GoTeach

40 ESL Debate Topics for Adults: Debate Cards

B1 topics 1–14 · B2 topics 15–28 · C1 topics 29–40 · cut out the cards, one per pair or team

Each card has a motion, a warm-up question, two arguments for each side and three key words. Teams can use the arguments if they get stuck, but the best debates add their own reasons and examples.

30-minute team debate

1. **Warm-up (3 min):** pairs answer the warm-up question on the card.
2. **Language (4 min):** pick six phrases from the table below and drill them.
3. **Sides (1 min):** split into two teams at random. Nobody has to argue their real opinion.
4. **Prep (7 min):** three arguments with an example each, and a guess at what the other side will say.
5. **Debate (10 min):** openings (1 min each), rebuttals (1 min each), open discussion (4 min), summaries (30 s each).
6. **Vote and feedback (5 min):** everyone votes with their real opinion, then fix four or five errors together.

Debate phrases

FUNCTION	B1	B2–C1
Giving an opinion	I think... · In my opinion...	As I see it... · I'm firmly convinced that...
Giving a reason	...because... · The reason is...	The main reason is that... · This is borne out by...
Giving an example	For example... · In my country...	Take..., for instance. · A case in point is...
Agreeing	I agree. · That's true.	I couldn't agree more. · That's exactly my point.
Disagreeing politely	I don't agree. · I'm not sure.	I see it differently. · I'm not convinced that...
Rebutting	Yes, but... · That's not true because...	That argument ignores... · The problem with that is...
Conceding a point	OK, maybe, but...	That's a fair point, but... · Granted, ... however...
Buying time	Good question. · Let me think.	That's an interesting point, let me come back to it.
Summing up	So, we think...	To sum up, ... · At the end of the day, ...

Quick scoring (out of 20)

Arguments and examples	5	Clear reasons, each with a real example
Responding to the other side	5	Answers what was actually said
Range of language	5	Uses linking, conceding and rebuttal phrases
Fluency and clarity	5	Keeps going, easy to follow

Turn the score into a percentage with the free Easy Grader: **goteach.io/tools/easy-grader** · Full guide and more topics: **goteach.io/resources/how-to/esl-debate-topics-adults**

#1 B1

Life in the city is better than life in the countryside

Warm-up: Where did you grow up, and where would you like to live when you're 70?

For

- More jobs, better public transport and more to do in the evening
- Hospitals, schools and shops are close by

Against

- Cleaner air, less noise and lower rent
- People know their neighbors and life feels less rushed

Key words: commute · rent · peace and quiet

#2 B1

Everyone should learn to cook

Warm-up: What's one dish you can cook really well?

For

- Home cooking is cheaper and healthier than eating out
- It's a basic life skill, like swimming or driving

Against

- Busy people don't have time, and ready meals are good now
- Some people hate cooking, and that's fine

Key words: ingredients · takeout · from scratch

#3 B1

It's better to rent a home than to buy one

Warm-up: How many times have you moved in your life?

For

- You can move easily when your job or life changes
- No repair bills and no huge loan

Against

- Rent is money you never get back
- Owners can paint, renovate and keep pets

Key words: landlord · mortgage · deposit

#4 B1

Dogs make better pets than cats

Warm-up: Did you have a pet as a child? What was it like?

For

- Dogs are loyal and get you out walking every day
- You can train a dog to do almost anything

Against

- Cats are independent and happy alone all day
- Cats are cleaner, quieter and better for small apartments

Key words: loyal · independent · take care of

#5 Handle with care B1

Children should get an allowance for doing chores

Warm-up: What jobs did you do at home when you were young?

For

- Children learn that money comes from work
- It teaches responsibility and helps the family

Against

- Helping at home should be normal, not a paid job
- Children may refuse to help unless they are paid

Key words: chores · allowance · responsibility

#6 B1

Paper books are better than e-books

Warm-up: What was the last book you read, and how did you read it?

For

- They're easier on the eyes and nicer to hold
- You can lend them, write in them and keep them forever

Against

- One e-reader carries a thousand books on a trip
- E-books are cheaper and have a built-in dictionary

Key words: e-reader · bookshelf · screen time

#7 B1

Online shopping is better than shopping in stores

Warm-up: What's the best or worst thing you've ever bought online?

For

- It's faster, cheaper and open 24 hours
- You can compare prices and read reviews first

Against

- You can't try clothes on or touch the product
- Local shops close and town centers become empty

Key words: delivery · return · in person

#8 B1

Traveling alone is better than traveling with friends

Warm-up: Have you ever traveled on your own? Would you?

For

- You decide everything and meet more new people
- You become more confident and independent

Against

- It's safer and cheaper to share with friends
- Good memories are better when you share them

Key words: itinerary · share the cost · on my own

#9 B1

The weekend should be three days long

Warm-up: What does a perfect weekend look like for you?

For

- Rested people work better and get sick less
- More time for family, hobbies and short trips

Against

- Some jobs, like hospitals and shops, can't close an extra day
- People might work longer hours on the other four days

Key words: day off · work-life balance · productive

#10 B1

Phones should not be allowed at the dinner table

Warm-up: How often do you check your phone during a meal?

For

- Meals are for talking to the people in front of you
- Phones at the table are rude to the cook and the guests

Against

- Sometimes you need to answer work or family calls
- Looking up a fact can start a good conversation

Key words: rude · notification · switch off

#11 B1

It's better to have a few close friends than many friends

Warm-up: How did you meet your oldest friend?

For

- Close friends help you when life gets hard
- You have more time for each person

Against

- More friends means more ideas, contacts and fun
- Different friends are good for different things

Key words: close friend · acquaintance · keep in touch

#12 B1

A service charge should be included in the price, so nobody has to tip

Warm-up: How does tipping work in your country?

For

- Prices are clear and nobody feels awkward
- Staff get a fair, regular income

Against

- Tips reward great service and keep staff friendly
- Customers should decide what good service is worth

Key words: tip · service charge · the check

#13 B1

Gyms are a waste of money

Warm-up: What do you do to stay active?

For

- Running, walking and online workouts are free
- Many people pay every month and rarely go

Against

- Gyms have equipment and trainers you can't get at home
- Paying for it helps you stay motivated

Key words: membership · work out · motivated

#14 B1

Fast food should be more expensive than healthy food

Warm-up: What's your favorite fast food, honestly?

For

- Price changes what people buy
- It would cut health problems and costs for everyone

Against

- People should be free to eat what they want
- It hurts families with less money the most

Key words: unhealthy · tax · afford

#15 B2

Working from home is better than working in an office

Warm-up: Where do you do your best work, and why?

For

- No commute means more time and less stress
- People can live where they want, not near the office

Against

- New staff learn faster by sitting next to colleagues
- Home and work blur, and people feel isolated

Key words: remote · commute · collaborate

#16 B2

A four-day work week should become the norm

Warm-up: If you had one more free day a week, what would you do with it?

For

- Trials show the same output with happier, healthier staff
- Companies attract and keep better people

Against

- Customers still expect service five or more days a week
- Some staff end up squeezing five days into four

Key words: output · burnout · trial

#17 B2

Social media does more harm than good

Warm-up: Which app do you spend the most time on?

For

- It's linked to anxiety and poor sleep, especially in teenagers
- Fake news spreads faster than corrections

Against

- It keeps families and friends in touch across countries
- Small businesses and new voices reach people for free

Key words: addictive · misinformation · connect

#18 B2

University should be free for everyone

Warm-up: Is university expensive in your country? Who pays?

For

- Talent shouldn't depend on your parents' money
- Graduates pay more tax later, so society gets the money back

Against

- Taxpayers who never studied would pay for others' degrees
- Free places often mean crowded classes and lower quality

Key words: tuition fees · student loan · taxpayer

#19 Handle with care B2

Teenagers shouldn't have smartphones before 16

Warm-up: How old were you when you got your first phone?

For

- Teens sleep better and focus more at school
- It protects them from online bullying and harmful content

Against

- Parents need to reach their children
- Teens without phones get left out by their friends

Key words: peer pressure · screen time · left out

#20 B2

Tourists should pay a tax to visit popular cities

Warm-up: What's the most crowded place you've ever visited?

For

- Locals shouldn't pay for the damage crowds cause
- Fewer, better-spending visitors are good for everyone

Against

- Travel becomes a luxury for the rich
- Tourists already bring jobs and money to the city

Key words: overtourism · locals · fee

#21 B2

Cash should be replaced by card and phone payments

Warm-up: When did you last pay for something with cash?

For

- Faster, cleaner and easier to track your spending
- Harder for criminals to hide money

Against

- Older people and people without bank accounts are left behind
- When the system goes down, nobody can pay

Key words: contactless · cashless · privacy

#22 Handle with care B2

Companies should publish what every role pays

Warm-up: Is it normal to talk about pay in your country?

For

- It makes unfair pay gaps easy to spot
- Job hunters waste less time on bad offers

Against

- It can cause jealousy and arguments between colleagues
- Pay depends on experience, and numbers don't show that

Key words: pay gap · transparency · negotiate

#23 B2

Experience is more important than a degree when hiring

Warm-up: What has taught you more: school or work?

For

- Real results show what someone can actually do
- More people get a chance, not only graduates

Against

- A degree shows knowledge, discipline and commitment
- Some jobs, like medicine and law, need formal training

Key words: qualifications · hands-on · candidate

#24 B2

Artificial intelligence will create more jobs than it destroys

Warm-up: Have you used an AI tool this week? What for?

For

- New technology has always created new kinds of work
- AI handles boring tasks so people do more creative work

Against

- It changes jobs faster than people can retrain
- The new jobs may go to far fewer people

Key words: automate · retrain · replace

#25 B2

Fast fashion should be taxed

Warm-up: How many items of clothing did you buy last year? Roughly.

For

- Cheap clothes create huge amounts of waste
- Better-made clothes last longer and save money over time

Against

- Families on low incomes need cheap clothes
- Shoppers, not taxes, should change the industry

Key words: sustainable · landfill · secondhand

#26 B2

Zoos should be closed

Warm-up: Did you enjoy going to the zoo as a child?

For

- Wild animals suffer in small spaces
- Children can learn about animals from documentaries and parks

Against

- Good zoos protect endangered species
- Seeing real animals makes people care about nature

Key words: captivity · endangered · conservation

#27 B2

Single-use plastic should be banned completely

Warm-up: How much plastic did you throw away yesterday?

For

- Plastic stays in oceans and food chains for centuries
- Bans work: bag bans cut waste very quickly

Against

- Hospitals and food safety depend on plastic
- Alternatives can use more energy to make

Key words: single-use · recycle · alternative

#28 B2

Professional athletes are paid too much

Warm-up: Which athlete do you admire, and why?

For

- Teachers and nurses do more for society for far less
- High prices for tickets and TV come from those salaries

Against

- Careers are short and injuries are common
- Athletes earn what the fans and sponsors pay

Key words: salary · sponsor · deserve

#29 C1

Art made with AI is real art

Warm-up: What makes something art for you: the idea, the skill or the feeling?

For

- The idea and choices behind it come from a person
- Photography was also called 'not real art' at first

Against

- Art needs human skill, effort and experience
- AI copies existing artists without asking them

Key words: originality · copyright · authentic

#30 C1

Advertising aimed at children should be banned

Warm-up: Which ad from your childhood can you still remember?

For

- Children can't tell an ad from entertainment
- It pushes unhealthy food and pester power on parents

Against

- Parents, not governments, should decide what children see
- Bans hurt children's TV and free content that depends on ads

Key words: target · influence · regulate

#31 Handle with care C1

Voting should be compulsory

Warm-up: Why do you think some people don't vote?

For

- Results reflect the whole population, not just keen voters
- Politicians must listen to everyone, including young people

Against

- Freedom includes the freedom not to take part
- Forced voters may choose at random

Key words: turnout · civic duty · fine

#32 C1

Space exploration is a waste of money

Warm-up: Would you go to Mars if you had the chance?

For

- The money could solve problems on Earth today
- Robots can explore more cheaply than people

Against

- Space research gave us GPS, weather forecasts and medical tools
- Humanity's long-term future may depend on it

Key words: funding · breakthrough · priority

#33 C1

It is never acceptable to lie

Warm-up: When did a small lie make a situation better?

For

- Trust breaks easily and takes years to rebuild
- Small lies make bigger lies easier

Against

- White lies protect people's feelings
- Sometimes a lie protects someone from harm

Key words: white lie · trust · justify

#34 C1

Security cameras in public places do more good than harm

Warm-up: How many cameras do you think saw you today?

For

- They prevent crime and help solve it
- People feel safer in stations and streets at night

Against

- Constant watching changes how free people feel
- Face recognition can be misused or make mistakes

Key words: surveillance · privacy · deter

#35 C1

Museums should return objects to their countries of origin

Warm-up: Which museum object would you most like to see in person?

For

- Many objects were taken without permission
- Culture belongs to the people who created it

Against

- Big museums let millions of people see world culture
- Returned objects may be harder to protect

Key words: heritage · artifact · return

#36 C1

Every adult should receive a basic income from the state

Warm-up: Would you still work if you didn't need the money?

For

- It protects people as automation changes jobs
- Simpler than many separate benefits

Against

- It would cost a huge amount of public money
- Some people might stop working

Key words: welfare · incentive · safety net

#37 C1

Celebrities have a duty to be role models

Warm-up: Who did you look up to as a teenager?

For

- Fame gives them huge influence over young people
- With money and attention comes responsibility

Against

- They chose to be actors or athletes, not teachers
- Parents and teachers are the real role models

Key words: influence · role model · accountable

#38 C1

Meat grown in a lab should replace farmed meat

Warm-up: Would you try a lab-grown burger? Why or why not?

For

- Far less land, water and animal suffering
- Same taste and nutrition without the farms

Against

- Farmers and rural communities would lose their living
- We don't yet know the long-term effects

Key words: cultivated · livestock · ethical

#39 C1

Tradition should never stand in the way of progress

Warm-up: Which tradition from your country would you never give up?

For

- Many old traditions were unfair and needed to change
- Societies that adapt do better

Against

- Traditions give people identity and belonging
- Not every change is progress

Key words: custom · identity · evolve

#40 C1

Being famous today is more about luck than talent

Warm-up: Name someone who became famous for something surprising.

For

- Viral posts make people famous overnight
- Talented people are often never discovered

Against

- Lasting fame still needs talent and hard work
- Social media lets talented people skip the gatekeepers

Key words: go viral · gatekeeper · overnight