

Seminar Discussions and Debates

What are the differences between seminar discussion and debate?

Debate	Seminar Discussion
Debate is competitive and/or oppositional; opposing sides try to prove each other wrong	Seminar discussion is collaborative; cooperative; multiple sides work toward a shared understanding
In debate, one listens to find flaws, to spot differences, and to counter arguments	In seminar discussion, one listens to understand, to make meaning, and to find common ground
Debate defends assumptions as truth; participants may tend to "dig in" and get defensive to prove their point	Seminar discussion enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view
Debate creates an close-minded attitude, a determination to be right; often tends to lead toward one "right" answer	Seminar discussion creates an open-minded attitude; an openness to being wrong and an openness to change
In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right	In seminar discussion, one submits one's best thinking, expecting that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than threaten it
Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs (or the beliefs assigned)	Seminar discussion calls for temporarily suspending of one's beliefs
In debate, one searches for weaknesses in the other positions	In seminar discussion, one searches for strengths in all positions
Debate rebuts contrary positions and <i>may</i> belittle or deprecate other participants	Seminar discussion respects all the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend
Debate assumes a single right answer that somebody already has	Seminar discussion assumes that many people have pieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to a greater understanding
Debate demands a conclusion	Seminar discussion remains open-ended
Discussion is individual opinions; individual knowledge	Seminar discussion is mutual inquiry; collective knowledge

Note: The differences between seminar discussion and debate should not imply that seminar discussion is "good" and that debate is "bad." There are certainly times when debates are useful instructional strategies. The chart above is simply intended to articulate the differences.