



The Great Debate

Modern Communication Skills
Guaranteed to Make Others Listen

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Introduction

How often do you get into arguments because of total miscommunication?

How often do you get into it with someone over a deeply held value or belief and feel disappointed that you can't a) make the other person listen and b) get your point across in the way you want. You say your piece, they ignore you, and you feel the frustration boiling just beneath your skin. What was a disagreement over a particular topic is suddenly a full-blown argument.

You felt confident when the subject came up, but you forgot to consider just how confident the other person felt. More importantly, you forgot that the person opposite you might also be defending their deeply held value or belief. You're on opposite sides, but you're both passionate about the topic.

Or, worse, you're dealing with a devil's advocate who argues simply for the sake of arguing. Though, in those cases, it's best to know when to cut and run. If someone is playing devil's advocate, there's a good chance they will continue the argument until they get bored. Though, they might be a good person to practice your debate skills on. It *will* force you to consider your position on a deeper level *and* try out different ways to get your point across.

When people think of *having a debate*, they think about politicians standing on a stage behind their podiums. They imagine a moderator directing questions to each party and cutting in when someone runs over their time. Or they think about debate clubs in high school and college, where people speak as quickly as possible to fill the time and throw their opponent off. Yes, those are formal debates.

However, synonyms of the word debate include discussion, give and take, argument, and disputation.

You debate on some level almost every day, especially if you work in a team. There is always **something up for debate**. The last thing you want to do is break down and yell at everyone. The last thing you want is to look like an amateur unable to make your point.

Debate skills are simply communication skills on a modern level. If you want to be better at making other people listen to you, you need to brush up on the skill of debate.

This eBook is going to help you productively harness your debate skills.

If you have ever defended your position on a certain topic and realized after, you could have done a better job. If you have had to make a case for a big decision, like a cross-country move. If you have a big project idea and face resistance at every turn. Then you need to improve your communication skills and brush up on your debating ability.

Think of debating as constructive arguing.

To be an efficient debater, you need to be an effective communicator.

Holding Your Own

When you address a disagreement, conflict, or new topic of conversation, the words you use matter. Sometimes, no matter how good your intentions, the words you choose upset the other person, and it will only ever make things worse. Sometimes, you can say the exact thing to take them from 100 to zero. It's all down to your words.

You don't want to be aggressive or combative. The only reason people slip into those modes is that they *can't* use their words. They get frustrated and angry because they cannot find the correct words to communicate what they are trying to say.

You can be an effective debater without being a pushover. You don't need negative emotions to drive the conversation forward. In fact, it is often calm, constructive, and effectively conveyed arguments that win the day!

The Trouble with Debating

If you believe in the opinion you are trying to communicate; then it is up to you to do everything you possibly can to get your point across. However, it has to be done respectfully. There are three big issues you may run into during confrontations.

- **High Stakes** – negative emotions are often involved in these situations because you have two (or more) people on opposite sides of the aisle discussing a topic that matters to them equally. Rarely do people cope well when negative emotions are riding high. That type of discomfort makes us fumble with words, resulting in saying things we simply don't mean.
- **Wrong Words**
It's common to use the wrong words simply because, in a debate situation, our first instincts can be off. It's the wrong words we use that roil us into a bigger problem. We frame the situation into one person as right, and therefore, the other must be wrong. A debate is this – you are advocating your position. Unfortunately, it often becomes a blame game. *I'm right, and I will tell you why you're wrong!*
- **Misaligned**
You said one thing, the other person heard another. These communication misalignments are common, *especially* in a debate situation. Your intent does not matter. The impact does. Your focus is on what you mean to say, and you have to pay attention to how others interpret it.

Let's make sure you avoid all of these debating pitfalls and put your best foot forward. To debate successfully, you must first put together your evidence and argument. While this isn't something you can always do, particularly if you did not see an argument coming, the very practice of doing it will still prepare you for the difficult conversations that seemingly come out of nowhere. If you don't have a lot of time to research and organize, it's key that you organize your information efficiently.

Building Your Case

Keep all of your evidence on a specific topic or subject in a single file so you can easily grab it when you need to. If it grows too large, then you can create separate files for each subtopic. The entire point of this process is to easily find the information you need when someone makes a point you'd like to counter. Once all of your evidence is prepared, you can start to build your argument.

In the world of debate, this is known as a brief. You can write a short version of your argument. You don't have time to pull out every piece of evidence that you compiled, so you have to make choices on the evidence that you choose to put in your brief. It has to be short and to the point, but you have to present evidence alongside your argument; otherwise, you leave yourself open to attack.

To do this well, you will need to test your evidence.

- How old is your evidence? If it's not recent enough, then it might not be useful. If you're dealing with a topic of religion or philosophy, the evidence's age isn't as important as if you're arguing the importance of vaccines.
- Is the evidence relevant? Does it provide your point? If not, then it's not relevant.
- Is the evidence reliable? Are you using trustworthy sources? Is it a qualified source? You want an expert with advanced training who has experience in the subject or has carried out the research. Questions to consider when testing your source:
 - Is this source in the position to know?
 - Did this source witness an event?
 - Is it possible this source is biased?

That is essentially what it all comes down to. So, remember this as you prepare for a debate:

- Research your topic well.
- Gather evidence that will help you make your point.
- Use statistics, testimonials, examples, and expert opinions to build your case.

When building your case, you should consider how someone else might counter it. We'll go into this a bit deeper in the next section.

Common Logical Fallacies

There are several common logical fallacies to consider, but let's look at **the** most common that you are likely to come across in a debate situation.

- **The Strawman**

This is probably *the* most common fallacy you will encounter. In this situation, someone misrepresents the opponent's view. They distort and twist it to make it weaker, and then they attack the weaker version of the argument that they themselves created rather than the true argument being made. See the example below.

June: You know, we should include secular songs in the winter show too.

Stanley: Oh, well, that's just fine. You'll just keep pushing until Christmas is canceled!

This strawman feeds into slippery slope reasoning. June simply wants to be more inclusive, but Stanley sees it as the first step in an attempt to remove Christmas from the equation entirely.

How do you counter it?

Point out *why* it's a strawman argument and challenge the opposition to justify their view. Or you can ignore it and focus on elaborating the original point. Alternatively, you could accept their strawman but discuss why it's irrelevant to your stance. By countering it calmly, you put yourself back in control of the conversation.

- **The Ad Hominem**

In this situation, someone outright rejects the argument someone else is making by focusing their attacks on the person rather than the argument itself. This is something that happens on the political debate stage and in everyday life.

Myra presents her opinion on a topic.

Jeremy: How could you possibly have an opinion on this topic? You didn't even go to college!

This fallacy can also play out with age-related prejudice, ethnicity, marital status, income bracket, etc.

An ad hominem attack is simply evidence of prejudice. By identifying those types of attacks, you can defend yourself. It is possible to use ad hominem attacks to great effect if they are relevant. However, they're rarely rooted in data and facts and are generally emotion-based. Remain calm and counter.

- **Begging The Question**

You might say you're begging the question when you are literally raising a question that requires an answer. However, in the debating sphere, begging the question is essentially assuming the premise is the conclusion.

Charlie: I am fully confident that God is real because the Bible tells me God is real, and it is the inerrant word of God.

This doesn't make a claim incorrect. By no means are we claiming God isn't real. This is simply an example of an argument that fails to support the claim on its own. It assumes the original claim is true in a circular manner. It isn't evidence because this is simply not something that we can know or prove.

You have to form a sound argument to support any claim you make. Begging the question is not the way forward. It shouldn't be too difficult to counter it when you recognize someone else using it.

- **The Red Herring**

When someone attempts to sidetrack the opposition or audience by bringing up irrelevant content and claiming it solves the original issue.

"We can't give our employees a raise; we work hard to create fantastic products and high levels of customer service."

Or, in a mystery novel, the writer will spin a detailed tale about a masked intruder that leads you to believe said masked intruder is the person who

murdered the homeowner, only for that to be a red herring to distract you from the spouse.

How do you counter a red herring? You can take control by explaining why it's false, you can make the other person justify what they're saying, or you can shift the conversation back to the original subject. You could also ignore it and move on entirely.

- **The Bandwagon**

The bandwagon fallacy is this – a significant number of the population believe something to be true. But that doesn't mean that it is automatically true. Popularity isn't sufficient for an argument to be validated. Trying to argue from this standpoint doesn't consider proper evidence.

It's the *9 out of 10 dentists agree* conversation. If nine dentists agree that this toothpaste is the greatest, then it must be true... even though 10 is a fairly small sample size in terms of available dentists.

- **The False Dilemma**

This fallacy aims to mislead by presenting a complex issue by focusing on two opposing sides. It ignores the reality that most issues exist on a spectrum and rarely is anything a black and white situation.

It's incredibly problematic because it tends to result in extreme stances and the false dilemma fallacy overlooks compromise to force dishonest acceptance of one or the other. For example, Jordan has presented a plan, and Barclay tells the room that they can either accept Jordan's plan as is or the project will fail.

- **The Hasty Generalization**

When someone draws their conclusions based on insufficient or inadequate evidence, we get the hasty generalization fallacy. Essentially, someone jumps to conclusions about the validity of a situation, belief, value, or opinion, and they come up with some evidence they believe backs it up. But they didn't dig deep enough. They found a couple of articles that source each other and overlooked the wealth of potential counterarguments.

Or worse, the person who sees a headline presents it with an opinion without realizing that their opinion is countered within the text of the article they have just shared. This is one that talking heads on social media are particularly guilty of committing. Sadly, it's enough to spin the outrage machine, and the truth is overlooked by the people who agreed. The people who most need to see the correction are the people who don't see the correction or, worse yet, don't care about it.

It might be simpler, such as a manager who decides to institute a mandatory rule for all employees to attend a public speaking class. The reasoning for this decision was two or three employees attended the class off of their own back, and the manager saw a steep increase in their engagement after that. The manager makes a hasty generalization about the class's benefits and decides it will work for everyone.

- **Correlation/Causation**

This fallacy is when there appears to be a correlation between two things. It's easy then to jump to the conclusion that one caused the other. You would think it's an obvious issue to spot, but it's more challenging to identify in practice, especially when you *want* to find the correlation between two points to prove your point.

For example, you changed the color scheme and layout of your blog in January. Your post views were down in January. Therefore, changing the color scheme of your blog resulted in fewer views. Or, you posted less compelling content, fewer posts. Perhaps, your views drop every January. Correlation certainly does not equal causation.

Conduct

Finally, let's take a look at how you should conduct yourself during a debate. It's simple.

- **No Attacking**

As mentioned above, debates tend to involve a lot of emotions, many of which are negative. This can result in the temptation to attack the other person. It's not relevant, so remain focused on the topic at hand and avoid attacking someone else.

- **Avoid Generalizations**

You should also avoid sarcasm and exaggerations. Any of these tactics shift an argument's focus. It forces the other person into a corner to defend themselves, and they start to make excuses. What that means is they aren't listening to what you are trying to communicate.

When you use terms like *always* or *everyone*, it blows the situation out of proportion and gives the opposition an inroad to make your argument look weak. You can't have a constructive conversation this way. *You always... This always... Everyone thinks... Everyone says... people* often make generalizations when they have no other argument.

- **Don't Be A Know-It-All**

No one likes a know-it-all in any situation, so *don't be a know-it-all*. There is not a single person on this planet who knows absolutely everything. So, don't approach a conversation, argument, debate as though you do.

- **Don't Make Threats**

Or use ultimatums. When you slip into this habit, your argument fades to black, and the focus shifts to your threat or ultimatum. This results in an all-out defense or a counterattack. It does not contribute to the conversation.

- **Be Respectful**

As tempting as it might be, avoid rolling your eyes, tutting, shaking your head, name-calling, saying duh, or *obviously*. Don't be sarcastic, don't insult, don't adopt disrespectful body language.

This brings me to another important point – do not interrupt. It might be tempting to butt in to refute something the other person is saying, but it's important to wait your turn. Simply make a note of it and bring it up when it's your turn. Think about how annoying it is when someone interrupts you. Think about how frustrated you feel when you can't finish your point. Don't do the same to someone else, even if they keep doing it to you. Be the bigger person.

It's also important that you avoid raising your voice. The louder your voice gets, the more likely it is to incite anger. Don't get sucked into a shouting match.

- **It's Over When It's Over**

No matter what, do not walk away unless the debate is over. Unless, of course, the other person is being verbally or emotionally abusive. Until then, show them the respect you wish to be shown and participate until an agreement is reached.

Even if that agreement is to agree to disagree, walking away is disrespectful. Though, someone who is behaving irrationally and disrespecting the entire process shouldn't be entertained any further.

...But Take Time To Listen

If you want to make others listen, then you must be prepared to listen just as carefully.

Firstly, it's important to ask questions in the process of a debate. There is no point in asking questions if you are not prepared to listen to the answer. Asking the right questions will allow you to remain in control of the conversation, and it will put your opponent in a position to search for answers. Your questions can challenge their point; they can pose hypothetical situations, put them in a difficult position, or use it to provoke them.

Questions are powerful tools in debates.

However, when you ask those questions, be prepared to give your opponent time and space to respond and listen to what they say. Don't just listen to the words coming out of their mouths. Pay attention to the nonverbal cues in their body language too. You should spend more time listening than you should be talking. While some may suggest a 75/25 split, aim for 50/50 at the very least.

Let's be clear – listening does not mean that you are standing by making extensive notes on what you plan to say next. You can make notes of what the person is saying as a reminder to counter the point. However, it would be best if you focused your attention solely on your opponent. This is where things can veer off course if you aren't careful.

When you do not listen to what the other person is saying, you slip into bad habits, such as repeating the same points rather than addressing their point or statement. You're not going to get their buy-in if you repeat yourself. You will only frustrate them because they won't feel heard.

When you actively listen, you improve your ability to respond to arguments. By listening to the way they present their argument and communicate their opinion, you gain an insight into the type of arguments they may or may not find convincing from you. There are multiple ways you can respond to a point – you can challenge

their facts, you can challenge their conclusions, or you can accept their point, but argue the weight they place on that point.

If you're listening carefully, you should be prepared to concede when your opponent has made a good point. There is no joy in arguing every single point just for the sake of arguing. If someone makes a valid point, you look like a far more reasonable person by conceding it.

You can still outweigh that point by proposing a different argument. For example, your opponent can highlight that prison is not an effective way to rehabilitate offenders. You can agree with that but propose it serves more another purpose – to deter and/or punish offenses. Concede, but counter.

Additionally, listening to what your opponent has to say gives you a chance to study them. You get to know their strengths, values, weaknesses, and beliefs. That helps you shape your approach because you know how to explore their weaknesses, which values to appeal to, and how best to turn their arguments back on them.

Don't be afraid to compromise positions that accommodate both of your points. You don't always have to win by knockout. You can win by negotiating too.

There's another benefit to listening – it gives you a chance to look out for crafty tricks like red herrings, personal attacks, strawmen, and the like.

Finding Common Ground

The world is fairly chaotic, and it feels as though the very idea of public discourse has been popped like a balloon. If there is just one thing that we can all agree on, it's that we really can't agree on anything at all. Turn on any TV show that revolves around a panel, and you'll hear raised voices and disagreements.

Make a quick visit to any social media platform, and it won't take you long before you find a spat. Many people withdraw from engagement because they simply aren't willing to risk getting into an argument. Conversation and communication have been replaced by contempt.

When you engage in a debate, it can get tense, but finding common ground is the best way forward.

The big question is *how*?

The only way to do it is to separate ideas and identity. You also have to open yourself to persuasion genuinely. Having a debate with someone is an excellent way to talk about what the world is right now, what it could be or should be. It's how we determine whether our ideas stand up to scrutiny or make major life decisions with a partner who isn't on the same page (yet).

You cannot debate unless you are willing to engage with ideas that conflict with your own, whether that debate is on an online message board, in the replies of a social media post, or in person. This is the simple foundation of debate, where people gather to argue their sides. The word argue can often carry a somewhat negative connotation; however, in debate arguing is welcomed and expected.

At the foundation of every debate is a rebuttal. It's the idea that someone makes a claim and someone responds, then the original person responds to that response, and so on. If there is no rebuttal, there is no debate. Without debate, you simply have pontificating.

It doesn't matter how much you disagree with someone, how opposed your views are. You should always start by finding common ground, even if it is barely a sliver.

This is the most productive way to disagree. Identify the one thing you can agree on and move forward from there. This is a skillful way of establishing your shared reality. Shared reality is the result of two people motivated to experience a commonality. It is the ultimate remedy to alternative facts.

A conflict remains because the conflict is the basis of a debate. However, shared reality provides a platform to kickstart the conversation. It is much easier to find common ground when dealing with someone in person because hearing their voice humanizes them. It is easier to engage with their points when you have a voice and face to assign the opinion. It's why online debate quickly spirals into mudslinging.

Nothing is stopping you from pausing an argument mid-shout to put some rules in place to create a more structured debate. It would certainly inject a bit of humanity into the conversations we *need* to have.

Once you're in a shared reality with someone, you can easily separate someone's ideas from their identity. In formal debates, debaters don't choose the side they argue. It is assigned to them. Yet, they research and plan their argument from the assigned side, and they create a winning strategy to back it up.

They find the clearest, least personal way to engage with the idea. You have to do the same thing when you debate a subject that matters to you. You have to remove your emotions from the equation, you have to distance yourself from the idea, and you have to approach it from a dispassionate place.

Think about how you identify. Now imagine watching weekly news segments that involve members of each political party.

Do you really listen to the words that are coming out of their mouths? Or do you immediately find yourself siding with the letter beneath their name on screen? It's an easy trap to fall into.

What if those segments didn't feature the faces of the people involved? What if they didn't signify their political leaning next to their names? What if op-eds were fact-checked and presented without a name attached? When we stop and listen to what other people are *really* saying, we find more common ground than we realize existed. By debating ideas rather than debating people, we accept that the world is

filled with many shades of gray. By debating, you open yourself to the possibility that you might actually be wrong.

You *might* be wrong, and as powerful as your case might be, you should enter every debate with the humility of uncertainty. You *might* be wrong.

One of the biggest reasons we struggle to agree to disagree or disagree productively is how emotionally attached we become to our ideas. Now, there are certainly valid reasons for this emotional attachment, but they can take control of you if you allow them. If you debate something long enough, you might switch sides. You should consider this before you engage in any debate.

Take some time to argue against your perspective to understand better the people who espouse that belief. You're forcing yourself to see the world through their eyes and thus accepting the humility of uncertainty discussed above. You are embracing the possibility that you are wrong, or at least trying to remember that your opponent is human. Either way, it will make you a better decision-maker.

It would do you well to consider what argument or position would make you change your mind because it forces you to consider why you were so certain that you were right in the first place. There's a lot to consider when debating, and common ground is where all productive conversations begin. Bring humanity back to your conversations, even if you believe someone's opinion is truly odious.

Unless you are taking part in an official debate that judges or an audience decide, there are three typical outcomes to any debate.

You Persuade Them

In an ideal world, every debate would end with you persuading your opponent to your side or to your way of thinking. If you do manage to persuade your opponent over to your opinion, do not boast. An inevitable endorphin rush comes with winning, but that doesn't mean you should strut around boasting about your big win.

As much as it might feel like it, the purpose of a debate is *not* about winning. It's about educating others on your way of thinking or a particular subject. If that person comes around to your way of thinking, you have achieved that goal.

You have won because you convinced them, but more importantly, someone has faced up to an incorrect value, opinion, or belief. This is particularly important when the differing view relates to matters of health, wealth, and happiness. For example, you have successfully persuaded someone that vaccinations are safe and effective. You have not just won the debate. You have ensured that they protect themselves, their family, and the people they come into contact with most often.

If you managed to have a polite debate, you have still educated others on a particular subject or your way of thinking regardless of the outcome. No matter the outcome, it's important to maintain a sense of class. In victory, you can be a magnanimous winner. You never know when you will have another debate with this person or when you will need them on your side, whether it's a colleague, family member, or otherwise.

They Persuade You

Sometimes, your opponent will manage to persuade *you* to their point of view. Whether it's your partner convincing you a cross country move is a correct decision or your sister-in-law bringing you around to her point of view regarding a potato salad recipe.

Sometimes we simply adopt views because people around us adopt them. Or we take on beliefs because we were raised with them. It's easy to do, it's something everyone is guilty of, but usually, we come face-to-face with those beliefs' reality. Unfortunately, you might not be in this situation until you find yourself debating your opinion against someone with a wealth of knowledge on the subject.

When you open yourself up to the prospect that you are wrong and you listen carefully during the debate, it's always possible that an opponent convinces you that your opinion, value, or belief is the wrong one.

If this is the outcome of your debate, then you should thank your opponent for educating you. You may go through a grieving process following the loss of a belief you have held onto for a long time. Give yourself time, but you can be proud that you were open-minded enough to listen to someone else.

You Agree to Disagree

The most common outcome of any debate is that neither party is convinced to shift their stance, but they agree to disagree because they respectively heard each other out.

The greatest example of an agree to disagree debate would be the political debates we hold every presidential election. In the primary stages, those debates are made up of people on the same side but who approach things differently.

You would think that these debates matter, but... they don't. President Joe Biden was seen as the weakest performer at most of the primary debates, but he won the Democratic nomination handily and became the United States president. In the Republican primary debates before the 2016 election, other Republicans roundly mocked former President Donald Trump based on his poor performances. Still, he knocked out the competition, won the nomination, and served as United States President.

Their debate performances didn't particularly matter. The people at home made up their minds based on the views they heard their candidate of choice espousing. Their views aligned closest to a specific candidate, and for the most part, their mind was made up before they even sat down to watch the debate.

Presidential debates matter even less. People tune in to watch a Democrat debate a Republican, and the performance doesn't matter because they are still going to vote based on their voter registration. If you're a Republican sitting at home watching the Presidential debate, it's unlikely the Democrat will sway you to vote for them.

If you're a Democrat sitting at home watching the Presidential debate, it's unlikely the Republican is going to sway you to vote for them. You watch out of interest, but ultimately, it's an agree to disagree situation.

It might not be the most satisfying result, especially if there's an audience cheering you and your view on. However, it is the most likely. Ultimately, people tend to amplify the evidence that aligns with their view, and we lean toward sources we trust, whether they are reliable or not.

There is a bias within all of us, and if you don't enter into every debate with an open mind and the belief that you could be wrong, then every debate you engage in will end the same way. You will both make your cases and then simply shrug, agree to disagree, shake hands, and walk away. While there is nothing wrong with that, I would encourage you to ask yourself whether that is how you want to live.

Conclusion

Which superpower is the greatest?

Which topping doesn't belong on pizza?

Which topping is the greatest?

Which musician or band is the best of all time?

If you were to stand in front of a room full of people, you would hear a wide range of responses to those questions, and it wouldn't take long for the situation to descend into chaotic arguments. These are the type of arguments that crop up daily, and they are the ones that typically end in agreeing to disagree.

No one is going to change your mind about whether pineapple belongs on pizza, and you're not going to change Jared's mind about CCR being the greatest band of all-time. There isn't a right answer here. There isn't a wrong answer. It's all down to preference.

Agreeing to disagree is a bigger challenge when there are stakes involved and facts to rely on. But that doesn't mean that it's impossible. When you debate and agree to disagree, you establish peaceful relationships.

When you establish peaceful relationships, people are more willing to open up to you about their beliefs, and they're more open to having debates with you about those beliefs. That can only be a positive step forward because you never know when you or someone else holds a toxic belief that requires correction. You don't have to agree with everything your friends, co-workers, family, or partners do. But it's good to have those beliefs challenged from time to time.

The reality of life is that arguments are everywhere. We argue over breakfast, we argue in the boardroom, we argue to persuade, we argue to investigate ideas, and because of that, we argue to make decisions collectively. It's easy to forget that there are ethics to arguing, making it easy to slip into old habits and mistreat others when you fall into an argument or debate.

Before you debate a topic, belief, value, or subject, show your opponent the respect they deserve by researching your position thoroughly. You should always have a wealth of evidence to present because there is no point debating your position if you cannot back up what you say. Use the research you did and the evidence you collated to put your brief together.

Keep it short and to the point, but ensure you use the best sources of evidence to state your case. It's important to stay the course and focus on stating your case without resorting to sneaky tricks or personal attacks.

Always separate the idea from your identity as well as your opponent's identity. It's a debate of ideas, not a debate between two people. By separating those two things, it should make it easier to keep your emotions on the level.

Search for the common ground before you delve into the topic at hand. It's important to see the person on the other side and not just their idea, even if it is a terrible one. Ultimately, no matter the topic at hand, you are still two human beings having a conversation, and it's important to remember that to keep things on an even keel.

Put your best foot forward, and no matter the result of your debate, as long as you do it properly, you can walk away with your head held high.
