The Great Debaters Viewing Guide: Day 1

Inspired by a true story, The Great Debaters takes us into the Jim Crow South of the mid 1930s—a time when blacks endured the daily humiliation of discrimination, and racial violence always simmered just beneath the surface. The film tells the story of the debate team at Wiley College, a small Black college in Marshall Texas. Denzel Washington plays the part of the brilliant but unpredictable English professor and debate team coach, Melvin B. Tolson. Professor Tolson teaches his students the power of reason and words and creates a powerful debate team, able to go head to head and mind to mind, against any team in the country. At the height of an incredible run in 1936, the team even travels to face off the Harvard debate team in Boston. (The historic debate was actually against the reigning champions, the University of Southern California debate team.)

Tolson inspires his small, underdog team to believe in themselves, their cause and the power of their words to persuade people and bring about social change.

1. The film cuts between a party, a young woman riding a bus, and a man addressing a group at Wiley College. What does this man say is the most important job in America? ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

2. a) How does the fight begin at the party? __________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

   b) How does it end? ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

3. When and where does this film take place? ______________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

4. What word does Professor Tolson write on the board? _____________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

Melvin B. Tolson, second from left, with the 1930 debate team at Wiley College in Marshall, Tex.
5. What does it mean to be “born without record”? ________________________________

6. Professor Tolson says, “Debate is blood sport. It’s combat. Your weapons are ____________.”

7. Describe what students have to do in the “hot spot”. ________________________________

8. Why does Henry compliment Samantha? ____________________________________________

9. James Farmer Jr. repeats his father’s motto, “We do what we have to do, so that we can do what we ____________ to do.”

10. James Farmer Sr. hits a white man’s pig. What does he have to do to avoid trouble? ____________________________________________________________

11. Who was Willie Lynch and what word comes from his name? ________________________

12. Professor Tolson says, “I and every other professor on this campus are here to help you find, take back, and keep your righteous __________________.”

13. What does James fantasize about at the dance? ______________________________________

14. Where does James find Mr. Tolson when he follows him? ____________________________

15. What does James promise Professor Tolson? ________________________________________
Exit Ticket—Day 1

*The Great Debaters: Film Reflection*

**Directions:** answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. Professor Tolson pointed out to his students that many black people during this time were born without birth certificates. What do you think it would be like if you were “born without record?” How might you feel? _____________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________

2. Farmer also says, “We do what we have to do, so that we can do what we want to do.” What do you think that means? What things did the debate team “have to do”? ________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________
3. Describe Professor Tolson's teaching style. Would you like to have him as your teacher? Why or why not?
The Great Debaters Viewing Guide: Day 2

1. What time does James Jr. come home from the dance? ___________________________

2. James Jr. refuses to apologize to his father. He asks, “Why should I apologize? Like he apologized to that pig farmer?” How does his father react? _______________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________________

3. The sheriff questions two men. He says white men are coming from the north and stirring up trouble by trying to make a sharecroppers’ _________________.

4. One week before their first debate, Mr. Tolson tells the team that they will be doing the research and he will be ___________________________________________________________________________________________________.

5. What unexpected thing does Henry do during the debate? __________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

6. How does the sheriff find out who is organizing the sharecropper meetings? ______
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

7. The Wiley College debate team learns about their first debate against a white college, Oklahoma City University. Where will the debate take place? ____________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

8. a) Why is Hamilton afraid? _________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

b) What does he do when Mr. Tolson refuses to explain his political beliefs? ________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
9. What argument does the Wiley team present at the Oklahoma City University debate?
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

10. James Farmer Sr. talks to Mr. Tolson about his “extracurricular activities.” What is his main concern? __________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

11. What does James Jr. see from the doorway of the lake cabin? __________________________________________

12. James Farmer Sr. quotes St. Augustine saying, “An unjust law ________________________________________.”

13. How does he convince the sheriff to let Mr. Tolson go? _____________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

14. What danger does the debate team encounter on their way to the Howard debate?
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

15. What does Henry do after they escape? __________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________

16. Why does Henry tell James, “You can’t talk like that! Not you.” What do you think he means?
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____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
Exit Ticket—Day 2

*The Great Debaters: Film Reflection*

**Directions:** answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. Hamilton Burgess left the debate team because he did not agree with the work Professor Tolson was doing with the unions. How did his decision affect the team? What would you have done in his position? __________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

2. When Henry became involved with Samantha, James became very upset. How did that affect their relationship and their teamwork? What advice would you give them? __________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
3. Samantha Booke was one of the few black women to attend college during this time period. What challenges do you think she faced?
The Great Debaters Viewing Guide: Day 3

In order to understand the Wiley team’s debate in today’s portion of the movie, we must learn a little bit about civil disobedience.

Civil disobedience is a __________ used by many famous leaders in history, such as Dr. Martin Luther King and _________________.

It is the refusal to __________________________ or follow a policy believed to be _________________. People who practice civil disobedience base their actions on ________________ right and usually employ the ________________________________ technique of passive resistance in order to bring wider attention to the injustice. Risking __________________, such as violent retaliation or imprisonment, they attempt to bring about ________________ in the law. In the modern era, civil disobedience has been used in such events as street demonstrations, ________________________________, the occupying of buildings, strikes, and other forms of economic resistance.

1. How does James get his chance to debate against the Howard team? __________________________

   ________________________________________________________________

2. How do you think James feels after the debate? ______________________________

   ________________________________________________________________

3. What does James do when he gets home? ______________________________

4. What news does Mr. Tolson receive when he gets home? ______________________________

   ________________________________________________________________

5. What important information does Mr. Tolson tell the team just before they get on the train? _______

   ________________________________________________________________

6. What does Henry say when the security guard asks if they are supposed to be in the Harvard auditorium? ______________________________

   ________________________________________________________________
7. a) What change is made 48 hours before the debate? ____________________________________________

b) Why did Harvard make this change? ______________________________________________________

8. a) What was the result of the team’s argument over how to begin the debate? ____________________

b) What is different about this time? _________________________________________________________

9. What big decision does Henry make as team captain? ______________________________________________

10. What famous person from history does James begin his argument by talking about? ____________________

11. Where is Mr. Tolson during the debate? ________________________________________________________

12. How does James respond to the Harvard debater’s story about the policeman being shot and his point that, “nothing that erodes the rule of law can be moral”? __________________________________________

13. Who wins the debate? _____________________________________________________________________
Exit Ticket—Day 3  
*The Great Debaters*: Film Reflection

**Directions**: answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. What themes or important messages can you take away from this movie? ________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

2. What did the members of the debate team have in common? What made them different? What made them come together as a team? ________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________
3. James was constantly trying to gain the approval of his father. Did he ever receive his father's approval? Have you ever worked to gain someone's approval? Was it worth the time and energy?

_______________________________________________________

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_________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

4. What scene in the movie had the greatest impact on you? Why? ______________________

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_________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
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