

# IN-CLASS DEBATE

**SERGIO BURGOS**, Assistant Professor

Animal Science  
Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences



COURSE:

**CARBOHYDRATE AND LIPID METABOLISM**

(ANSC 551)

## SUMMARY

In teams, students prepare arguments, supported by evidence, for and against a controversial topic. The position students argue is decided by a coin toss. Audience members participate in polling, discussion, and evaluation.

## GOALS

- Encourage students to think critically
- Foster students' ability to see multiple perspectives
- Teach students to question their own thinking

*“The debate helps students question why they think the way they do.”*

- Sergio Burgos

## STEPS

- 1 In teams of three, students [prepare arguments for and against a controversial topic](#).
- 2 The instructor provides students with [“Rules of Engagement.”](#)
- 3 Immediately before the start of the debate, the instructor tosses a coin to assign “for” and “against” positions.
- 4 The debate follows a [structure](#):
  - a. Team One presents affirmative position (3 min.)  
Team Two presents negative position (3 min.)
  - b. Team One reintroduces affirmative position with secondary arguments (3 min.)  
Team Two reintroduces negative position with secondary arguments (3 min.)
  - c. Team One offers rebuttal (3 min.)  
Team Two offers rebuttal (3 min.)

During the debate, each team member has a task: one speaks, another takes notes, while a third selects appropriate counterarguments.

The audience:

- is polled before and after the debate to determine whether their views changed in response to the debate.
- participates in post-debate discussion.

## BENEFITS

- Debates help raise students’ awareness of their underlying assumptions. They push students to question their own thinking.
- Students are motivated to engage in the activity because they enjoy it.
- Debates allow instructors to see differences among student abilities that might otherwise go unnoticed.

## ASSESSMENT

The debate is worth 15% of the final grade. The assessment has two components:

**Oral (team grade): 12%**

Assessed according to the following [criteria](#):

1. Argument and evidence (10 points)
2. Presentation (10 points)
3. Debate (10 points)

**Written (individual grade): 3%**

A 1-page reflection essay where students address one of two prompts: (1) How did your understanding of the subject change during or after the debate? or (2) What is your position on [the topic of the debate]?

## READY TO TRY IT OUT?

HERE’S SOME ADVICE ...

- Choose a controversial topic that is meaningful to students.
- Prepare students for how to engage in debates.
- Provide several opportunities for students to debate, including a practice run, because their skills improve with practice.
- Use a timer during the debates. Projecting a countdown clock in PowerPoint that everyone can see works well.

## CHALLENGES

- Students tend to rely on notes and readings; it can be challenging for them to respond on the spot.
- Physical space is a consideration: not all classrooms lend themselves to debate set-ups.

The implementation of this strategy was inspired by Oros, A. (2007). Let’s debate: Active learning encourages student participation and critical thinking. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 3(3), 293-311, DOI: 10.1080/15512160701558273

 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-4.0 International License](#).

Please cite as follows: Teaching and Learning Services. (2020). *Beyond Grading: Assessment Strategies from McGill Instructors* – S. Burgos. Montreal, Canada: Teaching and Learning Services, McGill University.