

# Switching Sides: A Debate Activity

You can do this exercise with the entire class or with a small group of volunteers.

## GROUND RULES:

Explain to the class that everyone is entitled to his/her own position and is not to be targeted for having a view that might be unpopular or in the minority. There are valid cases to be made for each position, but we will not hear them or learn about other views if people are intimidated from saying what they really think.

Remind students that John Stuart Mill said: “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that.” Discuss the meaning of this quotation.

## Post 4 different signs on the 4 walls of your room.

Agree Strongly

Agree Somewhat

Disagree Somewhat

Disagree Strongly

The middle of the room is for Neutral/Undecided

**Post a controversial position on the blackboard.** (free speech, immigration, gun control...see list of debate topics in debate activity kit.)

Example: “The United States ought to provide a universal basic income.”

**Ask students to stand in the place appropriate for their view.** If no one is standing in a particular location, or if the distribution of students is very unbalanced, the teacher should go and stand in the least-represented position. You could also ask for volunteers to switch positions, to make the distribution more even.

[Notice how it feels if no one is standing in a particular position in the room. It takes real bravery to be the only one taking a certain position. (You could do an anonymous poll on tiny folded slips of paper asking if anyone would like to change positions but is afraid to. This would help to teach the class about the power of peer pressure in people’s willingness to expose their views to public scrutiny.)]

**Have the people in each of the positions speak to one another to collect reasons why they have chosen this position.** Instruct them try to come up with 3 pieces of evidence to support their position. The teacher should assist students in the under-represented positions. The students who are neutral or undecided are not excused; they need to detail why they are conflicted and what ideas they are

weighing against each other.

**Go around the room and have a representative from each group explain their group's reasoning for their position.**

**Then, after every group has spoken, tell everyone that they are allowed to switch positions if their view has changed.**

**Finally, tell the remaining students that they must move to a different position in the room, even if their view has not completely changed.** They should move to a position that best represents whatever “pull” or “lean” they felt listening to the other groups share their explanations. Explain to the students that the point is not for them to wind up standing in front of their ultimate, final view of the topic, but rather to illustrate that there is more than one way to think about a complex topic and that it is okay to consider changing positions, sometimes.

\*You could also do this exercise anonymously, by having all the students write their responses on folded paper and then having a representative divide the responses into different marked boxes.

**SECOND OPTION:** Students are instructed to prepare BOTH sides (pro and con) of a controversial issue beforehand. They will not know which side they will be assigned to argue until right before the activity begins.