

How To Watch A Presidential Debate: An Updated Media Literacy Guide for Teachers and Students (Revised for 2024)

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(Summer 2024)

by Frank W Baker



More than 4 years ago, my colleague and I wrote [this column](#) prior to the 2020 presidential debates. Now that the two major party candidates have just agreed to meet, now seems a good time to revise it.

Democrat President Joe Biden and presumptive Republican nominee Donald Trump have agreed to meet in just two debates. Third party candidates were not invited. (This marks the first time that the [Commission on Presidential Debates](#) has not organized the events.) Vice-presidential debates have not yet been announced.

DATE	TIME	PRIMARY BROADCAST/ CABLE
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June 27, 2024	9:00-10:30pm ET	CNN
September 10, 2024	9:00-10:30pm ET	ABC

CNN says it will make sure the debate is available for simulcast by other networks; ABC will also share the September debate with other broadcast and streaming news networks.

The two parties did not yet announce whether each debate will be dedicated to a specific topic, like domestic or foreign policy.

These debates—once again— provide rich teaching opportunities in social studies, language arts and media literacy. In addition to helping students understand the role of the debates in our election process, using the debates as a teaching tool will help students examine the candidates' use of language and word choice, and analyze the media's influence on both the debate process and on the electorate.

Preparing Students To Watch & Analyze the Presidential Debates

What do your students need to know before they watch the debates? Simply taking notes is no longer sufficient. Students who plan to watch the debate should, ahead of time, learn the two candidates' positions and prior statements on various topics.

- ▶ Task your students with brainstorming topics they would expect to be addressed in these debates. (e.g. the economy, Mideast war, Ukraine war, China, immigration, environment, etc.)
- ▶ Students can research the candidates' positions, using candidate websites: [Biden/Trump](#)
- ▶ Students can research what each candidate has previously said about a particular issue in campaign appearances.

- ▶ Ask students to choose 3 or 4 issues listed on the candidates' websites and present the pros and cons of each one. Succinct summaries and arguments for and against many major issues are available at [ProCon.org](https://www.procon.org).
- ▶ Review the glossary terms in [this handout](#).

What Students Should Watch For

In any televised political debate there are two levels or types of viewing that can occur. One focuses on the content – the specific proposals and ideas offered by each candidate. The other looks at the non-content aspects of the debate, which include the television production techniques and the non-verbal cues (“body language”) displayed by the candidates themselves. Analysis of both types of viewing falls under the umbrella of media literacy.

Content. What ideas or proposals, old or new, do the candidates present during the debate? Students can note these in the [Media Literacy Analysis Worksheet](#) we have tailored specifically for these debates.

Production techniques. Where is the camera focused? Are there shots such as split screen, or reaction shots of the other candidate or audience members? Is there music? What kind? When is it used? What does the stage look like? What colors are used in the background? How do these techniques affect the viewer's perception of the debate?

Candidates' language. Since the two candidates became the presumptive nominees, they have gone after each other in speeches and in commercials. Students should be aware of these prior comments so they can listen for them during the debates.

Use of oppositional research. Consultants have done “oppositional research” and advised each candidate on which issue(s) their opponent is most vulnerable. President Biden might be expected to reference the recent trials of his

opponent. Mr. Trump might bring up the Southern border immigration issue which has been in the news.

Emotional language. The candidates also have certain emotional buzzwords or phrases that they like to use. What does their word usage tell you about the candidates?

Body language. Research has shown that a candidate's body language – facial expressions, gestures, voice tone, appearance (like rolled-up sleeves, right) and performance – do as much to influence public reaction to the debates as what the candidates actually say. ([Source](#)).

Texas Tech and University of Arkansas researchers report that “False smiles, toothy smiles, eye blinks and darting eyes...are the expressions that appear in reaction shots, and in the moments that are replayed for days after the debates.” ([Source](#))

All of this becomes evident during **cut-aways**. So when one candidate criticizes another, students should note whether the broadcaster cuts away to show us the reaction shot.

Key Media Literacy Concepts and Student Questions about the Debates

1. All media are constructed. Who is responsible for creating the debate? Who decides the questions? How are audience members involved, if at all? Who is omitted from participation and why? (See reference to Two-Party system in Topics for Further Exploration, below.) What topics might be left out and why?
2. Media sources use language unique to the medium. How are symbols, stagecraft, split screen, and cutaways used and why?
3. Many media are created for commercial purposes. Was there an audience? If so, how were they used? Who

benefits from these debates? Are they sponsored? [Who are the advertisers?](#)

Activity: Viewing vs. Listening. To sharpen the students' media literacy skills, consider doing the following activity: Ask for several volunteers who will only *listen* to one of the debates. They may find it carried by the local NPR station, or they may simply put a cover over the screen of their TV during the debate, leaving the sound on. Discuss the students' different perceptions based on whether they viewed or only listened to the debate. (See Post-viewing Discussion below.)

Conducting Post-Debate Analysis with Students

Sharing our debate handouts ([Glossary](#) and [Media Literacy Analysis Worksheet](#)) can be very helpful to students and teachers as they conduct some post-debate analysis. During the discussion, students might consider these questions, among others:

- ▶ In general, did the candidates answer the questions asked by the moderator, or did they use the time primarily to repeat statements that are part of their campaign rhetoric?
- ▶ How effective was the moderator in attempting to keep candidates "on topic"?
- ▶ Did either candidate attempt to go over their allotted time? Were they cut off?
- ▶ What new information, if any, did students learn from or about either candidate?
- ▶ Was fact checking used during the debate by the networks or during post debate analysis?
- ▶ Discuss each of the sections of the Media Literacy Analysis Worksheet. How would students evaluate each candidate's overall performance in the debate?

► How did viewing compare to only listening? Ask the “listeners” which candidate came across as more informed or more eloquent. How do their perceptions compare with those of the “viewers”? How do they explain the differences?

Topics for Further Exploration or Debate

Two-party system. The two major political parties in the U.S. have evolved as a matter of tradition, but there is no law restricting the number of parties. In fact, many presidential races have included a third-party candidate. Ask students to research and discuss the role of parties other than the Republican and Democratic in previous presidential campaigns. Have them debate the pros and cons of a two-party system.

Campaign finance. The influence of money in political campaigns seems to be a perennial issue. Ask students to research the amounts spent on the presidential campaigns of each candidate, or by the candidates in a local race for Congress or another local office. Is it fair to allow unlimited funding of campaigns? Who benefits? Who is at a disadvantage? Who should be allowed to contribute and how much? Have students debate the pros and cons of public funding of political campaigns.

Role of political parties. This year’s presidential campaign has been marked by intra-party conflicts within both the Democratic and Republican organizations. Some have suggested that the parties no longer wield the power and influence they once did.

Ask students to research the role of political parties in American politics. How has that role changed over time? Do the parties serve an important function in the 21st century? Have students debate the pros and cons of open elections, that is, elections in which voters may vote for any candidate regardless of political affiliation. How does that relate to the Electoral College process?

Opportunities for Rich Learning Experiences

As our discussion here suggests, the presidential debates provide a portal through which students can explore a multitude of topics that are critically important in developing their media literacy skills and preparing them for future role as voting citizens in a democracy.

In our minds, there is little doubt that the time involved in pursuing these learning opportunities is a worthwhile and even crucial investment in any student's education.

NOTE: portions of this column were previously published at Middleweb.com

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

The False Claims You Might Hear During Tonight's Debate

<https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-misinformation-election-debate-trump-biden-577507522762aa10f6ee5be3a0ced2bb>

Do Debates Really Matter?

<https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2024/0625/presidential-debates-history-biden-trump-elections>

Biden and Trump campaigns agreed to mic muting, podiums among rules for upcoming CNN debate

<https://www.aol.com/news/biden-trump-campaigns-agreed-mic-120445565.html>

CNN Will Put Commercial Breaks In The Debate

<https://variety.com/2024/tv/news/cnn-biden-trump-debate-commercial-breaks-ads-1236020209/>

The New Biden-Trump Debate Format is Worth Keeping (MSNBC)

<https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/biden-trump-debate-2024-rcna152759>

What the last Biden-Trump Debate Tells Us Now (New York Times)

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9bzdj6>

Donald Trump's Use of Rhetorical Appeal In Past Presidential Debate

https://www.123helpme.com/essay/Donald-Trumps-Use-Of-Rhetorical-Appeal-In-PCGZDSYA4SB#google_vignette

The American Democracy Project

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/index.php>

How do politicians use ethos, pathos and logos during political debates?

<https://www.quora.com/How-do-politicians-use-ethos-pathos-and-logos-during-political-debates>

Five Things to Listen For in A Presidential Debate (National History Museum)

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/stories/five-things-listen-during-presidential-debate>

Four Mini-lessons on Presidential Debates (PBS)

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/classroom/lesson-plans/2020/10/lesson-plan-presidential-debate-mini-lessons>

Debate Watcher Worksheet (2012)

<https://www.middleweb.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Presidential-Debate-worksheet1.pdf>

Lights, Camera, Debate (Cable In The Classroom, 2008)

<CIC0908LightCameraDebate.pdf> (frankwbaker.com)