

How to Disagree

(in an respectful, informed, and reasoned way)

Critical thinking involves the ability to see the world from many different points of view. As uncomfortable as it can be at times, engaging in a conversation with someone you don't agree with can be a very effective way to learn about a new perspective that you've never thought of before.



*Perspectives - Deep Water by Frits Ahlefeldt
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But I thought it was bad to disagree...

Disagreements have a bad rap but all the progress we have made as a society started with some form of disagreement. Someone introduced a new idea, often one that was widely unpopular at the time, then people argued about it and exchanged different opinions.

Remember, there was a time when it was outrageous to think that women should be given the right to vote in Canada. But from that controversial notion many diverse voices emerged, society learned to think about the idea differently, and over time, what once seemed unpopular and perhaps even impossible became more mainstream and supported by law.

Tips on how to disagree

Some types of disagreements are better learning opportunities than others.

Here are a few tips on how to engage in an effective disagreement:

- 1) **Keep it respectful and focus on substance:** Hurling insults is not the best way to try to understand where someone else is coming from, nor is it the most effective way to persuade someone to hear you out and perhaps consider your point of view. Saying “you’re stupid and your ideas are idiotic!” is likely not going to be received well by your audience. It also doesn’t make for a very convincing argument because it doesn’t actually address the substance of the ideas that you disagree with. Your chances of being heard and taken seriously are far better if you say, “I disagree with your point and here’s why,” or “I hear your point, but this is why I disagree...”

- 2) **Be an active listener:** Everyone wants to be heard and treated with respect. If you demonstrate that you’re only interested in sharing your opinion and not listening to what others have to say, why would anyone want to listen to you? While you may have really great arguments to share, be open to the possibility that someone else might have information or personal experience that could inform or change your initial opinion. When you’re actively listening, you are demonstrating that you’re paying attention to what is being said. Body language, such as looking at the speaker or nodding your head can show that you are actively listening, as can asking follow-up questions, requesting clarification, or repeating back what was stated.

- 3) **Counterarguments vs. contradiction:** Contradiction is simply stating an opposing view with very little evidence to support that view. “You said that the earth is flat. It’s round, everyone knows that! Duh!” does not make a very compelling argument.
A well-thought counterargument goes farther than simply stating the opposite of what was argued. It addresses the central point of the argument you oppose and provides persuasive reasoning or evidence to discredit it. For example, the following is much more convincing: “You’ve argued that no matter your elevation, the horizon is always at eye level, and therefore the earth must be flat. However, you can detect the curve of the Earth by looking at ships sailing away from the coast towards the horizon. They sink behind the horizon, as an ant would if you watched it at eye-level crawl across a ball. This is proof that the earth is round.”

- 4) **Disagreements aren’t always about winning or losing:** When you’re making an argument, it can be really tempting to want to stick to your guns against all evidence or reason to the contrary because you may feel like you must defend the side you chose. Disagreements should not simply be an exercise in trying to prove a particular opinion. Instead they should serve as an exercise in uncovering evidence and reasoned arguments (yours and those of your opponents), examining which points seem more persuasive or credible, and using that information to support an *informed* opinion or judgement. For example, even though the Crown (prosecution) and Defence are on opposing sides in our criminal justice system, they should both be working towards the goal of uncovering the truth, not simply “winning” a case. You may find after considering other points of view, that you’ve changed your initial opinion, or strengthened your belief in it.