

Tug for Truth

A routine for exploring tensions of truth.

1. Identify a question of truth—a controversial claim that something is true or false—where you know there is some evidence on both sides that students can bring forward.
2. Ask students if they have an opinion about it (it's okay not to have one).
3. Draw a tug of war diagram on the board (or tape a piece of rope on the wall and use Post-its to make it more dramatic). Explain that students can add two kinds of things. One is evidence — tugs in the Yes, True direction or the No, False direction. The other thing to add is a question about the tug of war itself, a question that asks for more information or about “what if” we tried this or we tried that, what would the results be?
4. Finish the lesson by asking students what new ideas they have about the question of truth. Can we decide now? Do some people lean one way and some the other? Is the best answer in a “gray area”—most of the time true but not always, or half the time? How could we settle it if we had to?

PURPOSE

What kind of thinking does this routine encourage?

It encourages students to reason carefully about the “pull” of various factors that are relevant to a question of truth. It also helps them appreciate the deeper complexity of matters of truth that can appear black and white on the surface.

APPLICATION

When and where can I use it?

It can be used in any situation in which questions of truth come up, and there is evidence to be considered, evidence from common knowledge or from information resources like newspapers or encyclopedias or the Internet. Questions of truth can come from school subjects or everyday life. Newspaper headlines are full of claims from politicians and others that can be evaluated. Science brings many issues like whether genetically engineered foods are dangerous or how old the universe is. History comes with endless controversies, for instance about who really started a particular war or what everyday life was like at various times in the past. Many works of literature create suspense by offering only bits and pieces of information until the end: Before the end, can you the reader figure out who the culprit really is or what secret from the past the heroine is hiding?

LAUNCH

What are some tips for starting and using this routine?

This is a routine that builds on children's familiarity with the game of Tug of War to help them understand the complex forces that "tug" at either side of a question of truth (there is also a Tug of War for fairness dilemmas with the same basic structure). The routine uses a rope or a diagram to represent pulls toward true or false in evaluating a claim. The tug of war is between True and False. Help students think about the various factors that tug at one side of the rope or the other, as well as other considerations related to the issue. A natural follow-up to the activity is to have students investigate facts related to the questions written above the Tug of War.

This thinking routine was developed as part of the Visible Thinking project at Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Explore the full PZ Thinking Routine Toolbox at pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines.