

Winsight[®] Assessment ELA Key Practices

DISCUSS AND DEBATE IDEAS



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ELA Key Practices: Discuss and Debate Ideas

What is the Discuss and Debate Ideas Key Practice?

The key practice of *Discuss and Debate Ideas* in English language arts involves mastery of knowledge, skills, and strategies needed to participate in argumentative discourse. This practice includes the ability to understand what is at stake in an issue, evaluate other people's arguments on that issue, think through one's own position, and then develop and present arguments to support it.

Connecting the Discuss and Debate Ideas Practice to the Common Core State Standards

Discuss and Debate Ideas skills are emphasized by Common Core State Standards for English language arts (Grades 3 to 12). The Writing Standards require students to write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning as well as relevant and sufficient evidence (W.1). Reading standards require students to delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence (R.8).

How Is The Key Practice Organized?

The key practice is organized into five phases: (1) *Understand the Issue: Context and Stakes*; (2) *Explore the Subject*; (3) *Consider Positions*; (4) *Create and Evaluate Arguments*; and (5) *Organize and Present Arguments*. *Explore the Subject* is addressed under the *Research & Inquiry* key practice, and the other four phases are unique to argument practices. For instructional purposes, these phases may occur in sequence, but for advanced levels of the practice, the phases often overlap or may be revisited multiple times as the student’s understanding of the subject develops and becomes more refined over the course of building an argument. For example, after a student evaluates evidence, she may revise her position on the issue. Figure 1 below shows the five phases of the *Discuss and Debate Ideas* key practice.

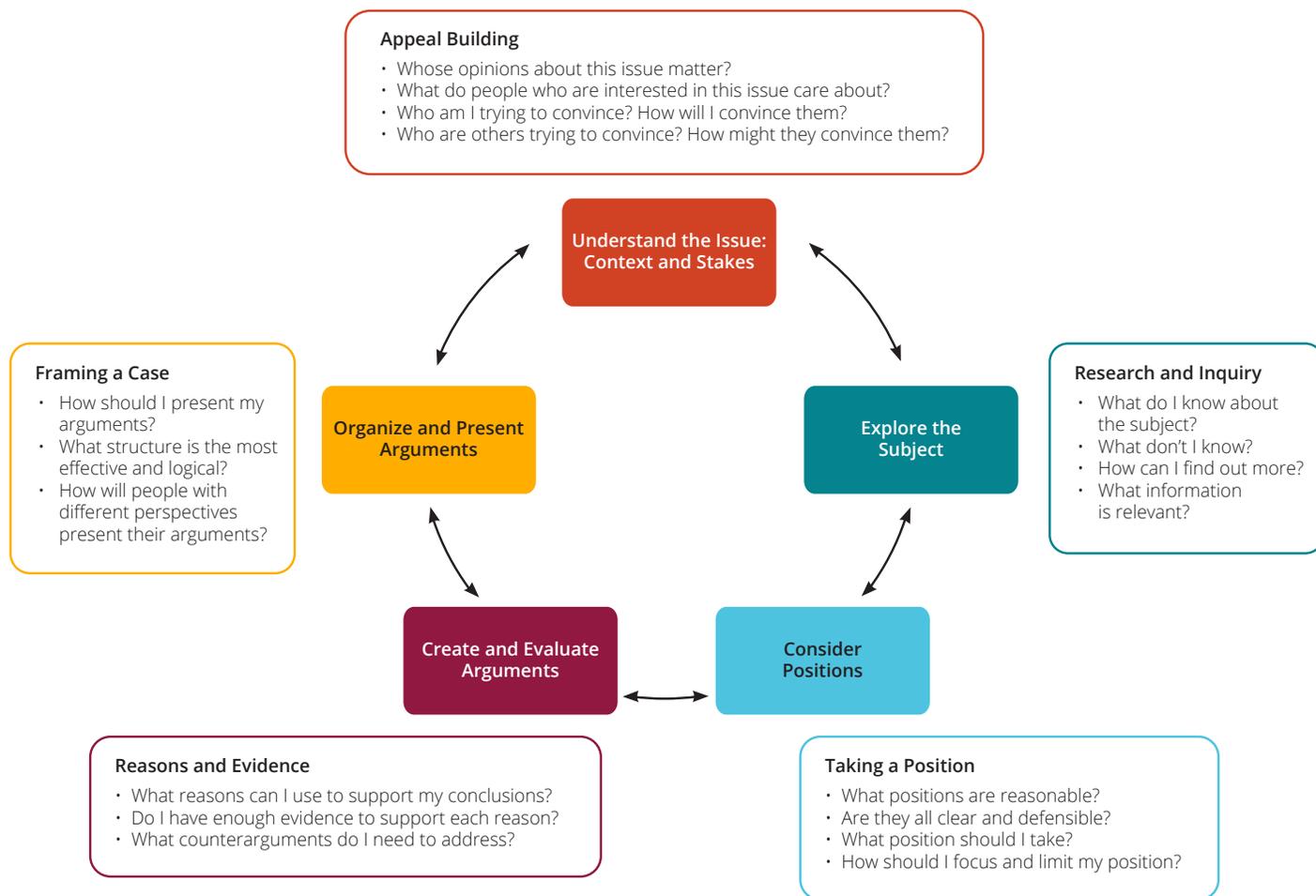


Figure 1: *Discuss and Debate Ideas* Key Practice Diagram.

Students engage in this key practice when they have argumentative discourse or produce an argumentative essay. For example, an instructional unit on argumentative writing may begin with introducing a controversial issue, identifying the audience, and setting up a goal. Students may then explore available resources about the issue and collect relevant information that can potentially be used as evidence. After that, students can use a graphic organizer to brainstorm reasons for different standpoints. Students can add evidence to the graphic organizer. The next step involves evaluating arguments — for example, asking questions about reasons for an alternative standpoint. The teacher also can provide a rubric and a checklist when students evaluate arguments. The above process can be conducted individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Finally, students produce their own essays. The teacher may provide an essay template that includes the discourse markers and slots for the standpoints, reasons, counterarguments, rebuttals, and solutions.

Each phase of this key practice involves multiple skills. Within *Understand the Issue*, students must understand the context and stakes, which requires appeal-building skills such as knowing how to identify the audience, analyze the audience's interests, beliefs, and values, and select appropriate rhetorical strategies. *Explore the Subjects* corresponds to research and inquiry skills. Participants in an argument need to be clear about what they already know about a subject and what they do not know, and carry out effective strategies for obtaining relevant information.

After that, students need to *Consider Positions*. Reasoned argument does not start by taking a stand; it informs what stands to take. Experts at argumentation know how to develop their own position while taking alternative perspectives into account. Before taking a position, experts explore multiple lines of argument to evaluate what positions are reasonable and defensible. We use the term “taking a position” to identify this skill set, although it is important to remember that skilled practitioners take a position informed by thoughtful consideration of alternative perspectives.

To defend a position, it is important to both present plausible reasons and evidence and to address counterarguments. The *Create and Evaluate Arguments* phase presupposes the ability to evaluate other people's arguments, for example, by identifying unwarranted assumptions that could undermine the logic. We use the phrase reasons and evidence to identify the set of skills that are critical during this phase — a skill set that supports abstract, conceptual reasoning focused on establishing the truth or validity of statements and arguments.

When arguments are presented to an audience in the phase of *Organize and Present Arguments*, they must be embodied in a structured text or discourse. This phase requires the framing a case skill set, which involves choosing the best way to structure and present each argument, following genre forms and genre conventions as appropriate, whether in informal conversation or in written text.

The questions that are included as part of each phase of the key practice in Figure 1 are useful guides to help both teachers and students attend to how these multiple skills are organized to make up the larger practice.

Learning progressions are defined for each skill within the key practice. For example, the *Create and Evaluate Arguments* phase has a learning progression for the skill set of Reasons and Evidence. At the first level, students understand that they need to give reasons to convince their audience. They can identify reasons that people give for their positions. At the second level, students can recognize and develop multiple reasons, and they start to explain or elaborate their reasons. They could show an initial understanding of evidence. Some students may even know how to use their reasons to counter other people's arguments in a familiar context. At the third level, students are more skillful in identifying and using evidence. They can build relatively logical and hierarchically structured arguments. They can select and arrange reasons and evidence to support main and sub points. At the next level, students understand the role of critique and rebuttal, and they can address counterarguments. They can evaluate arguments critically. At the highest level, they can build systematic mental models of entire debates, and write extended discussions and critiques that place arguments in a larger literature or discourse, such as writing a research paper.

Please note that every grade has a mix of students at different levels on different learning progressions. Teachers can use the higher levels of the learning progressions as models for the kinds of expert behaviors that we would like students to develop. These higher-level descriptions can also inform the development of rubrics or guidelines for evaluating sources that can be used during in-class exercises. The appendix provides summaries of the four learning progressions that make up this key practice.

What Does the Key Practice Look Like in Student Work?

Student responses to assessment tasks may reflect different learning progression levels. For example, when asked to write an essay on the topic of *whether students should be required to study a foreign language before the age of 12*, students may provide the following responses:

- “I think that foreign languages should be taught before age 12. The main reasons to support my position are that European students begin studying a second language before the age of 12. As a result, the majority of European adults can speak more than one language, in the United States many students do not start studying a language other than English until after the age of 14; in fact, less than half of all high school students take a foreign language course. Also, only half of U.S. colleges require a foreign language. As a result, many U.S. students never learn another language during their entire education, and they can only speak English for their entire life. Research suggests that learning a new language is easiest when a person is very young because kids’ brains are language sensitive. If they don’t use their brains to acquire a different language when they are young, their brains will lose the sensitivity to different pronunciations. Other people might take a different position because they would argue that since so many people around the world are learning English, students who speak English no longer need to learn additional languages. However, that is not true because there are still many people in other countries can only speak their own languages. You won’t be able to have a conversation with those people if you don’t know their languages. If you like traveling and want to learn about another’s country’s culture, you’d better understand their language rather than relying on someone else’s translation. In conclusion, learning a foreign language at an early age should be beneficial to our students.” (Level 4)
- “I believe that students should start learning a foreign language before the age of 12. The main reasons to support my positions are students who are older tend to care a little less about school rather than a younger child who hopes to fulfil dream by doing good in school. Older students can be distracted by other school activities, and they enjoy doing things together with their friends. Also if you are taught a foreign language daily to daily, you get used to it and begin to just memorize it naturally. By the time you get to high school you can speak it very well. Lastly children at younger ages have much better memory than children who are older. They can learn a foreign language easily and quickly. Not to mention that kids like talking all the time, so they can practice their language skills. Furthermore, one day you could be the one person to help others. For example, if you take Spanish you will be able to help Spanish-speaking people who does not understand English so well. All that good comes out of one little change children need that extra language it could end up helping them later in life.” (Level 3)
- In my opinion, schools should not require students to study another language before the age of 12. The main reason to support my position is that if you learn a foreign language so early, it might become extremely difficult with all other school work and extra activities after school, and in general because they might not understand what learning a different language means at such a young age. Kids are still trying to develop their English language skills in various ways, speaking, listening, reading and writing. Introducing a foreign language too early will interfere with their English learning.” (Level 2)
- “I think that U.S. schools should require students to study a language other than English before the age of 12. I believe so because we want children to have better jobs in the future and speaking a second language can help that.” (Level 1)

Each response emphasizes different criteria for Reasons and Evidence; students at lower levels of the learning progression only provide supporting reasons with no or minimal elaborations and often fail to consider alternative perspectives. Examining student responses for evidence of their level of understanding about building an argument will help a teacher target the next learning opportunity for students.

How Can We Help Students Make Progress with this Key Practice?

In the classroom, teachers can use the *Discuss and Debate Ideas* key practice as a model for building plausible arguments and structuring argumentative discourse. Teachers also can use the learning progressions to identify where students are in their current level of skill development, and use this to determine next steps for instruction. For example, students working toward Level 3 benefit from activities that develop their ability to construct logical and persuasive arguments to make a structured case. Key skills to address at this level include helping students develop multiple appeals, identify alternative perspectives, select relevant evidence for an argument, and use appropriate connective words to organize

arguments coherently. Students' reasoning skills also benefit from small-group discussions designed to elicit multiple arguments followed by time to categorize the varying points. Furthermore, students moving toward Level 3 need help mapping out common ground and disagreements in people's arguments. Finally, these students benefit from activities designed to help them transit from primarily working with briefer, more basic writing assignments to drafting lengthier, increasingly complex written arguments that require a logical organization. Incorporating these skills into work on the larger practice, such as debating a controversial issue or producing an essay on a controversial topic, can provide meaning and purpose for students to develop this skill.

Using the Key Practice Diagram and Learning Progressions

Teachers can use the Key Practice diagram and Learning Progressions to deepen their own understanding of how reading, writing, and critical thinking skills work together in the practice of Discuss and Debate Ideas, and how they might help their students develop these skills. In the classroom, the diagram can be used with students to model the argument discourse process and encourage students to include key argument elements in their essays.

For More Information

For further reading, see (1) Deane, P., & Song, Y. (2014). A Case Study in Principled Assessment Design: Designing Assessments to Measure and Support the Development of Argumentative Reading and Writing Skills, *Spanish Journal of Educational Psychology (Psicología Educativa)*, 20, 99–108. (2) Deane, P., & Song, Y. (2015). The key practice, 'Discuss and Debate Ideas': Conceptual framework, literature review, and provisional learning progressions for argumentation. (Research Report No. RR-15-33). Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service. (3) Deane, P., Song, Y., van Rijn, P., O'Reilly, T., Bennett, R. E., Fowles, M., Sabatini, J., & Zhang, M. (In press). The case for scenario-based assessment of written argumentation. Paper accepted by *Reading and Writing Special Issue*.

Appendix: Learning Progressions Relevant to Each Phase of the Discuss and Debate Ideas Key Practice¹

	Social	Conceptual: Argument Building	Discourse
	Appeal Building	Taking a Position	Reasons and Evidence
	Framing a Case		
Level 1	Understands the idea of trying to convince someone by making some sort of persuasive appeal.	Understands the idea of taking a side in an argument and accepting or rejecting another person’s statements as true or false based on how well one thinks it fits the facts.	Understands the idea that positions may need to be supported with reasons that will be convincing to the audience.
Level 2	Transfers the idea of making a persuasive appeal into a written context and does some simple analysis of how oneself or an author might appeal or has appealed to different audiences and interests.	Understands and expresses positions in writing with reasonable attention to what one knows and some ability to focus on what is important in the domain.	Recognizes, generates and elaborates on reasons in writing, with some awareness of the need for evidence, and uses one’s own argument to counter others’ argument in an engaging, familiar context.
Level 3	Infers rhetorical structure in texts, and builds rhetorical plans of one’s own that coordinate multiple appeals and rhetorical moves into a coherent effort to persuade a target audience.	Understands and expresses positions clearly, capturing their relationships both to similar and contrasting points of view.	Understands use of evidence and clearly grasps the need to provide evidence and reasons that are directly relevant to and support the main point and which are logically sound.
Level 4	Shows flexibility in interpreting and developing rhetorical plans, with sensitivity to differences among audiences with different points of view.	Successfully analyzes unstated assumptions, biases, and other subjective elements in a text and can use that to develop one’s own position more clearly.	Understands the role of critique and rebuttal and is able to reason about and respond to counterevidence and critical questions.
Level 5	Displays a well-developed rhetorical (metacognitive) understanding of persuasion.	Can use others’ arguments to develop one’s own understanding and then frame one’s own position in terms that exploit the current “state of discussion.”	Builds systematic mental models of entire debates, and uses that model to frame one’s own attempts to build knowledge.
			Approaches argument as a chain of individual turns, and understands and produces such turns in context, such as taking a position or giving a reason.
			Approaches persuasive text as a coherently organized sequence of reasons supporting a position.
			Approaches persuasive text as a logically structured presentation of a case with embedded reasons and evidence.
			Approaches persuasive text as part of a dialog between multiple perspectives with appropriate attention to counterpoint and rebuttal.
			Displays mastery of many different forms of argument, demonstrating flexible understanding and control of genre features.

¹Note that for the three tables with learning progressions, the breaks between the columns are intended as a reminder that a student may have an uneven profile of understanding across the levels of the progressions. In other words, a student may display evidence of Level 3 on Taking a Position but Level 2 on Appeal Building.

