

Deconstructing Arguments – Teaching Strategy

Quick Overview

Students use a standardized note-taking strategy to deconstruct arguments from historical and contemporary sources. They practice reasoned argumentation and introduce their own voices into historical conversations.

Skill Objective

Students will...

- Deconstruct arguments of scholars and historical figures
- Assess arguments for clear reasoning and logic
- Construct rebuttals and counterarguments based on historical evidence

Content Objective

Students will...

- Deepen disciplinary literacy through argumentation
- Summarize multiple viewpoints from experts or people in a historical period

Civics Skills Connection

Inquiry Skills

- **Inquiry based learning:** students approach texts with an eye towards understanding their construction and reasoning. They interrogate meaning and use of evidence in a standardized way
- **Problem based learning:** students make sense of complicated texts and arguments by breaking them down into their component pieces
- **Project based learning:** in the option 2 customization, students create new arguments in speeches and essays that enter the conversation with scholars and historical figures based on the evidence and reasoning that they identified in the main activity

Prep ahead

- Select text-based primary or secondary sources for students to deconstruct.
- Print copies of the note-taking handout for students to collect and organize their thoughts.

Strategy Steps

1. Introduce the activity by telling students, “There is no one way to experience or interpret history. Instead, we have to use evidence and clues to figure out what happened and how we understand it.”
2. Distribute sources and handouts.

3. Depending on group level, read the source out loud as a group. Otherwise, give students time to read and annotate the source independently.
4. Guide students through an analysis of the source, using the handout to collect notes on the following:
 - **Claim:** Identify the main argument of the text in their own words
 - **Evidence:** List the individual facts and details that the author uses
 - **Reasoning:** How does the author connect pieces of evidence? What logic transforms individual facts into clear argument?
 - **Questions:** What additional information could an author add to make their point stronger? What, if anything, is missing from their argument right now?
 - **Counter:** How might an opponent challenge the argument? What claim or evidence could help establish a rebuttal?
5. Return to the beginning with an overall assessment of the claim. Students offer answers to the question: “Was the author effective in proving their claim? Why or why not?”

Customizations

- **Option 1: Divide it**
 - Provide two documents for students to use, one which provides the “point” and the other the “counterpoint.” Half of the class works on each source, and then the teacher can facilitate a back and forth of evidence and reasoning to bring the two sides into conversation with each other.
 - **Teacher Note:** This option helps students to see the success of their deconstruction in action by challenging them to use their reasoning against the other half of the class. Students take ownership over the arguments that they have deduced and think critically to apply them in a good-spirited debate.
- **Option 2: Reconstruct It**
 - Students work from the completed worksheet as an outline for writing a new speech or essay on the same topic. They practice putting ideas into their own words and combining reasons with evidence that has been preselected.
 - **Teacher Note:** This option brings students into the role of author without requiring an additional layer of research. It provides a sense of ownership to the document and deepens content literacy.