Argument structure

Lesson Type

Skill work

Explanatory Note

Good arguments stand on two legs: truth and importance. If a judge or audience don't believe an argument to be true, they won't care about it. '*If you don't do your homework dragons will eat you*' does not persuade my A level economists to do their essays. Getting eaten by a dragon is important, but it's not true. '*Mum, I want to eat chocolate for dinner every night this week*' might be true, but a child's desire to eat chocolate is rarely that important to a parent, especially when weighed up against their child's health and propensity to get a sugar rush and destroy the house.

Given this, we advocate for a simple structure for students to follow when making arguments.

State your point.
Explain why it is true. *(Sometimes thought of as why it makes sense.)*
Explain why it is important. *(Sometimes though of as why it matters/why anyone should care.)*
Give an example.

Students will skip at least one of these steps (sometimes 3 out of 4!) when they start debating. Constant reminders when giving feedback and repetition will work.

A good way for students to recognise these steps is to have them note down when judging debates which speakers managed all four steps in their arguments.

A mistake students often make is jumping between ideas. They should try to state their first point and then go through all the steps before moving to their next point.

The structure is essentially P.E.E. - Point, Explain, Example, which is used in many primary schools as an aide to good writing. Better writing is one of the many benefits of more structured speaking.

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Find the missing leg!

- A good game to play with students to practice this skill is to give them some topics and have students come up with arguments that are true but not important, important but not true, neither or both. They can then present these arguments to the class and the class can guess if the argument is missing a leg (truth or importance) or two legs!

For this game, you can put students in teams and award points if they like to get competitive. Extra points for most interesting and creative arguments!

Sample arguments.

- We should ban zoos. In zoos, evil zookeepers shoot the animals for fun.
- We should ban zoos. In zoos, animals are sometimes kept in cages.
- We should ban gambling. Gambling can be very costly and very addictive. People can get hooked on the feeling of winning money, but because the casinos and betting sites have a mathematical advantage, gamblers will always lose more than they win. No one enjoys losing money, so it is a bad industry.
- We should ensure that parliament is 50% female. After the 2019 election, 34% of the house of commons was female but the population is 50% female.
- Children under the age of fourteen should not be on social media. Social media is full of unrealistic images of people having amazing fun and both men and women looking incredible. Young people do not realise that these images are not representative of a real life and that often the photos of models and influencers are done after starvation diets, water restriction, steroids, plastic surgery, photoshop, professional lighting and other tricks. This makes young people feel their lives are rubbish in comparison to their idols which can cause feelings of sadness, inadequacy and even depression.
- Cats are the worst animal. They are sneaky. I don't like them.

Now all that's left is to get students to come up with some points, and argue them using the structure, making sure they have both Why Trues and Why Importants. Happy debating!

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