecution and defense: RTF | PDF
- Writing prompt: RTF | PDF

## Preparation

Propose the person or people who will be on trial to the class. Either state the charges against the defendant, or ask the class to suggest what the defendant should be accused of. For example, the charges might read “Andrew Jackson is charged with theft of property, kidnapping, and genocide for his role in the Trail of Tears.” You may find it easiest to develop a pro or con statement for a typical debate and then turn that statement into a charge for your class trial.

## THE JURY

Assign twelve students to serve as the jury. While the other groups work together to prepare their legal cases, these students should familiarize themselves with the time period that the case will address. An interesting activity for them would be to read newspapers and magazines from the time period to immerse themselves in the culture and events of the time. In the interest of fairness, you may want to give the jury group a separate assignment with these sources that will be as analytical and involved as the assignments for the legal teams — for example, you might ask the jury team to develop a presentation on culture in the time and place of the trial that they will present to the class after the trial is over. This will give them something to work on while the other groups plan their case, help them get connected to the relevant time period, and provide a great opportunity for the same kind of analytical thinking and learning to take place.

## PROSECUTION AND DEFENSE

Divide the other students into two groups — the defense and the prosecution. Each group will prepare its case and, from its own members, select students to serve as the witnesses for their side (including the person on trial!). Groups should have access to research sources that will allow them to prepare their cases. Provide students with guidelines:

- Determine the strongest arguments for your side’s position. Think about who you might call as witnesses to testify to the facts that will best support your case.
- For each witness, including the defendant, establish a basic biography (three to five sentences). You will need to decide on all of your witnesses quickly — halfway through the planning time, you will have to provide this list and the brief biographies to the other legal team.
- For each witness, identify five to ten key facts that are relevant to the case. You must be prepared to cite your sources for these facts.
- You may invent witnesses to support your case when you don’t have access to an actual specific individual’s life story. For example, in a case about unsafe working conditions for coal miners, you could create a “composite” coal miner based on true stories that you’ve read, but the person you create must be plausible and rooted in historical reality. (The judge, your teacher, will decide if any created characters have “crossed the line” into exaggeration!)
- Develop a list of questions that your legal team will ask your witnesses. Work with the witnesses to develop factually accurate answers. Remember that your defendants will be under oath — you may not make things up to fit your case! Assign one group member to be the lawyer who will ask these questions.
- Halfway through the planning time, the other legal team will give you a list of their defendants and a brief three to five sentence biography of each. Your group should study this list carefully, consult your research sources to learn more about each person on the list, and then develop questions that you will want to ask these witnesses on cross-examination to try to make your own case. Assign one team member to be the lawyer who will cross-examine the other side’s witnesses.
- Try to anticipate the main points that your opponents will make and the kinds of things they will grill your witnesses about. Be prepared to counter these points.
- Finally, write an opening statement that summarizes your case. This should be only three to five minutes long. Select one team member to present this opening statement to the jury.

## ALTERNATIVE SETUPS

If you would like your whole class to participate as defense or prosecution attorneys and witnesses, here are a few other options:

- Have your case be decided by a judge (you) alone instead of a jury trial. Students may have more fun, however, with a jury trial and may feel that a jury trial is more impartial.
- Partner with another teacher who is teaching the same course in the same period. Have his students serve as the jury for your class while you take on one reading or historical issue then, later in the term, his students can conduct a trial in which your

class can serve as the jury during one class period. The students on the jury will get a great exposure to the topic at hand without having to devote a lot of class time to out-of-class research, and each class will have the experience of trying its case in front of an impartial jury.

- Invite parents to serve as the jury either by having volunteers come in during the school day, or by planning your trial for an evening class event.

## Staging the trial

After students have had time to prepare their cases (you could do this in one class period, allow students to work overnight independently, and convene the court the next day — or develop a schedule that suits your own classroom’s pace and needs), call the court into session. During the discussion, you will serve as the judge. The two sides will present their cases — the prosecution will deliver their opening statement, then the defense. The prosecution will call each of its witnesses, who will then be cross-examined and then the defense will follow suit. As the judge, you will maintain decorum and rule on any objections or points of order. Finally, the two sides will be given five minutes to prepare closing statements and then deliver those to the jury.

You may then give instructions to the jury about what their options are — they may find the defendant guilty or not guilty on all counts or some counts, for example. You will have to decide if the jury must reach a unanimous decision or whether a majority rule will suffice. Assign a foreman to guide the discussion in the jury deliberations. The jury should be given ample time to deliberate. You may wish to sit in to help the discussion go smoothly.

While they deliberate, members of the legal teams may be given an informal writing assignment about the experience. One possible prompt might be, “What were the most persuasive points made by the *other side* in this case? What were the weaknesses in your own case? If you could start over with planning your case, what would you do differently?”

## Wrap-up

When the jury has reached its verdict, call the court back into session and ask the chairperson to reveal their decision. Afterwards, invite the jury to talk about what parts of each side were persuasive and which side they thought had the harder job. (In some cases, it will be much easier to be on one side or the other.) This activity may be a good “springboard” for an analytical essay by allowing students to think about a variety of good arguments on either side that they could then incorporate into a written assignment.



# Alternative discussion formats: A public relations campaign

Students are typically very familiar with advertising in print, on television, and even on the web. In this discussion activity, students are charged with developing an advertising and public relations strategy for a historical figure, historical movement, literary character, or idea. You might choose to have students do a PR campaign about the plight of Dust Bowl farmers while reading *The Grapes of Wrath*, or to have them focus their efforts on advertisements for a presidential candidate in U.S. history, for example.

## HANDOUTS FOR THE PR CAMPAIGN

- Handout: RTF | PDF

## Preparation

You may want to introduce the activity by talking more broadly about some of the possible goals of advertising and public relations:

- to make the client or product seem appealing to a particular audience
- to minimize any faults or liabilities in the client or product's public image or counter any misconceptions
- to show the client or product to be superior to other alternatives, to raise awareness about the client or product and/or reach a new audience
- to emphasize particular qualities or features

and so on. This introduction to advertising/PR could be done as a brainstorming session with students volunteering their ideas about what purposes advertising serves as well.

## Developing the PR campaign

After discussing the historical period and/or work of literature and familiarizing students with advertising and public relations, divide students into groups of three to six (depending on what works well for your class). Each class will be responsible for developing a PR campaign for the assigned person, character, group, movement, or idea.

Group work could vary based on the time available — in just twenty minutes, groups could develop a slogan and a brief ad strategy for the purposes of discussion, or students could do a more fully researched and elaborate campaign by working together over the course of several class periods.

Regardless, students will want to consider the following questions in their groups:

1. What are the positive qualities of the client? To which groups of people might the client already appeal?
2. What are the negative qualities of the client? Which groups of people might not particularly like the client?
3. Who should your ad campaign try to reach? Do you think it is more important to reach people who don't currently like the client or to consolidate your support from those who already have a positive association with the client and hope to persuade some people sitting on the fence?
4. What do you want people to think about the client? What do you want them to do? (Vote for him/her? Think about him/her in a more positive light? Join the movement? Buy a certain product or act in other ways?)
5. Are there any liabilities or misconceptions that you need to address in your campaign? Are there any alternatives to your client that you need to address in some way? (Will you run a positive or negative PR campaign, or some blend of the two?)

After making these decisions, students can then move on to developing an advertisement or public relations statement for their client. Possible in-class creations could include:

- a poster (or on a smaller scale, a bumper sticker)
- a one-page magazine or newspaper ad
- a public service announcement or t.v. ad
- a slogan, logo, and color scheme

Students should be reminded that their advertisement should reflect their views about the positive and negative attributes of the client, their perceived audience, and so on.

After each group has created its ad, each group, in turn, can present their results to the class and explain why they made the decisions that they made. The teacher might prompt the students in discussion by asking, "Why did you choose blue for the background color?" or "Why did you think that catch phrase would respond to your audience of senior citizens?" The instructor could encourage students to share what they liked about the other groups' presentations, leading to the development of a new campaign that combines some of the best ideas from all of the groups.

Another option for this activity would be to have students develop campaigns for individuals or groups with opposing views. For example, various groups could develop campaigns for opposing political candidates or groups could develop campaigns for opposing forces in a historical event or novel. For example, in reading about a labor strike, student groups could develop ad campaigns promoting the views of the workers vs. the views of management.

# Alternative discussion formats: Monuments and memorials

Much like the public relations campaign<sup>1</sup> discussion format, this activity allows students to develop a public presentation about the person, group, or idea that they are studying. While ad campaigns are primarily designed to persuade the audience, however, monuments usually commemorate important people or events and are intended to inspire visitors to remember and emulate the example of the subject of the memorial. By focusing on these goals instead of simple persuasion, students may be able to develop a more nuanced view.

## HANDOUTS FOR THE MOMUMENTS AND MEMORIALS DISCUSSION

- Handout: RTF | PDF

## Preparation

Announce to the class that we have been assigned the task of developing models for a monument or memorial recognizing a person or event from the historical or literary subject that you are studying. Examples might include building a memorial to commemorate the life and poetry of someone like Emily Dickinson, or a monument honoring the service of Korean War veterans.

Brainstorm with the class about what they know about the subject of the memorial and what adjectives they might use to describe the subject — you may want to write a list or create an idea map on the board or on an overhead as the class makes suggestions. Then break the class into groups of three to six students. Charge each group with developing a sketch of their memorial and a one-page press release describing the memorial, the inspiration behind it, and the creative or artistic decisions that went into its design.

## Creating the monument

In their groups, students will want to think about the following questions:

1. What qualities do you want to emphasize in your monument? What message are you trying to send?
2. What will your monument or memorial look like? How big will it be? What colors, materials, textures, and shapes will you use?
3. Where will your monument be placed? How do you expect visitors to interact with it? Will you include a visitor's center, picnic space, a park, or other amenities to make the space educational or functional in some other way, or will the monument stand alone?

## Wrap-up

Student groups can present their designs to the class and take questions about their design process and their choices. You may wish to have the class function as a “monument committee” and vote on the design that they like best (perhaps setting the rule that no one can vote on his or her own group’s design!) or, if you teach multiple sections of the same course, you could present the sketches and press releases of each class to another class that is working on the same project and ask *them* to vote, as a committee, on which design they would choose. You might take notes during the deliberations or ask students to write up a summary of why they chose the selected monument and share that with the class who developed it — students may be interested to see what another class decided, and enjoy seeing the ideas that their counterparts in the other class came up with!

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## Notes

1. See <http://www.learnnc.org/index.nsf/doc/discuss-pr-0703>.

# Alternative discussion formats: Museum exhibit design

## HANDOUTS FOR THE MUSEUM EXHIBIT DISCUSSION

- Handout: RTF | PDF

Museum exhibits are usually designed to educate and inform the public about the subject of the exhibit in a balanced and usually unbiased way. Similar to the monument activity above, students could work in groups to develop an informative museum exhibit about the topic at hand. Groups could all work on the same exhibit, developing different strategies for exhibits about, for example, the nineteenth amendment or Shakespeare's Globe Theater, or each group could work on a separate part of a larger exhibit. For example, if the class were studying turn-of-the-twentieth-century America, one group might be responsible for technology during that period, another group for politics, another for industrialization, another for immigration, and so on.

## Designing the exhibit

As they develop their ideas for museum exhibits, groups could consider:

1. What are the most important aspects of this time period or topic? What major themes should we try to convey with this exhibit?
2. What do we want people to walk away from this exhibit understanding? How do you want people to interact with your exhibit? Should they just walk through? Look? Pick up objects? Listen to recordings of voice or music? Participate in some other way?
3. Will this exhibit be controversial in any way? How will you present a balanced view if the subject is controversial?
4. What artifacts, images, and interactive features would help us convey those ideas?

Groups could sketch out their plan, and then come together to share their findings.

## Wrap-up and extensions

The class could then brainstorm the full exhibit together, based on the ideas developed in groups. In a summary discussion, students could determine what key themes they believe are most important for the museum-going public to understand about the subject of their exhibit, and which strategies seem most effective for presenting that information to visitors.

For a project that lasts longer than an in-class discussion, students could actually do further research and develop their exhibits, complete with replica artifacts, visual aids, and text for visitors. The museum exhibit could also incorporate artwork, performance, documentary film, or educational websites if the students were inclined toward artistic or technologically-oriented projects. These options would also allow for collaboration between history or literature teachers and art, music, or information technology teachers as well. Guests to their museum could include parents, other classes, or invited guests such as the curator of a local museum who could give them feedback!

# Contributors

## Kathryn Walbert

Kathryn Walbert holds a Ph.D. in United States History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She directs LEARN NC's efforts to develop instructor-led and self-guided materials for professional development in a range of topics in United States and North Carolina history. She has developed and taught online courses on "The Civil Rights Movement in Context" and "North Carolina American Indians." She is also the author of several articles for LEARN NC, including a series on using oral history in the K-12 classroom and "Beyond Black History Month."

A long-time associate of the Southern Oral History Program, Walbert has been using oral history in her own research and training others in the craft for over ten years. Her doctoral research focused on Southern women, both black and white, who became teachers after the Civil War, and the role of teaching in shaping their identities. From 2001 to 2003, she was an academic skills instructor at Duke University. She now serves as a consultant on U.S. history, oral history, and academic skills to LEARN NC and other organizations.



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