

# Using “Place Mats” as a Prewriting Activity for Opinionated Essays

by MICHAEL HORVILLEUR AND HIRAM RUVALCABA

Have you ever tried facilitating a debate in an English classroom but then noticed that most of the students weren't participating? Perhaps you even realized that the debate took a lot less time than you had anticipated? Debating in English is a vital part of second-language acquisition. Not only does it help students with their speaking skills, but it also is an excellent way to prepare them to write opinionated essays. In this article, we will explore how you can use “place mats” to organize a debate that gives each student the chance to speak, and then how to use that debate to guide an opinionated essay afterwards.

Whenever teachers would like students to write an essay, it is imperative that the essay is preceded with a prewriting task. In our opinion, the best prewriting tasks usually involve some sort of speaking activity that enables students to explore the topic itself before writing. When it comes to writing an opinionated essay, debating is a natural prewriting activity because it requires students to formulate an opinion and to elaborate arguments that support it. This is almost identical to what they will have to do when writing an opinionated essay. In addition, debates allow students to hear other reasons that support their argument, as well as reasons that oppose their argument that they may not have thought of. That will ensure that each student understands the topic of his or her essay and, before writing, has a chance to evaluate different points of view.

In order for a teacher to facilitate a productive debate in the classroom, students must be provided with opinionated language that corresponds with their level of English. They must also have adequate time to prepare their statements and responses beforehand. It must then be made clear how the topics they discussed during the debate can be transitioned smoothly into an essay. Using place mats as the basis of a prewriting activity contains all of these processes in a single lesson.

The place mat activity we outline below begins by presenting students with a writing prompt that can be adapted to different topics and to different levels of English. Then, students must take time to write their opinion in the form of a thesis statement. It is important that students get in the habit of starting the writing process with a thesis statement because it will give their essay a clear purpose and, consequently, make their essay more organized. Afterwards, students will debate the writing prompt in groups and try to reach some sort of agreement.

## PREPARATION OF MATERIALS

1. Distribute one post-it note per student. (If you do not have post-its, students can simply write in their corner of the place mat.)

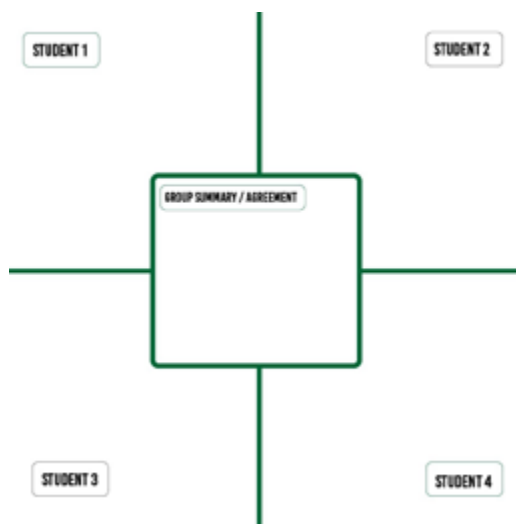
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2. Provide one place mat handout for each group of three or four students. (Groups of four work best.) If you cannot make copies of the place mat, ask students to draw one themselves on a piece of paper. Tell each group to take a piece of paper and choose one student to draw. Tell students that you will draw an example of a place mat on the board, and they should follow along.

First, instruct students to draw a square in the middle of the paper. Then, draw a line that connects a side of the square to the edge of the paper. Repeat that step for each side of the square. (See Figure 1 for an example of what a blank place mat should look like.)



**Figure 1. Blank place mat, ready to be used in the activity**

#### Procedure

1. On the board, write the essential question—which also serves as the writing prompt—that will guide the debate. Your essential question should be on a controversial topic that can spark conversation. It should also be a question that the students can relate to and find interesting. An example might be, “*The director of our school is thinking of requiring all students to wear a uniform. Do you agree or disagree with this, and why?*” (Note that if your students already wear uniforms, you might change the first

sentence to, “*The director of our school is thinking of not requiring all students to wear a uniform.*”)

2. Have the class vote on responses to the essential question. Ask students who agree with the statement to raise their hand, count the raised hands, and put the total on the board. Repeat the procedure for students who disagree. This step can help get the students interested in the topic and eager to commence debating.
3. Place the students in groups of three or four. Try to organize the groups so students who have different opinions are in the same group. For instance, try not to put together four students who have agreed with the essential question. Be sure to mix them up so they will be able to debate. It may help to have students who agree raise their hands, and then move the students into groups accordingly.
4. Tell students they are going to be writing a thesis statement about the topic on a post-it. If your students have not written thesis statements before, explain that their thesis is basically their stance on, or opinion of, the essential question. To keep things simple, tell students that their thesis should consist of three things: their stance on the question and two reasons why they hold that opinion. You should write an example of a thesis statement on the board. We have placed an example below:

*“In my opinion, students should be required to wear uniforms because it teaches students the importance of looking neat, and it saves students time when getting dressed in the morning.”*

If the students have a relatively low level of English, it is a good idea to provide them with sentence starters on the board in order to help them formulate full sentences. Below are examples of sentence starters:

- *In my opinion, ...*

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## Using the place mat technique as a prewriting task can be modified easily for different ages, subjects, and levels of English.

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- *I believe that ...*
- *While I can see both points of view, I think ...*

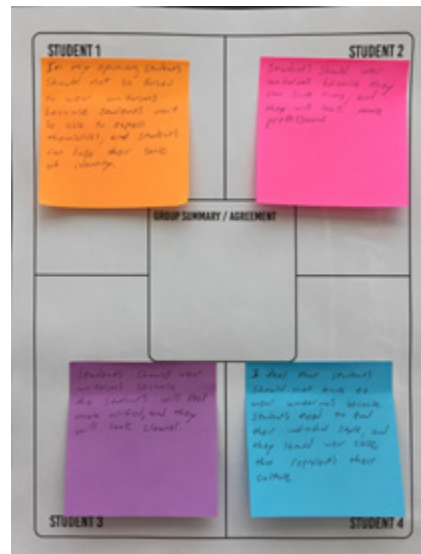
The teacher should walk around the room as the students are writing, make sure they are including all three parts in their thesis statements, and help out as needed.

5. Tell students to take turns in their groups to read their thesis statements out loud. The other students should listen carefully while each student reads, noting whether they agree or disagree and whether their reasons are the same. After all students in the group have read their thesis, each student places his or her post-it into a corner of the place mat.

6. It is time for the debate to begin! Students in each group should share their opinions and offer support for their reasons. Tell students that they must try to reach an agreement on the essential question. (They don't necessarily have to change their classmates' minds, but they should try to make an agreement and reach some kind of middle ground.) Whatever they decide, they must nominate one student to write the group's agreement in the center of the place mat.

Of course, depending on the topic, students might not be able to reach any sort of agreement. That is fine! They can simply write that they were not able to reach a consensus. If students are engaged in conversation and challenging one another's opinions, they are still meeting the objectives of the activity.

See Figure 2 for an example of a completed place mat.



**Figure 2. Completed place mat with student opinions**

7. Have members of each group share their consensus with the class and explain how they reached it. This often leads to a class debate about the topic.
8. Have students rewrite their thesis statements on a separate piece of paper, based on anything they learned during the discussion. You can collect this rewritten thesis statement from each student, check it for comprehension, and make sure it is a statement that can be the basis of an essay.
9. With the results of the place mat, students should have enough information about the topic to begin writing an essay. They have a thesis statement, and they have heard reasons that support and oppose their opinion.

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## Having students defend an opinion orally is an effective way to prepare them to defend their opinion in an essay.

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For the next lesson, you can show students how their thesis statement, and the reasons they used to support their argument, fit into a traditional essay format. You could do this by giving the students a sample essay and having them underline the writer's thesis, as well as the reasons he or she gives to support it.

### ADAPTING

Using the place mat technique as a prewriting task can be modified easily for different ages, subjects, and levels of English. The simplest way to modify it is to change the essential question. For example, with older or more-proficient students, it is possible to ask more-complex essential questions that relate to politics, social issues, and historical events. Conversely, with younger or beginner students, it is recommended to ask simpler, easy-to-answer questions. Below are examples of essential questions that can be used:

#### Younger/Beginner Learners

- Should playing sports be mandatory in school?
- Should violent video games be banned?
- Should homework be banned?
- Is the Internet good for society?
- Should boys and girls go to different schools?

#### Older/Proficient Learners

- Should the world abolish the death penalty?
- Should university education be free?
- Should people be required to take an exam before they become eligible to vote?

- Should alcohol be banned?
- Should everyone in the world be forced to learn English as a second language?

### CONCLUSION

Having students defend an opinion orally is an effective way to prepare them to defend their opinion in an essay. Using the place mat technique as a prewriting activity will ensure that every student has the chance to voice his or her opinion, and it will allow students to reflect on their own ideas before writing. If you want your students to learn to argue their ideas more clearly while improving their speaking, listening, and writing skills, activities like this will allow them to use the language freely, yet in an organized way. Good luck!

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