

**THE BETTER**  
**ARGUMENTS**  
PROJECT

**HOSTING A BETTER**  
**ARGUMENT ABOUT**  
**FREE SPEECH**

# WELCOME



Welcome to the Better Arguments Project. We believe that American civic life doesn't need fewer arguments; it needs Better Arguments. This toolkit was designed to help you foster a conversation that prompts participants to engage one another directly about differences in opinions, beliefs, and experiences related to free speech.

In offering this Better Argument, our goal is not necessarily for you and your fellow participants to change your

minds about a topic. Rather, we hope that every participant gains additional nuance and increased understanding of the many ways that the topic manifests itself. In turn, we aim for participants to be able to rely less on one side of the narrative and instead to be able to navigate issues based on the insights gained from diverse perspectives.

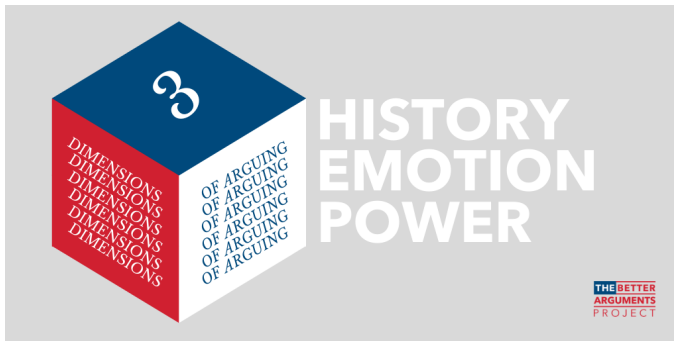
In this sense, arguments don't have to drive us apart. Better Arguments can bring us together.

Our approach to having Better Arguments was created in partnership with communities and advisers around the country. Together, we have synthesized three dimensions and five principles of a Better Argument, which are laid out on the following pages. The architecture of this conversation was designed with the three dimensions and five principles of a Better Argument at the center.

We offer Better Arguments related to hot-button issues such as voting rights, philosophical polarities such as liberty versus equality, and complex multi-player tensions such as those associated with the rapid growth of the tech sector in certain regions. For more information about our pre-designed conversation toolkit, visit our [website](#).

The Better Arguments Project is a partnership among the Aspen Institute Citizenship and American Identity Program, Facing History and Ourselves, and The Allstate Corporation.

# THREE DIMENSIONS OF ARGUING



The Better Arguments Project is based on the idea that one key to addressing division is for more of us to learn how to communicate better with those with whom we disagree. But to do that, we need to change how we have arguments. To have *Better Arguments*, we need arguments that are rooted in history, more emotionally intelligent, and honest about power imbalances. History, emotion, and power shape how we engage one another. By centering these three ideas, we can intentionally lay the foundation of the Better Argument.

## HISTORY

Today's civic arguments are rooted in a historical context. Remember, arguments—being able to reckon with differences and forge joint paths forward—are critical to a healthy American civic life. Today's civic and political debates are rooted in our history, and many of them can be boiled down to a finite number fundamentally American tensions such as liberty versus equality that require constant negotiation.

## EMOTION

A Better Argument is one in which all participants use emotional intelligence. This means that each party must seek to understand why the other party is taking a certain stance—rather than negating that party's point of view. Each side must step up to take responsibility for its own piece of the issue to create a new, more productive cycle.

## POWER

A Better Argument requires being honest about power. In many spaces of civil discourse, participants do not enter as equals; they enter reckoning with imbalances. These inherited inequalities need to be named before a Better Argument can take place. An important part of the Better Arguments process will be to account for these realities.

# FIVE PRINCIPLES OF A BETTER ARGUMENT



The following are five major tenets of a Better Argument. Every participant should commit to practicing these principles, and the Better Argument's host should uphold these principles.

## **TAKE WINNING OFF THE TABLE**

Conventionally, parties enter an argument with a goal of winning—or at least reaching resolution. Instead, the goal of a Better

Argument should be framed as reaching deeper insights, developing more nuanced understanding, and relying less on assumptions.

## **PRIORITIZE RELATIONSHIPS AND LISTEN PASSIONATELY**

A Better Argument foregrounds relationship and requires that all parties are truly listening to one another. Participants should listen to learn, not to win.

## **PAY ATTENTION TO CONTEXT**

A Better Argument acknowledges the complex realities surrounding any debate, including cultural context. Understanding these realities makes an argument more accessible. Any Better Argument should begin with specific questions that help establish a shared understanding of the context in which participants are entering the conversation.

## **EMBRACE VULNERABILITY**

In civic life today, many Americans engage only with circles that confirm their own worldviews. One major reason why this withdrawal occurs is because entering a space of argument means making yourself vulnerable. At the Better Arguments Project, we commend your willingness to take this risk, and we believe that when one person takes the leap, others will follow.

## **MAKE ROOM TO TRANSFORM**

A Better Argument is a transformational experience for all involved. Because it does not aim to win or reach resolution, the goal of a Better Argument becomes simply about changing how we engage with one another in order to build a community.

# FREE SPEECH

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution grants Americans arguably “the most protective free speech standard in the world.” While freedom of expression is indispensable to a free and democratic society, and has been key to scientific, social, and political progress, the Constitution protects many forms of speech, including hate speech, that are popularly deemed to be harmful to society.

Today, there exists tensions over whether, or to what extent, our institutions - from schools, to newspapers, to social media platforms - should embrace freedom of expression as a guiding ethic. While the First Amendment protects Americans from governmental censorship, it does not guarantee them any freedom of speech within institutions or platforms, which have their own First Amendment right to limit speech that they will not tolerate. While limitations on free speech within colleges or social media platforms, for example, are legal, it is not necessarily optimal. As Jacob Mchangama notes: “the larger ecosystem needed for free speech to thrive does not begin or end with the law. At least as important is what might be called the culture and practice of free speech. This culture is embedded in the attitudes and tolerance (or lack thereof) of citizens and the institutions that create, facilitate, and distribute speech.”

As a counterpoint, many people argue that colleges and universities should not tolerate hate speech, and that bigotry of any sort should not be protected under the umbrella of campus free speech guarantees. Likewise, similar arguments are made regarding social media, especially with attention to misinformation. The argument follows that allowing bigoted views or conspiracy theories to be aired can lead to the radicalization of others. Therefore, hateful or ignorant views would be less prevalent in our society if institutions or platforms placed more limits on acceptable speech. Lastly, disallowing hurtful speech is commonly viewed as a means of ensuring the emotional safety of disadvantaged groups by limiting their exposure to bigotry, thereby creating a “safe space.”

But opponents to placing additional limitations on free speech argue that it is dangerous to place individuals or authority figures in charge of determining what speech is and is not acceptable, and that the potential pitfalls outweigh any of the potential benefits of limiting people’s exposure to harmful or hurtful speech. According to Justice Black in the Supreme Court case *Healy v. James* (1972): “The freedoms ... guaranteed by the First Amendment must be accorded to the ideas we hate, or sooner or later they will be denied to the ideas we cherish.” In the context of a contemporary tension, there is no agreed-upon definition of “hate speech,” and active measures to curtail it could censor good-faith arguments about highly

sensitive topics or dissuade people from approaching certain issues altogether. Instead, free speech advocates argue that the best response to bigotry or misinformation is reason, facts, and argumentation, not censorship, and that we all must exercise our own free speech to advocate for a better and more inclusive society.

In addition to formal censorship, there are tensions over whether our culture has become hostile to free expression. Colloquially known as “cancel culture,” there is a popular movement, especially online, to “call out” or shame individuals who express views that are deemed to be offensive. While cancel culture is technically free speech—it is within anyone’s First Amendment rights to state that someone ought to be “cancelled” and, arguably, it is the only remedy to the hateful speech that the Constitution tolerates—opponents argue that our cultural moment has increased the risk of expressing oneself, limiting free expression. Rather than being censored in the court of law, individuals are being censored in the court of public opinion. And as John Stuart Mill wrote in his essay “On Liberty” in 1859, “Social tyranny” is “more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since ... it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself.”

# PREPARING FOR YOUR BETTER ARGUMENT

Now that you have chosen to host a Better Argument, you're ready to begin preparing for your event. Although no two Better Arguments are alike, the steps below outline some effective ways to bring Better Arguments principles to life and create a meaningful experience for participants.

- 1. Define your goals.** Better Arguments leaders have hosted events with a variety of goals: to change the tone of a local debate; to build connections among people on different sides of an issue; to create relationships that can support better decision making; and to inspire civic involvement. It's important to note that none of these goals are about persuading or converting the "other side." What would you like to accomplish with your Better Arguments work? What outcomes can you envision? Make these goals clear not only for yourself but for the participants as well.
- 2. Seek a range of perspectives.** A successful Better Argument includes diverse support and participation. Consider what range of perspectives need to be represented. We recommend spending some meaningful time inviting input and conducting outreach to advisers and participants who represent the full range of perspectives about this issue. This step will be an important investment in the success of your Better Argument. Place emphasis on securing the right range of perspectives rather than securing a high quantity of participants.
- 3. Choose your venue.** Better Arguments leaders have hosted conversations in person\* and on virtual platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. Select a venue that best fits your needs and the needs of your prospective participants. If you plan to include more than 10 participants, we recommend that your venue is equipped with the option to incorporate smaller breakout groups to keep participants highly engaged.
- 4. Schedule your Better Argument.** Pick your preferred date, time, and event duration. Additional guidance regarding event duration is included in the question prompt section below. Schedule your event using the [Better Arguments Project calendar](#). By doing so, you will set up an RSVP form that captures basic information about your participants and that elicits their views on the topic you select. This information will help you determine whether your participant group is sufficiently diverse. Use this RSVP link when you are promoting your Better Argument.
- 5. Get comfortable with the content.** Review the five principles of a Better Argument, included above, and make sure you can commit to practicing and upholding each principle throughout your event. Review the question prompts, included below, and make a timing plan to pace your event. Share this [briefing information](#) with your participants so that they can come prepared.
- 6. Follow up. Send a thank-you letter.** Use this opportunity to conduct a [post-event survey](#) and to encourage participants to stay connected and collaborative. Invite anecdotes on how participants have continued to use Better Arguments Project concepts in their everyday lives, and make sure to share those anecdotes with the Better Arguments Project!

For additional support planning your Better Argument, contact us at [BetterArguments@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:BetterArguments@aspeninstitute.org) or attend one of our [trainings](#).

*\*We encourage virtual events while public health threats are ongoing. Follow local guidelines.*

# PROMPTS FOR YOUR BETTER ARGUMENT

## STEP 1: WELCOME AND CONNECT

As the host, introduce yourself and then invite each participant to take turns introducing himself or herself. Consider using question prompts, such as “Share your name, the city where you live, and one reason why you want to have a Better Argument” or “Share your name, what brings you here, and what you bring.”

The purpose of this opening part of the agenda is to help participants connect as individuals who share a community—by inviting them to tell a story, share an aspect of their identity, or reflect on a common experience. Sometimes these conversation prompts will foreshadow the topic of your Better Argument, but this first discussion isn’t about exchanging opinions; it’s about prioritizing relationships and inviting participants’ voices into the room.

## STEP 2: SET NORMS AND GOALS

At Better Arguments, we understand that history, emotion, and power shape how we engage around controversial issues. By establishing norms for discussion, we can intentionally create a safer space for emotions and level the playing field for the conversation. Participants’ ability to live our Better Arguments principles—take winning off the table, prioritize relationships and listen passionately, pay attention to context, embrace vulnerability, and make room to transform—depends on creating a sense of trust and safety within the group. Norms help establish such trust and allow everyone in the group—not just the facilitator—to take responsibility for an honest and respectful conversation.

Begin norm-setting by asking participants to fill in the blanks:

“When I talk about [this event topic] I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.”

Ask people to name some of the feelings, which will likely range from “nervous” to “curious” to “angry.” Ask, “With this range of emotions in the room, what do we need in order to be open, honest, and vulnerable in this conversation?”

Then share some norms for discussion. Review the five principles of a Better Argument together as a group. Ask each participant to commit to practicing the principles during the event. You might invite participants to suggest additional norms.

During this step, the host should also share the goals for this event. The host will have determined these goals as part of the planning process. By articulating these goals to all participants, the group can proceed with a shared purpose.



### **STEP 3: ARGUE**

With introductions and norms completed, you are ready to begin your Better Argument. Invite participants to engage in the Better Argument by using the following question prompts. These questions start by inviting participants to share personal connections and experiences related to the chosen topic and then move into a more explicit exchange of views and opinions.

These questions will help elicit individuals' stories, perspectives, and opinions, and allow everyone the chance to speak, be heard, and listen in turn. Your role as host is essential in ensuring that the conversations unfold in this spirit, making space for all voices, and maintaining a tone of inquiry, engagement, and respect. Find additional facilitation guidance below.

#### **Better Argument Question Prompts:**

1. In your own words: What is free speech?
2. How is the topic of free speech showing up in your life and the life of your community? Have you experienced or witnessed speech that you wish could have been limited? Have you experienced a time or witnessed a time where you felt that speech was being limited or suppressed?
3. In many ways today, we are navigating the need to uphold the right to freedom of speech, while at the same time working to prevent the harm that certain speech can cause. What factors do you consider as you navigate this balance?
4. When is it acceptable to place limits on someone's speech? Who should be responsible to make these decisions and why? Where should the line be drawn?

### **STEP 4: REFLECT AND LOOK AHEAD**

After a robust exchange of views, participants step back from the argument to reflect on the experience as a whole. Consider using reflection prompts, such as the following:

- "What stood out to you about how we approached this conversation?"
- "Think about your mindset before today's event as compared with your mindset after it. What are some differences that stand out to you?"
- "What are some things you gained today that you want to bring into your everyday lives? What are some actions you will take moving forward?"

If there are specific next steps associated with your Better Argument, then invite participants to take action at this time.

# FACILITATING YOUR BETTER ARGUMENT

A facilitator sets the tone of a Better Argument, guides participants through the experience, and brings Better Arguments principles to life. Good facilitators offer clear instructions and move the conversation forward, but facilitation is as much about listening as it is about speaking—and about enforcing the agreed-upon norms. These facilitation guidelines can support your ability to respond to the needs of individuals and the group.

## STRAIGHT A'S FOR FACILITATING DISCUSSIONS

*Dr. Diane Goodman, a trainer and consultant, developed this framework to support discussions about issues of race and social justice; Sarah Stuart of Facing History and Ourselves adapted some of the questions below.*

**AFFIRM.** Affirm and appreciate people's comments and questions.

- Thank you for asking that question. I'm sure others were wondering about that too.
- Great point. That's important to consider.
- I appreciate you taking the risk to share that with us.
- I appreciate your willingness to stay open and consider other perspectives.
- I know this isn't easy to think or talk about. Thanks for doing the hard work.

**ACKNOWLEDGE.** Acknowledge what people are saying. Make sure you understand what they're expressing. Paraphrase their words and feelings. Acknowledge areas of agreement or commonalities with others.

- I'm hearing you say that \_\_\_\_\_. Is that correct?
- It sounds like you feel \_\_\_\_\_.
- So, from your perspective \_\_\_\_\_.
- It seems like both of you are concerned about \_\_\_\_\_ even though you're approaching it differently.

**ASK.** Ask questions to better understand individuals' behaviors and perspectives and to help participants reflect on their views.

- Can you tell me more about how you came to think that?
- What experiences led you to that belief?
- How would you make sense of ...?
- What would it mean for you if this were true?
- How were you feeling when ...?

**ADD.** Add more information, historical/social/political context, or alternative explanations. Challenge misinformation, broaden people’s perspectives, address differences in power and privilege, and put issues in a larger context.

- This research study found that ... .
- What institutional policies might have contributed to these challenges?
- Let’s consider how the history of ... has impacted what we see today.
- How might a person’s social identity affect his or her experience in this situation?
- What are some other explanations for this?

**ASSESS and ADDRESS.** Assess individual and group dynamics and your own internal and external responses and decide how to address them. Notice people’s reactions, body language, degree of participation, and the tone in the room. Reflect on your own behavior and feelings. Say the following to the group:

- People are very quiet. I’m wondering what’s going on.
- People seem restless. Do you need a break?
- I noticed some folks just had a reaction. Is there a volunteer who wants to tell us what happened for you?
- I’m noticing that people are interrupting one another. We agreed that we’d let people finish their thoughts before someone else spoke.

Say the following to yourself: I’m starting to get more tense and more aggressive. What’s triggering me? This person is reminding me of the stereotype. I need to refocus on the individual’s full humanity.

## **TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE FACILITATION**

*The following framework includes information from *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision Making* by Sam Kaner, Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk, and Duane Berger and from *Teaching and Learning Dialogically Organized Reading Instruction* by Maren S. Aukerman, Monica A. Belfatti, and Diane M. Santori.*

Your role as a facilitator is not to be an expert; you are there to help enable the conversation and move it along.

PROBLEM	INEFFECTIVE RESPONSE	EFFECTIVE RESPONSE
Everyone has different perspectives.	Try to get the group to arrive at one common understanding by the end.	Differences in understanding are good. Try to draw out the distinctiveness of other arguments and ideas with caring humility. If you find yourself becoming confused or skeptical, those moments are precisely the points at which to stop and discuss your reaction. Ask, "Can you say more about that?" or "What do you mean by ...?"
Arguments are inconsistent.	Call out the participant.	Let the group know it's okay to change and construct new understandings as you go along. That is a key sign of intellectual growth.
The group is silent.	Fill the silence just to fill the gap.	Be comfortable with silence. Sometimes people need time to process before speaking up.
A highly vocal member dominates discussion.	Try to control this person: "Excuse me, do you mind if I let someone else take a turn?"	If one person is over-participating, then everyone else is under-participating, so focus your efforts on the under-participants and encourage them to speak more. Ask, "How do the rest of you feel about this?"
Participation is minimal by members who don't feel involved/interested in the particular topic.	Ignore it, and act as though silence means consent.	Look for an opportunity to have a discussion on "What's important to me about this topic?" This gives everyone a chance to consider their own stake in the outcome of the discussion.
Someone becomes strident and repetitive.	Talk behind the person's back. Confront the person during the break, and then be surprised when you see his or her anxiety go through the roof when you resume.	People repeat themselves because they don't feel heard. Summarize the person's point of view until he or she feels understood. People just want to feel heard, not necessarily that everyone must agree with them.

As a reminder, a facilitator's role is to enforce the norms the group has agreed to at the outset of the Better Argument. Above all else, referring back to those norms can help remind participants of shared expectations, which will enable the conversation to move forward productively.

# THE PARTNERS



**The Aspen Institute** is a global nonprofit organization committed to realizing a free, just, and equitable society. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve the most important challenges facing the United States and the world. Headquartered in Washington, DC, the Institute has a campus in Aspen, Colorado, and an international network of partners.



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For more information about the Better Arguments Project, please visit [www.BetterArguments.org](http://www.BetterArguments.org) or reach us directly at [betterarguments@aspensite.org](mailto:betterarguments@aspensite.org).

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