

Debate: America, Refugees and Asylum

Overview: After viewing the program, *Well-Founded Fear*, students will conduct a classroom debate on the topic: **Resolved: US asylum policy regarding asylum status shall be eased in order to provide more refugees “safe haven” in this country.**

- **Standards**
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Standards: This lesson addresses the following national content standards established by McREL at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>:

Understands what is meant by "the public agenda," how it is set, and how it is influenced by public opinion and the media.

Understands the changing role of the United States in world affairs through World War I.

What is the Relationship of the United States to Other Nations and to World Affairs?

Understands how the world is organized politically into nation-states, how nation-states interact with one another, and the issues surrounding U.S. foreign policy.

Understands the impact of significant political and nonpolitical developments on the United States and other nations.

Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs, and civic beliefs in an increasingly multi-ethnic American society.

Preliminary Procedure: The teacher shows the program *Well-Founded Fear* to the class, discussing prior to the viewing that asylum policy has evolved throughout US history, and that the policy of granting asylum has changed as well. Examples of this can be seen in the program regarding US policy toward Soviet Jews as well as Chinese citizens. The teacher should mention that part of the reason for this consistent change in policy is due to evolving human rights concerns in various areas of the world (historical examples could include the Soviet Union's treatment of Jews, or possibly apartheid in South Africa) and how the United States government has reacted to those human rights issues.

Next, the teacher prepares the students for developing concepts and ideas for debate. The teacher might mention that a debate is a "gentlemanly argument," and that the purpose of a debate is for the contestants to prove their point and sway a judge or judges to their view through the use of logic and evidence. The teacher also needs to ensure that students are aware that debates, while often adversarial in nature, are also generally friendly in nature.

Here is a format for a typical classroom debate:

- a. Based on the resolution, one team (usually two students, but can be adapted for more or less) takes the affirmative side, while the other takes the opposing or negative side. The affirmative side, in this instance, is in favor of easing asylum rules, while the opposing or negative wants to maintain things as they are. In other words, the opposing side is in favor of maintaining the *status quo*.
- b. Time frame for the debate goes as follows: each “constructive” speech is eight minutes long, while cross examination is three minutes per session. Rebuttal speeches (one per team member) are four minutes.
- c. On the affirmative side, the opening statement includes the following information: a stating of the *Resolved* topic, a short definition of germane topics, and an explanation using evidence that shows that the current policy is inherently ineffective. The opening opposing statement attempts to show that the status quo is effective. The second affirmative speech sets forth their “plan” to change the system to make it more effective (at least in the view of the affirmative), while the second negative or second opposing speech seeks to show that the affirmative plan will not succeed. The rebuttal speeches attempt to review each side’s respective cases, and attempts to remind the judge(s) that the other view is wrong.
- d. Debate format is as follows:

First affirmative constructive speech (8 minutes)

Cross-examination (negative asks questions of the 1st affirmative speaker) (3 minutes)

First negative constructive speech (8 minutes)

Cross-examination (affirmative asks questions of the 1st negative speaker) (3 minutes)

Second affirmative constructive speech (8 minutes)

Cross-examination of second affirmative speech (3 minutes)

Second negative constructive speech (3 minutes)

Cross-examination of second negative speech (3 minutes)

First negative rebuttal (4 minutes)

First affirmative rebuttal (4 minutes)

Second negative rebuttal (4 minutes)

Second affirmative rebuttal (4 minutes)

(NOTE: This is the standard format for contest debate as set by the National Forensics League, which is the national organization for interscholastic speech and debate competitions across the United States. Teachers wanting to utilize a formal debate structure can find information regarding competitive debates at <http://debate.uvm.edu/default.html>. A less formal debate format can be found at <http://7-12educators.about.com/education/7-12educators/library/howto/htdebate.htm>.)

- e. The teacher should develop a rubric to judge the debate (or to allow the class to judge the debate) based on criteria including speaking style, development of logical arguments, questioning skills, and evidence. Perhaps the best way to do this would be to develop a grid of some sort with a 1-5 scale for each category (1= poor; 5= excellent). The teacher could also add a space for comments on what they felt as far as a critique of the debate. If the school offers an interscholastic debate program, the school’s forensics coach may have ballots that may be utilized. A sample rubric that can either be used “as is” or adapted to fit a specific class instance can be found at <http://7-12educators.about.com/education/7-12educators/blrubricdebate.htm>.

The Lesson:

The teacher shows the program *Well-Founded Fear*. In introducing the program, the teacher should point out that asylum law as well as asylum interviews are open to a variety of interpretations and often “knowing if a story is true” is difficult at best. Asylum Officers strive for and work to maintain consistency in determining who is awarded asylum status and who is denied asylum. The teacher might also point out to the class that most asylum cases referred by Asylum Officers to an immigration judge are denied at the appeal level.

During the viewing of the program, the teacher might also note instances where the Asylum Officers use personal judgments in order to determine whether or not to grant asylum status. The affirmative team might interpret this to mean that the system is flawed because individual interpretation of asylum policy makes the procedure less precise. The opposing or negative team, on the other hand, might look at the same point to infer that personal interpretation allows the process to be more precise when taking individual issues into account.

The teacher might also suggest (require) that the students use information/quotes from *Well-Founded Fear* as part of their case or rebuttal.

In addition, the teacher should also require that students conduct their own search for information regarding asylum policy. While the amount of material in this area is substantial, a few example web links are included as a “springboard” for web-based research.

Resources: Refugee and Asylum Policy Links

Americanvisas.com (U.S. Asylum and Refugee Policy) (<http://www.americanvisas.com/asylum.htm>)

Human Rights Watch Report homepage (<http://www.hrw.org/worldreport99/intro/index.html>)
(Long-27 pages)

Immigration and Naturalization Service (<http://www.ins.usdoj.gov>)
(Note: The INS web page literally contains hundreds of documents on the idea of asylum and asylum policy. We suggest doing a web search using the INS search engine for pertinent and related documents.)

National Passion versus National Interest (http://www.npg.org/forums/ref&asylum_policy.htm)

P.O.V. website for “Well-Founded Fear” (contains many resources including: information about asylum policy, a glossary of terms, a discussion guide, an interactive game and more links to related sites.)
(<http://www.pbs.org/pov/wellfoundedfear/>)

US Committee for Refugees: asylum cases approved or referred
(http://www.refugees.org/world/articles/asylum2_rr98_12.htm)

In addition, it is suggested that student participants conduct their own web or text based searches for materials. Links included in this activity were gathered primarily from two Internet search engines, Google (<http://www.google.com>), and AltaVista (<http://www.altavista.com>). However, teachers and students can easily use other search engines if they prefer.

Assessment:

The teacher may wish to “score” the debate individually, have the class do so, or bring in outside judges (for example, local INS officials if available) to judge the debate and determine a “winner.” Generally, the winner is determined by which team scores higher in the rubric. According to the rules of interscholastic debate, the negative or opposing side (since it represents the status quo and the affirmative has the burden of proof to show change is needed) wins any tie.

Alternative format:

If the teacher desires to involve more students, they may elect to change the debate format into one of a panel discussion. While the issue under consideration is the same, the format and outcome are somewhat different. In a discussion, the group works together in order to reach a consensus decision.

In interscholastic forensics competitions, discussion groups usually run six to seven students, but the teacher may decide to increase or decrease the number to fit their class situation. The teacher may also elect to divide the debate topic into smaller, discussable subtopics, such as “Should the appeals process for asylum be changed?” or “Should the definition of “well-founded fear” be altered?”

The format is somewhat different, also. In a discussion, one student is selected as “leader”. It is their job to keep the discussion going smoothly, maintain order, allow all participants an opportunity to speak, and summarize each of the discussion segments. In some discussion formats, the leader is scored and assessed separately from the other participants. The leader has the right to add comments and participate in the discussion as do the other participants.

Once the leader is selected (either by the teacher or the other participants), the following format is maintained (within the scope of the class period):

Definition of terms

History of the situation/problem

Problems with the current system

Solutions to the problems identified by the group

Again, there is no set time frame for any one segment, however, the teacher and group should recognize that if this is a one class period activity, enough time must be set aside for each segment as well as the summaries by the group leader.

Once the discussion is completed, participants can be evaluated in a rubric created by the teacher. While the teacher may wish to develop his or her own assessment tool, a sample rubric is included as an example.

Discussion Rubric:

1. **Knowledge of the subject material (20 points):** How much research did the participant do toward the discussion? How effective was the research used? _____ points total.
2. **Participation (20 points):** How often did the participant speak? Was the participation worthwhile? _____ points
3. **Development of logic skills (20 points):** How well did the participant utilize logic skills in making points and demonstrating viewpoints? _____ points.
4. **Speaking ability (20 points):** Did the participant make points well? Use correct grammar? Were they able to be heard by the audience? _____ points.
5. **Cooperation (20 points):** Did the participant act in a manner of cooperation toward the leader and other members of the group? Did the participant tend to monopolize the discussion, or did they contribute significantly to the final solution? _____ points.

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