

1 Because you do it all the time anyway

Think you aren't a debater? Think again.

You probably started being a debater when you were about four. When your Mum told you to put your shoes away in the cupboard, and you said, 'why?' And she said because it will keep the house tidy and stop your shoes getting lost, and you said, 'But if I leave them out by the door I can put them on quicker when I leave the house.' See what you and your Mum did back then? She made a proposition. You questioned it. She came back with arguments. You came back with counter-arguments. That's debating. You probably didn't win that debate. But at least you were getting started.

Or when, in the playground, you wanted to play one game and your friends wanted to play another, and you dug your heels in and said, 'We're going to play my game', and they said 'why?' and you gave them reasons, and answered their objections, until they gave in. You were debating then.

Or when your brother or sister wanted to use the computer to play a game and you needed to do your homework on it, or you wanted to play a game and they needed to do their homework, and you gave them reason after reason until they gave in. You were debating then.

Or when you wanted to go to a party and your parents said no and three hours of persuading later they said yes. You were debating then.

Or even when you lay in bed all night, not able to sleep, trying to decide whether or not you should drop History, or whether or not you should forgive your friend, or whether or not you should ask that person out, or whether or not you believed in God, or whether or not you should ever wear those trousers again, and the argument in your head kept going backwards and forwards until, just as the birds started singing, you knew what the right thing to do was. You were debating then (just with yourself).

Debating is one of the most basic of human activities.

Everyone does it, in every culture, and they always have done and they always will do. It happens because humans have choice. It happens when there is more than one course of action, or more than one way of interpreting a situation, or more than one way of seeing the world. It involves putting each side of the case in turn, and letting each side in turn be looked at and questioned

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and pushed and prodded and kicked, until one side comes out stronger, and the decision can be made, and we see the world in a different way. We all do it, all the time. What we call 'debating', the activity that takes place in clubs and competitions in schools, is just a formalised, disciplined way of doing what everyone does all the time - only doing it better.

Debating is a way of using your mind, a way of thinking.

We all have minds, of course. We all think. We also all have bodies, and we all move them. Athletes have bodies, and they move them too. The difference is that athletes train their bodies and discipline them until they can move them faster, stronger, further. Debating is like athletics for the mind. It trains you to think faster, stronger, further.

2 Because it will make you more confident

Do you remember the first time you had to speak in public? Or the second? Or the third?

How did you feel?

Were your legs shaking? Did your face (and / or other parts of your body) go red? Was your stomach like a hamster who's just drunk a triple espresso running on her wheel? Did you think everyone was laughing at you?

Everyone feels like that. Even people who seem utterly confident fear failure and humiliation, whether they're doing 'Show and Tell' in Year 1, or presenting on a topic in class, or doing a reading in Assembly, or making their first speech in the House of Commons, or giving their inaugural address as the newly elected President of the United States. I have no evidence for this, but I bet Martin Luther King went to the bathroom more often than usual just before he gave his 'I have a dream' speech.

It never goes away.

So what should you do about it? Hide under the duvet? Or in the cupboard? Draw the curtains? Never go out?

That won't work.

Even if you don't become an MP, or President of the United States, or lead a mass movement against racism, you will have to speak in public, whatever line of work or way of life you end up in. You may well have to do it in your private life too. So you might as well get good at it.

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