



Doha Debates

Production of Qatar Foundation

Do we really have free will?

A Doha Debates Town Hall teaching guide

Are the choices we make truly our own—or is everything predetermined? From what to wear to whom to marry, what actually shapes our choices, both big and small?

This town hall and guide was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

Do we really have free will?

A Doha Debates Town Hall teaching guide

This guide aims to support teachers, community leaders, youth advocates and others in facilitating dialogue around questions of free will in conjunction with the Doha Debates Town Hall, "Do we really have free will?"

Is free will real—or just a story we tell ourselves? With neuroscience now suggesting our decisions may be made before we're even conscious of them, and AI steadily narrowing the choices we make for ourselves, this Doha Debates Town Hall tackles one of the oldest and most consequential questions in human thought.

Philosopher Gregg Caruso, philosopher Jeremy Koons and Islamic scholar and activist Omar Suleiman join host Imran Garda and an onstage audience of students and recent graduates for a debate that moves from the lab to the courtroom to places of worship, asking whether or not we actually have free will, and what the answer means for how we punish, how we forgive, and how we live.

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Doha Debates: Our debate style

The world needs debate. It's how we surface new ideas, spark innovation and find solutions to complex problems. Now, more than ever, we need dialogue that prioritizes listening, curiosity and respect for divergent viewpoints; where the goal is not to win, but to better understand one another and our world.

Doha Debates is reimagining debate for today's world. Inspired by the Majlis—a welcoming social space to discuss community issues—we bring together people from across the globe to engage in meaningful and respectful conversation about complex problems.

Majlis (المجلس) is an Arabic word meaning “a place of sitting.”

In the Arab world, a Majlis is a designated space, often in someone's home, for socializing and discussing important community issues and events. When you are invited into a Majlis, you enter into a space that prioritizes listening with a desire to understand, respectful dialogue and shared decision-making, all couched in hospitality and interpersonal connection.

The Majlis: A unique learning environment

At Doha Debates, the concept of the Majlis offers a unique way for educators to organize the learning environment and foster participants' ability to embrace diverse perspectives, cultivate curiosity and, consequently, engage in rich, open-minded debate.

In the Majlis, participants sit on the same level in a circle where everyone is able to see and hear each other, rather than seeing the back of each other's heads, as in a traditional classroom. Emphasis is placed on reducing hierarchies that might create an uneven power dynamic, potentially stifling some voices while amplifying others. Lived experience is honored, as we acknowledge its influence on our beliefs and positions as well as our knowledge. And finally, diversity is not only welcome, it is critical for the genuine pursuit of truth and understanding.

Facilitating in the Majlis means working with participants to create a safe space for everyone to share and exchange ideas, and productively guiding the group through moments of tension. Facilitation begins with an invitation into dialogue, framed with a few simple principles:

- Take seriously the things others hold dear. If it matters to them, let it matter to you.
- Come to the conversation not to convince anyone they're wrong or to change them, but out of curiosity about why people think the way they do.
- Trust that listening carefully to ideas you might disagree with enriches you rather than diminishes you.
- Expect more common ground than you anticipate—and where there isn't any, know that you can fundamentally disagree with someone and still respect them.

Facilitation tips for the Majlis

Set the frame gently. Share goals up front so participants feel a sense of ownership, and if timing calls for changes, make them together.

Reach for inclusive language. Define terms, ease off the jargon and acronyms, and notice when "we" might not yet include everyone in the room.

Hold intent and impact side by side. When something lands as hurtful, a clarifying question can help a speaker bring their words back in line with what they meant.

Guide more than you steer. Rather than naming ideas "right" or "wrong," let lived experience hold the many truths in a conversation, and offer questions back to the group.

Let the expertise shift. If you find yourself answering everything, or notice the group leaning toward you instead of each other, step back so others can step forward.

Keep curiosity at the center. Invite questions that come from genuine interest rather than a wish to interrogate or score points.

Follow the group's energy. Notice its natural rises and falls, name them, and offer space to pause.

Be aware of what's missing. Consider whose perspective is not being heard—for example, a key stakeholder or traditionally underrepresented voice—and address it.

Let yourself be human. Pausing to think, sharing your own reflections, and owning your missteps all make hard conversations feel safer.

Call people in, not out. When a comment causes harm, accountability and belonging can hold together.

Know your own tender spots. Noticing your hot buttons ahead of time makes it easier to stay present.

Getting ready

Step 1: Read, watch and reflect

In addition to doing a full review of this guide, watch the Doha Debates Town Hall "[Do we really have free will?](#)" As you watch, make note of your thoughts and reflect on these questions:

- *Why is this a good topic for your group?*
- *What do you hope your group will gain from this learning experience?*
- *What do they need to know or be able to do before they engage with this topic?*
- *What do you personally hope to gain from facilitating this learning experience?*
- *What concerns do you have about the material? The process?*
- *What accommodations will you need to make for any participants who have accessibility challenges, such as hearing or visual impairments?*

Step 2: Gather materials

You will need very few materials for this program; however, these are essential:

- A space large enough to accommodate your group sitting in one large circle, as well as several smaller circles of 4-8 for the final debate (depending on the size of the group). **If working online:** a videoconferencing platform such as Zoom, and the ability to create break-out rooms
- A whiteboard or chart paper with markers. **If working online:** a digital whiteboard and ability to use the chat function
- Paper and pen for each participant (or the digital equivalent).
- Capacity to watch several videos as a group, including the town hall
- Accommodations for any accessibility issues, including technology and language interpretation
- Sticky notes (optional)

Step 3: Identify learning goals

After reviewing this guide in full, and before you begin activities, draft 3–5 overall learning goals. Be prepared to share them during the first activity to establish the tone for the learning environment and give a sense of your expectations.

Goals should be based on:

- what skills would you like the participants to strengthen.
- what concepts you want participants to learn and discuss.

Make your goals verb-oriented, manageable and concrete. Connect goals to previous work the group has done, where relevant.

Sample goals include:

- Facilitate and participate in discussions of complex global issues
- Effectively navigate intercultural communication
- Articulate and understand your own worldview and those of others
- Effectively tell your own story to engage people with an issue
- Develop and explore personal connections to global issues
- Better understand people and the motivations behind their positions
- Learn to hold open, productive community discussions

The PERA process

The next section of this guide will walk you through the PERA process (prepare, engage, reflect, act), a sequence of learning activities that follows a project-based learning arc. Each segment of the process requires approximately two hours of group time; the whole sequence should take about eight hours, with an additional 90 minutes to watch the town hall itself. Some activities can be assigned as asynchronous written reflections instead of in-person group discussion—these are noted in the guide. Estimated activity times are based on groups of less than 15 participants; larger groups may need additional time.

In these activities, participants will:

- articulate and understand their own worldview and those of others
- facilitate and participate in discussions of complex questions
- develop and explore personal connections to the topic of free will
- better understand others and the motivations behind their positions

At every stage of the process, facilitators should consciously notice the direction the discussions are taking, where the interests of the group lie and how they evolve. This information will inform the structure of the culminating activity in the final Act stage—a Majlis-style debate (or multiple debates, if the facilitator chooses to break participants into smaller groups).

PREPARE

Activity 1: Set the tone for the Majlis (20 minutes)

Setting the tone means creating the safest possible place for your group to openly share their ideas, their emotions and their creativity. It is a critical step for all facilitators to practice. Each time you gather, conduct the welcome activity and review learning goals and agreements.

Step 1: Conduct a six-point welcome

1. Personally greet your participants from the moment they enter the learning space. Use names and make personal connections when possible.
2. Use positive tone and body language; e.g., a calm voice, friendly facial expression and open body posture that signals approachability.
3. Conduct a brief check-in with the group to gauge their mood and energy levels. There are many options for this online; for example, the one-word check-in.
4. When introducing the learning, give clear instructions from the very start: Participants should understand where to sit and what materials they need. Clarity reduces anxiety, and predictability of format creates psychological security.
5. Encourage everyone's voice with a gentle invitation to say something—whether to a neighbor, with a group song or recitation, or in the chat (if conducting online learning). Remember that the first time you say something in a group can be unnerving. Make the initial invitation to be heard as low-stakes as possible.
6. Explain that as a group, you will be engaging in a unique learning experience. Describe the attributes of your particular group that you believe will make it a success.

Step 2: Introduce the Majlis

Watch "[Welcome to the Majlis](#)" together. After watching, ask the group to briefly discuss these questions:

- *How is debate in the Majlis different from your current ideas about debate?*
- *What is the purpose of debate in the Majlis?*
- *How is a debate in the Majlis different from a day-to-day conversation?*
- *How is it different from a Western-style/Oxford debate?*

PREPARE

Activity Two: Goals and agreements (20 minutes)

This activity is the basis of all activities going forward. Take as much time as needed to create a solid foundation. Use a whiteboard or chart paper to record your goals and agreements, and make them visible every time you gather.

Step 1: Share your goals

To help participants relax and feel a sense of direction and purpose, share an overview of what participants can expect from the process, then share your learning goals. If possible, connect goals to previous work the group has done, as well as to the larger aims of the Majlis.

Step 2: Co-create agreements

To encourage the group to develop ownership of the learning process, help them co-create agreements about how everyone should behave in order to reach the learning goals. These agreements should be:

- crafted by everyone.
- followed by everyone.
- reinforced by everyone.

Start by suggesting one or two agreements that are important to you; e.g., *stay curious* or *be kind*. Briefly discuss each suggested agreement in order to reach a shared understanding of what it means and what it looks like to honor it.

With a larger or less-familiar group, you can reduce pressure on individuals and encourage broader participation by dividing participants into smaller groups to brainstorm 3–5 agreements they would like to set. Have these groups share their agreements, then work as a whole group to consolidate any overlapping ideas and check for understanding.

Revisit the agreements each time you meet as a group, and revise when necessary.

Pro tips

- Agreements should describe what to do rather than what not to do.
- Less is more. Up to five agreements should be sufficient.
- If meeting online, use the chat bar and remember to save the conversation.

PREPARE

Activity Three: Explore better listening (15 minutes)

Listening is the most critical skill needed for successful debate in the Majlis. This activity cultivates awareness of the listening skills participants will practice throughout the learning process.

Step 1: Hold a discussion on listening

Hold a brief group discussion on the following questions:

- *What makes a conversation go really well?*
- *What does it mean to listen?*
- *What does it mean to be heard?*
- *What is the difference between hearing and listening?*

Step 2: Watch and debrief "Master Listening"

Watch "[Master Listening](#)" from Doha Debates' [Better Conversations series](#), hosted by Dr. Govinda Clayton, an expert in peace processes, negotiation and conflict management.

After watching, ask the group to briefly discuss using these prompts:

- *What did you like about the video? What stood out to you? What surprised you?*
- *What is the difference between saying you understand and saying you want to understand?*
- *What kind of questions can you ask to show that you want to understand someone's perspective?*
- *Dr. Clayton encourages us to use our active listening skills to "imagine a world where both your stories can exist together." What do you think that means? What are the challenges? What are the benefits?*

Pro tip

Take the reflection deeper by either assigning this as a journal prompt, or by pairing participants to share their experiences using this prompt: Have you ever felt your words or perspective were misunderstood in a conversation? If you could go back to that time, how might you incorporate some of Dr. Clayton's advice to change the way you communicated?

PREPARE

Activity Four: Introduce the topic (20 minutes)

This activity will launch your group into exploration of the debate topic: Do we really have free will? Use it to learn about the group's baseline knowledge and beliefs about the topic, and where their curiosities lie.

Step 1: Determine where participants stand

Ask participants to form a horizontal line all facing forward toward you. Introduce the concept of free will and explain why you have chosen it.

Offer this definition: *Free will is the ability to make choices that are genuinely one's own and that are not determined by prior events or external forces (a.k.a. determinism).*

Ask participants to take two steps forward if they believe we have absolute free will. Then ask remaining students to take two steps backward if they believe that we absolutely do *not* have it.

Ask remaining students to take one step forward if they believe we *mostly* have free will, and one step backward if we mostly do not have it. Those who believe we have equal parts free will and determinism may stay in the same place.

Have a brief discussion, asking volunteers to explain the reasoning behind their choices. Be sure to hear from someone in every position, including anyone who did not take a step at all.

NOTE: If meeting online, choose and label five emojis from the reactions menu, and ask each participant to signal their position using the corresponding emoji.

PREPARE

Step 2: Create a KWL chart

Tell participants that you will be conducting an activity to find out about what they already know about the topic of free will and what they wonder about it.

On a whiteboard or digitally, create three columns labeled **know**, **wonder**, and **learned**.

Crowdsource participants' existing knowledge to fill out the K (know) column of the chart, using these suggested prompts.

- *Why do you think it is important for us to explore this issue?*
- *What have you seen in the news or on social media about this issue?*
- *Has anyone read any books or seen a movie about this issue?*
- *Does anyone have any personal experience with this issue?*

If any questions arise during this step, make note of them in column W (wonder).

Lead the group in filling out column W (wonder), using these suggested prompts:

- *Did any (other) questions arise for you as we filled out column K?*
- *Are there any ideas in column K that you feel are inaccurate or debatable?*
- *What are some other possibilities or ideas you would like to explore?*

Post or share the KWL chart for continued group reference. Revise or add to it at any time during the learning process. You will return to it as a final activity.

PREPARE

Activity Five: Build a shared vocabulary (20 minutes)

The primary purpose of this activity is to establish a shared understanding so that the group can move forward together, and prevent semantic misunderstandings which can easily derail a conversation. The secondary purpose is to practice listening skills, apply the agreements and build group trust and cohesion.

Step 1: Define key vocabulary

Generate key terms and concepts by asking participants (either independently or in small groups) to generate a list of 3-5 key terms and concepts related to the topic, using their KWL chart as a source.

Combine the lists in a place where everyone can see them. Work with the whole group to eliminate overlap and solidify definitions. Refer to an authoritative source to clarify meanings. Throughout this process, solicit questions and check in to confirm shared understanding of each term and concept.

NOTE: The terms and concepts on page 12 appear often in the town hall. If they do not appear on the participant-generated lists, share and discuss them prior to watching the town hall itself.

Town hall: Do we really have free will?

Key terms and concepts

Free will: the ability to make choices that are genuinely one's own and that are not determined by prior events or external forces.

Determinism: the idea that all events, including human decisions, are the inevitable result of prior causes and laws of nature.

Compatibilism: the philosophical view that free will can coexist with determinism.

Moral responsibility: the status of being accountable for one's actions, which is often thought to require some form of free will.

Predestination/fate: beliefs (often religious or philosophical) that outcomes are predetermined by external forces, such as divine will or causal laws.

Justice system implications: discussions on how ideas about free will affect punishment, rehabilitation, and legal responsibility.

Accountability: the degree to which individuals can be held responsible for their actions if choices are determined by factors outside their control.

Restorative justice: an approach to wrongdoing that focuses on repairing the harm caused to victims and communities by holding offenders accountable in ways that promote healing rather than punishment.

ENGAGE

Activity One: Watch the town hall (90 minutes)

Watching and discussing the town hall together opens up thinking, builds a shared understanding of the topic, and prepares the group for the deeper analysis. As the facilitator, you may wish to pause the video for reflection or checks for understanding. If necessary, participants may watch asynchronously (outside of meeting time) and reflect in writing using the discussion questions as prompts.

Step 1: Watch and debrief “Do we really have free will?”

Watch “[Do we really have free will?](#)” to consider how societies with different belief systems grapple with the concepts of autonomy and concepts of free will, and how they might shape everyday ethics and criminal justice systems.

Town Hall Guests

Dr. Jeremy Koons, professor of philosophy at Georgetown University in Qatar, teaches courses ranging from political and social thought and just war theory to philosophy of religion and philosophy of sacrifice.

Dr. Gregg D. Caruso is a professor of ethics and management at Fairfield University. His research focuses on free will, moral responsibility, criminal punishment, moral psychology, neuroethics and public health approaches to crime prevention.

Imam Dr. Omar Suleiman is a world-renowned scholar and theologically driven activist for human rights. He has been recognized by CNN among 25 Muslim American changemakers.

The onstage audience is composed of students and recent graduates from universities in Qatar.

Imran Garda, the moderator, is a South African journalist with two decades of experience covering international news.

ENGAGE

Step 2: Discuss and clarify after initial responses

Hold a brief discussion with participants to gauge their initial reactions and feelings about the town hall, using the suggested prompts:

- *Did you learn anything new?*
- *Did this change your understanding of free will?*
- *Did any of the ideas presented surprise you?*
- *Which expert guest did you agree/disagree with most?*
- *Which onstage audience members did you find interesting?*

Activity Two : Positions vs. interests (20 minutes)

This activity gets to the heart of debate in the Majlis: seeking understanding of why people feel the way that they do about the issue at hand. It is an opportunity to practice deep listening, curiosity and empathy before seeking a solution or resolution.

Step 1: Watch and debrief "Change your approach"

Watch "[Change your approach](#)" from the [Better Conversations](#) series.

Debrief the three conversation hacks introduced in the video, using the following prompts:

- *Hack 1: Focus on interests and not positions.* What does this mean to you? Can you think of an example?
- *Hack 2: Reframe their side of the story.* What does this mean to you? Can you think of an example?
- *Hack 3: Try to be present.* What does this mean to you? How does this benefit you in a difficult conversation?

Step 2: Complete the positions vs. interests iceberg

Give each participant a sheet of paper and a pen. On a white board (or digitally), draw or display a simple iceberg with the waterline covering the bottom two-thirds of the figure. Label the area above the waterline POSITIONS, and the area below the waterline INTERESTS. Label the very bottom of the figure NEEDS.

ENGAGE

Share these definitions with the group:

- **Positions:** what a person or group explicitly says they want or demand in a situation. These can easily be seen on the surface of the iceberg.
- **Interests:** the underlying reasons, motivations or goals that explain *why* they want what they want. These might be hidden “underwater” and need to be revealed through dialogue.
- **Needs:** the deeper, often non-negotiable human requirements (e.g., safety, respect, security) that drive interests and then manifest in positions. These are often the most hidden from view.

Give these instructions to the group to help each person complete their iceberg:

- Above the waterline, please record your *position* on the question of free will. Do we have it, or don't we?
- Below the waterline, write about your *interests*. Why do you believe what you believe? What experiences, or information influence the position or opinion that you hold?
- Can you identify a *need* that may be at the core of how you feel about the issue? Perhaps a need for safety, belonging, protection, security, certainty, clarity, power, control, agency, justice? Record this at the bottom of the page.

If you wish, have participants share their completed icebergs with one another, either in pairs or in small groups. Ask them to engage in discussion using the following prompts:

- *What is each person's position, and how do they differ?*
- *Did anyone struggle to identify their underlying interests?*
- *What questions do you have for each other?*
- *Did you have any interests in common, even if your positions differed?*
- *Were you able to connect your interests to a need?*

ENGAGE

Activity Three: The stakeholder review (30 minutes)

Once the concepts of positions, interests and needs are clear and participants understand their own relationship to the issue better, they can move forward in understanding the interests of other key stakeholders. In this activity, participants brainstorm to create a list of stakeholders and analyze their positions, interests and needs.

Step 1: Brainstorm key stakeholders

Share this definition with the group: *Stakeholders are people, groups or individuals who have the power to affect, or are affected by, the issues raised by the topic.*

Tell participants that they will now be identifying the possible stakeholders in the issue of free will, and digging deeper into the possible interests of these stakeholders.

On a whiteboard or digital document, brainstorm a list of 8-10 stakeholders with the group, following the group's curiosity. Encourage deeper thinking with these prompts:

- *Are you a stakeholder in the issue? How?*
- *How are the expert guests stakeholders in the issue?*
- *How are global youth stakeholders in the issue?*
- *Who else is impacted by the issue?*
- *Who influences the issue?*
- *Does the question of free will present a problem?*
- *If so, who is responsible for creating the problem? Who is responsible for fixing it?*
- *Who might support a solution? Who might obstruct a solution?*

ENGAGE

Step 2: Complete and discuss a stakeholder iceberg

With the group, choose a stakeholder from the list who is either most highly impacted by the question of free will or most influential in resolving it.

Tell the group that they will be stepping into this stakeholder's shoes and thinking about the issue from their point of view.

On a whiteboard or digital document, draw or display another iceberg and work with the group to map your chosen stakeholder's *position* along with their *interests* and *needs*. Use these prompts to guide the process:

- *What is this stakeholder's position, and why might they be taking this stance?*
- *What experiences or background might be shaping their view?*
- *What might they be trying to achieve or protect?*
- *What might they fear losing or hope to gain?*
- *What values or beliefs might guide them?*
- *What assumptions might they be making?*
- *Might there be any non-negotiables for them?*

NOTE: To save time, the group can simply discuss the chosen stakeholder's positions, interests and needs without completing an iceberg.

REFLECT

Activity One: Reflect on the process (20 minutes)

Reflection is a dynamic process that requires curiosity, open-mindedness and a willingness to revisit first impressions. This is an opportunity to practice these skills and sets the group up well for the culminating activity.

Step 1: Debrief positions, interests and needs (20 minutes)

Using the following prompts, reflect as a group on the position vs. interests vs. needs activities completed during the Engage phase. Participants can either discuss aloud or write their reflections.

- *What did you notice when you moved from identifying positions to identifying interests and needs, either for yourself or for other stakeholders?*
- *What was it like listening to your peers' positions, interests and needs?*
- *Did you see any overlap around interests, even when positions differed?*
- *How did it feel to step into another stakeholder's shoes? Did it expand your thinking? How?*
- *Was there a stakeholder with whom you initially disagreed but now understand better?*
- *How difficult was it to identify guests' positions, interests and needs? Was one more difficult than others? Why?*
- *How did this activity change how you listen to or judge others' views?*

Activity Two: Understanding our stories (20 minutes)

Successful debate in the Majlis relies on emotional as well as intellectual safety to express what we truly believe, and to ask curious questions that genuinely seek to understand. To create this safety, we need to understand each others' stories.

Step 1: Watch and debrief "Understanding their story"

Watch "[Understanding their story](#)" from the Better Conversations series, then debrief using these prompts:

- *What did you like about the video?*
- *What stood out to you?*
- *What surprised you?*

REFLECT

Step 2: Invite further reflection

In the video, Dr. Clayton says, "Address your problem as the gap between these two stories." Discuss this statement with the group, using the following prompts:

- *What does this mean?*
- *What are some strategies to better understand someone else's story?*
- *Why might it be challenging to accept that our stories of the same circumstances might be different but both true?*
- *If we accept this, how might it change the way you speak with others in difficult conversations?*

Activity Three: Tap into curiosity (20 minutes)

One of the most useful skills for debate in the Majlis is the ability to tap into genuine curiosity. Suspending judgement long enough to get curious can be difficult, but it can also open a pathway to deeper understanding and connection.

Step 1: Unpack curious questions

Share these suggestions on formulating curious questions from journalist Mónica Guzmán in her TEDxSeattle talk, "[How Curiosity Will Save Us](#)."

1. *Ask how instead of why.* Instead of "Why do you believe that?", try asking "How did you come to believe what you believe?" As they walk the path they took to their views and you walk right alongside them. It's a tour, not a trial.
2. *Ask them to share their concerns.* And before you voice your own, ask if they have any others. Our concerns reveal our values, and conversations about values—if they are honest and curious—will almost certainly lead you to common ground.
3. *Ask what you might be missing.* You may share values with the person you're talking to, but you could both be "stacking" them in a different order. Instead of asking, "Why don't you care about X?", try asking: "What do you care about more than X?"

Step 2: Practice formulating questions

Place participants in pairs. If possible, make pairs with opposing views on free will. Tell them that they will be using their personal icebergs from the Engage stage for this activity.

Instruct one of them (Partner A) to make a statement about their position on the issue of free will. Instruct their partner (Partner B) to ask, "Why do you believe that?" and allow Partner A to respond.

Then ask Partner B to reformulate the question by asking, "How did you come to believe what you believe?" and allow Partner A to respond.

Ask the pairs to reflect aloud to the larger group on whether the reformulated questions created a shift in their responses (or their feelings as they responded).

Instruct Partner B to ask Partner A about their concerns, allowing Partner B an opportunity to connect with those concerns.

Ask each pair to consider whether they share any concerns, and where their concerns differ. If their concerns do differ, ask them to cultivate genuine curiosity for the concerns of the other and to ask more questions formulated to suspend judgement and seek deeper understanding.

ACT

Activity One: Prepare for the debate (60 minutes)

Participants have taken a deep dive on the topic at hand and practiced many of the skills necessary for debate in the Majlis. It's now time to put the learning into action by having them engage in their own debate.

Step 1: Structure the group(s) for debate

Draw from the instincts, learning goals and experience of the group thus far to structure your debate group(s). Decide whether to have participants engage in a whole-group debate or multiple debates in smaller groups (recommended size: 5–6 participants).

There are just two participant roles to assign: facilitator or guest. Both are important. Use the following methods to assign roles, choosing a facilitator first or choosing guests first:

- Select a facilitator because they are eager to volunteer or because they have shown particular ability.
- Choose guests based on how their personal story or connection to the issue illuminates something special or interesting about the issue.

Step 2: Identify the framing question(s)

Choose the question(s) for debate from the following list, or let your group(s) choose their own:

- *To what extent are our choices truly our own, and to what extent are they shaped by biology, environment and prior causes?*
- *If some aspects of choice are determined, what does that mean for moral responsibility and the justice system?*
- *Do findings in neuroscience and psychology challenge or support the idea of free will?*
- *What can different traditional views of free will, fate and accountability teach us?*
- *As technologies like AI grow more autonomous, how might our understanding of human free will change?*

Alternatively, choose another question that surfaced during the group's discussions.

ACT

Step 3: Cultivate stories (guests)

In the Majlis, personal stories that inform opinion are as important as data. Review these four points with the whole group and briefly discuss:

Four Things Story Does That Argument Cannot

1. *Story puts a human face on the issue.* Data describes a problem. A story makes you feel it. When someone shares their experience—not the statistics, but the morning they turned on a tap and nothing came out—something shifts. The issue stops being abstract. That shift is where real dialogue begins.
2. *Story creates empathy before it creates agreement.* When the goal of a conversation is to win, we stop listening and start defending. Story interrupts that. When you hear not just what someone thinks but why—when the experience behind the position becomes visible—it becomes much harder to dismiss them. Empathy doesn't require agreement. But it does make agreement possible.
3. *Story reveals what's underneath.* Positions are the surface of an argument. Interests — the values, fears, and experiences that shaped the position — live underneath. Stories surface those interests. And it is almost always easier to find common ground in the why than in the what.
4. *Story builds a sense of "we."* Consensus isn't just agreement. It's a shared sense of identity—a feeling that we are in this together. That doesn't come from logic. It comes from recognizing yourself in someone else's story.

Ask participants who are guests in the debate to reflect on the personal stories they might share in order to illustrate why they hold the opinions that they do. Guests may draw from their role as a stakeholder, a personal experience that informs their opinion, something they have read or seen or something from the town hall that moved them.

Pro Tip

Guests should be prepared to share their own stories, any research that supports their position and any questions or curiosities they have that may open up new complexities.

ACT

Step 4: Create a "Run of Show"

Explain to the group that the Run of Show (RoS) is overseen by the facilitator, though creating it is a collaborative process. It is a working document that holds the Majlis together. It is not a script, as the debate is a live conversation and should feel like one. It is a map: a clear, shared reference that keeps the group aligned, the conversation on track and the space protected for genuine dialogue.

Work together to create a RoS for the debate(s), using the template below.

Opening Remarks (5 minutes)

The opening sets the emotional and intellectual tone. It should include a warm welcome, goals and agreements, and guest introductions that are brief, humanizing and relevant.

Framing Questions (5 minutes)

These questions open the conversation and should be broad enough to invite multiple perspectives, but specific enough to keep dialogue focused. Write two or three and decide in advance which one to lead with.

Conversation Body (30 minutes)

This is the heart of the debate. Prepare 4–6 questions ordered from broader to more specific. Remember to leave room for follow-up questions or silence.

Closing Question (15 minutes)

This question should invite participants to step back and reflect. Example questions: *What are you leaving with that you didn't arrive with? What question is still alive for you?*

Closing Remarks (5 minutes)

These remarks should close the circle with intention. Thank participants for showing up honestly. Name something specific that happened and where the conversation converged and diverged.

Pro tips

- The RoS serves the conversation, not the other way around.
- Build in time before the event for technical checks (if needed).
- Times above are approximate. If possible, allow 90 minutes for the debate.
- Prepare for silences. A pause is not a problem to be fixed.

ACT

Activity Two : Hold the debate (2 hours)

It is now time to enter the Majlis and debate. The role of the educator, is to step back and allow the debate to unfold while being mindful of participant needs. Participants now fully own the dialogue, their learning and their challenges. Be present and watchful, interjecting only when asked or when you observe clear need.

Step 1: Set up the space

Create space for the group (or small groups) to sit comfortably in a circle, all on the same level, and be able to see and hear each other. If there are multiple debate groups, ensure that each group has their own space.

Echoing the six-point welcome from the Prepare stage, convene and welcome the whole group, acknowledge the hard work that has led to this culminating event, and share your beliefs about their ability to have an enriching experience. Ask if there are any questions about the process, and let everyone know you are available for support.

Step 2: Begin the debate(s)

Send groups to their space or spaces to debate. We have an expression at Doha Debates: *Trust the process*. Participants are learning a new way of debating, but you have prepared them well.

Step 3: Debrief the experience

Once the debate is over, bring everyone back together. Thank the facilitator(s) for guiding the debate, and thank guests for engaging with each other. Tell them you are curious to hear about their experience, and that they are welcome to share, though it is not mandatory.

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Pro Tips

- If you are concerned about timing, arrange for a visible countdown clock or signs indicating remaining minutes.
- If conducting the program online with multiple debate groups, arrange one breakout room per group, named after the facilitator.
- Whether online or in-person, be sure to have a messaging system in place should anyone need your support.

ACT

Encourage reflection and open sharing by asking the following questions:

- *Did anyone learn anything new during your debate?*
- *Were you able to apply any new skills?*
- *How would you summarize the experience?*
- *Can you imagine applying this style of public discourse in other areas of your life?*

NOTE: Participants may be tired, thoughtful, or "all talked out." Do your best to gauge their energy and adjust your expectations of the debrief accordingly.

Step 4: End with gratitude

Begin by expressing your own gratitude for each participant, and invite others to add any appreciations that come to mind. While this should never be a forced discussion, it is important to create space for these expressions.

Activity Three: Return to KWL (15 minutes)

The KWL chart from the Prepare section can be a simple yet powerful tool for reflection and self-assessment.

Step 1: Review and add to the KWL chart

As a whole group, review the questions from the W column (wonder). As participants respond, add answers to the L column (learned).

Review the K column (know). Ask participants to identify and correct any misconceptions or assumptions that they included in this column. Add corrections to the L column.

Step 2: Reflect on the process

Ask participants what new questions have arisen as they've explored this complex issue. Give them the following prompt: *I used to think ... but now I know ... and I still wonder about ...*. Participants can respond to this prompt in writing or share aloud with peers (in pairs or small groups).



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