

Preparing For Tournaments

Debate requires not only a sharp mind in the round, but also significant pre-round preparation. Debaters need to learn how to perform adequate research and prepare to refute. In fact, much of the educational value of the activity comes from effort put in before the tournament. This chapter will briefly outline the steps that competitors need to take before they walk into a round.

Preparation in Congressional Debate

Congressional Debate does not require competitors to prepare both sides of a topic. Hypothetically, a participant could prepare for only the affirmative side of a bill and still give an excellent speech. That said, the session does not always work out as debaters anticipate. If a debater has poor recency or precedence, he may have difficulty speaking on the side he has prepared. Consequently, most debaters will prepare to speak on both sides of each issue on the docket.

Unlike a Public Forum constructive, which is written out in its entirety, a Congressional Debate speech is only

outlined. Ideally, the outline should fit on no more than one half of a legal pad page, leaving the rest of the page for the flow. The speaker needs to write only a few words to remind her of her introduction and conclusion. Each argument should be organized by claim, warrant, and impact, with a few words used to remind the speaker of each element of her argument. Debaters may want to jot down phrases or specific words that they want to use in their speech. By planning some of their vocabulary beforehand, they can ensure that they sound as eloquent as possible.

While debaters can write out a number of constructive arguments before the session, there is no guarantee that those arguments will not have already been made by the time a competitor gets the opportunity to speak. Consequently, debaters must be prepared to alter their argumentation at any point. This requires them to read broadly on each topic before the round begins; there is no good substitute for understanding an issue before the debate. Debaters should also read and print out a number of articles on each side of a topic before the debate round. Having this topic-specific reference material available allows speakers to make new constructive arguments if their original arguments have already been made and allows them to use evidence when refuting. A refutation, just like any other argument, is stronger when it is supported by topic-related expertise.

Preparation in Public Forum Debate

In addition to writing an affirmative and negative case, Public Forum debaters need to prepare for rebuttals. They should attempt to anticipate the most common positions

on each side and prepare responses to them. Each Public Forum team should have two block files: one that answers affirmative arguments and one that answers negative arguments. Each of these should be organized by argument and include a table of contents for easy access.

In addition, if a team is using particularly important pieces of evidence that they anticipate other teams will also use, they should become familiar with the methodology of the evidence. Such preparation allows the team to defend their evidence against a challenge; it is difficult to respond to methodological indictments if a team doesn't understand the methodology supporting their evidence. Understanding the methodology also makes it much easier to criticize that piece of evidence should another team use it. Every piece of evidence will have flaws; no source is perfect. Being familiar with important pieces of evidence allows a debater to point out those flaws when that evidence is used against them. Such an indictment can be an effective defensive argument.

Research

Debaters must perform research to gain a broad understanding of the issues they discuss. Research can be conducted in a variety of ways, but the guiding principle should always be the same: research a subject to learn more about it. This sounds obvious, but many speakers make the mistake of seeking specific evidence to support a specific point; they write an argument, then look for a quotation or statistic to substantiate it. This type of research can be useful when preparation time is limited, but ultimately leads to a narrow and incomplete understanding

of an issue. A speaker who finds only three pieces of evidence to support her three arguments will be unprepared for questions and ill-equipped to answer the arguments her opponent makes. Instead, speakers should read and research to obtain a broad understanding of the issues involved in a topic.

Acceptable sources include: academic monographs; articles published by academic experts; reports from think tanks (like Cato, Heritage, and Brookings, though debaters should be wary of the bias inherent in many think tanks; Cato has a libertarian agenda, while Heritage leans to the right, and Brookings leans to the left); government reports (from the relevant organizations; if there is a bill about reducing crime, it would make sense to cite FBI statistics); articles from respected magazines (*The Economist*, *Foreign Policy*, *Foreign Affairs*, etc.); Supreme Court and appellate court rulings; and articles from reputable newspapers (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, etc.) are also acceptable. Academic studies usually provide the most reliable evidence because they are written by qualified experts in the field, and they tend to have sound and well-explained methodologies.

Debaters use a number of databases to find evidence, including LexisNexis, HeinOnline, and JStor. These provide academic and legal research that competitors can use to form arguments. Not all schools and competitors will have access to these resources, however. All competitors, though, have access to Google.

That said, debaters must realize that simply typing the topic into search engines and databases is unlikely to yield useful results. Debaters should take several steps when using these online resources. First, they should attempt to find the key terms used when discussing each topic. A

key term is a specific phrase used by academics collectively to talk about a particular issue. For example, if a debater were discussing whether or not corporations have the right to fund political campaigns, he would discover that the term academics and the courts use to describe this right is “corporate personhood” and search using that term. Additionally, a large amount of academic research is available online in PDF format. Debaters searching for academic research should perform an advanced search on Google and select PDF as the file type. This will ensure that only PDF files appear as search results, greatly increasing the proportion of useful results.

UNDERSTANDING SOURCES

On the vast majority of topics, the amount of topic literature available will be immense. Debaters should use different types of sources based on the kind of argument they are going to make. If a debater wishes to make an argument about broad global trends, academic research is probably more valuable than a newspaper article. In general, academic articles and books are great sources if a competitor is looking for depth on an issue. They provide extremely well-researched and thorough accounts of major issues. Yet, because they provide such thorough research, they won’t necessarily be the most timely. Debaters searching for the most up-to-date information should look for newspaper and magazine articles—they are most likely to provide on-the-ground coverage of global situations. Debaters can also use RSS feeds, an online tool that provides links to the most up-to-date articles on specific issues. If a debater wishes to make an argument about public opinion, then polling services are the way to go. Reputable polling services, like Gallup, Zogby, and Pew, are

methodical and provide more accurate accounts of public opinion than, say, a poll on the CNN website.

Debaters must also understand any bias in the sources they use. Authors or organizations may have agendas that inform their writing; this can make some sources less credible than they first appear. For example, certain news organizations have political tendencies; Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* lean to the right, while MSNBC leans to the left. While news organizations may not have explicit political agendas, some think tanks will. Debaters should read the mission statement of the organizations they are citing; this will allow them to assess the validity of the information they are reading. For example, if a debater wished to cite Americans for Tax Reform, reading their mission statement would quickly inform the debater that their stated purpose is to oppose tax increases. This agenda likely informs any research they may provide. Debaters should also perform a quick Internet search of the authors they are citing to discover any bias they might have. For example, if a competitor is citing a real-life legislator to support his argument, it is important to know whether or not that legislator has a political interest in supporting one side or another. If a legislator makes an argument against increasing agricultural regulations, and his biggest contributor is Monsanto (a multinational biotechnology company that produces herbicides), then his argument is less likely to be unbiased.

Finally, while the Internet is full of helpful and credible research, much of the available material is unreliable. It is important that debaters be able to differentiate between the two. Credible information can usually be found on think tank websites, websites of major newspapers,

websites of government agencies, and on academic databases like JStor, LexisNexis, and HeinOnline.

On the other hand, blogs, forums, and message boards are almost universally unreliable or heavily biased sources. Anyone can create a blog or a message board post; there is no standard to ensure that the information being presented is reliable. If a blog provides an excellent piece of information, then make sure that the author of the blog post is an expert in the relevant field. For example, The Volokh Conspiracy is a popular blog run by Eugene Volokh, a professor of law at UCLA. When discussing legal issues, he is considered to be an expert, and so citing this particular blog is acceptable. On the other hand, citing the Daily Kos, a popular liberal blog, is much less acceptable because the authors are usually not experts in a particular field. Competitors must check the credentials of all authors they wish to cite; this is largely how they can tell whether or not a particular piece of research is credible.

CITATION

Debaters need to ensure that they properly cite their sources in the debate round. This involves giving due credit to the authors or organization that produced the text. Proper citation is necessary for two reasons: first, it ensures academic honesty, as students will be making the audience aware that the information they are using is not their own; second, it allows fellow competitors to identify and criticize the sources being used, a necessary step in any academic discussion.

The exact content and form of the citation depends on the kind of source being used. Anything involving an academic authority should include the author's name and credentials. The debater should have the book title

or the name of the academic publication that they are citing on hand, but it is not necessary to cite it in the round unless asked. If the source being cited is a newspaper or magazine, a think tank, a government agency, or a polling service, then the competitor must cite the name of the publication or agency; they need not cite the author's name, but should have it to hand in case they are asked for it. Regardless of the source, debaters must always cite their source's publishing date. This allows the judge and competitors to determine the timeliness of the content being presented. A good rule of thumb is that a competitor's citation should reveal enough information that a listener could find the exact article given only the information presented in the round.

Source citations can be inserted in a speech in three ways: before the data, in the middle of the data, and after the data. The actual words used to introduce a source can vary widely, but students should try to keep these attributions brief and clear. Some examples of pre-source citations include "According to an April 2nd report from the Carnegie Foundation . . .," and "The Congressional Budget Office reported last month that . . ." Both of these citations provide clear attribution and set up the ensuing information in a grammatically simple way.

Mid-source citations move these attributions to the middle of the sentence rather than at the beginning. For example, "In 2000, according to a March report from the Department of Justice, there were fewer than 10 cases of this type prosecuted in the entire nation." This style of citation is the most sophisticated option for students, but can also lead to a lack of clarity if the speaker does not clearly differentiate between the citation and the information.

Debaters should avoid post-source citations because they violate the audience's expectations; providing a citation after the fact causes the audience to retrospectively evaluate the source and the information, which means the audience is no longer paying attention to the speaker. By providing the source before the information, the speaker allows the audience to evaluate the data as it is delivered.

Debaters should not cite websites. Finding information on a website is perfectly acceptable, but the citation delivered in the round should exclude the "dot-com" label. For example, if a debater has found information on CNN.com, she should cite CNN in the round, not CNN.com. Always cite the organization providing the information, not the website. Additionally, much of the information published in newspapers and magazines has underlying sources that they rely on. When possible, these underlying sources should be cited instead of the newspaper or magazine. For example, if a *New York Times* article says, "A Gallup poll reported that 67% of Americans favor socialized medicine," the debater should attempt to find and cite the Gallup poll instead of the *New York Times* article. This ensures the most accurate representation of the evidence.

Finally, while Wikipedia is a valuable tool, debaters should never cite Wikipedia. Wikipedia can be used to gain a broad understanding of an issue since, more often than not, the information is accurate. That said, because Wikipedia is susceptible to false edits, it should never be used as a source in a debate round. However, each Wikipedia article links to several sources, many of which are credible. Debaters can use these sources and cite them in the debate round.

Materials

Once the debaters have researched their topic, developed their arguments, and prepared the materials that can be written before the debate, they must organize the information and ensure that they have all of the materials necessary to compete effectively.

CONGRESSIONAL DEBATE

Congressional debaters should have all of their outlines on a white or yellow legal pad before the round begins. Additionally, they should bring at least two different colored pens and a folder containing whatever research they wish to use. Competitors need not have each article they will cite—they need only the paragraph they are citing—but the folder should include the materials they will use to develop additional speeches or refutation as well. They can organize the information as they wish, but it is usually organized by piece of legislation. Debaters should also have a copy of the legislation packet as well as copies of any other information the tournament provides. An almanac or a book detailing important Supreme Court cases might also be helpful as these will provide useful information for almost any debate.

PUBLIC FORUM

Public Forum debaters should have at least three copies of each of their cases to ensure that even if a copy is lost, extras are available; having an electronic copy of the case on a flash drive or laptop provides additional backup. They should also have multiple copies of their block files for each side of the resolution. The block files should be organized by the argument they address in either a folder or an expando file. An expando is ideal because its pockets help

the debater create a built-in filing system that makes finding documents easy. In order to flow the round, debaters should bring a substantial amount of unlined paper and several pens in multiple colors.

Competitors may need to show their evidence to the judge or their opponents. Consequently, they must have the full paragraph containing the information they are citing accessible, either in print or electronic form. This allows their opponents and the judge to evaluate the quality of the evidence and to ensure that the evidence is not being distorted. Although having the full article is not required, it is most helpful. It gives everyone an advantage: it prevents their opponents from making claims of misrepresentation, and it allows the judge the most clarity if a dispute arises over the quality of evidence.

KEY CONCEPTS

- Debaters should prepare for both constructive speeches and rebuttal speeches before the tournament begins.
- Research serves two primary purposes: to be well-informed generally and to obtain evidence for specific arguments.
- Debaters need to become familiar with a wide variety of sources, both academic and popular.
- Debaters should be aware of potential biases in their evidence.

- All evidence used in a debate must be accompanied by a citation, the form of which will differ depending on the source.
- Debaters should ensure that they have all materials prepared and accessible for competition.