



HIGH SCHOOL · GRADES 9–12 · AGES 14–18

Debate & Discussion Guides

From Science to Systems Thinking

FORMAT SUGGESTIONS

- Assign students to argue a position, regardless of personal opinion, to build research and rhetorical skills.
- Allow 20–30 minutes of research time before each debate using the provided prompt questions.
- Close each session with a reflection discussion using the questions at the end of each topic.

TOPICS IN THIS GUIDE

- 1 Topic 1: Should Plastic Bans Be Mandated by Law?
- 2 Topic 2: Extended Producer Responsibility — Fair or Costly?
- 3 Topic 3: Compostable Packaging — Whose Responsibility?

Topic 1

Should Plastic Bans Be Mandated by Law?

Cities and countries worldwide have banned single-use plastics like straws, bags, and cutlery. Students debate whether legislative mandates are the most effective path to reducing plastic pollution, or whether market-driven alternatives should lead instead.

AFFIRMATIVE (PRO)

- Bans create immediate, measurable reductions in plastic use
- Legislation levels the playing field so no business is disadvantaged for switching first
- Public health and environmental costs justify government intervention

NEGATIVE (CON)

- Bans can burden small businesses with higher compliant-material costs
- Enforcement and compliance vary widely by region
- Market incentives may drive innovation faster than regulation

REFLECTION

After the debate, discuss: what combination of policy and market forces would you design if given the authority?

Topic 2

Extended Producer Responsibility — Fair or Costly?

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) laws require manufacturers to fund the collection and processing of the packaging they produce. Students debate whether this shifts responsibility appropriately or creates unintended economic consequences.

AFFIRMATIVE (PRO)

- Places the cost of waste management on the producers who create it
- Incentivizes companies to design more recyclable and compostable packaging
- Reduces the financial burden on municipal waste systems

NEGATIVE (CON)

- Costs are often passed on to consumers through higher prices
- Smaller manufacturers may struggle to comply compared to large corporations
- Implementation and reporting requirements can be complex and costly

REFLECTION

After the debate, discuss: who should ultimately bear the cost of end-of-life packaging management?

Topic 3

Compostable Packaging — Whose Responsibility?

Compostable packaging only breaks down properly with access to industrial or home composting infrastructure. Students debate who is responsible for ensuring that infrastructure exists: manufacturers, municipalities, or consumers.

AFFIRMATIVE (PRO)

- Manufacturers who choose compostable materials should also invest in end-of-life infrastructure
- Municipalities benefit from reduced landfill volume and should expand composting access
- Consumer education is essential but insufficient without accessible systems

NEGATIVE (CON)

- Consumers ultimately control how they dispose of packaging
- Municipalities face budget constraints that limit new infrastructure
- Manufacturers argue their responsibility ends at the point of sale

REFLECTION

After the debate, discuss: what would an ideal shared-responsibility model look like in your community?