

Discussion Texts

Structure and features of discussion texts

PURPOSE

A discussion presents differing opinions, viewpoints or perspectives on an issue, enabling the reader to explore different ideas before making an informed decision. The writer normally explores different opinions and ends with a personal opinion or comment.

TYPES OF DISCUSSION

Throughout their lives students will need to make decisions. Rather than simply responding emotively, it is important that they develop the skills to look at both sides of an argument, weighing the positives and negatives objectively before they make a rational decision.

Discussion texts are concerned with the analysis, interpretation and evaluation of issues. This text type will give students the opportunity to develop the skills of finding information to support their arguments and emphasises the importance of anticipating arguments and responding to these.

In effective discussion, all points of view on an issue are considered and attitudes change when different perspectives are seen. By becoming aware that facts can be interpreted in different ways, students will understand that a variety of opinions on an issue may be valid. Experiencing discussion texts helps students to think clearly and critically. When reading this text, students need to focus on how authors use persuasive evaluative words to influence the reader. It will encourage them to listen and respond to others' opinions, to ask pertinent

questions and to present arguments in clear and coherent ways.

Informal discussions should initially involve students in decision-making and problem-solving processes. Students should begin by discussing areas that require no research so that they are encouraged to express a point of view. It is important, and will help their understanding, if they are given situations to discuss where there are many different points of view. This will broaden their thinking and make them aware that the same situation can be viewed from different perspectives.

Discussion text can be found in talkback radio when people with varying perspectives comment; interviews when speakers with different points of view are questioned; letters to the editor when people respond in different ways to an issue; and in newspaper articles. They can also be found in editorials, trial judgements and videotaped results.

Students can write discussions on issues from different Key Learning Areas. In Human Society and Environment, for example, discussions can be written exploring the issue: Should more facilities be provided for children in the local area? In Science and Technology, students can discuss: Would it be fair to all citizens if, in the name of a cleaner environment, cars were banned from the city centre? In Personal Development and Health a possible issue could be: Is it fair to have a no hat, no play rule at school?

Written discussions will require some background information drawn from the historical, media-based or political areas. Students' writing should show a clear understanding and develop selected material and abstract ideas. Discussions provide opportunities for developing the use of many language skills. In oral sessions students can work towards developing their ability to factually justify a point or support an opinion by using personal experience, survey results, interviews and research. Techniques used in discussion texts include the use of thought provoking questions, analysis of points of view

and repetition of words, phrases and concepts. Students will have to search for supporting evidence and critically discuss the arguments put forward by others. Their ability to involve and persuade an audience, while evaluating the strength of different arguments needs to be developed. Frequently the speaker's attitude and opinion will be conveyed in the tone of voice, expression and language that is used.

At this stage encourage students to participate in debates on both formal and informal issues as opportunities will be available to spontaneously rebut issues that arise. Here students need to develop the ability to maintain an argument while ensuring they are aware of the audience. They can do this by using gesture to emphasise points and pacing the material effectively while distancing themselves from the audience by using the passive voice, e.g. The truth is...; It seems that...

STRUCTURE OF DISCUSSION TEXTS

There are different stages in a discussion:

- an introductory statement of position supplying necessary background information
- arguments for and against and supporting evidence
- a recommendation or conclusion.

Statement of position

A discussion begins with a brief introduction describing the situation. This introduction has a statement or question and serves the purpose of introducing the reader or listener to the author's point of view or thesis. Often it is recognised that there are two points of view.

Arguments for and against and supporting evidence

The next few paragraphs elaborate the arguments for and against the issue. This should be based on researching books, the Internet, surveying or interviewing people. The evidence and opinions should support the statements. The number of arguments varies according to the writer's desire and the content. The arguments can be structured in different ways.

Example 1

- A first argument for the point of view with supporting evidence or additional details elaborating each point.
- A second argument for the issue with supporting details.
- A first argument against with supporting elaboration.
- A second argument against with supporting details.

Example 2

- A topic sentence introduces a point, then arguments are written for and against the issue. This should be based on researching, surveying or interviewing people.
- A second topic sentence introduces a second point and this is followed by arguments for and against.
- A third topic sentence introduces a second point and this is followed by arguments for and against.

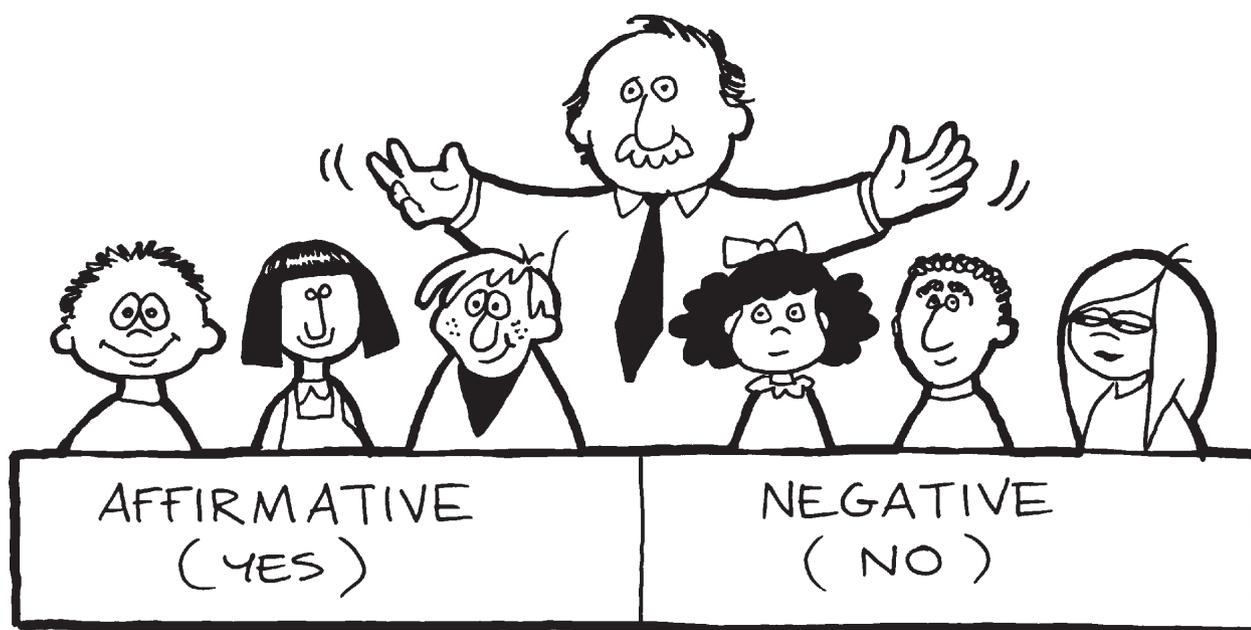
Each paragraph should be clearly structured with a topic sentence supported by details. The supporting material could be reported speech reflecting comments from specialists who have responded to the issue or supporting evidence. Thinking and action verbs are used to persuasively establish and evaluate each argument, and some technical language will be necessary.

Recommendation or conclusion

The discussion ends by presenting a personal point of view before concluding. The recommendation or conclusion sometimes sums up both sides of the argument if they are fairly balanced, or can recommend one argument over the other if the evidence is overwhelming.

LANGUAGE FEATURES OF DISCUSSION TEXTS

- Use of present tense.
- Use of general nouns to make statements, e.g. men, papers.
- Use of detailed noun groups to reinforce an argument, e.g. The national treasure that is our Daintree forest can be...
- Use of saying verbs to quote.
- Use of relating verbs, e.g. is.
- Use of thinking verbs expressing a personal point of view, e.g. wonder.
- Use of factual adjectives, e.g. my *last* holiday.
- Use of adjectives expressing an opinion, e.g. my *horrifying* adventure.
- Use of comparative or contrasting adjectives, e.g. boring, most significant.
- Use of adverbs of manner, e.g. honestly, rapidly, carefully, thoroughly.
- Use of connectives to link arguments, e.g. however, in the same way.
- Use of conjunctions to link clauses.
- Use of varying degrees of modality for effect, e.g. Perhaps we *might* see... followed by but we *must* see...
- Use of abstract and technical terminology.
- Use of quoted and reported speech, e.g. Ms Kim declared...
- Use of evaluative language, e.g. The threatened landscape will continue to be tragically eroded, if steps are not taken.
- Phrases to introduce the other point of view, e.g. on the other hand, generally.
- Words showing the writer's opinion, e.g. For the above reasons I fervently believe that...
- Use of clearly structured beginning of sentences that focus attention, e.g. Game parks..., The cleaner environment focus...
- Use of passive voice to change focus of the sentence, e.g. The environment is threatened...
- Using complex combination of clauses, e.g. While it is vitally important to have a clean environment, we must think about...
- Use of word chains, synonyms, antonyms and repetition for effect.



Sample Annotated Text

TEXT ORGANISATION



LANGUAGE FEATURES



SHOULD GALACTIC PARK BE CLOSED?

Introductory statement of position

Arguments for and against with supporting evidence

Conclusion and recommendation

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Many of you **are concerned** that the redeveloped **Galactic Park** is now facing closure. So this morning we **have with us** in the studio Mr Willis—the **managing director of Galactic Park**. If you have anything that you would like to discuss with Mr Willis, here's your chance. The lines are open, so ring us now.

Good morning Johanna. Do you have something to say to Mr Willis?

JOHANNA

Well yes. Mr Willis, the Big Dipper has caused a lot of **noise** and unrest for the people of North Park. And now it looks like **Galactic Park** will close at great expense to the public. How can you justify what has happened?

MR WILLIS

Johanna, I understand what you are saying, **but** all you have to do is put it in an **historical** context. **Galactic Park** is an Australian icon which has been a part of our history for as long as people can remember. **The smiling face** has greeted millions of people, both Australians and tourists. **The Park** has also provided millions of people with hours of enjoyment.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

We now have Russell from Aqua Bay on the phone. Go ahead Russell.

RUSSELL

It **is** ~~all~~ very well for **Galactic Park** to be an Australian icon, but I—and the other residents of Aqua Bay—don't get any sleep. We lie awake all night listening to the noise of the Big Dipper, and to the screams of the people on it. Why wasn't any thought given to this problem? In my opinion, the park **must** be closed. The sooner the better.

MR WILLIS

Russell, I understand your concerns. **As a result of many complaints we have restricted the use of the Big Dipper so that it now only operates between certain hours.** In addition to this, we are providing **sound proofing** for the houses which we feel are affected. We have spent two years and ten million dollars ensuring that this Park is right for everyone.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Thanks Russell. We now have Martin from Middle Bay. Hi Martin. What are your thoughts?

MARTIN

I've been to **Galactic Park** a couple of times since it opened. It's fantastic. At last there's a place for **young** people to go and have a **cheap**, fun night out. We don't have to go into the city. **I don't have a problem** with the Park except for the price of the rides—they're **so expensive**.

MR WILLIS

Thanks Martin. It's great to hear that we have some support. **Galactic Park** is an important Australian icon. I just ask that everyone gets behind us and supports the smiling face.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Do you support **Galactic Park**? We've set up two listener hot lines so that you can vote for saving the **Park**—or for closing it down. Here are the numbers to register your vote...

Use of thinking verbs, e.g. are concerned

Written in present tense

Use of detailed noun groups, e.g. managing director of Galactic Park

Use of general nouns, e.g. noise

Use of repetition, e.g. Galactic Park

Use of conjunctions, e.g. but

Focus on the beginning of sentences, e.g. The smiling face, The park

Use of factual adjectives, e.g. historical

Use of relating verbs, e.g. is

Use of high degrees of modality, e.g. must

Use of connectives, e.g. as a result

Use of technical language, e.g. sound proofing

Use of complex sentences

Use of comparative adjectives, e.g. cheap, young

Use of evaluative language, e.g. don't have a problem, so expensive

Outcomes Checklist Discussion Texts

At the end of the units on discussion texts, students will have worked towards achieving the following National Level 4 (NSW Stage 3) outcomes.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING	BLM	DATE & COMMENTS
NA 4.1 NSW 3.1 Communicates and interacts confidently for a range of purposes and a variety of audiences to express well developed, well organised ideas dealing with more challenging topics.	75, 77, 79, 84, 85, 86, 89, 90	
NA 4.3 NSW 3.4 Controls and evaluates structures and features of spoken language. Interprets meaning and develops and presents ideas and information in familiar surroundings.	79, 83, 84, 85, 86, 90	
NA 4.4 NSW 3.2 Interacts in different sized groups using effective communication skills and strategies and listening attentively	77, 84, 90	
READING AND VIEWING		
NA 4.5 NSW 3.5 Reads an extensive range of texts with fairly complex structures and features, justifying own interpretation of ideas, information and events in the response to themes and issues.	82, 89	
NA 4.6 NSW 3.7 Analyses and explains techniques to position the reader and to interpret experiences differently in texts.	75, 82	
NA 4.7 NSW 3.8 Identifies the structures of different texts and with assistance discusses the grammatical structures and features that shape readers' and listeners' understanding of texts.	82, 89	
NA 4.8b Working with peers, is able to find information and resources for specific purposes.	82	
WRITING		
NA 4.9 NSW 3.9 Writes well structured literary and factual texts using challenging topics, ideas and issues for a variety of purposes and audiences.	76, 78, 79, 85, 91, 92	
NA 4.10 NSW 3.13 Evaluates writing in terms of effectiveness of presentation of subject matter and adjusts to focus on context, purpose and audience.	75, 76, 78, 85, 89, 91, 92	
NA 4.11 NSW 3.14 Discusses and evaluates how texts have been constructed to achieve their purpose and shape readers' and viewers' understandings using grammatical features and structures.	76, 78, 83, 92	
NA 4.12a NSW 3.10 Uses a range of strategies to plan, edit and proofread own writing.	76, 78, 79, 83, 92	
NA 4.12b NSW 3.11 Uses a range of strategies to spell unfamiliar words.	77	

Background Lessons

Session 1 Examining discussions

Collect discussions that students might come across every day, for example an editorial, debates, public speeches, newspaper and magazine articles. Ask students to identify the points of view that may be evident in both sides of the argument and to reorder the arguments to see how this affects the strength of the discussion.

Ask students to compare these discussions, by answering questions about differences in text organisation, structure and features.

- What is the topic?
- Is the target audience adult, teenager or child?
- What is the assumed background knowledge?
- Are two sides given in each text? Find examples.
- Is evidence, research data or elaboration used? Give examples.
- Is each side's argument elaborated to the same extent? What is the conclusion? Is an opinion expressed?
- Is the level of modality appropriate?
- Is technical language used?
- Is emotive language used?
- What different conclusions might have been reached?
- Do the conclusions summarise, recommend or solve an issue?
- Look at the visual texts. Do they add to the understanding of each text?

Session 2 Oral discussion

Ask students to look at an issue and with them list under two headings firstly all the negative issues and then the positives. Follow this with an activity where as a group all

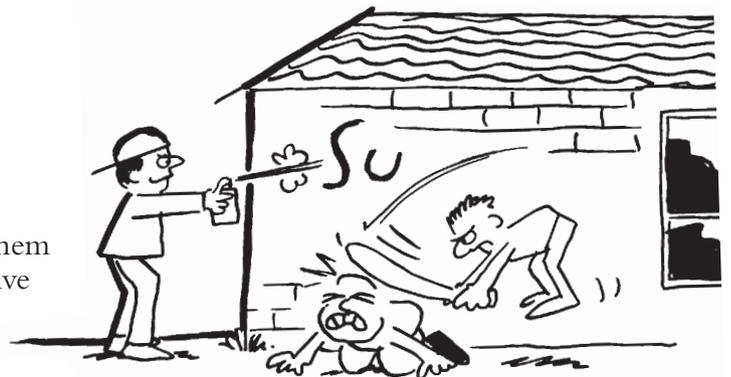
focus on only one perspective or point of view. Ask students to focus on use of high modality and persuasive language in their points, e.g. It seems as if ...; All sensible people realise.

Ask students working in groups of six to imagine that they have their own talkback radio program. One student in each group is the host or leader and begins by expressing their point of view about an issue following the discussion scaffold. Students will need to research, interview or survey other students before they begin. The rest of the group can then express if they feel for or against the issue and support their arguments with details. Encourage students to pause, change intonation and volume when stressing a point.

A possible subject could be 'Where are our priorities? Gifted student wins gold'. The leader could begin by explaining that an Australian high school student has won an extremely important international mathematics competition. This has been virtually ignored in the press except for a five line article appearing on page fifteen of the daily newspaper. This can be contrasted with the response to the winner of a gold medal for swimming. Other students can then express their ideas.

Ask students to work in groups of three. They are to imagine they are on a current affairs program and one person is the interviewer while the two others are people who have opposing points of view. Possible topics could be:

- Bicycles are road hazards. They should be banned.
- Australia should become a republic.
- All cars should be painted blue.



Session 3

Language features

In order to improve students' language skills encourage students to develop word banks of different language features found in discussion texts.

- The first paragraph in a written description or the beginning statement in an oral discussion makes a statement about a matter and lets people know that there are two sides to the case. Model for students the different ways this can be said and build up a word bank of different expressions.

- Everyone has different responses to...
- There are two sides to...
- Often comments are made that..., but there are different points of view.
- Advantages and disadvantages become apparent in the discussion...
- In discussing whether we should enter or not...
- Before deciding which path to take...
- Although there are many excellent reasons for..., there are...

Give students these topics and ask them to write the introduction for one of them: 'A dog is man's best friend'; 'The school day is too short'.

- Explain to students that there are different ways to introduce another point of view. Working with them build up word banks.

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| although | a different point of |
| however | view |
| pay attention to | this is challenged by |
| in contrast | on the other hand |
| even though | in spite of |
| evidence supports this | yet another point of |
| please take note | view. |

Use these phrases to give students practice joining sentences:

- 1a. The first witness, Selwyn, saw an old bearded man.
- 1b. The second witness, Lawrence, reported it was a middle-aged woman.
- 2a. Gregory believed the most interesting book

was *Space demons* by Gillian Rubinstein.

2b. Charmaine argued that *Feral kid* by Libby Hathorn was the most worthwhile.

- Ask students to listen to the reading of a discussion and to create a word bank of connectives used as linking words. Words they can focus on are *firstly, on the other hand, consequently*. Follow this with an activity when students are asked to focus on linking ideas by completing cloze passages that have time connectives and conjunctions omitted.
- Revise the use of modality that expresses the certainty or regularity of something occurring. Give students a number of sentences and ask them to underline words that indicate modality, e.g. It was the pollution which *probably* gave her asthma. Encourage students to focus on the degree of certainty in a text to see how persuasive it is intended to be.
- A number of words are suitable for use when

High modality	Medium modality	Low modality
Undoubtedly	Apparently	Unlikely
Always	Luckily	Hopefully
Absolutely	Often	Perhaps
Certainly	Honestly	Sometimes
Indeed	Seriously	Possibly
Obviously	Probably	
Amazingly	Maybe	
Definitely	Seldom	
Never		

concluding or summing up the arguments.

admittedly	under these
consequently	circumstances
in conclusion	because of what was
it is evident that	mentioned above
thus	on closer inspection

- Ask students to rewrite an argument for a younger or older audience. How would they alter the arguments or language that has been used? Is greater detail needed? Are additional examples and simpler language necessary? Should the argument be further developed for an older audience?

Session 4 Writing discussions

Help students develop their skills in discussion writing by developing questions, completing concept maps or writing key words that will focus research skills. Encourage students to research information using CD-ROMS, the Internet and encyclopedias or viewing videos. Ask them to think of target audiences and what their opinions may be on this topic. It is important that students anticipate the audience's opinions in relation to the issue so that these can be addressed in the discussion. Ask students to plan by mind mapping. This method is great for structuring and organising thoughts.

Encourage students to write a topic sentence or main point about a subject and then to elaborate adding details. Demonstrate the development of arguments from note taking points to sentences by using word banks of connectives and content words. Remind students about the usage of persuasive words that show certainty.

Ask students to write discussions on one of these issues after completing a concept map:

- Wood fires should be banned.
- Internet and CD-ROMS will soon replace books.
- Swimming is better exercise than tennis.

Session 5 Preparing a debate

In a debate there are two teams: one takes the negative and the other the positive side. The chairperson introduces each speaker in turn and introduces the topic. The time keeper rings the bell when there is one minute left of the three minutes each speaker has to speak, and again when the time is up.

Each team has three speakers and a fourth person who is the silent member (makes notes and gives ideas to the other speakers in the team).

Discussion structure	Roles	Debate structure
Opening statement	1st speaker affirmative	Defines topic from affirmative point of view and explains each member's role and content.
	1st speaker negative	Explains the negative ideas and criticises the affirmative speaker's point of view. Outlines what each member of the team will say.
Second stage	2nd speaker affirmative	Elaborates supporting the case with evidence and criticises 1st speaker negative. Tries to convince audience to believe the affirmative case.
	2nd speaker negative	Presents main ideas briefly elaborating and supporting with evidence. Criticises 2nd speaker affirmative and tries to convince audience to believe the negative case.
Third stage	3rd speaker affirmative	Criticises points made by 2nd speaker negative and tries to convince audience affirmative reasoning is right. Sums up case.
	3rd speaker negative	Criticises points made by 2nd speaker affirmative and tries to convince audience negative reasoning is right. Sums up case.
Concluding statement	Adjudicator	Judges the winner looking at effectiveness of opening and closing, development of team chain of thought, content (what was said), methodology (how it was developed) and manner (how it was said) of each speech.

Session 6

Letters to the editor

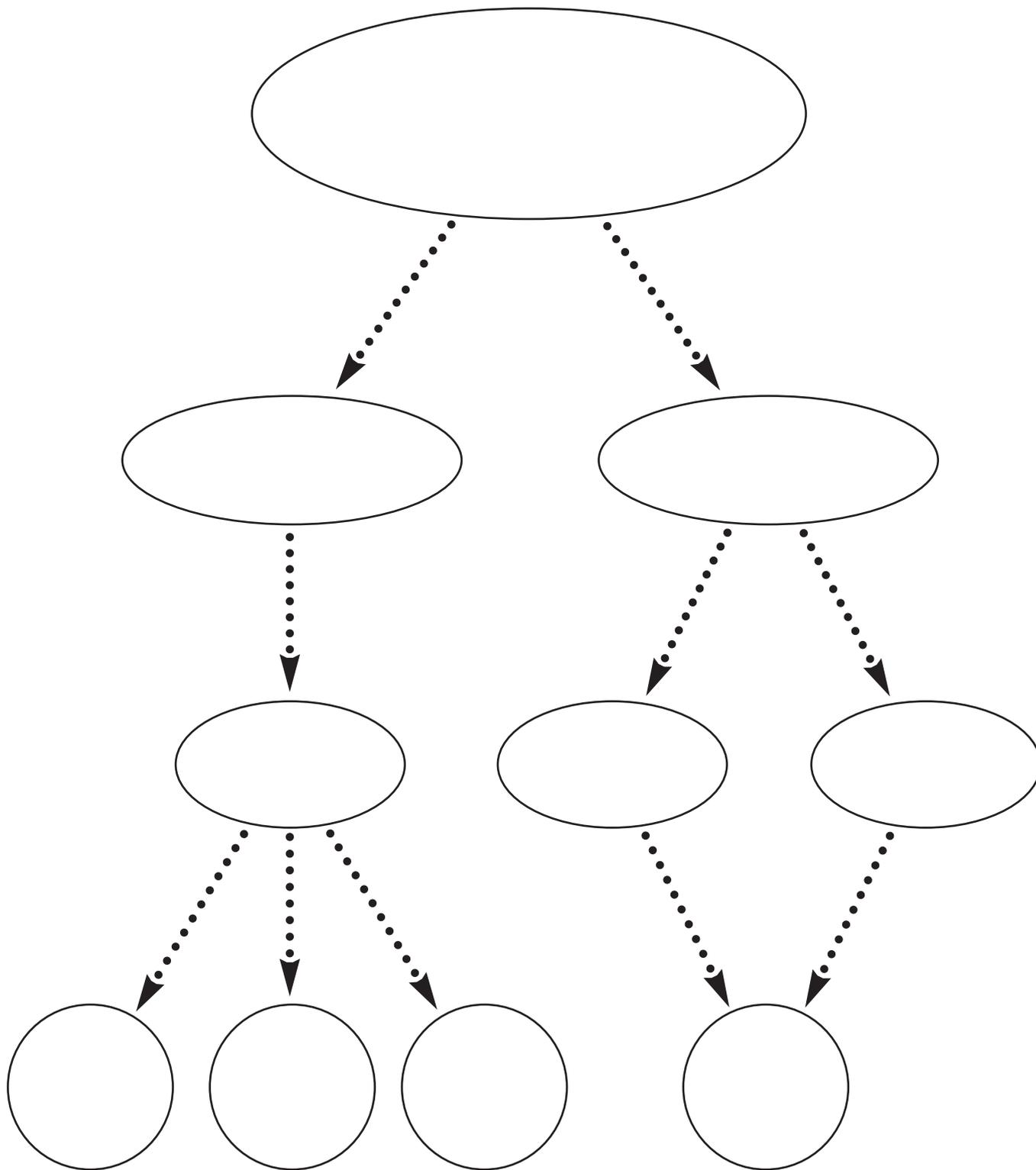
If letters are written exploring only one side of an issue, then this is an exposition text. If writers discuss both sides of an argument, then they are creating discussion texts.

Give student a newspaper article or editorial on a current topic. Ask students to structure their letters as discussion texts and to write letters agreeing or disagreeing with the issues.

Structure of a discussion text	Structure of a discussion letter
Title	Title usually from an aspect of the text
Statement of position	Explains what the issue is
Arguments for and against and supporting evidence	Agrees with aspects Disagrees with other aspects Expresses the writer's point of view
Recommendation or conclusion	Concluding statement Writer's name and date written.



Concept Layer Map



Discussion Text Outline

Introduction

Have you described the issue or defined the topic? Have you written background information so that the reader starts with sufficient knowledge? Have you recognised that there are two points of view?

Arguments

Have you used connectives and conjunctions; detailed noun groups; action verbs; quotes or reported speech; a moderate to high degree of certainty; appropriate technical language; adjectives that show your opinion and how you evaluate the arguments? Have you used the passive voice? Are you using complex sentences?

Arguments for

Are you structuring your paragraphs properly using a topic sentence and supporting evidence from survey results, research or interviews?

Arguments against

Have you supported each point with evidence? Have you used your personal experience to persuade the audience?

Conclusion or recommendations

Is the evidence overwhelmingly pointed in one direction? Are you simply summing up both arguments? Can you make a recommendation?

Discussion Text Scaffold

Statement of position

Introduce the topic and supply necessary background information.

List arguments for the statement and support with evidence.

Argument 1 _____

Evidence _____

Argument 2 _____

Evidence _____

Argument 3 _____

Evidence _____

List arguments against the statement and support with evidence.

Argument 1 _____

Evidence _____

Argument 2 _____

Evidence _____

Argument 3 _____

Evidence _____

Recommendation or conclusion

Discussion Text Structure

Introduction _____

Topic sentence introducing a point _____

Arguments for based on research, interviews or surveys _____

Arguments against _____

Topic sentence introducing a second point _____

Arguments for _____

Arguments against _____

Third topic sentence _____

Arguments for _____

Arguments against _____

Recommendation or conclusion _____

Discussion Skills Checklist

Name:				
Class:	Date/Level	Date/Level	Date/Level	Date/Level
PURPOSE				
Understands the purpose of a discussion.				
STRUCTURE				
Writes a clear statement supplying background information.				
Writes arguments for and against an issue.				
Supports with evidence and detail.				
Sums up arguments or recommends one side of the argument over the other.				
TEXT ORGANISATION				
Develops a well-sequenced plan.				
Locates relevant information.				
Organises arguments into appropriate paragraphs.				
Gauges whether arguments are facts or opinions.				
Concludes by summarising or persuading people to do something.				
LANGUAGE FEATURES				
Writes in the present tense.				
Uses detailed noun groups.				
Uses thinking and saying verbs.				
Uses medium to high degrees of modality.				
Uses conjunctions and connectives.				
Uses quoted and reported speech to support arguments.				
Expresses a personal point of view.				
Uses evaluative language.				
Uses passive voice to change focus of sentences.				
Focuses attention on beginning of sentences.				
Uses complex combination of clauses.				
Uses word chains, synonyms, antonyms and repetition.				
Uses complex sentences.				
Uses technical terminology meaningfully.				
LEVEL CODES				
	1 Consistently evident	2 Sometimes evident	3 Not evident	