Students are used to reading stories that contain multiple perspectives and can usually figure out the viewpoints of different characters based on what they say, do, or think.

In nonfiction texts, writers explicitly state different viewpoints. While this may seem easier, many students struggle with some of the words and phrases used when discussing multiple perspectives. Some examples are highlighted for you here.

In room 207, Mr. Smith is teaching his students about the civil rights movement. He asks the students questions such as, “Who were the Freedom Riders?” or “What year was the Montgomery bus boycott?” or “Where did the 1963 Children’s Crusade occur?” It is easy for students to find the answers in their textbooks or on the internet. Mr. Smith tells the students whether they are right or wrong. On Friday, they will have a quiz about these facts.

In room 209, Ms. Miles is also teaching about the civil rights movement. She asks her students, “Which people or events during the civil rights movement had the greatest impact?” The students have a debate. Some think that organized boycotts such as the Montgomery bus boycott had the most impact because they led to the end of segregation on buses and in certain stores. Others think that large protests such as the March on Washington were more powerful because they brought national awareness to issues of inequality and injustice. Others believe that organized boycotts such as the Montgomery bus boycott had the most impact because they led to the end of segregation on buses and in certain stores. Others think that large protests such as the March on Washington were more powerful because they brought national awareness to issues of inequality and injustice. Others believe that large protests such as the March on Washington were more powerful because they brought national awareness to issues of inequality and injustice. Others believe that large protests such as the March on Washington were more powerful because they brought national awareness to issues of inequality and injustice.

In a classroom debate, students hear their classmates’ perspectives and opinions. Students justify their perspectives with evidence from texts and from their own experiences. People have unique perspectives defined by their knowledge, experiences, and values. Even teachers and textbook authors have their own perspectives.

Some people believe that debates show students why the facts they learn in school are important. Debate can help students understand the complexity of many important issues. Sometimes, hearing from classmates who disagree with them helps students learn about their own biases and understand a problem in a new way. Supporters of debate may point out that students can now use the internet to quickly look up historical facts. They may believe that memorizing dates and names is less important for students than understanding how to think critically. We live in a democracy, where everyone needs to know how to form and justify opinions in order to work together to make decisions.

Other people do not believe school is a place for debate. They believe that students in school should focus on learning and memorizing facts from their textbooks and teachers. That way, some argue, all students will learn the same things, and they will all be able to do well on tests. Opponents of debate in school point out that students learn different things from a debate because there are no right answers. This makes it hard for teachers to give a test to find out what students have learned. Debates also take a lot of time. Teachers who have debates may not be able to cover as many of the topics and facts in the textbook. Some people also worry that debates will get too heated, so they do not think it is safe for children to debate in school.

There is controversy over what strategy best prepares students for college, careers, and success in life. What do you think? Should students focus on facts in school? Or should debates be an important part of their education?