

# English 9

## Discussing Ideas as a Class

*According to the B.C. government, the prime goal of public schools is “to develop the ability of students to analyze critically, reason and think independently, and acquire basic learning skills and bodies of knowledge; to develop in students a lifelong appreciation of learning, a curiosity about the world around them and a capacity for creative thought and expression” (Statement of Education Policy Order, Government of British Columbia).*

English is a language. Like any other language, English is used to express yourself and to learn from the expression of others. A goal of this course is to help you gain mastery over the English language – so that you can use it to express your views, opinions, ideas, values, and beliefs. We will read texts from a variety of perspectives. We will hold class discussions aimed at supporting **dialogue** and we will perform **debates** to encourage that different viewpoints be evaluated.

The goal of helping you express yourself stems from the purpose of public education. This includes the development of citizens who are “thoughtful, able to learn and to think critically, and who can communicate information from a broad knowledge base,” are “capable of making independent decisions,” are “cooperative, principled and respectful of others regardless of differences,” and are “creative, flexible, self-motivated and who have a positive self image” (Statement of Education Policy Order, Government of British Columbia).

This course invites students to think for themselves and to listen to the views of others, even when in disagreement. Throughout this course you may say or hear things, or read or write things, that you or someone else disagrees with. At times, disagreement may be strong. Hearing other points of view, especially ones that you don’t agree with, can be stressful. Contrary to the statement that “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me,” words **can** hurt. That is why we’ll work together, as a class, to express ourselves respectfully and with compassion.

At the start of the term, the class will discuss how to discuss difficult and controversial topics and ideas. We’ll develop, together, some ground rules for how we’ll speak and listen in this class. Below are opening ground rules to help guide us in how we start to facilitate diversity of thought, freedom of expression, responsibility to one another, and compassion toward one another.

As the above policy statement continues, another goal of the provincial school system is to develop citizens who are “aware of the rights and prepared to exercise the responsibilities of an individual within the family, the community, Canada, and the world”. We will base our discussion on both the rights of free expression and thought and the responsibilities that come with the exercise thereof.

**Guiding Principles:**

1. When discussing the ideas, opinions, **beliefs**, and **values** of students and the authors whose materials we'll read or view in class, the aim of the discussion is educational, in support of the curricular goals of this course.
2. Class discussions will be grounded in the application of the following educational discourse strategies: **open inquiry**, **viewpoint diversity**, **constructive disagreement**, and **compassion for others**.
3. School rules, district policies, and provincial mandates on the rights and responsibilities of students will also guide the facilitation of class discussions about ideas, including ideas that some might consider offensive or controversial.
4. According to the School District's *Code of Conduct*, students are expected to conduct themselves in a courteous and respectful manner, to use appropriate language, and to demonstrate **respect** for all people. The teacher is also expected to treat others with respect and **dignity**.
5. District policies expect that students demonstrate respect for diversity, including diversity with reference to the race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, religion, marital status, physical or mental disability, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, and/or socioeconomic background of that person or class of persons.

If a topic or point of view that you don't agree with is shared in a class discussion, you may:

- respectfully speak up and express your own view on the matter,
- ask the teacher to help you navigate the conversation,
- request to leave the classroom for the duration of the discussion.

If you feel that another student is **bullying** or **harassing** you or another student, you may:

- inform the teacher during the conversation to request help navigating the matter right away (as part of the classroom discussion),
- inform a school counselor, other trusted staff member, or school administrator and request help (at a later time),
- request that the teacher meet with you in the hallway for immediate help.

According to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, everyone has the fundamental freedom of "thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communications". While freedom of expression is an important right, there are limits to expression. These include restrictions on **hate speech**, **discriminatory speech**, violent or threatening speech, and **defamatory speech**. Furthermore, speech in schools must adhere to certain policies, codes of conduct, and educational purposes.

***Our motto: Be yourself. Include everyone.***

You are encouraged to freely speak your mind – respectfully and within the limits of what is allowed at school. You are also invited to listen to differing points of view. And, in this class, you are expected to treat others with compassion, especially when discussing ideas that others may find deeply offensive or upsetting. That said, not all disagreeable speech is intended to make others feel bad and disagreeable speech is not always directed at others. In a pluralistic society like Canada, people hold diverse points of view on many issues and matters. There is value in hearing from others, even when they hold beliefs or express opinions that you don't like or agree with.

### DISCOURSE STRATEGIES

<b>Open inquiry</b>	Asking questions and sharing ideas without the risk of <b>censure</b> .
<b>Viewpoint diversity</b>	Allowing diverse peoples with diverse perspectives to come together and challenge claims, deepen understanding, and engage in dialogue.
<b>Constructive disagreement</b>	Discussing ideas and perspectives across lines of difference that help us better understand our own viewpoints and those of others.
<b>Compassion for others</b>	Keeping in mind that conversations happen in relation to one other. Demonstrating respect for one another in how we talk and listen to each other strengthens these relationships and helps build community for all.

Source (with modification/addition): Heterodox Academy

### TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Beliefs:** Beliefs are things that one considers as true. Beliefs can stem from what you observe or what you have been taught. They can be mundane, such as the belief that a pencil is a real thing and is used for writing things down. Beliefs can also be profound, such as a certain belief in the origin of creation or of the universe, or the belief in the inherent worth, or dignity, of all humans. Some beliefs are the basis for knowledge; they can be objectively proven as true. Other beliefs cannot be objectively proven and therefore are subjective, meaning that they are based on personal opinions and feelings. What is “knowledge,” or universally true, and what is “subjective” is often contested. People often disagree on what is provable and “real” and what is a matter of faith or of opinion.

**Bloom’s Taxonomy:** Bloom’s Taxonomy is a tool for thinking about teaching and learning that organizes learning outcomes. At the start is recalling facts and basic concepts and at the end is the production of new or original works and ideas. Like the LOAs (see below), this helps organize thinking, writing, and learning. Each level of the taxonomy builds to other levels. Unlike LOA, Bloom’s model does not include shortcuts but instead becomes increasingly more complex when moving up the triangle. When discussing ideas in class, we will use this framework to guide our learning. This helps students not only state opinions, beliefs, and values but to also understand key concepts, evaluate them, and come up with original ideas.

**Bullying:** According to the B.C. government’s *Erase Bullying* website, bullying is a “persistent pattern of unwelcome or aggressive behaviour that hurts others physically and/or emotionally” and usually includes the following three indicators: power, frequency, and intent to harm. Bullying builds and exercises power through “physical size and strength, by status within the peer group, and by recruiting support of the group”. Bullying occurs across time and is directed at a victim on a repeated basis. Bullying targets a victim with the intent to either physically or emotionally harm another person, or to threaten another person with harm. Other behaviours, such as meanness or single acts of aggression, may not be “bullying” but are still inappropriate and unwelcome. School District 52 defines bullying as “the exercise of power or authority in a manner which serves no legitimate school or work purpose and which a person ought reasonably to know is inappropriate” or “misuses of power or authority including intimidation, threats, coercion and blackmail”.

**Censure:** Censure is an official reprimand, or punishment, that condemns someone for what they do or say (or their inaction). It can also be informal, such as when several people condemn someone’s actions (or inactions).

**Compassion:** According to the *Greater Good Science Society* of the University of California, Berkley, compassion “literally means *to suffer together*” and compassion is defined as “the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another’s suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering”. Beyond empathy, compassion includes “the desire to help”. In this class, compassion is placed on equal footing with the discourse strategies of open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive agreement. When discussing ideas, consideration of others should help us figure out how to present our viewpoints and how to express ourselves.

**Debate:** According to the *American Debate League*, debate is “an organized argument or contest of ideas in which the participants discuss a topic from two opposing sides”. Debate requires that participants clash in how they present opposing, or differing, ideas and propositions (proposals). Debates are often structured so that either side may end up taking both of two positions, requiring that the debaters speak on a side that they do not agree with. This requires the debater to see things from more than one perspective and to construct and evaluate arguments using constructive thinking strategies (such as Graham’s Hierarchy of Disagreement – see below).

**Defamation (defamatory speech):** Defamation is public communication about a person that hurts their reputation by making a false statement (oral or written) about them. If spoken, defamation is called slander. If written, it is called libel.

**Discriminatory speech:** According to the *Office of the Human Rights Commissioner*, discriminatory speech is speech that “discriminates or intends to discriminate against a group of people because of characteristics including race, place of origin, religion, disability, sex and gender identity”. For expression to be considered as “discriminatory speech” it must be expressed in a public way (such as a flyer, notice, article, or speech), it must intend to make a highly negative distinction between groups, and it must intend to create highly negative consequences for the targeted group.

**Dialogue:** Dialogue is mutual listening and is the truthful and meaningful exchange of ideas, facts, values, beliefs, experiences, viewpoints, and opinions between two or more people. A dialogue must not have a pre-determined end point. While dialogue may increase understanding between people, it may only result in “agreeing to disagree”. For a dialogue to have value, participants should speak truthfully and respectfully. All participants should listen and respond to those with whom they are in a dialogue. At times, a dialogue may involve discomfort.

**Dignity:** Dignity is the state of being worthy of honour or respect and human dignity is an irrevocable quality, intrinsic to each human, that confers equal and infinite value to all humans (meaning that all humans are believed to be of equal value, or are equally worthy of honour or respect); human dignity is self-recognized (meaning that the recognition of one’s dignity by others is not required for a person to have dignity); dignity is believed to be an inherent characteristic of being human, universal to all humans.

**Education** (or educational): According to the *School Act (1996)*, education is “an organized set of learning activities” that are “designed to enable learners to become literate, to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralist society, and a prosperous and sustainable economy”. Educational activities are aimed at fulfilling the purposes of education through instruction of the curriculum and assessment of student learning in relation to the curriculum. This course aims to help students learn the curricular concepts and skills that are outlined in the curriculum.

**Graham’s Hierarchy of Disagreement:** Graham’s Hierarchy of Disagreement is a tool for developing arguments and points you make during a disagreement, discussion, or debate. It was developed by Paul Graham in a short essay, meant primarily for online disagreements. It can be applied to debate, constructive thinking, and discussion in other contexts as well.

**Harassment:** According to School District 52, personal harassment is “any improper behaviour that is directed at or offensive to another person, is unwelcome, and which the person knows or ought to reasonably know would be unwelcome” or “objectionable conduct, comment, materials or display that demeans, belittles, intimidates, bullies, or humiliates another person”. Harassment is often distinguished from bullying when the abusive behaviour is discriminatory against a protected characteristic of a person or group (see “hate speech”).

**Hate speech:** According to the *Office of the Human Rights Commissioner*, hate speech “uses extreme language to express hatred towards a person or group of people because of their protected characteristic,” is expressed in public, and targets a person or group of people based on a protected characteristic (age, family status, mental disability, religion, ancestry, gender expression, physical disability, sex, colour, gender identity, place of origin, sexual orientation, criminal conviction, marital status, political belief, source of income, and race).

**Levels of Analysis (LOA):** LOA is a tool for organizing your thinking, writing, and learning and builds from describing facts or opinions to explaining theories (based on those facts and opinions). The model includes the shortcuts of connection and reflection and is “topped off” with metacognition. LOA provides you with several sets of questions to help you get started in the evaluation of ideas and beliefs.

**Respect:** Respect is the recognition of another person’s human power (or, in other contexts, of the power of anything); recognition of one’s human power goes beyond merely noticing, as this form of respect requires both seeing and responding to human power, which both dignity (defined above) and capacity (the ability to do or achieve something as intended); capacity can be understood in educational terms as (1) the exercise of human power (*praxis*) and (2) as the expansion of human power (Lev Vygotsky’s *Zone of Proximal Development*).

**Values:** Values are the things that you consider to be of importance or that you deem to be right or wrong. Values can form the basis for certain beliefs (things that one considers as true) and beliefs can be the basis for your values (because you believe in something you can consider it important, unimportant, right, or wrong). Unlike certain beliefs, which can be proven objectively true, values are purely subjective; it is up to you alone to define what you value and don’t value.