

# Barometer: Taking a Stand on Controversial Issues

## Rationale

The Barometer teaching strategy helps students share their opinions by asking them to line up along a continuum based on their position on an issue. It is especially useful when you want to discuss an issue about which students have a wide range of opinions. Because a Barometer activity gets many arguments out on the table, it can be an effective pre-writing exercise before an essay assignment.

## Procedure

### 1. Prepare the Space

Identify a space in the classroom where students can stand in a line or a U-shape. Place "Strongly Agree" and "Strongly Disagree" signs at opposite ends of a continuum in your room. Alternatively, you can post any statement at one end and its opposite at the other end of the line.

### 2. Contract with Students

Set a contract for this activity. Since it deals with students literally putting themselves and their opinions on the line, it has the potential to promote outbursts that result from some individuals not understanding how classmates can hold whatever opinion they hold. Reiterate your class rules about respect for the opinions and voices of others, and call for students to be honest but not insulting. Re-address ways to constructively disagree with one another, and require that when students offer their opinion or a defense of their stance, they speak using "I" language rather than the more accusatory "you."

### 3. Students Formulate an Opinion

Give students a few minutes to reflect on a prompt or prompts

that call for agreement or disagreement with a particular statement. You might have students respond to the prompt(s) in their journals.

4. **Students “Take a Stand”**

Ask students to stand on the spot along the line that represents their opinion, telling them that if they stand at either extreme, they are absolute in their agreement or disagreement. They may stand anywhere between the two extremes, depending on how much they do or do not agree with the statement.

5. **Students Explain Positions**

Once students have lined themselves up, ask them in turn to explain why they have chosen to stand where they are standing. Encourage students to refer to evidence and examples when defending their stance. It is probably best to alternate from one end to the middle to the other end, rather than allowing too many voices from one stance to dominate. After about three or four viewpoints are heard, ask if anyone wishes to move. Encourage students to keep an open mind; they are allowed to move if someone presents an argument that alters where they want to stand on the line. Run the activity until you think that most or all voices have been heard, making sure that no one person dominates.

6. **Debrief**

There are many ways you can debrief this exercise. You can have students reflect in their journals about how the activity changed or reinforced their original opinion. Or you can chart the main “for” and “against” arguments on the board as a whole-class activity.

## Variations

- **Forced Decision: Yes, No, or Undecided:** Read a statement aloud. Rather than have a continuum for agreement, require students to make a decision about whether they “agree” with the statement, “do not agree,” or “are unsure” about their agreement. If students agree with the statement, instruct them to move to one side of the room. If students disagree with the statement, instruct them to move to the other side of the room. Designate a place for students to stand near the middle if they are undecided or unsure. Have students explain why they are standing where they

are standing. If after hearing another student's position a student would like to move across the room, allow for this movement.

- **Post-It Notes Barometer:** Draw a continuum on the board. Ask students to place a sticky note on the spot along the continuum that represents their opinion. Then have students discuss what they notice about the collection of notes. This variation is less about individuals explaining their point of view than about illustrating the range of agreement or disagreement in the class.
- **Presenting Different Perspectives:** The Barometer strategy can be used to present the different perspectives of historical figures, schools of thought, and literary characters. Assign students a perspective to represent. Then give them time to research or study the ideas of this person or group in relation to the question being studied. When you frame a statement, ask students to stand along the line at a position that represents how their assigned individual or group would respond. For example, you could use this activity to show how different philosophers or groups have responded to the statement "Individual freedom is more important than protecting the needs of the larger community."

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