

Debating the Unbelievable: Argumentation & Evidence Analysis

Course: Debate / Speech / Argumentation

Grade Level: 9–12

Lesson Type: Skill-Based Debate Simulation

Time Frame: 2–3 class periods

Assessment Type: Participation & Skill Application

SCHOLARFORGE OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students research and debate well-known conspiracy theories—not to determine their truth, but to practice **debate structure, evidence use, and critical evaluation**.

Students are paired and assigned opposing roles:

- One student **affirms** the conspiracy theory using any available evidence
- One student **negates** the conspiracy by challenging evidence, logic, and credibility

The goal is to understand **how arguments are constructed**, how weak evidence can sound persuasive, and why skepticism and verification matter.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- Construct arguments for and against a given position
- Use evidence strategically (even when flawed)
- Identify logical fallacies and weak sourcing
- Separate personal belief from assigned debate role
- Evaluate argument strength independently from truth

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS & FACILITATION GUIDE

Critical Framing (Read Aloud Recommended)

“This activity is about **how arguments are made**, not what is true. You may be asked to defend ideas you do not believe. That is a fundamental skill in debate.”

Lesson Structure

Step 1: Assign Conspiracy Topics

Select well-known conspiracy theories that are:

- Widely recognized
- Non-violent
- Historically or culturally relevant

(Teacher discretion is essential.)

Step 2: Pair Students & Assign Roles

Each pair includes:

- **Affirmative Speaker** – Defends the conspiracy theory
- **Negative Speaker** – Refutes the conspiracy theory

Roles are **assigned**, not chosen.

Step 3: Research Phase

Affirmative Student Must:

- Find *any* evidence used by conspiracy proponents
- Focus on persuasion, not accuracy
- Prepare talking points

Negative Student Must:

- Evaluate credibility of sources
- Identify fallacies and weak reasoning
- Prepare rebuttals

Step 4: In-Class Debate

Suggested format:

- Affirmative opening statement
- Negative opening statement
- Rebuttal round
- Open questioning (teacher moderated)
- Closing statements

Step 5: Post-Debate Reflection (Essential)

Students reflect on:

- Which arguments sounded persuasive
- Why weak evidence can still convince people
- How debate differs from truth-seeking
- What this reveals about misinformation



TEACHER DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Why do conspiracy theories persist?
- What made the affirmative arguments sound convincing?
- How did source credibility affect your confidence?
- Can an argument be well-made and still wrong?
- What responsibility do speakers have to truth?



ASSESSMENT (Teacher-Flexible)

Recommended criteria:

- Use of evidence
- Clarity of argument
- Role adherence
- Engagement in rebuttal
- Reflection quality

*(This should **not** be graded on factual correctness.)*

STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS (HANDOUT TEXT)

Debating the Unbelievable

You will participate in a debate where **truth is not the goal**—*argumentation is*.

You will be assigned:

- A conspiracy theory
- A role (affirm or negate)

Your job is to:

- Argue your assigned position clearly and persuasively
- Use evidence strategically
- Engage respectfully

You may be assigned a position you do not agree with.
That is intentional.

Why This Matters

Debate often requires:

- Defending positions you don't personally hold
- Recognizing persuasive but flawed arguments
- Evaluating evidence critically

This skill is essential for debate, law, politics, and informed citizenship.