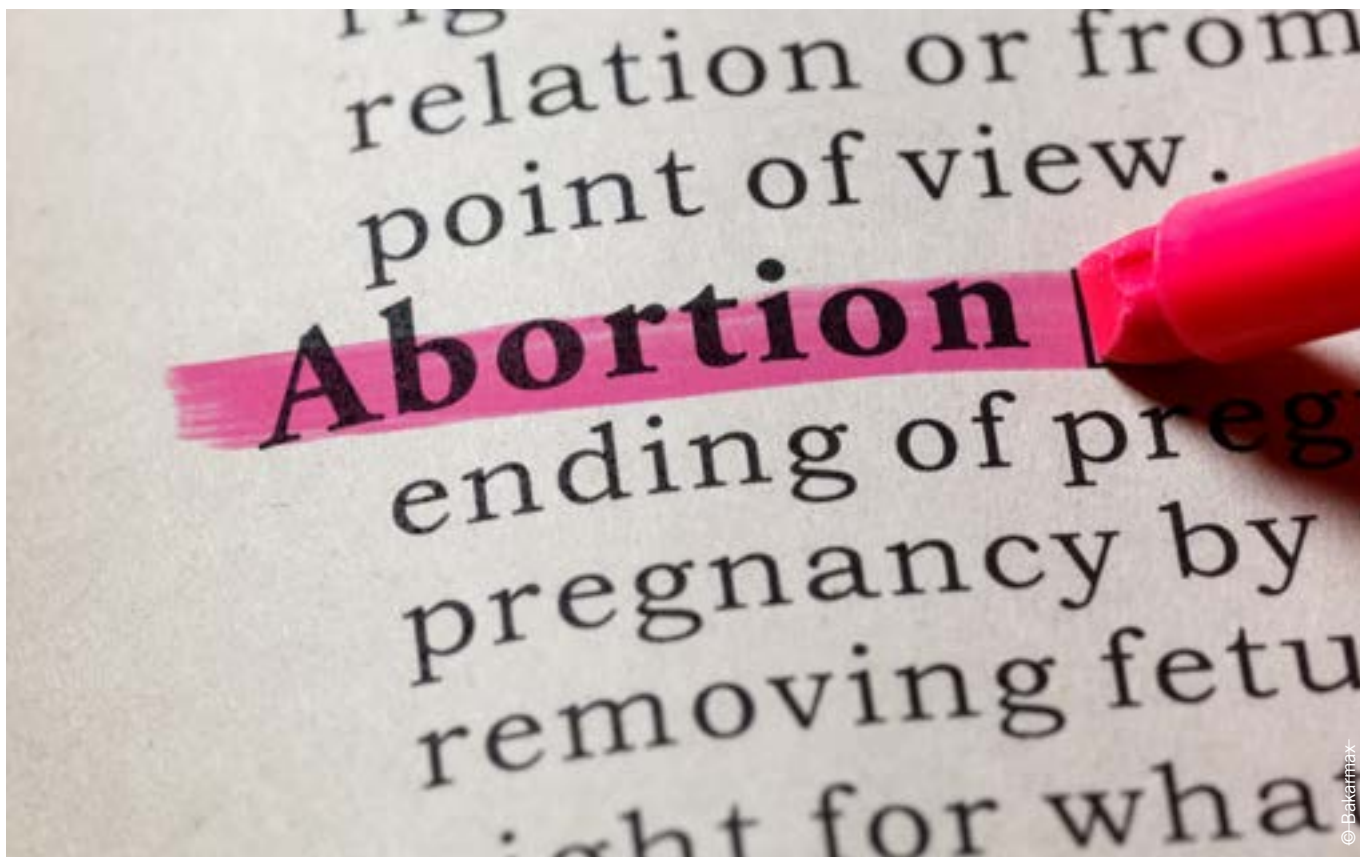


# ABORTION AND HUMAN RIGHTS AGE 14-16

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In this session, students will explore abortion as a human rights issue. The session looks at law and policy in different countries and particularly the impact it has on girls, women and people who can become pregnant. Students also spend time building a deeper understanding of how abortion impacts human rights through a group dialogue activity.

This is part of our set of Women's Rights and Gender Equality resource materials.

## Aims

- To gain an understanding of the abortion laws across the UK
- To consider the implications of abortion laws on human rights
- To explore personal views about abortion rights for women, girls and people who can get pregnant

## You will need

**Handouts:** Universal Declaration of Human Rights  
Country case studies  
Rights respecting discussion sheet

## GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

### **Sensitive content warning**

This lesson deals with abortion. This may be triggering for some students and may lead to disclosures. Please be aware of the content, and in case of any concerns liaise with the school safeguarding or pastoral team. It is important that students are clear that this is a safe space to discuss issues, but opinions must be presented in a sensible and respectful manner, and everyone must be listened to. Respond to student reactions, questions, beliefs and work in a rights respecting way that supports self-expression and debate.

### **Balancing rights**

Abortion is relevant to people of all genders and this resource is concerned with the rights of those who are or can become pregnant. It is important to understand that the criminalisation and restriction of safe abortions is also connected to the violation of girls and women's rights regardless of whether they can become pregnant.

All of the students in your class have the right to express themselves and feel listened to under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights also says they have the right to freedom of thought and belief, and to change their mind. These rights need to be balanced against the rights of students and staff to be free from discrimination and to be treated with respect.

Discussing the balancing of rights is a great place to start when developing ground rules with students. Involve your class in determining how they will uphold their own and each other's rights.

### **Amnesty International's policy on abortion**

Amnesty International recognises the right of every girl, woman or person who can become pregnant to abortion, provided in a manner that respects their rights, autonomy, dignity and needs in the context of their lived experiences, circumstances, aspirations and views.

We also recognise that while the majority of personal experiences with abortion relate to cisgender women and girls (that is, women and girls whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with the sex they are assigned at birth), intersex people, transgender men and boys, and people with other gender identities may have the reproductive capacity to become pregnant and may need and have abortions.

Instead of viewing abortion simply as a health issue, or one that only affects certain people, we recognise that access to safe abortion is essential to realise the full range of human rights.

We call for full decriminalisation of abortion and universal access to abortion services, post-abortion care and health and abortion information and education, free of force, coercion, violence and discrimination.

While we acknowledge there are a range of personal beliefs around abortion, our policy aligns with international human rights law and standards, which affirm that human rights protections start at birth.

- Read more: [amnesty.org/en/documents/poi30/2846/2020/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/poi30/2846/2020/en/)

## INTRODUCTION 10 minutes

### Defining abortion

Open the discussion by asking if students can define abortion. Allow for a few responses – they can be written on sticky notes if that is more comfortable for the class.

Read out the following definition: an abortion is the induced termination of pregnancy through medical (using abortion medication) or surgical methods.

Explain that worldwide, an estimated one in four pregnancies end in an abortion every year. That's a quarter of all pregnancies.

970 million women live in countries that broadly allow abortion.

The UK is one of them and in 2021 there were 214, 869 abortions for women resident in England and Wales. (source: [gov.uk/government/statistics/abortion-statistics-for-england-and-wales-2021](https://gov.uk/government/statistics/abortion-statistics-for-england-and-wales-2021))

Does that surprise them? Why?

Although it is so common, access to abortion is often discussed globally, surrounded by many legal, religious and ethical debates. The next activity will focus on exploring abortion in the UK.

## TASK 1 10 minutes

### Private personal reflection

Ask students to spend five minutes noting down their own opinions and beliefs about abortion in preparation for the dialogue activity later in the lesson. They can write about:

- What they think about abortion and why.
- Why they think abortion is a human rights issue.
- Any particular beliefs or ideas about abortion and where they think these came from.

If students are struggling with an open written task, invite them to write down any questions that they have about abortion if they would like to. Remind students that they are free to have their own opinions or no opinion about abortion and that their views may change throughout their lives.

After the activity, ask students:

- How easy did you find writing about abortion? Why?
- Do you have an opinion already? Why? Do you think it is fixed?
- Or do you have mixed feelings? Why?

Remind students that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, belief and religion and to freedom from discrimination. Duty bearers – including the government and schools – are responsible for upholding these rights, and our rights to safety, healthcare, and a good life.

## TASK 2 20 minutes

### Human rights and country case studies

The class will now look at abortion as a human rights issue. Hand out the Universal Declaration of Human Rights sheet (one per student).

Explain this is the first international agreement on human rights which governments across the world signed up to in order to protect the rights and freedoms that belong to all of us which forms the basis for much of international human rights law.

Ask students, in pairs, to highlight articles that are relevant to or support a woman's right to the highest attainable standard of health, including abortion. Talk through the list they identified.



**Watch this**

Show the video **Abortion is decriminalised in Northern Ireland** (2:49 mins).

After watching, ask for responses on why they think abortion is a health issue and how it links to human rights. Students can use their Universal Declaration of Human Rights sheet to identify specific ways that abortion links to human rights.

**Discussion points**

- Did anything surprise them? Why, or why not?
- What human rights did they see impacted by the situation in Northern Ireland?
- Do they have any further questions?

Now divide the class into groups and assign them one of the three country case study sheets provided.

Explain that research is an important skill for upholding human rights. Fact-finding and documenting what is happening in the world allows human rights defenders to show how human rights law is not being upheld, and how some laws contravene human rights.

Ask each group to read their case study and use their Universal Declaration of Human Rights to work out which articles or human rights are being restricted, removed or supported in this case. Remind them that they are aiming to be objective and impartial, whatever their own beliefs.

**Other discussion/research questions**

- How has the law changed?
- How has this change impacted human rights and why?
- Are abortion rights only related to the right to health – or does abortion affect the full range of human rights? If so, which human rights?

Next, ask them to present a summary of their discussion to their group, sharing notes and ideas.

Take a selection of feedback and discuss each country with the whole class. What

differences/similarities are there? Does anything surprise them? How easy or hard was it to present facts impartially?

**Teacher note: Relevant articles to examine**

You can explain that most human rights treaties and conventions do not refer directly to abortion; however, a number of human rights are directly relevant to it. For example:

**In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

Right to equality and non-discrimination (Article 1 and 2)

Right to life (Article 3)

Right to be free from torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (Article 5)

Right to privacy and family life (Article 12)

Right to information (Article 19)

Right to the highest attainable standard of health (Article 25)

You can also look at the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** in the same way.

**TASK 3 A full lesson if necessary**

**DIALOGUE: Is abortion a human rights issue?**

Tell the class they are now going to examine this issue from different perspectives through dialogue.

Explain that this type of activity is a way of sharing and exploring a range of different opinions and perspectives equally. It is a reciprocal process, allowing everyone a chance to have their say, with a focus on learning from one another.

Emphasise the importance of respecting each others' rights in discussion. Hand out or share the Rights respecting discussion sheet which includes sentence starters and listening prompts to help the class frame ways to take part.

Divide the class into groups of four and ask them to split into pairs. Each pair has five minutes to write down a number of different responses or views to the statement 'Is abortion a human rights issue?' For instance, whose human rights are affected by abortion, and which rights?

Each pair (assign a speaker or take turns) will have two minutes to share these views with the other pair in their group.

At this point, remind the class this is a sharing activity and not a debate, therefore it does not aim to prove one specific viewpoint.

While listening, each pair can note down important points and use the listening prompts provided to focus their reflection on specific points made. They can share thoughts on the viewpoints they've heard using the rights respecting prompts to support their feedback.

At the end of this dialogue activity, ask each group to reflect upon their discussion and write down the most important things they have learned. You could also take one idea to explore as a class and give the students five minutes to discuss their own views on whether abortion is a human rights issue and why.

### **FINALLY...**

Ask each group to feed back to the class. What did they learn from this activity? Has it changed their perception? Which viewpoints did they find the most and least convincing? What is the overall class consensus on this issue?

### **EXTENSION**

- Look at other views and laws on abortion around the world, and people trying to change this. For help, see **the World Abortion Laws map by the Centre for Reproductive rights**
- Do they want to live in a world where people are free to make their own decisions concerning their health and body or a world in which half the population is able to do this, and the states controls the bodies of the other half? Why?

# UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

## Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

## Article 2

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

## Article 3

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

## Article 4

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

## Article 5

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

## Article 6

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

## Article 7

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

## Article 8

Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

## Article 9

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

## Article 10

Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

## Article 11

1. Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.
2. No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.



**Article 12**

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

**Article 13**

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State.
2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

**Article 14**

1. Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
2. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

**Article 15**

1. Everyone has the right to a nationality.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

**Article 16**

1. Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.
2. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
3. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

**Article 17**

1. Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

**Article 18**

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

**Article 19**

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

**Article 20**

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
2. No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

**Article 21**

1. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
2. Everyone has the right to equal access to public service in his country.



3. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

**Article 22**

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realisation, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organisation and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

**Article 23**

1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
4. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

**Article 24**

Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

**Article 25**

1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
2. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

**Article 26**

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

**Article 27**

1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

**Article 28**

Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realised.

**Article 29**

1. Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.
2. In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.
3. These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

**Article 30**

Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

- More information  
<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/universal-declaration-human-rights-UDHR>

## COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

### Northern Ireland



Delivering a petition to the Westminster government, February 2019 © Adam Friedman/Al

In October 2019, abortion was decriminalised and became lawful in virtually all circumstances in Northern Ireland.

A new framework for abortion services came into effect on 31 March 2020 which allows abortion on request until the 12th week of pregnancy; abortion until the 24th week if the continuation of the pregnancy would involve a risk to the pregnant person's physical or mental health greater than that of termination; abortion with no upper gestational limit if there is a risk of death or grave permanent injury to the pregnant person; and abortion with no upper gestational limit in cases of severe or fatal foetal impairment.

Until then, in the vast majority of circumstances, it was a criminal offence in Northern Ireland to have or perform an abortion.

The 1967 Abortion Act partially legalised abortion in England, Scotland, and Wales up to 24 weeks in some circumstances, but this was not extended to Northern Ireland. So, for decades, abortions in Northern Ireland were allowed only if a woman's life was at risk, or there was a risk of permanent and serious damage to her mental or physical health. It meant that in many cases, women were forced to travel to England for an abortion.

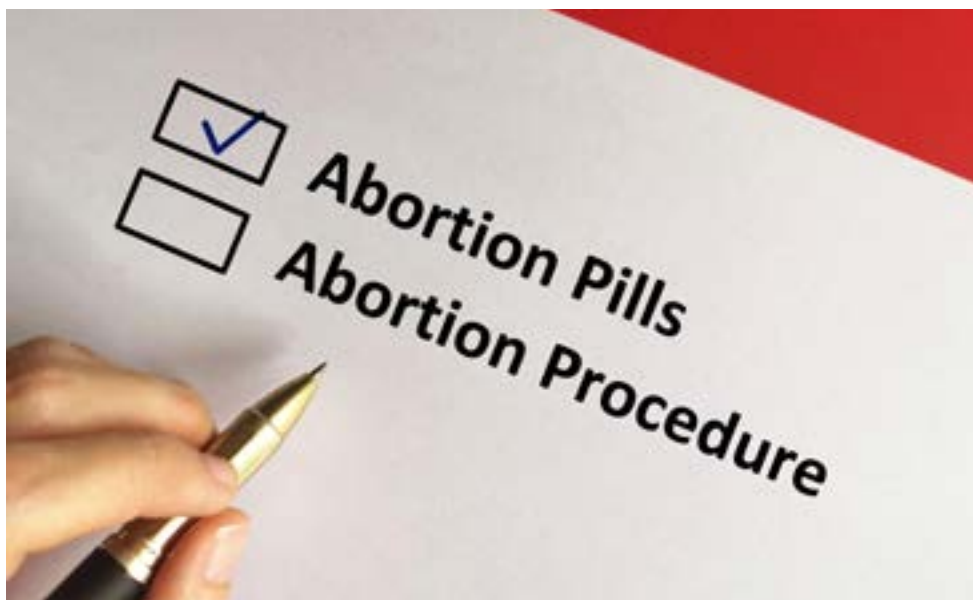
Northern Ireland's abortion law was changed after years of work by activists, who campaigned, lobbied politicians, and challenged the abortion ban in the courts.

Despite this legislation, the problem of access to abortion services remains as the region's executive at Stormont has so far failed to ensure services have the human and financial resources needed to run, and the services that are in place remain in a fragile state.

But the UK government announced in mid-October 2022 it will commission abortion services, a late but important step towards ending the denial of abortion healthcare.

## COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

### England, Wales and Scotland



In 1967 the Abortion Act partially legalised abortion in England, Wales and Scotland with the following conditions:

- The pregnancy has not exceeded 24 weeks
- The abortion is authorised by two doctors due to one (or more) of the following reasons:
  - 1) That continuing it carries a risk of injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman or any existing children
  - 2) That continuing the pregnancy involves a risk to the life of the pregnant woman
  - 3) That there is a high risk that if the child were born it would suffer from severe disabilities
- It is performed by a registered doctor.

Outside of these situations, abortion remains a crime rather than being treated in law as any other healthcare service. This means women, girls, and people who can become pregnant do not have access to an abortion in all circumstances. This has led to some women being prosecuted in England for abortion-related offences, including obtaining pills online to induce an abortion.

There has been one new development. Temporary measures were introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic allowing access to medication for early medical abortion via a phone or video consultation, and for the abortion pills to be taken at home within the first nine weeks and six days of pregnancy. This legislation was then made permanent in England and Wales.

The Abortion Act was amended from 30 August 2022 to reflect this change. This will help many people, particularly those who find it difficult to attend a clinic because of caring responsibilities or those are on low incomes or in situations of coercive control who are not otherwise able to access this healthcare.

## COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

### Argentina



In December 2020, abortion was legalised in Argentina in the first 14 weeks of pregnancy. The abortion law was liberalised after the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy Bill (Argentina) was passed by the National Congress.

Until then, access to abortion was permitted only in cases of rape or when the mother's health was at risk. However, in practice many pregnant women were denied the procedure, and were forced to seek alternatives, often unsafe ones.

The Catholic Church, highly influential in Latin America, had opposed the move to legalise abortion, calling on senators to reject the bill supported by President Alberto Fernandez.

Many credited this overhaul of restrictive abortion laws to pro-choice activists. Hundreds of thousands of women and girls from different movements and organisations came together to support what was known as the National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion which started in 2005.

This movement became known as the 'green wave' because of the green scarves and clothing that its members chose to wear. Their rallies put pressure on the government to change the law.

## RIGHTS RESPECTING DISCUSSION

### Sentence starters

Thank you for sharing your argument. Another point of view is...

I agree with your point because... I disagree with your point because...

I can see what you are saying. Have you thought about...

Are you saying that... A further way to look at this may be...

I am not convinced of that viewpoint. From another perspective it can be argued...

What beliefs do you think underlie this argument?

A strength of your argument is...

A weakness of this argument is...

That may not work as an argument because...

### Listening prompts

What was the most important idea mentioned in the discussion?

Who built on what someone else said?

Can you think of any reasons to agree or disagree with what was said? How did the pair move the dialogue on?

How did the dialogue change my own thinking?

How did X person respond to what was said by their partner?