

*“We plunge kids into long arguments long before they’ve written lots of small arguments.”*

– Tom Newkirk

# Structured Controversy Revamped

Stevi Quate



## History of the Structured Controversy

Back in the 80's the cooperative-learning gurus, David and Roger Johnson, developed a process for supporting students to think through academic controversial topics that required students to reflect on both sides of an issue before landing on their position. You can read their article on <http://www.steviq.com//>

Now with the standards' focus on argument, the Structured Controversy provides an important and engaging instructional tool. With just a little revamping, it can support students in thinking through counterclaims and rebuttal.

## STEPS IN THE PROCESS:

### I --Preparation

- Select a controversial issue, and craft it into a declarative statement. For instance:
  - ⇒ Teens spend too much time on smart phones playing stupid games
  - OR
  - ⇒ A reasonable drinking is 18.
- Collect resources on both sides of the issue, or have students collect the resources.
- Move students into groups of four. Then assign one pair in the quad to be **A** and the other **B**.

### II --Building Background Knowledge

- Give each pair a neutral image, painting, set of data, or cartoon for students to study. Have them collaboratively annotate the text. Encourage them to pose a question, draw an inference, and determine what's most important in the image or data.
- Move the pairs into quads to discuss their annotations.
- Distribute the packet of resources that present both sides of the position, and give the quads time to study.
- Have them collect their notes on the PRO/CON/INTERESTING chart. (See page 4.)

*I have no particular talent. I am merely inquisitive.*

**Albert Einstein**

### III --Position Preparation

- Move the pairs apart, and assign a position to each of the pairs: pro or con.
- Each pair continues to study the resources and prepares a “best case” argument that they will present to the other pair.
- Remind students that arguments need a claim (which is defensible and debatable), evidence to support the claim, and reasoning that explains the connection of the evidence to the claim.
- Explain that their task is to plan how to best support their claim so that *they and the other team learn the information* so well that there is no question but that their position is the correct one.

I love argument. I love debate. I don't expect anyone just to sit there and agree with me, that's not their job.

-- Margaret Thatcher

### IV --Position Presentation

The pairs meet for a structured debate:

- **A** presents their argument using the strongest evidence and reasoning possible.
- **B** summarizes **A**'s argument.
  - **A** needs to determine if the summary is adequate.
  - If **A** isn't satisfied with the summary, then **B** needs to redo their summary.
- **B** presents their argument.
  - **A** summarizes the argument.
  - **B** determines if the summary is adequate.

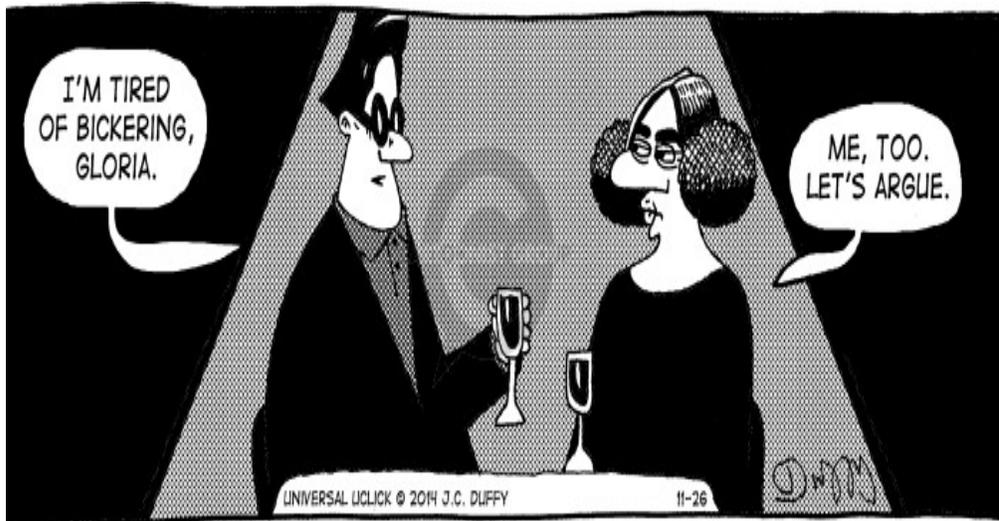
If time permits, encourage the two teams to debate, rebutting the opposing side.

### V --The Big Switch

- Have pairs switch pro and con roles and develop a new claim, different evidence or alternative reasoning. Explain to them that they are now thinking about counterclaims: How would someone refute their earlier claims and evidence?
- Encourage them to use the templates for presenting counterclaims. (See page 3.)
- Pairs will then reconvene and present their arguments, following the same process as above.

### VI --Consensus Building

- Students now drop their assigned positions.
- Considering the arguments offered by both sides, they work at arriving at consensus on the issue.
- Together they create a claim, utilizing the strongest evidence, listing counterclaims, and refuting those arguments.



The aim of argument, or of discussion, should not be victory, but progress.

Joseph Joubert

<http://www.cartoonistgroup.com/store/add.php?iid=118510>

### Discussion Rules

1. I am critical of ideas, not people.
2. I focus on making the best decision possible, not on "winning."
3. I listen to everyone's ideas, even if I do not agree.
4. I restate (paraphrase) what someone has said if it is not clear.
5. I first bring out all the ideas and facts supporting both sides and then try to put them together in a way that makes sense.
6. I try to understand both sides of the issue.
7. I change by mind when the evidence clearly indicates that I should do so.

-- David Johnson and Roger Johnson, "Critical Thinking Through Structured Controversy," *Education Leadership* 1988

### Templates For Presenting Counterclaims

X's claim that \_\_\_ rests upon the questionable assumption that \_\_\_\_.

I disagree with X's view that \_\_\_ because, as recent research has shown, \_\_\_\_.

By focusing on \_\_\_\_, X overlooks the deeper problem of \_\_\_\_.

Proponents of X are right to argue that \_\_\_\_\_. But they exaggerate when they claim that\_\_\_\_\_.

While it is true that\_\_\_\_, it does not necessarily follow that \_\_\_\_.

From Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say, I Say* (2010.)



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CLAIM: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>EVIDENCE/REASONS FOR... PRO</b>	<b>EVIDENCE/REASONS AGAINST... CON</b>	<b>INTERESTING/INTRIGUING IDEAS</b>

# Tips for writing argument

## Reminder about claims:

- In arguments, claims typically arise from the data/evidence while *often* in persuasive writing claims come before the data/evidence and the writer searches for data/evidence that corroborates the claim.
- Some verbs for making a claim: *argue, assert, believe, claim, emphasize, insist, observe, report, suggest.*

## About positioning the argument within an ongoing conversation:

- Because claims are both **debatable** and **defensible**, a wise writing move is to let your reader know that you are entering the conversation by responding to what others are saying.
- As students learn how to write the academic argument, they will need scaffolding. In *They Say, I Say*, Graff and Birkenstein suggest using templates as scaffolding. (*Keep in mind that scaffolds are meant to be temporary and when they are permanent, they stand danger of becoming a crutch.*) These templates are very similar to sentence stems.
- Positioning your argument within an ongoing conversation means that you will need to summarize other positions.

## About counterclaims:

- Along with knowing what others are saying about the claim, it's important to anticipate and address objections to your position. This is the **counterclaim**.

Graff and Birkenstein stress this point:  
“Paradoxically, the more you give voice to your critics’ objections, the more you tend to disarm those critics, especially if you go on to answer their objects in convincing ways.” (p 79)

- Some verbs for disagreeing with the other position: *complain, contend, contradict, deny, qualify, refute, reject, renounce, repudiate.*

