

Lesson Plan: The Presidential Debates

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Featured resource:

[The Lowdown: A History of Arguing](#)

Lesson opener: Quick-write prompt

Do you think watching a presidential debate is an effective way to learn about the candidates and they're perspectives on important issues? Or is really just a personality showcase? Explain your answer.



Fredd Thompson/Flickr

If students need a reminder about what some past presidential debates look and sound like, preview the video in the featured Lowdown post or show a portion of [this highlight reel](#) from the third 2012 debate between President Obama and Mitt Romney.

A quick write allows students to write down their thoughts before discussing the opening question in order to increase participation and make the discussion more accessible to English Language Learners.

Objectives

- Students will analyze the history of presidential debates and evaluate the role they play in elections.
- Students will reflect on the role of debates in the context of the current election.

Essential Question and Lesson Context

What role do debates play in a presidential election? Does their unscripted format reveal something meaningful about a candidate's character? Or do debates focus too much on personality and not enough on the issues?

Televised presidential debates have played a major role in modern elections and have been a deciding factor in several close races.

This lesson asks students to weigh in on whether debates provide an important look at a candidate's ability to govern or put the focus on soundbites rather than substance.

Key vocabulary

Pre-teach key vocabulary before students do the activity, especially if you have English Language Learners. After going over the simple definition, consider providing a visual aid or having students draw one. More ideas for how to pre-teach vocabulary can be found [here](#).

Word	Simple definition
Demeanor (n.)	The way someone looks and acts, outward appearance or behavior
Domestic policy (n.)	Laws and decisions related to what happens within a country
Foreign policy (n.)	Laws and decisions related to other countries
Gaffe (n.)	An embarrassing mistake
Unscripted (adj.)	Not practiced or expected

Activity

As a class, watch the NY Times video in the featured Lowdown post about the role of debates in presidential elections.

Before watching: Discuss students' responses to the quickwrite. If possible, review clips from a recent debate, which students can use as evidence to support their claims.

While watching: Explain you will occasionally pause the video and ask questions about the role of presidential debates in elections. Alternatively, students can watch independently or in groups, pausing the video on their own and responding to the questions on an online document.

- Pause at 1:00 to discuss or write a response: How did the appearance and comfort level of John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon differ during the first televised debate? How may this have influenced the outcome of the 1960 election?
- Pause at 2:17: What did Ronald Reagan do during a debate to address concerns about his age? Why do you think people (even his opponent!) liked what he did?
- Pause at 3:45: How did people react to the impression that John McCain wasn't respectful of Barack Obama during one of their 2008 debates?
- At end of the video: The narrator of the video states that debates are more about personality and character than policies and ideas. Do you agree or disagree? Use evidence from the video to support your answer.

After watching: Ask students to prepare to discuss the questions below.

Discussion questions

- Do you think presidential debates play too much of a role in deciding elections? Why or why not? Use evidence to support your answer.
- There are traditionally three presidential debates. Do you think there should be more? Fewer? Why?

- Review the debate formats listed in the Lowdown post. Which format do you think is the best? Explain why.
- Usually, political observers and journalists declare a winner of each debate. Do you think Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump will come out on top? Why? What do you think each candidate should do to improve his/her chances of winning?

Circle chats, small-group discussions and [think-pair-share](#) provide a safer space for students to practice speaking and listening, and also boost participation during whole-class discussions.

Homework/Extension activities

- **Vote on candidate questions:** Students choose their top three questions from [this New York Times interactive](#). The New York Times editorial board will tally the results and pose the three most popular questions when it meets with both candidates.
- **Debate bingo!** Assign students to watch any of the three Presidential debates and use the Presidential Debate bingo board included in the Lowdown post. Have them play a few rounds, and then replace each word with another word or phrase they heard throughout the debate.
- **A national platform for your students' voices:** Students make their voices heard on issues they care about by participating in [Letters to the Next President 2.0](#). This national initiative gives youth a platform to express their opinion about election issues that matter most to them. Teachers must sign up and get a group code that students can use to upload letters. For more resources and examples, see also [KQED's student video project](#), My Backyard Campaign.

Common Core standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1	Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7	Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.1	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
D2.His.1	Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical context.