

CLASSROOM TOOL: FLASH-DEBATE PROTOCOL

A Protocol for Quick, In-class Debates

- 1. Introduce divergent points of view concurrently.** Choose a topic that has (at least) two rational sides to it, and introduce both sides right away. Watching a video is a great way to begin, but a read-aloud, independent reading, or a combination of these can also work. We learned from Paul Deane at ETS's Cognitively Based Assessment *of, for, and as* Learning (CBAL) to be highly strategic in our release of texts. For instance, whatever text—and stance—kids encounter first, they tend to sympathize with, even cling to. The sooner you can introduce an opposing text, the more likely it is that kids will be open to investigating multiple sides. If you can begin with a text that introduces more than one side, that is even better, so that kids start out open to the notion of complexity. If, on the other hand, kids spend several days researching one side, and then turn to an opposing side, they tend to reject information for that opposing side, even when that information is rational.

It's often helpful to have a demonstration topic that you'll practice this work on at a fast, intense pace. Let's imagine we were demonstrating a flash-debate protocol on the pros and cons of the "take-the-knee" position. While we personally might be very sympathetic to Colin Kaepernick's position, we would introduce compelling text evidence for both sides very rapidly. We might, therefore, first show a few minutes from "**Colin Kaepernick, Amnesty International Ambassador of Conscience,**" and invite students to talk about the main points he makes, and which are the most compelling. And then we might immediately show "**Snoop Dogg says Colin Kaepernick needs to choose—football or revolutionary?**" and invite students to talk about what's compelling about Snoop Dogg's points. Notice that we're not asking kids to talk, yet, about the stance they agree with, we are inviting them to simply describe the main points each makes. This kind of summary work really helps with kids' comprehension.

- 2. Demonstrate how you distinguish two distinct stances, or positions.** What's interesting here, is that Snoop Dog doesn't disagree with Kaepernick's stance on protesting police violence. What he disagrees with is the football field as the site for that protest. It's nuanced. That is an important lesson for students—that often, they will find internal dispute, within one side of an argument, and they can research those disputes, coming to a more nuanced understanding of how there can be disagreement around solutions.

A lot of students need support clarifying parallel/opposing positions. You might, then, clarify that two distinct positions could be as follows:

Position A: It's appropriate for athletes to use their position to support political causes.

Position B: It's inappropriate for athletes to use their position to support political causes.

Position A: Professional athletes should be allowed to 'take the knee' during the Pledge of Allegiance.

Position B: Professional athletes should not be allowed to 'take the knee' during the Pledge of Allegiance.

Position A: "Taking the knee" is a powerful and justifiable form of political activism in any site—playing fields or schools.

Position B: "Taking the knee" is an inappropriate form of political activism on playing fields or in schools.

3. **Send kids back to reread or listen again, this time gathering specific evidence for opposing sides.** Often, you'll have students who could argue either side. This is helpful as you set kids up for one-on-one debate practice. You might reread the original texts, and/or introduce a more nuanced text. In that case, you might watch one of the original news reports such as "**Colin Kaepernick Takes a Knee for National Anthem**," and invite students to gather preliminary evidence that "taking a knee" is justifiable, and/or "**Terrell Owens confronts Stephen A. over Colin Kaepernick criticisms**," where these two debaters argue about Kaepernick's methods.
4. **Give debaters time to work with a quick study group to strengthen their arguments.** When writers have the chance to compare their evidence and their reasoning with others, it helps them compare their evidence and deepen their reasoning. As kids work together, circulate, asking things like, "How will your argument go?" "What are your main points?" and "How will you start?"
5. **Invite partners to flash-debate each other, one-on-one.** Encourage students to gather their evidence, rehearse their main points, think about the order of their points, and debate. Often, we've found that limiting the amount of time that students have to defend their position helps them be more discerning about what to include—it forces them to rank their evidence and sequence their main points. To prepare to debate, suggest that students first organize their strongest examples/evidence. Then they can see whether they can group these into categories so that they are making a few distinct points. Give them time to briefly rehearse what their claim (or hypothesis) will sound like and try out their argument as claim, point one, example, point two, example.
6. **Give specific, high-leverage feedback.** After Partner As have defended their positions, it's helpful to give some feedback that Partner Bs can apply. Then it's helpful to give feedback after Partner B has spoken, as well. You can prepare this feedback ahead of time and then give as much as seems helpful in the moment. Angle your feedback as ways to be even more compelling, including:
 - starting with a clear position statement
 - giving a little introduction, perhaps a roadmap of your main points
 - using your notes to support your ideas with detailed evidence
 - explaining how your evidence supports your point
 - quoting authorities or stories to help your cause
 - responding thoughtfully to predicted counterclaims
 - using gestures and tone of voice to strengthen your position and show that you listen carefully.
7. **Have students reflect on strengths and weaknesses of these preliminary arguments as they meet with like-minded debaters to strengthen arguments.** Send kids back to their study groups in order to compare how their arguments went and what their opponents said, and to fill in gaps in their arguments and responses to counterarguments.
8. **Have students wrap up with a reflection.** There are several options for wrapping up. These include:
 - *finding a position C.* Invite opponents to consider whether there is a Position C, which is more nuanced, that they could both support, and have them rehearse that argument.
 - *making research plans.* Invite students to make research plans for ways to fill in gaps in their arguments.
 - *reflecting on public speaking skills.* Invite students to share some of the moves they made as speakers that were powerful, such as using gestures, using notes, modulating their tone of voice, looking their audience in the eye.
 - *reflecting on argumentation techniques.* Invite students to reflect on your feedback and make choices about how they would strengthen their arguments next time—for example, by providing

an introduction, by considering sequence, by explaining their evidence, by quoting an authority or including a story, by predicting counterclaims and responding to them, by wrapping up with a brief conclusion.