

DEBATE WATCH TEACHING GUIDE



Second of the four televised Kennedy and Nixon debates, which took place at WRC-TV in Washington, D.C. on October 7, 1960.

Political debates can provide important learning opportunities. When election time comes around—whether it be a presidential election or a local contest for mayor, city council member, governor or member of Congress—these debates give teachers an opening to explore candidates, issues and the electoral process with their students.

More than 50 years ago, in 1960, the presidential election between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy was the first general election debate ever held and the first to be nationally televised. We have come a long way since then. During election season today, there is quite a bit of time and effort that goes into planning, watching and analyzing the debates, which provide great fodder for

political commentary and often move undecided voters in one direction or another.

Because teachers frequently assign students to watch and analyze political debates, we have provided this teaching guide for middle and high school teachers. The teaching guide includes vocabulary, instructions for the teacher prior to the debate and after students have watched, student materials including issues, a short response worksheet and long response essay topics as well as additional resources. The guide is nonspecific in format and substance and therefore can be used for any election, both national and local.

[**NOTE:** Before assigning students to watch a specific debate, make sure that the debate is available to watch on network television. If it is only available on cable television, some students may not have access. In order for all students to participate, find out in advance if and how the debate will be available online.]

Grade Level: grades 6–12

Common Core Anchor Standards: Writing, Language, Speaking and Listening

PRIOR TO WATCHING THE DEBATE

1. Read through this activity and decide in advance if you will assign students to do the [Short Response Worksheet](#), the [Long Response Essay](#) or both.
2. On the day or two before the debate, engage students in a discussion about the election and the specific debate. First ask: *What is a debate?* Elicit responses and explain that a **debate** is a discussion or argument of issues carried on between two or more teams or sides. Ask if anyone has either seen or participated in a school debate. Then ask: *What is a political (or election) debate? Has anyone ever watched one?* Explain that a political debate takes place during election season (for presidents and other locally elected offices) and almost always includes the candidates of the two largest parties (currently the Democratic Party and Republican Party) and may also include candidates from other parties such as the Green or Libertarian parties, or candidates running as independents.

There can be several debates during election season and they may include many candidates or just two; who is invited and why is a good subject for discussion. The topics discussed in the debate are issues that are facing the country (or local issues in the case of local elected officials) and are often the most relevant, timely and controversial issues. These public discussions are also an opportunity for people to assess the candidate's judgment and character and some might argue that this aspect is given too much attention. Debates are broadcast live on television, radio and the internet and their rules, length, format, questions, moderators and location can vary a great deal.

3. Give students some basic information about the debate that they are going to watch: what the election is for, where the debate is taking place, who is participating, etc.
4. Ask students: *During this election, what issues are most important to you? What issues are important to your friends, parents, family members?* If they don't have any ideas, distribute and share the [Issues](#) list and ask them to share ideas from that list. Then ask students: *How closely have you been following this election? What have you noticed so far? What will you watch for during the debate?*
5. If you have time, show the YouTube video [Presidential Debate Moments](#) (*The New York Times*, 4 min.) to have students learn more about the history of political debates. After watching, engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What did you learn about debates you didn't know before?
 - How have debates changed over the years?
 - After watching the video, is there anything else you'll be looking for?
6. Ask if students have any clarifying questions about the issues or their assignment.

AFTER WATCHING THE DEBATE

1. The day after the debate, have students discuss their reactions to the debate. First, have students discuss their initial thoughts by turning and talking with a person sitting next to them. Give them two minutes per person to share their reflections.
2. Engage students in a general discussion by asking the following questions:
 - How was it to watch the debate?

- What was the biggest surprise in the debate?
 - What did you learn by watching the debate?
 - Did you watch with anyone? What were their thoughts?
 - Did you change your mind about a candidate or an issue as a result of watching the debate? Please explain.
3. If time permits, have students share their responses from their short response worksheet and long response essays if you have assigned those. In addition, use some of the questions from the long response essay questions for discussion.

SUGGESTED EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Conduct a mock debate with the class. In advance, review the [Issues](#) and as a class, identify 5–6 issues that are most important to them for this election. For homework, assign students to conduct research to learn more about the specific issues and the different candidates' stances on those. Then in class, assign students to different roles which can include the candidates, moderators, audience and fact checkers. You can allow audience members to ask questions so that everyone can participate in the mock debate.
- Now that students are more knowledgeable about some of the most important issues of the day, have them write letters to the editors of their local papers based on a specific issue that is important to them. Students should use and integrate what they learned from the debates and follow up research in their letters, using facts, quotes, examples and statistics.
- Reflect on the format for the debate, noting what worked well and what was problematic. Students can then write a list of recommendations to make the debate better. Each recommendation should include what didn't work in the debate to inform why their recommendation would be more effective.
- Learn more about how people who watched the debate felt about it by analyzing social media (Twitter, Instagram and Facebook postings during the debate), Google searches directly following the debate and online polls. Have students write a paper analyzing how people viewed the debate from this angle, using facts, quotes, examples and statistics from their research.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [“9 semi-important and kind-of-fun facts about political debates”](#) (*The Washington Post*, August 6, 2015)
- [2016 Debate Schedule](#) (Election Central)
- [Compare U.S. Political Parties](#) (Graphiq, Inc.)
- [Debate Facts, Figures and Milestones](#) (ABC News)
- [“How to Reform the Presidential Debates”](#) (*The New York Times* The Opinion Pages, October 13, 2015)
- [Presidential Debates](#) (*The New York Times*)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Writing
Standard 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
Standard 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
Language
Standard 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
Standard 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

ISSUES

Abortion	Health Care	School Prayer
Affirmative Action	Homelessness	Supreme Court
Alternative Energy	Human Rights	Syria
Budget	Immigration	Taxes
Campaign Finance	Iran	Terrorism
Climate Change	ISIS	Transgender Rights
Criminal Justice	LGBTQ Rights	Unemployment/Jobs
Death Penalty	Marijuana Legalization	Unions/Labor
Defense	Marriage Equality	Veterans
Economy	Minimum Wage	Voting Rights
Environment	National Security	War and Peace
Education	Police Shootings	War on Terror
Foreign Policy	Poverty	Wealth and Income Distribution
Gun Control	Race Relations	Women's Pay Gap
Hate Crimes	Refugees	



SHORT RESPONSE WORKSHEET

- List the candidates who participated in the Debate and their political party (Republican, Democrat, Independent, Green, etc.).

Candidate	Political Party

2. Where was the debate held? _____

3. Who sponsored the debate? _____

4. Name 3–5 issues that were covered in the debate (see “[Issues](#)”).

a. _____ b. _____ c. _____

d. _____ e. _____

5. What are 5–6 words or phrases that describe your thoughts and feelings about the debate? _____

6. From which exchange did you learn the most? _____

a. Who was the exchange between? _____

b. What was the issue? _____



c. What did you learn? _____

7. What part of the debate most changed your point of view? _____

a. What was the issue? _____

b. What changed your position? _____

8. What was the most contentious or interesting part of the debate and why? _____

9. What was the most boring part of the debate and why? _____

10. What issue do you think needed more exploration? _____

a. What questions do you have about this issue and the candidates' stance on them? _____

11. What was a memorable moment in the debate and why? _____

12. After watching the debate, what candidate most impressed you and why? _____

LONG RESPONSE ESSAY

Directions: Choose one of the following questions to write a one page essay that responds to the question and uses evidence (quotes, statistics, examples, anecdotes and information) to support your position.

1. What issue is most important to you and how would you rate each candidate's position on that issue? As a result of hearing about the candidates' position on this issue, for whom would you vote and why?
2. Do you think the debate questions, moderators and candidates were fair and made the best use of the time spent?
3. If you could ask a question of the candidates (that wasn't asked) what would the question be and based on your knowledge of the candidates, how do you think they might respond?
4. Did the debate make you feel hopeful or fearful about the future of our country? Please explain.
5. Overall, what did you think about the format of the debate and the questions that were asked?
6. What would you change about the debate structure and process in order to improve it?
7. Who sponsored the debate and did that affect which candidates were included or excluded from participating in the debate? Please explain.
8. Do you think the debate focused more on personality and character than on substantive issues and topics? In what ways is this positive and negative?