

Forced Choice

What is it?

A tool that engages students in discussing and reviewing critical content (also practicing their argument skills) by requiring them to take and defend positions on content-related “controversies”

What are the benefits of using this tool?

Have you ever heard students having thoughtful and spirited conversations about chemical reactions, the Enlightenment, or the metric system? Forced Choice uses controversy, a known motivator and achievement booster (Lowry & Johnson, 1981), to get students engaged in discussing and debating critical content—even content they don’t typically get excited about. At the heart of the tool are simple frames that force students to take and defend a position on a given topic or issue. The debates that these frames spark tend to be animated and enthusiastic ones, as most students relish the opportunity to express and make a case for their ideas. But the tool does more than promote engagement. By encouraging students to develop, discuss, and defend their ideas, Forced Choice requires them to think deeply about the relevant content and hone critical discussion skills, including listening carefully, disagreeing respectfully, and supporting ideas with evidence.

What are the basic steps?

1. Review the Forced Choice frames on pp. 96–97. Pick one that appeals to you and fits your content.
2. Use the selected frame to develop a content-specific question or statement that will provoke debate when presented to students. Confirm that your question or statement is one that students can have legitimately different opinions about, not one that has a definitive right or wrong answer.
Note: The goal is to develop questions or statements that require students to explore and think deeply about the relevant content (review important details, clarify key concepts, etc.).
3. Present your question or statement. Give students time to develop a position and gather evidence. Clarify that there are no right or wrong answers, just different opinions.
4. Prepare students to engage in a heated but respectful discussion by reviewing and modeling the following discussion guidelines (modify the list as needed):
 - State your positions clearly. Support them with relevant facts, reasons, and evidence.
 - Treat your classmates as you’d want to be treated. If you’re going to disagree, do it respectfully.
 - Question and critique each other’s logic and evidence, not each other’s intelligence.
 - Be passionate about your positions, but listen to other people’s arguments as well.
 - Keep an open mind. Feel free to change positions in response to what you hear.
5. Invite students to share and justify their positions. Moderate the discussion by helping students recognize faulty or insufficient evidence, transform personal attacks into thoughtful critiques, etc.
6. Help students reflect on what they learned and how well they followed the discussion guidelines.

How is this tool used in the classroom?

- ✓ To promote active conversations about (and a deeper understanding of) critical content
- ✓ To use controversy and debate as a means of stimulating student engagement
- ✓ To develop students' ability to support a position with solid reasons and evidence
- ✓ To develop essential speaking and listening skills

Teachers use the Forced Choice frames described on pp. 96–97 to engage students in discussing key content and discussing it excitedly. Sample prompts show how the frames can work across grade levels and content areas.

Teacher Talk

- ➔ Remind students to support their “forced choices” with reasons and evidence by saying, “And you chose that position *because*?” (Students should respond with, “I think ___ because ___.”) For a more detailed look at this approach, see the Because tool (pp. 90–93).
- ➔ Forced Choice provides an ideal opportunity to review and give students feedback about their use of behavioral guidelines that relate to sharing and discussing ideas—guidelines like listening carefully, disagreeing respectfully, and critiquing ideas rather than people. As always, remember to teach expected behaviors explicitly, provide reminders as needed, and offer specific and informative praise to students who exhibit the behaviors successfully. (“I appreciate that you questioned Santiago’s logic rather than attacking Santiago personally.”)
- ➔ Despite its seemingly contentious nature, Forced Choice is actually an ideal tool for teaching students how to compromise. Once students have laid out their arguments, consider asking them whether compromise is possible. (“Can you come up with a position statement that everyone in the class can agree with?”) Students who are arguing about the merits of genetically modified foods, for example, might agree to the following compromise: “Genetically modified foods should at least be labeled so consumers can avoid them if they want to.”
- ➔ Be sure to leave time for reflection (Step 6). Help students solidify their understanding of the relevant content (and demonstrate they were listening) by challenging them to summarize their classmates’ positions and evidence. Prepare students to become more actively and appropriately engaged in future discussions by helping them assess—and think about how to improve—their performance. (“How well did you personally follow our discussion guidelines? How well did the class as a whole follow the guidelines? How can you/we do better next time?”)
- ➔ This tool supports the Common Core ELA/Literacy Standards (NGA Center/CCSSO, 2010a) and other ELA/literacy standards’ call to engage students in structured conversations around critical content and develop students’ argument skills, particularly the ability to support a position with evidence. As written, the tool develops oral argument skills, but you can target written argument skills instead by having students present and justify their positions in writing rather than orally.

Six Forced Choice Frames

More Alike or Different?

More Alike or Different? is useful when students are studying related pairs of items, events, concepts, or individuals. To use this frame, have students review what they know about each item, decide whether the items are more alike or different, and support their choices with relevant details. Asking students to decide whether two items are more alike or different and explain their reasoning forces them to examine the items more closely and attend to the most salient similarities and differences. Here are some sample prompts:

- Are spiders and insects more alike or more different?
- Are fractions and decimals more alike or more different?
- Are Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee more alike or more different?
- Are the heroines in these two stories more alike or more different?
- Are lithium and potassium more alike or more different?
- Are these two paintings more alike or more different?

Help students reflect on and analyze their decision-making process by calling attention to the criteria they use to make their choices. (“John argued that these paintings are more similar than different because their subject matter and color palette are almost identical. What criteria was Tameka using when she decided that the paintings were more different?”)

Which Is More . . . Better . . . the Best . . . the Most?

This frame asks students to make and defend judgments based on quality or degree. Prompts contain comparative or superlative words such as *more*, *better*, *best*, *most*, and *greatest*. Here are some examples:

- Which is the best season: spring, summer, winter, or fall?
- Which of these articles provides the most realistic advice for dealing with bullying?
- Which type of graph is best for presenting this kind of data?
- Which is the most powerful line in this text?
- Which of these scientific discoveries had the greatest impact on world history?

Agree or Disagree?

With this frame, students are given debate-provoking statements rather than questions. Students decide whether they agree or disagree with each statement and then justify their decisions with appropriate evidence. Here are some sample statements:

- Children my age should have a set bedtime.
- The United States should adopt the metric system.
- This design plan is better than that one.
- Politicians are all the same; there’s no real difference between Democrats and Republicans.

This or That?

This frame forces students to make a choice between two opposing characterizations of (or viewpoints on) a specific item, individual, or topic. Prompts take the form of questions like these:

- Is “playground time” useful time or a waste of time?
- Is Jay Gatsby a hero or a jerk?
- Is nuclear energy more helpful or harmful?
- Is teaching more of an art or a science?
- Do mobile devices in the classroom improve learning or interfere with learning?
- How should we remember the Age of Exploration—as a time of great discovery or a time of terrible exploitation?

As with all the frames in this tool, students are expected to support their positions with appropriate evidence.

Metaphorical Duels

Metaphorical Duels (Silver, Brunsting, Walsh, & Thomas, 2012) exploits the power of metaphorical thinking to promote depth of understanding. To use this frame, design two possible similes around a topic of interest, ask students which they feel is the most accurate, and have them justify their choices. Making the unusual connections that this frame requires forces students to think deeply and creatively about the critical attributes of the initial topic—a move that can have a powerful impact on comprehension and lead to truly insightful revelations.

Here are some sample prompts:

- Is a good friend more like a teddy bear or a flower?
- Is prejudice more like an iceberg or a runaway train?
- Is the circulatory system more like a bicycle or a delivery truck?
- Is the scientific method more like a recipe or a map?
- Are graphing calculators more like microscopes or telescopes?
- Are hieroglyphics more like a comic strip or a short story?

Encouraging students to describe the attributes of the items they’re comparing can help them make more thoughtful and well-supported choices. (“Before deciding whether prejudice is more like an iceberg or a runaway train, jot down everything you know about prejudice, everything you know about icebergs, and everything you know about runaway trains.”)

Physical Barometer

This frame, which is described more fully in the Interaction in an Instant tool (see p. 46), invites students to take a position on an issue, shore up their arguments with like-minded classmates, and then work to change the minds of classmates who hold different positions.