

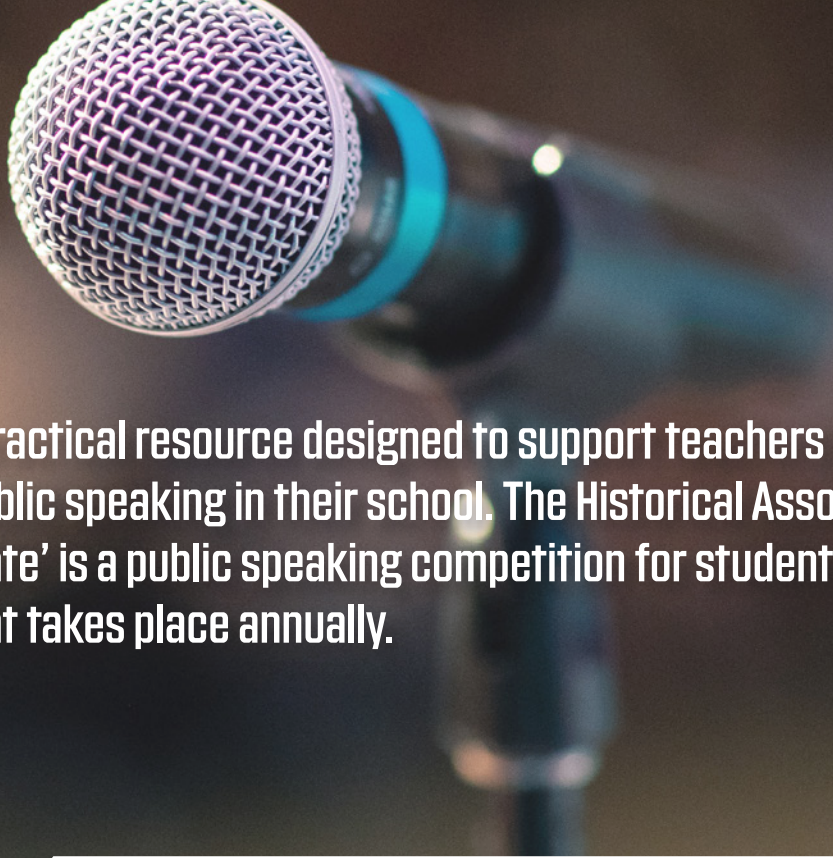
THE GREAT DEBATE 2026

TEACHER'S GUIDE



CREATING THE DEBATE
INTRODUCING PUBLIC SPEAKING
AND THE GREAT DEBATE





This pack is a practical resource designed to support teachers who want to introduce public speaking in their school. The Historical Association 'The Great Debate' is a public speaking competition for students in the UK & Ireland that takes place annually.

Debate guidance

Encouraging students to take part in an inter-schools debate can be difficult and time demanding but very rewarding. The HA Great Debate style is a good way for young people to:

- prepare a talk
- map out an argument
- research an idea or concept
- explore a variety of points of view
- deliver a piece to an audience
- prepare to take questions from people

The HA Great debate format means that students will:

- have a set amount of time to present their argument(s)
- not have to argue across other students or challenge other people arguments

Preparation for teachers

Create a debate club or team; this can meet at lunch times or after school.

Ask them for ideas that they think are important and set some questions.

In preparation, choose some headlines from the previous week. Ask the students why some people might agree with the headlines and why some people might disagree, and see if any can serve as a prompt for a full debate.

For example:

- The decision of a public referendum must be upheld by the government.
- Politicians should only be paid the living wage.
- Exams don't prove how capable a person is.
- All British police should carry guns.
- History is not a useful subject for a career.

Each of the following stages should have two sessions, or at least one session and a research session, which can be done in the students' own time.

Stage one

Divide the group into two and ask one side to research the arguments in favour of the question and the other group to research the arguments against – present to the group.

In discussion – is it easier to find arguments to support a statement than it is to disagree?

Tip: make sure you have an example for each statement for and against.



Stage two

In small groups or individually pick another question and ask the students to find five arguments for and five against the questions – present to the group.

How easy is it to defend an argument you don't agree with?

Tip: If you don't agree with a point but you have to represent it, then start by looking at factual evidence and how that evidence can be used persuasively.

Stage three

Choose a subject from the list you have drawn up (see page 3 for examples) and find a personal example that would justify taking one side. The personal argument can be a student's own or one from history.

In pairs ask the students to prepare their arguments and then present them. Discuss how they combined research with statements.

Tip: the personal example can be a point of view on someone else's experience. For example: My aunt works in a tourist office. Her A-level history is really useful when she is promoting the local tourist activities in her area.

Stage four

'The Great Debate' format does not pit students against each other in a cross-discussion. Rather, students are asked to answer the set question choosing some arguments that they think would support one point of view and provide a personal response.

The following questions might help your students to work together to prepare a talk in 'The Great Debate' format:

- The most important scientific discovery of the last 50 years is...
- The internet has changed my life from that of my grandparents irreversibly.
- Wars not social histories are the most important way to examine history.
- Women's history is only for girls.

Tip:

as well as constructing your arguments, explore how someone might argue against your point (such as in weeks one and two). This will make it possible to add a line acknowledging that some people might disagree with you, despite which you have reached your conclusions.

Stage five

Present your arguments to the group out loud and be prepared to have questions asked. Make sure that you stick to the time limit and have someone time it.

Tip:

a good structure for your talk is to break it into parts:

For example:

- First quarter – how you interpreted the subject and what it led you to think.
- Second quarter – your argument (presentation of evidence).
- Third quarter – a personal example of evidence to demonstrate how the subject relates to you.
- Final quarter – how people might disagree with your evidence but why you have reached your conclusion.
- Finish with your argument on the question once more.



Student practice – on your own or with a small group

If there is no organised club in your school but you still want to prepare for 'The Great Debate', use stages one to five above as a guide but focus much more on research and timings.

Prepare a talk in favour and against each of the questions and then think about which you found the easiest to do.

Choose one of the questions you feel you know nothing about and research the arguments for and against and find a personal example for each.

Watch videos of our past finalists on the Great Debate section of our website: You can view previous finalists on our website:

<https://www.history.org.uk/secondary/categories/the-great-debate>

Break their arguments down and use their format to create a talk – this will help you think about putting a talk together. Then look at the tip in stage five about breaking your talk into parts.

For further guidance on public speaking, take a look at our Students Guide, also available for download at www.history.org.uk

Tips for public speaking

- Start with the whole talk written down if that helps you but then break it down into headline points so that you are not reading from a script. Each headline can be put on a card. If it makes you feel more confident you can still have the whole talk with you as a back-up.
 - Look directly at the audience and pause at points in your talk.
 - Look towards the back of the hall so that your head is held high. If you look down, people will not be able to hear you.
 - Practice your talk so that you are sure about the timings.
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- Check that you have an example of evidence for each of your arguments.
 - Make sure you can give at least one reason why someone might disagree with you, and have a rational counterargument included in your talk.
 - Ask a friend or relative to listen to your talk and to ask you questions.
 - Do not speak too quickly.
 - Try to relax; if you are talking about a subject that interests you and matters to you, let your passion for the topic come through.