



# NWIP FACT SHEET

## Dialogue Technique

**Dialogue** is to have a shared flow of meaning amongst the participants, resulting from the exploration of thought. Since the nature of dialogue is exploratory, its meaning and its methods continue to unfold.  
*Oxford Research Group*

### The three principles behind dialogue are

1. Change happens on the individual level
2. Dialogue and lobbying are two different things
3. We need to get beyond the way of thinking that caused the problem in the first place

Be aware of the language and phrasing you use. Expressions and words like "ought to", "have to", and "should" can seem very confrontational and judgmental even though they are not used with that intention. Can you think of others?

The dialogue technique was introduced by the Oxford Research Group. Their focus was on dialogue with decision-makers, but the basic ideas they have introduced are all very relevant to our work.

Some of these are:

- Open-minded listening
- Establishing common ground
- Non-confrontational communication
- Open-ended discussion
- Dialogue is a process
- Deepening understanding
- Respect for each other

All the above apply to our version of dialogue technique as well. We have had to make some changes due to the fact that:

- a) We often only meet the students we dialogue with once
- b) We often meet with many students at the time
- c) We don't know the position of the students beforehand

To address this we have included some questions in the beginning of the discussion, so that the students can start by voicing their opinions and concerns and we get a better feeling of the distributions of pro-nuclear and anti-nuclear participants. We try to make up for the fact that we only meet the students once by establishing local student networks that can continue activities.

It is our experience that it takes relatively less to make students reconsider their opinions than to achieve the same change in a decision-maker. This is both because students are still in a process of formulating their worldview – and we basically present them with information they can use in that process – and because students are much less bound by formal positions. It might be a huge change for a student to acknowledge that nuclear policies might not only be good. On the other hand they are allowed to say that out loud whereas decision-makers are bound by official policies of their organisation, department, political party or of their country.

When preparing for a dialogue you should sit together the whole dialogue team and go through the arguments and the agenda. It is very important that everyone knows what the others are going to say and that you have had a chance to phrase your arguments before the dialogue. We usually appoint a chair in the group. This person is the one responsible for taking questions from the audience, making sure you cover the different topics you have on the agenda, who makes the opening and closing statement and who delegates answers to the rest of the group. This is necessary to



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## Tricks

Simple message  
Go Back to main points  
A few key messages  
Illustrate with examples and anecdotes  
Emotional message – appeal to people's humanity  
Speak loud, clear and slow  
Be attentive at all times  
Be aware of body language  
Summarize what people say before answering  
Know your own assumptions  
All contributions are valid

keep some kind of structure to the dialogue. The chair will naturally be the person speaking the most during the dialogue, summing up questions and answers, and the rest of the group must allow that. On the other hand a good chair delegates all questions (if possible) to the other team members, tries to stay relatively neutral and always checks with the others that they have no burning comments before moving on to the next topic. For the chair to properly live up to his / hers responsibility everyone's arguments must be known to the chair and you must have some kind of master plan prepared of who will cover what topic.

In a dialogue the opening and closing statements are very important. In the opening statement you explain who you are and why you are there. That is important to prepare the ground for the dialogue. Ideally you already then establish common ground by emphasising that you work globally and that you are students like the audience. In the closing statement you must sum up you most important points. People can usually not remember more than 3 main points – so chose these carefully and stress them in the end. It is also important to advice the audience on how and where to find more information and what they can do if they want to do something to make a change.

When preparing you also need to identify potential difficult topics that can lead off track. Recently such topics for us have been the war in Iraq, the War on Terror and the Israel – Palestine conflict. It is not that these topics are not extremely important, but they are so emotionally laden that discussing them very easily can move you far away from disarmament and make it difficult to get back on track in a way that seems natural. We have therefore discussed short statements we can make when these topics are raised that links the topic with disarmament and help us stay on track. You should analyse the context you dialogue in and try to identify similar difficult topics and then come up with good statements for each of them.

## DOs

Allow the audience to influence the agenda, so that you speak to their real concerns  
One argument at the time  
Be yourself  
Stay cool – even when the audience doesn't  
Be objective  
Finish one topic before starting the next (if possible)  
Respect the chair  
Ask those not so active  
Avoid "dangerous" topics that will move the discussion away from disarmament  
Ask people to repeat their question if you are not sure you have understood it  
Establish common ground

## DON'Ts

Do not get tempted to answer questions that will move you away from your topic  
Do not have separate discussions with just one person  
Do not interrupt people when speaking (unless they don't seem to stop...)  
Do not let a few active students set the agenda  
Do not use slang or bad habits like saying "right" after every sentence

## References

Everyone's guide to achieving change – a step by step approach to dialogue with decision-makers

NWIP dialogue material

NWIP handbook

[www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk)