



## A STUDENT GUIDE TO DEBATE

### 1. Debate Structure

- 2 teams – Proposition & Opposition
- 3 speakers per team

#### 1.1 Who else is present?

- Speaker of the House – chairs the debate; technically all speeches and points of information are directed to him/her, they call each debater to the floor, etc.
- Timekeeper
- Judge(s)
- Audience Members

#### 1.2 National Times

Each speaker has 5 minutes and the reply speaker has 3 minutes. The timekeeper uses a bell to indicate the timing. The bells work in the following way:

- 1 bell after 1 min – indicates the end of the 'protected time'\*
- 1 bell after 5 mins – indicates speaker has entered protected time
- 2 bells after 6 mins – indicates that 6 mins have lapsed and the 15 sec grace period begins
- Continuously ringing of the bell – indicates that the grace period is over and the speaker is now exceeding his/her allocated time

\* Protected time is time in which the speaker is 'protected' from points of information. In other words, the members of the opposing team may not make any

points of information during protected time.

### 1.3 Roles of Each Speaker

#### *1<sup>st</sup> Proposition speaker*

- Explains what the motion really means (definition) and identifies the real issue (case line)
- Sets out what each of his/her team members will discuss
- Puts forward his/her own arguments

#### *1<sup>st</sup> Opposition speaker*

- May agree with the proposition's definition or not (i.e. definitional challenge, if required, see below)
- States out the team's case line
- Sets out what each of his/her team members will discuss
- Rebuts 1<sup>st</sup> proposition speaker's arguments
- Puts forward his/her own arguments

#### *2<sup>nd</sup> Proposition Speaker*

- Defends his/her team's definition (ONLY if it was challenged by the Opposition)
- Rebuts the arguments of the 1<sup>st</sup> Opposition Speaker
- Puts forward his/her own arguments

#### *2<sup>nd</sup> Opposition Speaker*

- Rebuts the arguments of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Proposition Speaker
- Puts forward his/her own arguments

#### *3<sup>rd</sup> Proposition Speaker*

- Rebuts all arguments presented by the Opposition team (should be systemic, dealing with each in turn, having written down and ideally numbered, all of the arguments presented)
- Should not introduce new information/arguments unless his/her 1<sup>st</sup> speaker said s/he would and even then, should only be 1 very small point, introduced early in the speech to give the Opposition team time to deal with it

#### *3<sup>rd</sup> Opposition Speaker*

- Rebuts all arguments presented by the Proposition team (should be systemic, dealing with each in turn, having written down and ideally numbered, all of the arguments presented)

- Should not introduce new information/arguments

*Reply Speakers (Opposition goes first, followed by the Proposition)*

- Restate the team's case (using case line) and set out main points which have been argued by each team member
- Explain to the judges why the other team's key issues have not been proven – demonstrating how his/her team dealt with each of their main points

#### 1.4 Key things to Remember:

- Debating involves a team – not just individuals
- Team members must be consistent, not contradicting one another
- Logical arguments are the most persuasive

## 2. Debating Skills

- 3 categories that debaters are judged on – Content, Style & Strategy
- a good debater will not be particularly weak in any of these areas; strength in one area cannot make up for a shortcoming in another

### 2.1 Content

- What is said in the debate
- Covers the arguments that are used, divorced from speaking style; as if arguments are written down rather than spoken
- Team's case line is quite important to content – should form the basis of their case
- Constructive arguments (rather than assertions) should support the case line and should in turn be supported by facts and examples
- A team's understanding of the opposing team's key points and clear rebuttal of those points is just as important as making constructive arguments

### 2.2 Style

- How compelling a debater is
- Illustrates that a debate is not just editorializing, i.e.) the most brilliant idea presented without style is not likely to persuade the judges
- Persuasion is as important as content; debate is a form of entertainment
- It is key for debaters to find their own style – one that works for them – and then to stick to, i.e.) don't try to be funny if you are not a funny person!
- Style is very subjective, but there are some general guidelines:
  - Modulate Tone (do not speak in a monotone)
  - Clear Diction so judges can understand what is being said
  - Good Pace (not too fast/slow, remember to pause/breathe)
  - Good Volume (no whispering/shouting)
  - Eye Contact (i.e. no reading)
  - Palm cards or Writing pads are fine – just don't use either as a crutch and keep them organised
  - Some hand/body movement is ok, but be clear not to distract judges from what you are saying
  - Avoid hands in pockets or pen in hand
  - No 'um-mum's
  - Be careful with emotion/humour – each can be effective when used appropriately but can backfire easily

- Politeness – no personal attacks or bad language

### 2.3 Strategy

- This is where rules of debate are adjudicated; teams are rewarded for their adherence to the rules (i.e. fairness/otherwise of a definition – see below)
- Structure is important – speeches should have a beginning, middle and an end
- Sequence of arguments should be logical and the speech should flow naturally from point to point
- Fulfilling the role assigned to a speaker by the 1<sup>st</sup> speaker is key
- Timing is important as well:
  - speaking within the allotted time limit AND
  - giving an appropriate amount of time to particular issues (i.e. most amount of time to most important issues, less time to smaller ones)
- Points of information – important to take an appropriate number during a speech (see further discussion below)

### 3. How to prepare a debate

#### 3.1 You are given a motion – now what?

- Read it careful and decide what the motion is really about before diving into research
- Once it is clear what the heart of the motion is, then research can be divided into key areas to be covered within the arguments

#### 3.2 Definition

- Each team should prepare a definition; the Proposition must define the motion, but the Opposition *may* object to the definition provided
- Opposition team should write down all aspects of the definition when the 1<sup>st</sup> Government speaker presents it (Tip – write each word to be defined vertically down the side of your paper/card in advance and then just fill in the definitions as given)
- Opposition team have 3 choices once the Proposition have defined it:
  - Accept it
  - Reject it and redefine it (either partially or entirely) OR
  - Voice objections to it, but nevertheless accept it and move on
- Caution should be used before rejecting the definition presented by the Government; do not split hairs – reject only when necessary, i.e. just because you didn't think of it, doesn't mean it is wrong or unarguable; Everyone hates definitional debates!
- 2 things to look out for with the defining of a motion:
  - Truisms – stand alone statements that are true; example - This House Believes That (THBT) George Washington was number one. – when “is number one” is defined as “the first President of the United States”
  - Tautologies – definition whose circular nature defines its own truth – the definition makes the motion true so there is little room for clash; example – THBT government is best when it governs least. – when “best” is defined as “that which governs least” or something similar (i.e. least intrusive into the lives of its citizens)

#### 3.3 Case Line

- Trunk that holds the debate together (think of definition as the roots)
- One sentence that summarises the team's case (catch phrase)

### 3.4 Case Division

- Team should have 3 -5 arguments which are divide amongst team members
- Most important arguments should go first, when least important going last
- Most good debate teams will have 3 or 4 main points (5 points is pushing it) divided between their 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> speaker, leaving the 3<sup>rd</sup> speaker to focus entirely on rebuttal

### 3.5 Arguments

- Limbs or branches of the tree (definition is the roots, case line is the trunk)
- Where debate really happens
- Each argument must support the team's case (case line)
- Must be consistent from one team member to the next
- Arguments must be proven – no assertions!

### 3.6 Examples

- These are the leaves on the tree – they garnish the team's case
- They do not stand alone
- Must support the arguments presented
- Must be true – not hypothetical

## 4. Other/Miscellaneous

### 4.1 Points of Information

- Speakers should take at least one, probably two during their speech
- Be polite when dealing with these – i.e. “no, thank you”, “yes, please”, “please go ahead”, etc. – avoid language, such as “rejected” or “denied” (although debaters will not necessarily be penalised for this, etiquette should prevail)
- Wait until the end of your current thought to accept a point of information – stopping mid sentence to give the floor to your opponents is a sign of a weak debater. If you wish, acknowledge your opponent by saying “I’ll take your point in a moment”, or something similar, then finish your thought and accept the interjection.
- These should be brief with those giving them remembering that it is not their speech! (stick to 10 – 15 sec max)

### 4.2 Impromptu Debates

- Team given a motion they have not previously seen
- Given an hour to prepare before they must debate
- One of the rounds at the National tournament is an impromptu round – i.e. every team must participate in an impromptu
- Exercises can assist debaters in thinking faster on their feet and being ready for the challenges of an impromptu debate
- Practice is key – coaches should set impromptus for their teams so that they can practice having to prepare within the 1-hour time period
- A strong team leader is key because coaches cannot be in the preparation room with their team; this is not necessarily the best debater on the team, but rather the individual who can best help the team get arguments together in a logical fashion



## **5. Recommended reading for debaters:**

- a globally recognised newspaper (NY Times, The Times (London), Wall Street Journal, etc.) – suggest that your debaters read the news online every time they check their email ([www.bbc.co.uk/news](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news) is a great site for world news; also [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com))
- The Economist (weekly magazine)
- [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org) – is a great site to teach you about any number of topics/historical events, etc.
- Debatabase is another great resource – <http://www.idebate.org/debatabase/> – you can research topics/motions/ideas, etc.

\* Debaters should always carry dictionaries and an almanac – especially for tournaments!