

# How to Play 'Devil's Advocate'

Playing 'devil's advocate' is to take an opposing viewpoint or raise an objection to a claim merely for the sake of argument. You do not actually have to believe what you are saying when you raise these questions or objections; you are simply arguing in order to clarify issues and generate debate. This is a skill that requires considerable practice but when executed well, offers new insights, challenges stagnant thinking, and increases the rigor of debate and level of understanding. The following strategies can help you become an astute yet insightful 'devil's advocate':

## 1. Ask incisive questions

Speaker: "We should eliminate high school sports."

Devil's Advocate: "How can you be sure this proposal would work?"

Who or what group is disadvantaged by this proposal?

Can the proposal logistically be implemented?

Who would be in charge of overseeing whether or not the proposal is carried out?

Will the proposal apply to all people or in all situations?

Are there exceptions to the proposal?

What do you mean when you say...?

What examples can you provide that support this proposal?

Is the evidence relevant? Biased? Misrepresented?

How are you defining the words 'eliminate' and 'sports'?"

## 2. Consider proposals from other people's perspectives

Speaker: "The Supreme Court should uphold Proposition 8 in order to ban same-sex marriages."

Devil's Advocate: "What about the 40,000 children in California who live with same-sex parents? Do these children have a right to voice their opinion in this matter? Has anyone asked them what they think about giving full recognition and legal status to their parents?"

## 3. Think of comparable scenarios that refute the original claim

Speaker: "President Obama should call for an end to NSA government surveillance of Americans' phone and e-mail records because it violates the fourth amendment's protection against warrantless search and seizures."

Devil's Advocate: "TSA employees don't have to have a warrant to search a passenger before boarding a plane. Are they in violation of the fourth amendment?"

## 4. Pose hypothetical situations to clarify issues

Speaker: "The town of Greece, New York should allow prayer before town board meetings."

Devil's Advocate: "Suppose a devil worshiper wanted to pray to the devil? Would this be an acceptable understanding of your position on public prayer?"

## 5. Pose alternative explanations or solutions to problems

Speaker: "A 35 ft. buffer zone should be created around abortion clinics in Massachusetts because protestors are blocking the entrance and heckling patients going in to receive an abortion."

Devil's Advocate: "There are other ways to deal with the problem of blocking the entrance, such as prosecuting people for obstructing the entrance. Instead of making a blanket statement that infringes on the freedom of speech of everyone, police could arrest only those protestors who are blocking the entrance."

6. **Use reductio ad absurdum** – the technique of reducing an argument or hypothesis to absurdity, by pushing the argument's premises or conclusions to their logical limits and showing how ridiculous the consequences would be, thus disproving or discrediting the argument.

Speaker: "The United States should require that its citizens buy health insurance."

Devil's Advocate: "If the government can mandate you to have health insurance, can it also force you to buy broccoli?"

7. **Point out a flaw in the proposal**

Speaker: "The Home Owners Association should ban any new installation of swimming pools because homes with swimming pools use 49% more energy than homes without."

Devil's Advocate: "To suggest that a swimming pool is the sole cause of a home to use more energy than a home without a swimming pool is a causal fallacy. Homes with pools are probably larger than non-swimming pool homes and most likely would have children living there, meaning more occupants and more energy. The pool may increase some energy but it is not the only cause."

8. **Expose an exception to the proposal**

Speaker: "Our state should mandate that cyclists carry a form of identification just like motorists are required to carry a driver's license."

Devil's Advocate: "But certainly there are cyclists under the age of 16 who don't have a permit or a driver's license and who ride on our roads. Does your proposal account for that exception?"

9. **Identify hidden assumptions**

Speaker: "Homosexuality is wrong because it is unnatural."

Devil's Advocate: "You are falsely assuming that if something is unnatural, it is wrong. Contraception is also unnatural, but I don't think you want to ban contraception."

10. **Provide evidence that is ignored but contradicts the proposal**

Speaker: "Global warming cannot be legitimate because a scientific study published in the journal *Nature* found that 58 percent of Antarctica actually cooled from 1966 – 2000."

Devil's Advocate: "While that is true, the same article found that the rest of the continent was warming during that same time."

11. **Show the downside of the proposal**

Speaker: "Developing nations should have few regulations on businesses that extract natural resources so that the countries can prosper and quality of life can improve."

Devil's Advocate: "The problem with this idea is that the lack of regulations would also allow companies to potentially abuse the environment by depleting the natural resources, polluting of the air, deforesting the trees, and destroying plant and animal wildlife."