See Both Sides of a Controversial Issue

1. Focus

Introduce Persuasive Essay Writing

Use the sample think-aloud below as a model of how to introduce the word controversy to the class and talk about some controversial topics. Give an example of an argument for a controversial issue, and a counterargument against it. You may wish to share more than one example to clarify the concepts.

Sample think-aloud. Say: A controversy is a discussion of something about which people have strongly differing opinions. Some examples of controversies include whether or not it is acceptable to use animals in scientific research and testing, and whether or not it should be legal to talk on a mobile phone while driving a car. I recently heard about a controversy. Some states in the United States have proposed an extra tax on sugary sodas and juice drinks. The tax would slightly increase the prices of these products and would help the states collect money with which to pay for programs and services. People have argued for and against this idea. People who are for the idea think it will make people more aware of the sugary drinks they are consuming. They feel it is an issue of improving the public’s health. Others in favor of the idea think it is a good way to raise extra money for the state. But many other people do not like the idea. They feel the state is trying to punish people for drinking sodas and juice drinks. They don’t like the idea of the state telling people what is good for them to drink, and they think the tax would be an unfair way to raise money. What position would you take on the issue? Allow small groups of students to discuss the issue, then have a classroom discussion.

Say: When we discuss the different sides of the issue, we are making an argument and a counterargument. An argument defends one side of an issue. A counterargument takes the opposite position. When we write a persuasive essay, we focus on defending our position, but somewhere in the essay, we acknowledge the opposing position. To write an effective persuasive essay, you need to know the opposing point of view.

Introduce the Purpose and Audience for Persuasive Essay Writing

Say: You may ask yourself, “Why do people write persuasive essays? Who would ever want to know what I think about an issue?” I write persuasive essays because it helps me clarify how I feel about an issue and why I feel that way. It’s also a good way to learn more about a controversy. At the end of a persuasive essay, I always know more about the topic than I did when I started. I imagine that my audience is made up of people who want to learn more about that issue, too. They want to compare their thoughts about it to mine, and see if they...
agree or disagree with me. Sometimes, my audience includes people whose minds I want to change about an issue. These might be school or government officials who have the power to change policies that I disagree with.

2. Rehearse

Practice Making Arguments and Counterarguments Orally

Invite students to work with partners. Ask them to choose an issue that has two distinct sides. Tell them the issue does not have to be “big” or very controversial; for example, students could discuss raising the legal driving age from sixteen to eighteen. Have one student make an argument about one side of the issue while the other student makes the counterargument. Remind them to acknowledge the opposing point of view as they make their case.

If your class includes English learners or other students who need support, use “Strategies to Support ELs.”

Share Arguments and Counterarguments with the Class

Invite volunteers to share their arguments or counterarguments with the class. Use one or more of the following questions to engage students in a discussion about the exercise:

- What reasons did you give to support your position?
- Who made the stronger case, you or your partner? Why?
- Did knowing the other side of the argument help you make your case? In what way?
- Was one side of the issue more difficult to argue? How so?

3. Independent Writing and Conferring

Say: We can write to express our views about controversies. As we write about our positions on issues, it’s important to make sure we also understand the opposing point of view. Over the next several weeks, we will learn ways to help readers understand our point of view about a topic.

Encourage students to choose an issue that has two distinct sides. Ask them to write one paragraph for one side of the issue and one paragraph taking the opposing viewpoint. During student conferences, reinforce students’ use of this and other strategies using the prompts on your conferring flip chart.

4. Share

Bring students together. Invite volunteers to read aloud their paragraphs that explore opposing viewpoints.

Strategies to Support ELs

Beginning
Meet with beginning ELs one on one while other students work with partners. Show students two photographs, one in which a group of students are wearing school uniforms and one in which they are wearing casual clothes. Have students say or point to which one they prefer. Expand on their ideas with simple sentences.

Intermediate
Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during partner practice. Write simple sentence frames on chart paper and model how students can use them to talk about their topics. For example:

This controversy is about ______. My argument is ______.

Advanced
Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during partner practice.

All Levels
If you have students whose first language is Spanish, share these English/Spanish cognates to help them understand the lesson focus: argument/el argumento; controversy/la controversia; opinion/la opinión.