

# Whataboutism ?

🔦 B2 Level

🔦 Duration: 1 hour

🔦 Group lesson

## 1

### Warm-up

**Exercise 1: Look at these short dialogues. All of them have something in common. What is it?**

🔦 **Tip:** if the students find it hard to answer the question, you can steer them in the right direction by giving hints, e.g. "which strategy do you think the second speaker is using?"

\*two people at a charity foundation

**Liz:** Showing sympathy for the earthquake victims is natural and important.

**Bobby:** But why are you only focusing on one group when there are so many others who need just as much attention?

\*a son and a father talking

**Son:** What's this about my grades? Is that why you dragged me all the way to The Globe pub in London?

**Father:** Yes, Gerald. Your grades do not reflect your intelligence and potential. I'm worried about how you're doing at university.

**Son:** It's fine, Dad. Don't sweat it - what about you? You never even went to university!

\*a hockey coach talking to his team

**Coach:** The offensive play wasn't the problem, it was the defence that couldn't shut down the goal.

**Player:** Come on, what about the goalie? He let in some easy shots! Isn't the goaltender there to make up for any mistakes anyone else might make?

\*an analyst asks a CEO about a firm's excessively high debt levels

**Seth:** Why is this firm taking on so much debt?

**Jacobson:** Look at our competitor; their debt is double ours!

**Seth:** That doesn't make any sense. Our company has been steadily increasing its debt while theirs has remained stable.

**Jacobson:** Yes, but they have proportionately higher debt loads than us.

**Exercise 2: Read about the purpose of Whataboutism. Match each statement with a dialogue from Exercise 1.**

1. Whataboutism can be used to deflect criticism.
2. Whataboutism has recently become more widely employed in public discourse to evoke public guilt.
3. Whataboutism attempts to minimize or completely disregard one's own misdeeds.
4. Whataboutism is used as a distraction technique in order to shift the focus away from actual issues.

**2****Pre-listening****Exercise 3: Match the words with their definitions.**

- |                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1. repeatedly                       | a. Criticized strongly and publicly.   |
| 2. doesn't have anything to do with | b. To turn away from a course of action or an opinion.   |
| 3. substantial answer               | c. To answer in a way that avoids the question.  |
| 4. denounced                        | d. A strong and clear answer, usually based on facts.  |
| 5. steer away from                  | e. Opposing an idea or argument with another one.  |
| 6. demagogues                       | f. Has no connection with the subject being discussed.   |
| 7. to deflect questions             | g. People who try to get support by making false statements and promises.  |
| 8. rhetorical                       | h. More than once.   |
| 9. countered with                   | i. Using or concerned with language that is elaborate and impressive in order to have an effect on the listener or reader. |
| 10. sound arguments                 | j. A set of statements or ideas that is intended to explain something.   |
| 11. the topic at hand               | k. The subject that is being discussed or considered.  |

**3****Listening****Exercise 4: Watch the video and answer the questions.**

1. What is the origin of the term 'Whataboutism'?
2. How does Whataboutism typically take form in debates and arguments?
3. What is the purpose of Whataboutism?
4. In what ways is Whataboutism seen in political discourse?
5. What is an example of How Donald Trump has used Whataboutism?
6. What does the use of Whataboutism suggest about the user's argument?
7. What makes Whataboutism an ineffective tactic in debates?



**Exercise 5. Read the script and fill in the gaps with the words and phrases from Exercise 3. Watch the video and check your answers.**

Whataboutism? Ever heard about it? Well, for starters, it's a made-up word, composed of the terms “what” and “about”. It's a \_\_\_\_\_(1) tool, often seen in debates and arguments, when a critical point or question is being \_\_\_\_\_(2) another question that \_\_\_\_\_(3) the topic \_\_\_\_\_(4). If candidate A, for example, says, “we should use less plastic to protect the environment”, and candidate B responds that there are problems that are far more important, such as the famine in South Sudan, then that's Whataboutism.

The purpose of Whataboutism generally isn't to contribute to a topic in a constructive way. The goal instead is to try and \_\_\_\_\_(5) difficult topics and to \_\_\_\_\_(6) without giving a \_\_\_\_\_(7). Whataboutism got its name in Ireland where in 1974, in a letter to the Irish Times, a reader spoke about whatabouts for the first time.

Whataboutism is especially popular in political propaganda. For example, when the United States \_\_\_\_\_(8) the Soviet Union's prison camps during the Cold War, they \_\_\_\_\_(9), “and you lynch black people”. The tactic is also often used by \_\_\_\_\_(10), such as Donald Trump. As president, he \_\_\_\_\_(11) responded to critical questions by pointing at Hillary Clinton's email scandal.

Whataboutism is widespread not only in politics but in our daily life and on social media too. If Ann, for example, complains about the gender pay gap and Kevin responds that women in Saudi Arabia aren't even allowed to drive then that's fundamentally the same tactic.

In the end, people using Whataboutisms all but directly admit that they don't have any logically \_\_\_\_\_(12) themselves, and that they are unable to argue in a constructive, goal-oriented way.

**4****Speaking****Exercise 6: Discuss the questions with your group.**

1. Can you remember a time when you used Whataboutisms? Was it an effective way to debate or discuss the issue?
2. How can we recognize when someone is using Whataboutism?
3. What strategies can be used to counter Whataboutism?

**Exercise 7: Look back at the dialogues from Exercise 1. Work in pairs and create new dialogues with constructive arguments. Use the dialogue below as an example.**

**Coach:** The offensive play wasn't the problem, it was the defence that couldn't shut down the goal.

**Player:** Come on, what about the goalie? He let in some easy shots!

**Team captain:** I don't think blaming just the goalie is fair either. Everyone needs to bring their best if we want to win this game. Every single member of a team should take responsibility for each other and not just point fingers at one another when things go wrong.

**Player:** Okay, then why isn't everyone playing to the same level? That's the real issue here.

**Team captain:** Everybody has off nights, that's part of sports. You can't expect the players to be able to outperform themselves every time. If we had all been more organized during practice, maybe the outcome would have been different.



## Correct answers

### Exercise 2: Read about the purpose of Whataboutism. Match each statement with a dialogue from Exercise 1.

1. A hockey coach talking to his team
2. Two people at a charity foundation
3. A son and a father talking
4. An analyst asks a CEO about a firm's excessively high debt levels

### Exercise 3: Match the words with their definitions.

- |      |      |      |       |
|------|------|------|-------|
| 1. h | 4. a | 7. c | 10. j |
| 2. f | 5. b | 8. i | 11. k |
| 3. d | 6. g | 9. e |       |

### Exercise 4: Watch the video and answer the questions.

1. The term 'Whataboutism' is a made-up word composed of the terms "what" and "about".
2. It is a rhetorical tool where a critical point or question is countered with another question that does not have anything to do with the original topic.
3. Generally the purpose of Whataboutism is not to contribute to a topic in a constructive way, but rather to try and steer away from difficult topics and to deflect questions without giving a substantial answer.
4. Whataboutism is especially popular in political propaganda and is often used to deflect criticism or discredit the opposition.
5. To deflect criticism regarding his administration, Donald Trump has repeatedly responded to critical questions by pointing out Hillary Clinton's email scandal.
6. The use of Whataboutism suggests that the user does not have any logically sound arguments themselves and is unable to argue in a constructive, goal-oriented way.
7. Whataboutism is an ineffective tactic in debates because it does not address the difficult topics, it does not contribute to the conversation in a constructive way and it can discredit the user as appearing to be unable to provide logical arguments.

### Exercise 5. Read the script and fill in the gaps with the words and phrases from Exercise 3. Watch the video and check your answers.

- |                                     |                       |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. rhetorical                       | 7. substantial answer |
| 2. countered with                   | 8. denounced          |
| 3. doesn't have anything to do with | 9. countered with     |
| 4. at hand                          | 10. demagogues        |
| 5. steer away from                  | 11. repeatedly        |
| 6. deflect questions                | 12. sound arguments   |