

ACADEMIC BRACKETS

Because of this close-analysis, a bracketed tournament lends itself to debates and discussions in the classroom, especially when students must learn about many options.

Applications

Let's take a common elementary school subject: learning the fifty US states. Typically, each student chooses one state and writes a report. However, there's really only one state everyone wants, plus a handful of "cool" states like Hawaii and Alaska, and then everything else.

Learning the US Presidents takes a similar turn. Everyone wants Lincoln or Washington.

What if we did a bracketed tournament to determine the "best." This demands higher levels of thinking, uses multiple perspectives, and requires developing criteria to make judgements.

A New Way Of Thinking

Students no longer see Washington, Lincoln, and then a bunch of other guys. Each week, they will have to consider a single matchup, like:

- Jackson vs H.W. Bush
- Garfield vs Tyler
- Clinton vs Polk

States aren't just a big list. Instead we have a weekly debate over:

- Wyoming vs Nebraska
- New Jersey vs North Carolina
- Michigan vs Ohio

The Plan

Let's look at this as a weekly exercise:

- Monday and Tuesday: teach the necessary facts about each option.
- Thursday: students turn in a paragraph explaining and backing up their opinion. Then, you can give students time to discuss, debate, and persuade.
- Friday: the class votes to determine who moves on in the tournament.

As students make their decisions, you'll want to demand some evidence of their thinking. Help them form thoughtful opinions by developing criteria. I [wrote about this process here](#).

The first round will take the longest, since you're introducing all of the options. After that, the match-ups will feature repeat contenders and will move faster.

Tournament Details

You don't need to know the nitty gritty of setting up the brackets, since there are [many online generators](#), but students should be familiar with two concepts: seeding and byes.

Seeding

In tournaments, the best teams shouldn't play each other right away. For example, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln should meet in the finals, not round one. Instead, Washington would start against a low ranked president, like Van Buren. This process is called "seeding." And if Van Buren were to beat Washington, we'd call it an "upset."

If seeding is too difficult or time-consuming, just randomly select the match-ups.

Byes

A tournament works best when the number of options are a power of two (8,16,32,64). But, with 50 states and 44 presidents, this won't work out perfectly.

Not a problem. The highest seeded teams get to skip the first round. We call these skipped games "[byes](#)."

If you're not seeding, then random teams will get byes. And again, byes are calculated by the bracket generator for you.

Samples

I used this [ranking of the Presidents](#) to seed a [presidential tournament](#). As you can see, Lincoln, Kennedy, and FDR all have byes in the first round since they are highly ranked presidents.

Here's a [randomly seeded US States tournament](#).

You might run a tournament for the [first 16 elements of the periodic table](#) or the [rare earth elements](#).

Characters from stories, explorers, or Native American tribes would all make for interesting, curriculum-based tournaments. I'm sure you'll have even better ways to apply the brackets to your class. Let me know at ian@byrdseed.com!