

How to Never Lose an Argument

The only way you can make sure you never lose an argument, to paraphrase Dale Carnegie, is to avoid getting into one in the first place.

In a discussion everyone wins.

- We treat other people as partners in a problem-solving session.
- We throw out ideas, consider alternatives, and evaluate the pros and cons.
- We listen to other people's thoughts and explore ideas we haven't previously considered.
- We learn more about an issue, about what we think and feel, and about each other and each other's values.
- We seek people's support, not their resentful silence.
- We may passionately disagree with each other, but mutual respect keeps the dialogue civil.

In an argument no one wins.

- We treat other people as opponents to be defeated.
- We draw sides, defend our own positions, and attack the opposition.
- If we listen at all, we do so only to find the weaknesses in the other person's reasoning.
- We aren't open to new ideas or to the possibility of changing our opinions.
- We want to prove the superiority of our side (and the inferiority of the other side).
- Even when we "win" an argument, we usually do so by losing a potential ally.

Here are some guidelines to help create discussions out of sensitive situations:

1. Don't argue.

Refuse to get drawn into an argument. Be civil. Respect the other person as much as your honor your own values. Be assertive without resorting to aggression.

2. Seek areas of agreement.

Often, we agree with people in principle, but disagree with them in practice. (We want the same thing -- safer schools for our children, for example -- but we have different ideas of how to accomplish it.) Find those areas of agreement. Make them explicit. Try always to make the other person a fellow problem-solver, neither an opponent nor a friend.

3. Focus on interests, not positions.

An issue is what we want or need -- safer schools for example. A position is a way of achieving it. Avoid getting attached to your positions so that you don't lose sight of your interests. It's often easier to negotiate and compromise around interests than around positions.

4. Try to see things from the other person's point-of-view.

There's a reason why other people act and think the way they do -- however illogical, wrong-headed, or misguided as it may seem to you. If you condemn them or show contempt for their

reasoning, they will only harden in their resolve. They will resent and resist you. Seek, instead, to ferret out their hidden reasons, and you will find the key to their motivation.

5. Ask clarifying questions.

Ask open-ended questions. Closed questions -- like "Do you agree with my proposal?" -- limit people's ability to express themselves. Open-ended questions -- like "How do you feel about my proposal?" -- give them greater freedom and give you more information.

6. Listen.

Spend more time listening than speaking. (You can't get yourself into trouble by listening, but you sure can start a brawl by speaking.) Listen with your body, your eyes, and your mind as well as with your ears. Try to understand what people mean, without getting caught up in the exact words they say. Make them feel understood, and they'll be much more likely to try to understand you.

7. If you're wrong, admit it.

There's nothing wrong with changing your opinion, once you've gained new information or perspective. As a matter of fact, it's the sign of wisdom and maturity. Remember that you've been wrong in the past even when you thought you were right, and admit that you might be wrong this time.

8. If you're right, allow the other person to save face.

You're trying to win people's cooperation, not to prove them wrong. Your kindness will do more to gain their goodwill than anything else.