

How to persuade and influence people: The art of effective geographical debate

Ruth L Healey* & Chloe Leatham

Department of Geography and International Development

University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester, CH1 4BJ

*Corresponding author

r.healey@chester.ac.uk

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6872-4900>

01244 513176

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Introduction

The discipline of geography explores many controversial and complex topics that rarely have straight forward responses e.g. climate change, environmental management, sustainability and social exclusion (Healey 2012). As an undergraduate geography student you should be able to critically analyse evidence from different sources and from different perspectives in order to construct an argument (QAA 2014). Debate offers a method for doing this. It can also be a fun and interactive way of learning subject material!

A simple definition of a debate is “a formal discussion on a particular matter... in which opposing arguments are put forward” (Oxford Dictionary 2019: no page). Debates can be used in a variety of different contexts, whether formal or informal, and may involve more nuanced exchange over the merits of specific arguments. But primarily a debate is a serious discussion on a topic. In a fast-paced, rapidly-changing, information-heavy world you need to learn how to use information to construct arguments rather than merely produce lists of facts (Kennedy 2009). Debates present an opportunity to develop higher-order critical thinking skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Brown & Wilson 2016; Kennedy 2009). This includes learning to define the problem, assess evidence (including the credibility of the sources used), critique assumptions, identify inconsistencies and select the most relevant points to support your overall argument (Kennedy 2007). Debates enable you to critically consider different people’s perspectives on the issues under consideration, as well as why they might have those perspectives in the first place (Brown 2015), whilst simultaneously enhancing your active listening and verbal communication skills (Brown 2015) and, in team debates, your team working skills (Walker & Warhurst 2000). These skills should help you with other assessments that you undertake during your degree, including essays and presentations by helping you to construct and present your argument. A debate is therefore not an end in itself, rather it is a way of enhancing your learning of geographical material and developing a range of analytical, discussion, and content application skills (Kennedy 2009).

We consider thorough preparation as the foundation for effective debate. Here we provide guidance on one approach to preparing as effectively as possible. We outline this before considering three key elements to this method of preparation: 1) substance: your knowledge and understanding of the debate topic; 2) style: how to present your points clearly and succinctly; and 3) persuasion: how through both

substance and style you effectively persuade people of your argument. We conclude by summarising the key points raised in this guide and identifying how they apply to other assignment contexts. The discussion that follows uses the debate topic 'Should an additional charge be applied to all single-use plastics?' to demonstrate the approach we suggest.

Preparation: the foundation of effective debate

The following quotes from students who participated in a debate emphasise the importance of preparation:

"Make sure to premeditate [i.e. think about] arguments which the opposing side are likely to bring up so that you can respond effectively"

"Always have some stats or evidence to back up your point so you can 'prove' that it's valid"

"Fully research your topic, there could be sub-topics or articles/journals that you could bring up that the other team didn't think of"

Different debates may adopt slightly different formats, but all will usually involve 'back and forth' discussion between opposing sides, during which each side has the opportunity to present their argument and cross-examine the other side on the points they have made (see Appendix 1 for example debate structure). If the debate is being assessed, then ensure that you have carefully read the assessment brief and criteria. This will provide guidance as to what the marker is looking for in relation to content (the topic), structure (how it is ordered) and argument (reasons given to support your idea), and should therefore direct what and how you prepare. If you are unsure at any point then seek further advice from your lecturer/professor.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

All debates inevitably involve some 'thinking on your feet', i.e. responding in the moment to the points that your opponents raise. However, the better prepared you are, the more likely it is that you will be able to respond effectively. Figure 1 illustrates what we consider to be the three 'pillars' of preparation for a debate - if you lack effective preparation in relation to any one of these areas, then your debate is less likely to be structurally sound.

Substance

You should start by ensuring that you understand your debate topic, the remit and the scope of the brief. As with an essay title, the words used in a debate topic act as pointers as to what you should be focusing on (see West *et al.* 2019 on how to break down an essay title). With the debate question: 'Should an additional charge be applied to all single-use plastic?', the key areas to focus on are single-use plastic, the potential impacts of this on the different stakeholders (different people, the environment, different businesses) , and the feasibility of implementing a charge. The arguments concern the relationship between different costs (financial and environmental), evidence of the impacts of additional charges on consumer behaviour, and the ethics underlying the different positions on implementing a charge. Guided by these starting points you should outline your overall argument, whether for or against the debate motion. Through research you should then identify the strongest supporting arguments for your overall position and provide clear points with credible supporting evidence (Figure 2). Be careful not to underestimate how long it will take to identify and extract these points (West *et al.* 2019) but don't get bogged down in so much reading that you struggle to identify the big picture. Remember, a key part of your preparation is clearly identifying and articulating your *overall argument* as well as the specific supporting details.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

When preparing for a debate it is advisable that you research both sides of the argument. Researching the opposition's position provides you with clues as to the points they will make and therefore allows you to prepare challenges or critiques, and/or identify gaps in the logic of those points. It also helps you to find gaps in your own argument that the opposition might identify, giving you the opportunity to re-evaluate and, if necessary, adjust your approach accordingly. Even if some of your themes or points are not strong enough to underpin your main argument, keep hold of them as they may work well as points to raise during the cross-examination of your opponents. The more your opposition's potential arguments are explored at this stage of the debate preparation, the greater clarity and strength you will be able to bring to your own position, as well as your cross-examination and rebuttal of the opposition. All of this should help you to be confident in your understanding of the substance of the debate and enable you to think critically so you can:

- Define the problem, the remit, and the scope of the brief
- Assess the credibility of your sources

- Recognise inconsistencies in your arguments and those of your opposition
- Prioritise the most important points in your overarching argument

Once you have established your key themes, cross-examination points, and evidence to support your debate, your notes will start to take shape. It is useful if your notes takes a similar structure to the debate (see example Appendix 2). This prevents arguments being brought up at the wrong point or in the incorrect order. Notes should be brief in order to prevent you from relying on reading information which may reduce your ability to respond in the moment. It is also useful to leave space beneath each argument within your notes to record key points made by the opposition. This helps you to refer back to opposition points and unpick them. This is particularly useful if the opposition provides an argument you did not anticipate. We recommend that all factual points are supported with evidence, which should be referred to within your notes. Citing incorrect, unclear or partial factual information could lead to a loss of credibility in your argument. It is also helpful to include an outline of a brief conclusion in your notes. You might structure this with an initial review of the arguments you know you will make, but leaving space to highlight new points made throughout the debate, e.g. the arguments you successfully cross-examined and the points you believe were the strongest in the debate itself.

Top tips on preparing the substance of your debate:

- Identify your overall argument and break this down into your strongest supporting points
- Research both sides of the debate to identify the likely opposing arguments as well as the strongest arguments to support your position
- Clearly structure your notes around the debate format you are working with leaving space to insert additional notes during the debate

Style

Effective preparation also requires consideration of how you will present your position. Figure 2 illustrates how you might break down your side of the debate to identify key themes and the points within them. In order to explain each point you might consider using the paragraph structure framework of 'point', 'example', 'analysis' (P.E.A.) to help you to succinctly state your argument (Table 1). Your 'point' here should be a short sentence that summarizes your argument for that section of the debate. You then provide examples to support your point.

Consider your examples (or evidence) carefully for the point you want to make and the context of that example. If you are making a general, contextual point then you are more likely to want large scale data or statistical evidence to support your claim. However, if you are trying to draw people into the experience of a particular issue from the perspective you are presenting, then it may be appropriate for you to provide authentic personal stories and/or quotes from individuals to bring to life the reality of the experience that is being debated. The analysis of the example should clearly illustrate the point you are seeking to make. Keep in mind the time constraints on the debate and ensure that what you plan to say is possible in the time you have. This includes using the full extent of your time to good effect as well as ensuring you do not run out of time.

[insert Table 1 here]

Top tips on the style of your debate:

- Make each argument clearly and succinctly by ensuring it is well structured
- Provide reasoned evidence appropriate to the point you are making
- Ensure that you are using credible sources and/or authentic stories to support your points

Persuasion

Fundamentally the purpose of debate is to persuade people of your position. Having identified what your strongest arguments are you now want to consider the most persuasive way you can present the substance of your debate. For this you need to consider the audience and what might be most persuasive to them. You need to consider the context of your specific debate what is the background of the members of the audience and how to persuade the majority of people during the course of the debate, e.g. certain arguments may be more appealing to undergraduate students than to your academic tutors. Persuasive appeal might relate to ethos (ethical appeal), pathos (emotional appeal) and/or logos (logical appeal) (Beqiri 2018) (Table 2). Depending upon the nature of your debate topic, it might be appropriate for you to use all of these forms of appeal at different points. Think across the debate identifying how you want your argument (as a team or as an individual) to build and develop. It is advisable to begin with the most important arguments and those that you think are most persuasive in order to highlight these clearly to the audience and get them onside early on (Beqiri 2018).

[insert Table 2 here]

In order to 'sell' your argument it helps if you at least appear to be confident, passionate and engaged in the merits of your position. How you demonstrate this needs to be in a style that suits you, and that you are comfortable with. There is no single way of debating well. Consider your stance, voice and practice your use of technical terms (if relevant) to ensure you are able to speak with authority on the subject. Generally it is best to avoid reading notes like a script as this might make your argument appear less authentic, and thus less persuasive. If you feel that you need some notes as a prompt remember that a verbal script differs from a written one, e.g. short, clear sentences are easier for others to understand. Varying your tone will also make you sound more interesting and interested in the topic. Be aware of the reactions of people in the audience - confused or smiling facial expressions and/or supportive nodding (or lack of) will help guide you how people are responding to your argument. Think of it as a conversation with the audience, so try to maintain eye contact. Ensure that you keep your speech steady and clear – this may require slowing down relative to your normal conversational speed. This will also help you not to overwhelm people with information. Your confidence in your ability to persuade will come from practice and good preparation. Try one or two practice runs where you present your argument to friends and colleagues and ask them for their feedback.

Tips on preparing to persuade in your debate

- Identify which are the strongest approaches to persuading your specific audience in relation to your topic
- Present your strongest arguments early on in the debate
- Be passionate and engage your audience – demonstrate that you care

Performing in the debate

Whilst we have argued that preparation is fundamental to effective debating it is also useful to think through how you will respond in the moment of the debate itself. If your preparation has been thorough you should have a good idea of the arguments the opposition are likely to make allowing you to plan a critique or rebuttal prior to the debate. When arguing against another position it is important to listen out for and highlight potential errors and contradictions in the opposition's argument. If teams are uncoordinated there is a higher chance they may present contradictory arguments, or repeat certain points and miss out others. Your own research and evidence can be used to indicate these flaws. It is

important to be respectful but critical when identifying the limitations of the opposing argument. Remember, you are criticising the argument, not the individual making the argument.

Arguing something you don't agree with

Within a debate you may be presented with the challenge of arguing for a position that you do not yourself agree with. This can be challenging, however it can also be used to your advantage. Firstly, you already know or can easily identify the arguments that the opposing team are likely to use. Secondly, you are in a position to learn more about the topic and carefully consider the arguments from the opposing side. Thirdly, this may help you to be more open minded about the topic, which may either cement your original views but with further evidence to support them, or lead you to become more balanced in your overall opinion of the issue (Budesheim & Lundquist 2000). Overall an in-depth understanding of a position you don't agree with may also enhance your contribution to informed, reasoned and civilised debate on the topic beyond the classroom.

Conclusions

Debates can be powerful experiences to help learning of subject material as well as development of critical thinking skills, alongside a variety of verbal presentation and discussion skills (Healey 2012). Effective debate offers the opportunity to persuade people of your position. Such an ability is a life-long skill enabling you to expand your understanding of the world; reflect on issues based on evidence; and think about others' perspectives. These skills are valuable in the workplace and in wider society where you need to think critically about the issues you face and gain support for your preferred course of action.

We have dealt with verbal debating styles specifically in this paper. It is important to recognise that 'debates' can happen in other contexts such as online blogs, discussion forums and in the media. Whilst you may or may not be assessed in debating in any one of these formats in your university course, you can apply what we have outlined here in terms of preparation and arguing of position for other assessment types. Many of the elements regarding preparation (breaking down the title; considering both sides of the argument; providing evidence to support your points; clearly structuring your argument and being succinct) also apply to writing an essay or a report (West *et al.* 2019). Furthermore, the advice about presenting your argument in a verbal form is also useful in preparing other oral

presentations. Key to all of this is preparing and clarifying your position with evidence to support the points you make.

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Table 1: Structuring the points of your argument

Structure	Illustration
1. Point	Whilst an additional charge on single-use plastic items may lead some people to a more sustainable alternative, others may not be able to afford either the additional charge either on items that they genuinely need, or alternative options.
2a. Example (large scale)	Whilst we are encouraged to shop more sustainably there are few alternatives that are equally priced or cheaper. Shopping in large supermarkets where most of the food is packaged in single-use plastic saves money. Applying an additional cost to each piece of this plastic would therefore increase the cost of a weekly food shop. Passing this cost on to the consumer would disproportionately affect people living in poverty much more than wealthier groups.
2b. Example (personal)	For example, in a supermarket on 7 th July 2019 a single can of baked beans cost £0.75, whereas a pack of four tins wrapped in plastic cost £2.00. The same product wrapped in plastic cost a third less than its counterpart.
3. Analysis	This example illustrates how a charge on single use plastic would disproportionately affect people with less disposable income.

Note: We have chosen to use the P.E.A acronym here to structure the argument. You might also find the acronym PEEL (Point, Elaborate, Evidence, Link) a useful tool for structuring an argument.

Table 2: Different approaches to persuading people

Nature of Appeal	Example
Ethos (ethical)	Charging more for single use plastics will disproportionately affect the poorest people who cannot afford the additional charge. It discriminates against individuals who do not have the financial resources to make alternative purchasing decisions.
Pathos (emotional)	We have to do something, and soon, to address the environmental issue of single use plastics before we irrevocably damage our planet. A charge on single use plastics may not address the issue entirely, but it enables us to start making a difference straight away.
Logos (logical)	Charging more for single use plastics will reduce their use as people will choose to use re-usable bags rather than pay for a plastic bag each time they need one.

Appendix 1: Example debate structure

1. First Affirmative Constructive – 3 minutes

- This is an opportunity for the Affirmative team to speak uninterrupted
- A good introduction that attracts the audience's attention and interest in the topic
- Clearly state the Affirmative's position on the topic and support this with reasoned arguments and evidence
- Conclude effectively

2. Cross Examination of the Affirmative by the Negative – 5 minutes

- This is an opportunity for the Negative team to question what the Affirmative team have introduced
- The Negative team ask questions of the Affirmative team ensuring that the Affirmative team have the opportunity to respond to those questions
- The Negative team should have a strategy or at the very least a direction to their questioning
- New evidence may be introduced to challenge the points made by the Affirmative team

3. First Negative Constructive – 3 minutes

- This is an opportunity for the Negative team to speak uninterrupted.
- A good introduction that attracts the audience's attention and interest in the topic
- Clearly state the Negative's position on the topic and support this with reasoned arguments and evidence
- Question the Affirmative's contentions/evidence
- Conclude effectively

4. Cross Examination of the Negative by the Affirmative – 5 minutes

- This is an opportunity for the Affirmative team to question what the Negative team have introduced
- The Affirmative team ask questions of the Negative team ensuring that the Negative team have the opportunity to respond to those questions
- The Affirmative team should have a strategy or at the very least a direction to their questioning
- New evidence may be introduced to challenge the points made by the Negative team

5. Second Affirmative Constructive – 3 minutes

- This is an opportunity for the Affirmative team to speak uninterrupted
- Clearly state each of your contentions - support with reason and evidence
- Respond to Negative arguments/attacks
- Conclude effectively

6. Cross Examination of the Affirmative by the Negative – 5 minutes

- This is an opportunity for the Negative team to question what the Affirmative team have introduced
- The Negative team ask questions of the Affirmative team ensuring that the Affirmative team have the opportunity to respond to those questions
- The Negative team should have a strategy or at the very least a direction to their questioning
- New evidence may be introduced to challenge the points made by the Affirmative team

7. Second Negative Constructive – 3 minutes

- This is an opportunity for the Negative team to speak uninterrupted
- Clearly state each of your contentions - support with reason and evidence
- Respond to Affirmative arguments/attacks
- Conclude effectively

8. Cross Examination of the Negative by the Affirmative – 5 minutes

- This is an opportunity for the Affirmative team to question what the Negative team have introduced
- The Affirmative team ask questions of the Negative team ensuring that the Negative team have the opportunity to respond to those questions
- The Affirmative team should have a strategy or at the very least a direction to their questioning
- New evidence may be introduced to challenge the points made by the Negative team

Rebuttal Speeches – no new arguments – new evidence and analysis are ok

9. Negative Rebuttal – 3 minutes

- Rebuild the Negative case
- Summarize how the Negative position is superior
- Respond to the Affirmative arguments – extend arguments by giving additional support for them

- Conclude effectively

10. Affirmative Rebuttal – 3 minutes

- Rebuild the Affirmative case
- Summarize how the Affirmative position is superior
- Respond to the Negative arguments – extend arguments by giving additional support for them
- Conclude effectively

Adapted from: Jessamine (2019) available at:

<http://www.jessamine.k12.ky.us/userfiles/339/Classes/2291/Team%20Debate%20Format.doc>

Appendix 2: Preparation notes framework

The Debate 'Against' Should an additional charge be applied to Single-use plastic.

Introductory argument

Predicted opposing arguments

Second argument

Predicted opposing arguments

Concluding Points

Key Facts with References

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-