

Let's Talk About It: Lincoln-Douglas Debates

Grade Level: 4-8

Lesson Overview

How can people have civil, informative conversations about important issues? Formal debates are an organized way for individuals to express their beliefs and reasoning, and for audiences to learn about the debaters' views. In this lesson, students will learn about the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates and stage their own debate on the contentious topic of genetically modified organisms.

Student Objectives

1. Learn about the debates that took place between Abraham Lincoln and Steven Douglas during their 1958 campaign for a seat in the United States Senate.
2. Describe why debates are held and how they work.
3. Conduct a debate on genetically modified organisms, a modern-day topic relevant to agriculture and consumers.

Materials

First class period:

- ✓ The Lincoln-Douglas Debates Information Sheet
- ✓ four signs, labeled as follows: "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree"
- ✓ small notecards
- ✓ a variety of recent newspapers or news websites – one for every two students

Second class period:

- ✓ Genetically Modified Organisms Information Sheet
- ✓ Setting Up a Classroom Lincoln-Douglas Debate Information Sheet
- ✓ Classroom Lincoln-Douglas Debate Team Worksheet

Third & fourth class periods:

- ✓ Classroom Debate Evaluation

Vocabulary

- **affirmative** – argument that supports, or agrees with, a policy or idea
- **debate** – formal discussion in which arguments are presented in support of and against a policy or idea

- **incumbent** – person currently holding a political office
- **Lincoln-Douglas debate style** – a one-to-one debate in which two individuals present arguments from two sides of an issue
- **negative** – argument that disagrees with a policy or idea (opposite of affirmative)
- **oppose** – to be against; to fight against or strongly resist an idea or policy (opposite of support)
- **proposition** - statement that affirms or denies something; may also be called a topic, motion, or resolution
- **rebuttal** – presentation of information or evidence that contradicts, or disagrees with, evidence given by the opposing individual in a debate
- **support** – to aid in the cause of; to be in favor of an idea or policy

Background Information

See the Lincoln-Douglas Debates and Genetically Modified Organisms information sheets included with this lesson.

Procedure

First class period

1. Read and discuss Student Information Sheet - The Lincoln-Douglas Debates. Some questions for discussion include:
 - a. Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas were competing for what elected position?
 - b. Lincoln and Douglas disagreed on what key issue?
 - c. What was the purpose for the series of debates that took place between the two?
 - d. How many people attended the debate that took place on August 27, 1858 in Freeport, Illinois? Why do you think so many people would travel to Freeport to hear this debate? If you wanted to hear an important debate today, would you have to travel to do so? Why or why not?
 - e. How do the debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas compare to political debates that take place today? (Optional—show an online video segment of a modern-day debate between local, congressional, or presidential candidates. Be sure to use a video that posted by a trustworthy and credible news organization.)

2. Explain that as times change, issues important to people also change. In 1858, slavery was a national issue on everyone's mind. Today, other challenges face us as a country. Distribute copies of recent news articles or provide news websites and allow students to work in pairs to identify current national issues. Based on what students find as well as their prior knowledge, discuss with the class what some of today's challenges might be. List students' answers on the board under the heading "National Issues."
3. Continue discussion by explaining that while there are issues that concern us at national and state levels, there are also local challenges. Ask students to think of issues that concern their community or their school. List their answers on the board in a new column with the heading "Local Issues."
4. Stage an impromptu "four corners" debate in the classroom. Choose one of the local issues listed on the board. Re-state the issue as a statement or proposition such as "Schools should eliminate homework," or "Students should be allowed to wear whatever they want to school" and write it on the board. Post four large signs, one in each corner of the room. The signs should read "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree."
5. Distribute notecards to each student. Ask students to give thought to the statement on the board, and then write their position—strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree—on their card. Underneath this, they should explain why they chose that position. Once all students have recorded their position and reasoning, direct them to stand in the corner of the room with the sign that matches their card. (Writing their positions in advance will prevent students from simply following their friends.)
6. Give the groups a few minutes to discuss why they took the position they did. Each group should then appoint a spokesperson to explain their position. Allow each spokesperson 30 seconds to explain the group's position. Invite students to move to another group after each position is stated if the explanation given persuaded them to change their minds.
7. Have students return to their seats. Discuss the debate as a class. What happened? Did hearing the viewpoints of others make anyone change their mind? What could make the debate process work better?
8. Discuss points of debate etiquette, such as one person speaks at a time, no put-downs, respect other points of view.

Second class period

9. Remind students of what happened during the previous class period. Revisit the lists of current issues that were brainstormed. Guide discussion to the area of food and agriculture. What are some issues affecting food and agriculture today?
10. Distribute copies of the informational page titled Genetically Modified Organisms. Using this sheet, discuss genetically modified organisms as one of today's challenges in agriculture.
11. Tell students that they will engage in another debate, this time more similar in format to those between Lincoln and Douglas. (For younger students, it may be easier to continue using the "four corners" debate format.) The topic for the debate will be related to the issue of genetically modified organisms.
12. Divide the class into teams of six. Assign each team to represent one side—either the affirmative or the negative—of the issue. Each member of the team will have a specific responsibility during the debate. (In a class of 24 students, there will be two affirmative and two negative teams. If there are fewer students, some team responsibilities may be combined.) Distribute copies of the Setting up a Classroom Lincoln-Douglas Debate Information Sheet. Discuss responsibilities and debate format. Allow each team to decide who will fill each role during the debate.
13. For the remainder of this class period, allow teams to research and discuss their topic. By the beginning of the next class period, each team should develop and turn in a position paper Classroom Lincoln-Douglas Debate Team Worksheet outlining three to five points that support their position. This will help you determine each team's readiness for the debate.

Third and fourth class periods

14. Return the team worksheet/position paper to each group. Allow teams several minutes to review their position and arguments. Give each student a copy of the Classroom Debate Evaluation. Explain that as two of the teams are conducting their debate, the remaining teams will be observing and evaluating the process. The observing Affirmative Team will evaluate the debating Affirmative Team, and the observing Negative Team will evaluate the debating Negative Team. Remind students that they may refer to the Setting up a Classroom Lincoln-Douglas Debate Information Sheet distributed during the previous class period.

15. Conduct the debate between the first two teams and discuss as a class. Then conduct the debate(s) between the remaining teams. (Conducting the debates will take two or more class periods.)

Extension Activities

1. Watch and discuss the Intelligence Squared Debate: Genetically Modify Food found at <https://www.intelligencesquaredus.org/debates/genetically-modify-food>
2. Visit <https://yourbias.is/> and <https://yourlogicalfallacyis.com/> to explore the types of bias and logical fallacies that can weaken arguments.

Additional Resources

- Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) <http://www.debates.org/index.html>
- Lincoln-Douglas style debate procedure <https://www.teachervision.com/lincoln-douglas-style-debate-procedure>
- Your Bias Is <https://yourbias.is/>
- Your Fallacy Is <https://yourlogicalfallacyis.com/>
- Genetically Modified Organisms <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/genetically-modified-organisms/>
- Understanding Genetically Modified Foods <https://ohioline.osu.edu/factsheet/HYG-5058>
- Intelligence Squared Debate: Genetically Modify Food <https://www.intelligencesquaredus.org/debates/genetically-modify-food>

Standards

Illinois English Language Arts Standards

CCRA.R.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCRA.R.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CCRA.R.9 Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

CCRA.SL.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

CCRA.SL.6 Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

Illinois Social Science Standards

SS.CV.3.4. Identify core civic virtues (such as honesty, mutual respect, cooperation, and attentiveness to multiple perspectives) and democratic principles (such as equality, freedom, liberty, respect for individual rights) that guide our state and nation.

SS.IS.8.6-8.MC. Apply a range of deliberative and democratic procedures to make decisions and take action in schools and community contexts.

SS.H.1.4. Explain connections among historical contexts and why individuals and groups differed in their perspectives during the same historical period.

The **M**ultidisciplinary **A**gricultural Integrated Curriculum (mAGic) was created in 2004 under the leadership of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and the Facilitating Coordination in Agricultural Education Project (FCAE). Funding was made available through the FCAE grant budget from the agricultural education line item of the ISBE budget. This revision, as printed, was developed in January 2021.

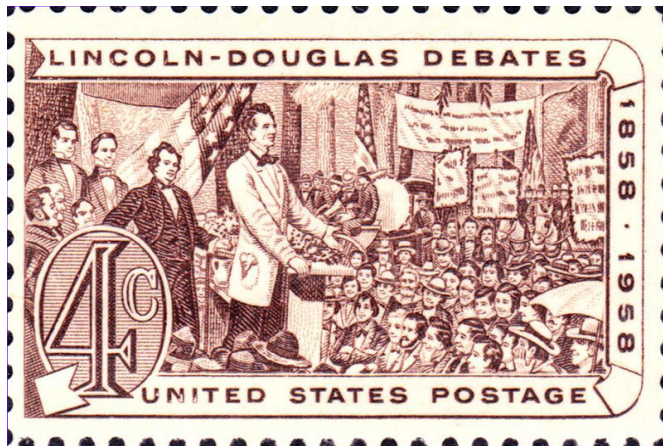


These mAGic lessons are designed to bring agriculture to life in your classroom. They address the Illinois Learning Standards in math, science, English language arts and social studies.

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The Lincoln-Douglas Debates Information Sheet

In 1858 and 1859, two men named Steven A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln competed for one of the two Illinois seats in the United States Senate. Then, as now, members of the U.S. Senate and of the U.S. House of Representatives made up what is referred to as Congress. Congress makes the laws that govern our country. Thus, whoever won the election in 1859—Lincoln or Douglas—would be able to help decide what happened in the United States.



Steven Douglas was the incumbent, meaning he was already holding the office, in this Senate race. Abraham Lincoln hoped to unseat, or take Douglas' place, in the Senate and thus in Congress.

One of the most difficult challenges of this particular time in history was the issue of slavery. Whoever was a member of Congress would have the power to help shape the laws regarding slaves. Lincoln and Douglas disagreed on slavery. Because of their different views, people in Illinois and around the country watched the race between Lincoln and Douglas closely and were anxious to hear what each of them had to say.

In order to make known their views, and to help people decide which candidate deserved their vote, Lincoln and Douglas participated in a series of seven debates during the year 1858. These debates took place in various locations spread across Illinois, including Ottawa, Freeport, Jonesboro, Charleston, Galesburg, Quincy, and Alton. The issues of states' rights and slavery were the primary topics discussed during these debates.

The second of the seven debates took place in Freeport, Illinois on August 27, 1858. It is said that over 15,000 people attended this debate. At the time, the population of the entire town of Freeport was only 5,000, so many people must have traveled a great distance to attend. During this debate, Lincoln spoke for one hour, then Douglas spoke for an hour and a half, then Lincoln was allowed a half-hour reply. (The two took turns speaking first throughout the seven debates.)

Stephen Douglas was re-elected to the U.S. Senate in 1859. But Lincoln's eloquence during the debates, along with his position on the issues of the day, made him popular enough to become President of the United States in 1860.

There are many ways in which debates can be held. The debate format in which two people take turns discussing opposite sides of an issue is still known today as the Lincoln-Douglas debate style. However, in most political debates that take place today, candidates do not speak as long. Instead, they may take turns speaking for just a few minutes at a time, discussing many issues. Modern debate styles include the following:

- Round Table Discussion – Candidates sit at a table with a moderator who guides the conversation.
- Town Meeting – Candidates are seated on a stage and answer questions posed by a moderator or the audience.
- Multi-candidate Panel – A larger group of four or more candidates sit at a long table facing the moderator and a group of questioners.
- Interview Show – Candidates are asked questions during a pre-existing television or radio talk show.

Genetically Modified Organisms Information Sheet

National Geographic Resource Library – Encyclopedic Entry

A genetically modified organism contains DNA that has been altered using genetic engineering. Genetically modified animals are mainly used for research purposes, while genetically modified plants are common in today’s food supply.



GMO Salmon

This genetically engineered salmon continuously produces growth hormones and can be sold as a full-size fish after 18 months instead of 3 years.

Photograph by Paulo Oliveira, Alamy Stock Photo

A genetically modified organism (GMO) is an animal, plant, or microbe whose DNA has been altered using genetic engineering techniques.

For thousands of years, humans have used breeding methods to modify organisms. Corn, cattle, and even dogs have been selectively bred over generations to have certain desired traits. Within the last few decades, however, modern advances in biotechnology have allowed scientists to directly modify the DNA of microorganisms, crops, and animals.

Conventional methods of modifying plants and animals—selective breeding and crossbreeding—can take a long time. Moreover, selective breeding and crossbreeding often produce mixed results, with unwanted traits appearing alongside desired characteristics. The specific targeted modification of DNA using biotechnology has allowed scientists to avoid this problem and improve the genetic makeup of an organism without unwanted characteristics tagging along.

Most animals that are GMOs are produced for use in laboratory research. These animals are used as “models” to study the function of specific genes and, typically, how the genes relate to health and disease. Some GMO animals, however, are produced for human consumption. Salmon, for example, has been genetically engineered to mature faster. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has stated that these fish are safe to eat.

GMOs are perhaps most visible in the produce section. The first genetically engineered plants to be produced for human consumption were introduced in the mid-1990s. Today, approximately 90 percent of the corn, soybeans, and sugar beets on the market are GMOs. Genetically engineered crops produce higher yields, have a longer shelf life, are resistant to diseases and pests, and even taste better. These benefits are a plus for both farmers and consumers. For example, higher yields and longer shelf life may lead

to lower prices for consumers, and pest-resistant crops means that farmers don't need to buy and use as many pesticides to grow quality crops. GMO crops can thus be kinder to the environment than conventionally grown crops.

Genetically modified foods do cause controversy, however. Genetic engineering typically changes an organism in a way that would not occur naturally. It is even common for scientists to insert genes into an organism from an entirely different organism. This raises the possible risk of unexpected allergic reactions to some GMO foods. Other concerns include the possibility of the genetically engineered foreign DNA spreading to non-GMO plants and animals. So far, none of the GMOs approved for consumption have caused any of these problems, and GMO food sources are subject to regulations and rigorous safety assessments.

In the future, GMOs are likely to continue playing an important role in biomedical research. GMO foods may provide better nutrition and perhaps even be engineered to contain medicinal compounds to enhance human health. If GMOs can be shown to be both safe and healthful, consumer resistance to these products will most likely diminish.

Vocabulary

- **biotechnology** - the use of a living organism for food, industrial, or medical use
- **crossbreeding** - mating two different organisms together to form a hybrid species
- **DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid)** - molecule in every living organism that contains specific genetic information for that organism
- **gene** - part of DNA that is the basic unit of heredity
- **genetically modified organism (GMO)** - living thing whose genes (DNA) have been altered for a specific purpose
- **genetic engineering** - process of altering and cloning genes to produce a new trait in an organism or to make a biological substance, such as a protein or hormone
- **microbe** - tiny organism, usually a bacterium
- **organism** - living or once-living thing
- **pesticide** - natural or manufactured substance used to kill organisms that threaten agriculture or are undesirable. Pesticides can be fungicides (which kill harmful fungi), insecticides (which kill harmful insects), herbicides (which kill harmful plants), or rodenticides (which kill harmful rodents)
- **selective breeding** - breeding to produce desired characteristics in animal or plant offspring
- **trait** - characteristic or aspect

From <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/genetically-modified-organisms/>

Setting up a Classroom Lincoln-Douglas Debate Information Sheet

Team responsibilities:

The following jobs must be filled by members of your team. Each person on your team should have at least one job. Write the team member's names in the chart below.

	Affirmative Position Team	Negative Position Team
1	<p style="text-align: center;">Moderator</p> <p>Calls debate to order, states debate topic or question.</p> <p>Name:</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Timekeeper</p> <p>Makes sure speakers do not take more than their allotted time.</p> <p>Name:</p>
2	<p style="text-align: center;">Lead Debater</p> <p>Presents main arguments of the Affirmative position.</p> <p>Name:</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Lead Debater</p> <p>Presents main arguments of the Negative position.</p> <p>Name:</p>
3	<p style="text-align: center;">Questioner</p> <p>Asks the Negative position team questions about its argument.</p> <p>Name:</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Questioner</p> <p>Asks the Affirmative position team questions about its argument.</p> <p>Name:</p>
4	<p style="text-align: center;">Question responder</p> <p>Must be able to answer questions about team's position.</p> <p>Name:</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Question responder</p> <p>Must be able to answer questions about team's position.</p> <p>Name:</p>
5	<p style="text-align: center;">Rebutter</p> <p>Responds to the arguments raised by the questions.</p> <p>Name:</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Rebutter</p> <p>Responds to the arguments raised by the questions.</p> <p>Name:</p>
6	<p style="text-align: center;">Summarizer</p> <p>Sums up Affirmative position, referring to new issues raised in the debate.</p> <p>Name:</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Summarizer</p> <p>Sums up Negative position, referring to new issues raised in the debate.</p> <p>Name:</p>

Adapted from <https://www.teachervision.com/lincoln-douglas-style-debate-procedure>

Debate Procedures Information Sheet

1. Moderator announces proposition to be debated. For example: "Schools should abolish all homework."
2. Moderator introduces the first speaker. For the rest of the debate, the Moderator must introduce the next speaker after the Timekeeper calls time.
3. The Timekeeper must now keep track of the time, letting participants know when they have one minute left to speak and when their time is up.
4. Five minutes: Lead Debater for the Affirmative position presents position.
5. Three Minutes: Questioner from the Negative position team asks questions of Question Responder from the Affirmative position team.
6. Five Minutes: Lead Debater for the Negative position presents argument.
7. Three minutes: Questioner from the Affirmative position team asks questions of Question Responder from the Negative position team.
8. Three Minutes: Affirmative Rebutter responds to the arguments raised by the questions.
9. Three Minutes: Negative Rebutter responds to the arguments raised by the questions.
10. Five Minutes: Affirmative Closer sums up position, referring to new issues raised in the debate.
11. Five Minutes: Negative Closer sums up position, referring to new issues raised in the debate.

Adapted from <https://www.teachervision.com/lincoln-douglas-style-debate-procedure>

Lincoln-Douglas Classroom Debate Team Worksheet

Team members:

Debate question/statement:

Team position (circle one): Affirmative Negative

Outline three to five points that support your team's position:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Sources used:

Name _____

Classroom Debate Evaluation

As you watch and listen to the debate, use this sheet to evaluate the process.

Team position (circle one): Affirmative Negative

Name of each team member

Moderator or Timekeeper: _____

Lead Debater: _____

Questioner: _____

Rebutter: _____

Question Responder: _____

Closer: _____

Rate the team's performance by making a judgment on each of the statements below and making a checkmark in the appropriate column.	Excellent	Good	Fair	Needs Improvement
Overall presentation of argument:				
Eye contact, voice volume, and poise:				
Ability to respond to opposition's challenges:				
Use of logical and well-stated responses:				
Ability to work together as a team:				
Overall comments for the team:				