

# DEBATING MATTERS ONLINE:

## EXPERIMENTAL GUIDE

### WHAT IS DEBATING MATTERS?

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the **boi** charity's Debating Matters Competition, which emphasises debaters' knowledge and clear thinking over points of order and rhetorical flourishes. By debating real-world issues, students are introduced to key controversies at the top of the public agenda. Using the acclaimed [Debating Matters Topic Guides](#), the competition challenges school pupils to go beyond the media headlines and delve deeper into the biggest issues confronting society.

### ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is an experiment. We want to encourage people to have Debating Matters-style debates, but to do so online. The Debating Matters format has been used for years to encourage young people to take ideas and argument seriously. To date, the competition has taken place all across the world – but always *in person*. With the current coronavirus situation, we want to provide a resource for teachers teaching virtually to carry on the spirit of Debating Matters.

### WHAT YOU NEED TO BEGIN

#### HOW IS DEBATING MATTERS DIFFERENT?

You might already do debating or public speaking at your school. If so, great. But Debating Matters is by design different to other forms of debating which are predominantly about public speaking. In brief, Debating Matters:

- Focuses on 'substance over style', and judges teams on who has the best arguments and research, not who has the most flowery rhetoric
- Encourages pupils to research topics well in advance using carefully produced 'topic guides'
- Situates real-world debates as they are discussed in politics and the media
- Involves judges in questioning the debaters and putting them on the spot to justify their argument

Make sure you, and your students, are clear on what DM is and how it is different. Then, you can prepare by choosing:

- **A TOPIC:** Start the process off by choosing a topic and motion from the available topic guides (find them [here](#)). Give your students time to read through and think about it in advance (how much time you give debaters to prepare is up to you and your needs, but the longer the better). Everyone is talking about only one thing right now – so make the most of the opportunity to think about something else.
- **FOUR SPEAKERS:** Choose two speakers FOR the motion and two speakers AGAINST the motion. This is a great chance for the two pairs to work together independent of you, so pair up people who you think will get on well. Read some guidance on how to win [here](#).
- **THREE JUDGES:** With many people staying and home and practising isolation, you may find it easier to locate judges. Approach teachers, governors, or other adults working within the school e.g. librarians, or older students. There may be people in your wider professional network, family friends, etc. who are suitable (always follow your school's safeguarding policies). You should send them the topic, and the advice for judges (found [here](#)) in advance.

- **ONE CHAIRPERSON:** The chair plays an important role in the Debating Matters format, acting as ringmaster of proceedings and putting everyone at ease. For good advice on chairing in normal times, see [here](#). Chairing virtually will be slightly different – you’ll have to be extra-focused and on the ball to make sure people know when they should speak (see ‘Technique’ above). Recommend you.
- **AN AUDIENCE (optional):** Consider who you will invite to join the debate as the audience. This could be a great way to entertain a whole class of students virtually, as it is sure to be an intellectually interesting event. If you’re using Zoom, you can invite up to 100 people total to join the call. As ever, please follow your school’s best practise for online teaching and safeguarding, especially when inviting large numbers.

### WHAT’S DIFFERENT WHEN WORKING VIRTUALLY?

How well this works, how interesting the arguments are, and how much fun you have will all depend on the quality of your preparation. Here’s three things to think about when preparing for a virtual debate:

- **Technology:** You’ll need to use some good video-calling software, and be comfortable with how it works. We recommend Zoom but Skype, Google Hangouts, or Microsoft Teams can also work fine. Follow all security and safeguarding advise, such as password protecting your call. Make sure you get set up properly, everyone has a log in and knows what they are doing, and before you start, TEST YOUR CONNECTION WITH SOMEONE ELSE. If in doubt, find someone younger than who can help! If using Zoom, make sure you [enable breakout rooms](#).
- **Team:** Given this is a bit of an experiment, start small. Pick a few interested or committed students, ideally some might have done Debating Matters before, a chair who’s prepared to be patient and flexible, and up to three judges you can get hold of. Once you’re comfortable with how its working, expand it out.
- **Technique:** Holding a debate virtually requires some different etiquette. Face to face, it is usually clear when you can speak, how to interrupt politely, etc. To make things smoother online strongly recommend that people wait to be invited to speak by the chair and avoid interrupting. You can either wave or use the messaging / raise hand functions in your program to ask to speak.

### HOW CAN I CHANGE THIS TO MAKE IT WORK FOR ME?

In short, you can change it how you like. This guide is based on what we have found works and we do recommend that you follow it. But you may have your own constraints or needs, such as:

- **Fewer judges:** If you can’t get three judges, you can make do with two or even one. If you have two judges, make sure you avoid a tie by letting the judges know they HAVE to come to a decision.
- **Shorter sessions:** You might not have time to run the full format. Or, if you use a free Zoom account, you might not be able to run a longer call. If so, you can remove the audience questions, shorten the length of speeches, or consider using fewer judges
- **More audience involvement:** If you want to involve more of your class, you might decide to allow more audience questions. You could skip the team exchanges to make room, or allow more time for the whole debate

## HOW A DEBATING MATTERS DEBATE WORKS – VIRTUALLY

If you've done Debating Matters before, the format should be familiar. Look out for the additions and changes in red to help you when doing DM virtually.

### **Log in and welcome:** minutes -10 to 0

Ask everyone to log in 10 minutes or so before the scheduled start time. This will allow everyone to informally meet each other. If you are chairing, ask some informal questions to break the ice.

**Once everyone has joined, ask any audience members to turn off their video and mute themselves** (this will allow debaters and judges to focus their screen on each other).

### **Introductions by the chairperson:** minutes 0-5

The chairperson welcomes everyone, **asks debaters and judges to introduce themselves**, and welcomes any audience to the debate. **Doing this will ensure everyone's microphones and cameras are on, and everyone has a good connection.**

### **Opening presentations:** minutes 5-20

Each debater is allowed up to three minutes to make their opening presentation. Presentations alternate between the two teams, beginning with the first debater arguing for the motion.

### **Judges' questions:** minutes 20-35

The chairperson will ask the judges to put one (**brief**) question each to the team arguing for the motion, who are then asked to respond. The same then happens for the team arguing against the motion. The purpose of the judges' questions is to push debaters to substantiate their statements and to demonstrate a greater understanding of the key issues at stake. **The judges can ask follow up questions if there is time.**

### **Audience questions:** minutes 35-45

The chair invites any audience members to signal that they want to ask a question (**on Zoom, you can use the 'raise hand' function**). The chair will then invite 3 or so questions (**remember to unmute them and turn on their video**).

### **Team exchanges:** minutes 45-55

The chairperson invites the FOR team to put one question to the AGAINST team. They then have a chance to briefly respond, and the FOR team can follow up. The chair then invites the reverse. **Aim to get each debater in for each round, e.g. someone on the FOR side asks a question, one person on the AGAINST responds, the remaining FOR side debater then follows up, and the final word goes to the remaining AGAINST side debater – then reverse this.**

### **Final remarks:** minutes 55 - 60

Each debater is then allowed up to one minute to sum up or to make a brief closing point.

### **Judges' decision:** minutes 60 - 70

**The chair will instruct the judges to deliberate. They can either drop out of the call and start a new call. Those using Zoom can organise a breakout room with a guide here.** They will discuss BRIEFLY who they think won and come to a QUICK decision. They will then rejoin the call, feedback their comments (what went well, what could be improved) and announce the results. **While the judges deliberate, start a brief informal chat about how things are, tips on staying busy and connected, etc.**

### **Thanks and close:** minutes 70 - 75

End on a positive note, noting especially the valiant efforts of the losing team. Thank all the judges, debaters and audience. **Keep the call open if you like and carry on the conversation!**