

The Debate Over Gun Laws in the United States - An Introduction

Overview

In this lesson, students read a short text that provides statistical background on gun ownership, gun violence, and public opinion on gun control laws in the United States; then they evaluate frequently-cited arguments on the issue of gun control policy. Next, they participate in a Civil Conversation based on the reading. In this structured discussion method, under the guidance of a facilitator (the teacher), participants are encouraged to engage intellectually with challenging materials, gain insight about their own point of view, and strive for a shared understanding of issues.

Standards and Topics

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.A
Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C
Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D
Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

Topics: Gun violence, gun control, public opinion

Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Examine statistics related to guns and gun policy.
2. Assess opposing arguments frequently offered on gun control policy.
3. Participate in Civil Conversation, which will enable them to:
 - a. Gain a deeper understanding of a controversial issue.
 - b. Use close reading skills to analyze a text.
 - c. Present text-based claims.
 - d. Develop speaking, listening, and analytical skills.
 - e. Identify common ground among differing views.

Materials

Handout A: The Debate Over Gun Laws in the United States – An Introduction (one per student)

Handout B: Civil Conversation Guide (one per student)

Procedure

I. Focus Discussion

- A. Ask students what they know about gun control. Look for answers that simply define gun control as laws and policies that restrict the sales and manufacture of firearms, as well as the ownership and use of firearms by civilians (persons who are non-military or non-law enforcement). Merriam-Webster defines gun control as, “regulation of the selling, owning, and use of guns.”
- B. Acknowledge that the question of gun control is one of the most controversial issues in the United States today. People have very strong opinions on this issue, and that can make it hard to talk about it when you disagree. Nonetheless, it is an important issue that Americans have to grapple with, and students can be informed participants in the conversation.
- C. Tell students that today they will be looking at some basic background information about gun violence, gun laws, and what people in the U.S. think about them; then they will evaluate arguments for and against gun control that people often make – reflecting first on their own and then in a small-group discussion.

II. Reading: The Debate Over Gun Laws in the United States -- An Introduction

- A. Briefly provide students with an overview of the purpose and rationale of the Civil Conversation activity. Use the Overview above to help you.

Give each student a copy of **Handout A: The Debate Over Gun Laws in the United States – An Introduction**

- B. Civil Conversation Guide

Distribute a copy of **Handout B: Civil Conversation Guide** to each student to complete as they read. (Each student should fill in his/her own guide.)

III. Activity: Civil Conversation

- A. Divide the class into groups of 3–4 students. You may want to have each group select a leader who will get the discussion started, ensure the group stays on-task, and finishes on time.
- B. Determine how much time the groups have to complete the discussion. (You will know what’s best for your students, depending on the length of the reading and how experienced your students are in student-directed discussion.)
 - **Time:** Conversations for classroom purposes should have a time limit, generally ranging from 15 to 45 minutes and an additional five minutes to reflect on the effectiveness of the conversations. The reflection time is an opportunity to ask any students who have not spoken to comment on the things they have heard. Ask them who said something that gave them a new insight that they agreed or disagreed with.
 - **Small Groups:** This discussion strategy is designed to ensure the participation of every student. Groups of 3-4 students are ideal. If you are scaffolding text for various reading levels, group students who will use the same text together.

- C. Review the rules of a Civil Conversation (listed under Step 3 on the Guide) and direct the groups to follow the instructions on the Guide to get started.
- D. Let groups know you will be circulating to listen in on their conversations and that each person in a group is expected to participate. The goal is for everyone to contribute equally to the conversation.
- E. If necessary, remind groups of the time and urge them to move to the next steps.

IV. Assessment/Closure

- A. After the groups have completed their discussions, debrief the activity by having the class reflect on the effectiveness of the conversation:
 - What did you learn from the Civil Conversation?
 - What common ground did you find with other members of the group?
 - Ask all participants to suggest ways in which the conversation could be improved. If appropriate, have students add the suggestions to their list of conversation rules.
- B. If you want to provide some whole-class debriefing or reflection on the topic without opening up to a whole-class debate, you might ask students to answer the following question on a small piece paper or a sticky note: *What is a question you have (or something you're still wondering about) on the question of gun control now that you've had a chance to examine it in class?*

You can then collect the notes and either read common questions aloud, or you can review them after class and then use them as the basis for subsequent research or classroom activities.

- C. For assessment, look for the following on each student's Civil Conversation Guide:
 - Step 2 – A, B: Basic understanding of text.
 - Step 2 – C, D: Text-based arguments.
 - Step 2 – E: Appropriate and compelling questions about the text.
 - Step 4 – A: Level of participation (should be “about the same as others”).
 - Step 4 – B: Answer is appropriately related to topic/issue presented in text.
 - Step 4 – C, D: Specificity/text-based.
- D. For additional assessment, you may want to collect the article/text students used to assess the annotations they made in terms of connections to prior knowledge/experience, questions they had while reading, and comments they made.

The Debate Over Gun Laws in the United States: An Introduction



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Estimates on the rate of gun ownership in the United States are difficult to confirm. Part of the reason for this is that a 1986 law, the Firearm Owners Protection Act, prohibited the creation of any national “system of registration of firearms, firearms owners, or firearms transactions or dispositions.” Given this limitation, researchers who want to know about how many guns Americans own have to rely on a range of sources. In 2017, the Pew Research Center found that 30 percent of American adults reported personally owning a gun, with an additional 11 percent saying they live with someone who does. A comprehensive 2012 study by the non-partisan Congressional Research Service estimated that there were 310 million firearms in circulation nationwide, or as many guns available to civilians in the U.S. as there were actual civilians.

Guns play a significant role in violent crimes committed in the United States. According to the FBI, in 2017, “firearms were used in 72.6 percent of the nation’s murders, 40.6 percent of robberies, and 26.3 percent of aggravated assaults.”

Americans have conflicting views on gun-control legislation to address gun violence. According to an October 2018 Gallup poll, 61 percent of Americans favor stricter gun laws, 30 percent favor keeping gun laws as they are now, and eight percent favor making our gun laws less strict. Below are some of the most frequently used arguments in the debates over gun-control laws.

Arguments on Gun Control

Against Gun Control	For Gun Control
Gun control impinges on a basic right of all Americans – the right to protect themselves. This right is so important that the Second Amendment to the Constitution guarantees the right to bear arms.	The Second Amendment is not an unlimited right. Most gun-control laws are reasonable restrictions on this right.
With our society’s high rate of violence and lack of adequate policing, guns offer citizens necessary protection.	Guns are far more likely to harm members of the owner’s household than offer protection against criminals.
“Guns don’t kill people. People kill people.” Switzerland, which has a very low rate of murder, also has a high rate of gun ownership; guns are common in Swiss households because all men aged 18-34 must serve in the military and are permitted to store their army weapons at home.	Guns make bad situations worse. Our murder rate is higher than other countries’ because guns, especially handguns, are so readily available. Although gun ownership is widespread in Switzerland, soldiers cannot store their army-issued ammunition at home, and there are strict government regulations on private gun ownership.
“When guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns.” Criminals will always find ways of getting guns or other weapons. Washington, D.C. and other jurisdictions with strong gun-control laws still have high rates of gun violence.	Most of the crimes committed with guns in Washington, D.C., are committed with guns bought in nearby states with lax gun laws.
Instead of penalizing ordinary citizens, the proper way to keep criminals from using guns is to impose harsher penalties on criminals who use them.	We already impose mandatory minimum sentences on criminals using guns, and many states allow sentencing “enhancements” for crimes involving firearms.
Our country has too many guns in circulation for gun-control laws to be effective. Some estimates show that there could be more guns in the U.S. than there are people.	Canada had similar laws to ours until the 1920s. Gun control has worked there. The number of homicides committed with a firearm in Canada is a tiny fraction (about 2%) of the same figure for the U.S.
Even if gun-control laws did reduce the use of guns, criminals would simply shift to other deadly weapons, such as hunting knives.	Guns are more fatal than other weapons. A person shot with a gun is five times more likely to die than a person stabbed with a knife.

CIVIL CONVERSATION GUIDE

Name: _____

Class: _____

Title of Reading: _____

Step 1: Read.

- A. Read through the entire selection without stopping to think about any particular section.
- B. Re-read the selection and annotate (“talk to”) the text:
 - Underline the main/most important points. You can comment on these points in the margins.
 - Circle words or phrases that are unknown or confusing to you.
 - Write down any questions you have in the margin labeling them with a “?”.
 - Draw an ➡ in the margin next to text that connects to something you know from outside the text. Note what the connection is, such as a news item or personal experience.

Step 2: Think about the reading to prepare for the discussion.

A. This reading is about...	B. The MAIN POINTS are:
C. In the reading, I agree with:	D. In the reading, I disagree with:

E. What are two questions about this reading that you think could be discussed? (The best questions for discussion are ones that have no simple answer and that can use the text as evidence.)

1.

2.

Step 3: Discuss and listen.

RULES FOR CIVIL CONVERSATION

1. Everyone in your group should participate in the conversation.
2. Listen carefully to what others are saying.
3. Ask clarifying questions if you do not understand a point raised.
4. Be respectful of what others are saying.
5. Refer to the text to support your ideas.

You will have _____ minutes to discuss. Your goal is to engage with each other and the text to gain insight about your own point of view while finding a shared understanding of the issue.

At the end of the reading, you will likely find at least one discussion question. Use that question to get started. If time permits, you can also discuss questions you came up with in Section E above.

If the reading does not provide discussion questions, choose questions to discuss from Section E.

Step 4: After your conversation...

A. Compared to others in your group, did you speak? ___ Less than, ___ About the same as, ___ More than others.

B. Note some of the ways you added to the discussion.

C. What evidence did you use from the text to add to the discussion? Why was this evidence helpful?

D. What did you learn about the topic from the Civil Conversation? (Be sure to reference the text!)