

## Competing at Tournaments

For the inexperienced debater, a tournament can be an intimidating event. Each tournament will feature seasoned competitors and judges who have been involved with the activity for years. Consequently, knowing what to expect and, more important, how to behave at a debate tournament is essential. Debaters need to behave with professionalism and respect the host school, their judges, their coaches, and their opponents. When students behave properly, debate tournaments run more smoothly and provide a more accepting, respectful, and enjoyable environment for everyone involved.

### **Tournament Structure**

Most larger tournaments will have both preliminary and elimination rounds. Preliminary rounds are those in which every team participates. Public Forum Debate usually has four to seven depending on the tournament; Congressional Debate has two to four preliminary sessions. Some tournaments, usually local tournaments, have only

preliminary rounds; the winners of the tournament are those with the best preliminary record.

Other tournaments will advance the top preliminary competitors to elimination rounds. Elimination rounds are those in which only the top competitors participate. In Public Forum Debate who reaches the elimination rounds is determined in one of two ways: either every team with a certain number of wins or better (usually four or five wins) will advance or some number of teams that was set before the tournament will advance. If the latter is the case, then that number will either be 64 (triple octa-finals), 32 (double octa-finals), 16 (octa-finals), 8 (quarter-finals), or 4 (semifinals). These numbers create a clean bracket that yields a two-team final round.

If the tournament decides to advance everyone with a particular record, then the first elimination round will usually be a partial one in which not all advancing teams participate. For example, if a tournament wishes to advance all teams with a winning record, this will, in all likelihood, not yield a full bracket of 4, 8, 16, 32, or 64; there will be some other number of debaters with a winning record. Thus, not every team will participate in the first elimination round; some teams will advance straight to the second elimination round without debating. If 30 teams have a winning record at a tournament and each of them advance to elimination rounds, then the top 2 teams will advance automatically to octa-finals and the remaining 28 teams will debate for the 14 remaining slots. The second elimination round will feature a full bracket in which every remaining team participates; this bracket eventually yields a final round of two teams. If a team loses in an elimination round, they are out of the tournament.

Whereas most preliminary rounds will have only one judge, most elimination rounds will have a panel of three judges (or more, depending on the size of the tournament). Whoever wins a majority of the ballots on the panel wins the debate and advances to the next round.

Congressional Debate also has tournaments with elimination rounds and tournaments without them. At tournaments with no elimination rounds, competitors will take part in a number of sessions, and the students with the best scores or the highest ranks in those sessions will be declared the victors. At these tournaments, every competitor participates in every session.

At tournaments with elimination rounds, competitors will advance from preliminary sessions to a semifinal session or a final session. At tournaments that advance directly to a final session, the top competitors in each chamber will be consolidated into one "Super Session," and the debaters with the highest scores or the best ranks in that chamber will be declared the victors. If a tournament advances to a semifinal session, then the top students from each preliminary chamber will be advanced to one of a number of semifinal chambers. The top students from each semifinal chamber will advance to the Super Session, and the top students in the Super Session will be declared the winners.

Some final rounds will feature a scenario, a fictional situation that the tournament develops for students to debate. These situations can range from an economic collapse to an invasion. The tournament will develop bills or resolutions that attempt to solve the problem the scenario created. Because the tournament staff provides the scenario, they will often supply evidence (such as a fake Supreme Court ruling or a fake issue briefing) the competitors can use when speaking. Competitors should be

creative and should attempt to role-play when debating a scenario. This involves consistently making reference to the specific situation at hand rather than making generic arguments that could apply to any similar situation. If the tournament also provides resources, then debaters will appear to be more creative and engaged if they make use of these resources. Debaters need to make clear that they are debating this specific scenario, rather than merely delivering arguments that they have made before.

### **Professionalism**

At tournaments, debaters should behave the same way they would in front of potential employers and college interviewers. Competitors should avoid being excessively loud, using vulgarities, and horsing around with teammates and other competitors. These types of behavior have a tendency to annoy or offend those in the surrounding area. If a debater acts inappropriately, chances are someone will see it; this person could very well be that student's judge in the next round. Out-of-round behavior can affect in-round results. Judges who have already formed an unfavorable opinion of a competitor are unlikely to rate him or her highly in the round. Therefore, in addition to being the right and courteous thing to do, behaving with respect is in the best interests of all competitors.

Competitors should also treat the building they are in with respect. Often debaters must move materials in a classroom to accommodate a round. Consequently, they should make sure that the room is exactly as they found it when they leave. If desks were moved, they should be put back in their original position. Any trash generated

during the round should be picked up and thrown away. Additionally, altering the electronic devices in a classroom is incredibly discourteous; teachers rely on these for their classes. In sum, debaters should make an effort to change as little as possible in the classrooms in which they are competing.

Respect for fellow competitors is crucial. In the round, debaters should not talk in a condescending or scornful tone when addressing competitors. In questioning periods, the speakers should always use a respectful tone, even as they attempt to poke holes in their opponents' arguments. Judges will never vote down a debater for being too courteous; many times, however, they have rated competitors poorly for being disrespectful to their opponents. This advice extends to out-of-round behavior as well. Debaters should not say negative things about their fellow competitors while at a debate tournament. This behavior is disrespectful and rude. Additionally, competitors never know whose coaches or parents are sitting next to them; students can offend someone without knowing it.

Respect is especially important when the tournament releases postings for elimination rounds. Whether or not a debater advances, she should always remember to be courteous to her fellow competitors. If a competitor is fortunate enough to move on to the next stage of the competition, he should not celebrate in a way that will embarrass those who did not advance; similarly, if a debater did not advance, he should not express his disappointment in a way that detracts from the accomplishments of others. Above all, debaters should remember to act with respect for those around them.

In Congressional Debate, competitors should work hard to cooperate with each other. This will make the

session more pleasant for all involved. Treating her opponents with the utmost respect is also in a competitor's best interest. Congressional Debate is a largely communal activity; the presiding officer election and the selection of the agenda all require a vote. If a competitor is disrespectful to her fellow students, the chances for her being elected presiding officer or getting the agenda she wants passed decrease significantly. Additionally, presiding officers have a degree of discretion over who to choose for speeches and questions. A disrespectful competitor does herself no favors by insulting or shunning her peers.

If competitors follow all of the steps above, they will be respectful throughout the tournament. The importance of respect in this activity cannot be overstated. Because this is an activity designed to facilitate argument, it is often easy to not be civil to opponents. Students cannot let the ease with which incivility comes overwhelm them. All competitors must make an effort to be courteous to their fellow students, to their judges, and to all involved in the activity. If they do, then debate is an activity that will be enjoyed by many for years to come.

## **Dress**

Dress for debate is business casual. Debaters should dress the same way they would in a professional setting or for a college interview. Males should wear a suit if possible. The suit should be a conservative color, such as black, gray, or navy blue; brown, white, and seersucker suits are typically not appropriate attire. Pinstripe suits are acceptable as long as the pinstripes are not too bright and obtrusive. Either a two-piece suit or a three-piece suit is acceptable.

If a student does not own a suit, he should wear a black, gray, or blue blazer and khakis or dress pants. Male students should wear a conservative colored dress shirt, such as blue or white, with a tie. The tie can be any range of colors, but should look professional and coordinate with the suit and shirt. Dark dress socks and dress shoes should be worn with all outfits.

Women should wear either a skirt suit or a pants suit. Female competitors have considerably more leeway in terms of appropriate colors and looks but should still dress conservatively. Either a blouse with buttons or a shell is acceptable. Dress shoes should be worn. Heels are acceptable, but not required; if a debater chooses to wear heels, she should make sure that she is able to move easily during her speeches. She should not wear shoes that prevent her from realizing her full stylistic potential by limiting the range of movements she can make.

Ultimately, these suggestions are just that: suggestions. Debaters should dress professionally, conservatively, and within their means. The goal is to build credibility through appearance and to avoid making stylistic choices that will negatively affect the debater's chances in competition.

## **Interaction with Judges**

Public Forum Debate (and, to a lesser extent, Congressional Debate) offers opportunities to interact with the judge before and after the round. These opportunities can be useful, but they can also be dangerous for those competitors who fail to treat the judge with respect.

Making small talk with the judge is acceptable before the round begins; in fact, it is encouraged. Debaters are

to treat judges as human beings, not automatons whose only function is to make a decision in the debate round. That said, any questions competitors have about the tournament or the judge more specifically should be reserved until both teams are present in the debate room. This ensures that each team has access to the exact same information before a round begins, making the playing field as equitable as possible.

In Public Forum Debate, asking the judge for a paradigm is acceptable. A paradigm is the judge's preferences about how a debate round should be conducted. Avoid using the term, however; many judges will be from the general public. They will not have a background in debate and won't understand what you mean. Judges are more likely to respond to debaters' concerns if they ask specific questions. For instance, "Do you prefer that competitors stand or sit during crossfire?" is much more helpful to a judge than asking "What are your preferences for the debate?" The more targeted the question, the better. Debaters should never argue with a judge's paradigm. Instead, they should adapt to whatever the judge tells them to do. If a judge prefers a slow, persuasive debate style to a faster, more analytical one, then competitors should make an effort to conform to that preferred style.

Debaters should be respectful of their judges and their judges' role. For example, competitors should not expect the judge to time their speeches. They should come equipped with a stopwatch to time their own speeches and those of their opponents. During the round, competitors should have almost no interaction with the judge except for the content of the debate. This allows the judge to flow the round and evaluate the debate as carefully as possible.

After a Public Forum round, the judge should give some indication as to whether she will offer an oral critique or a disclosure (these never happen in Congressional Debate). An oral critique has the judge giving competitors advice on how to improve their debating after the round. A disclosure is when the judge announces her decision immediately after the round. Some tournaments prohibit disclosure, while others encourage it. If a judge has remained silent for a short period after the round, a debater may ask if there will be an oral critique or a disclosure. If the judge announces that there will be, the debaters should remain in the room until she is finished writing her ballot. If there will not be, they should pack up their belongings and exit the room quietly. Debaters should never attempt to persuade a judge to give an oral critique or a disclosure if she has stated that there will not be one.

If the judge does decide to disclose or give an oral critique, debaters must never argue with the decision or the comments. Even if a competitor feels that the critique errs in some way, he should remain silent and exit the room without voicing his concerns to the judge.

Arguing with a judge about her decision is never a good idea for several reasons. First, to argue with someone who has taken time to judge a debate round is disrespectful. Second, the judge's mind will never be changed; altering a decision after interacting with competitors is almost universally against tournament rules. Third, arguing will cause the judge to look on the arguing team unfavorably, potentially leading to future losses.

If a competitor has a legitimate complaint about a judge's behavior in the round and not the reasoning behind his decision, she should inform her coaches immediately. This should happen only when the judge has

committed some egregious violation of judging norms. These include: falling asleep during the round, talking on a cell phone during the round, and making demands about the content of future speeches while the debate round is still in progress. Anything short of these disrespectful acts is likely not a legitimate cause for complaint. Students should never complain to the tournament officials; they should always tell a coach, who will then relay the message to the tournament staff if she feels that the violation is egregious enough.

### **Maintaining Mental Awareness**

Debate tournaments can be a harrowing experience. Competitors wake up at five or six in the morning and often compete until after nightfall. Maintaining awareness and keeping energy levels up throughout the day can be difficult. Yet, the most energetic debaters usually give better performances throughout the day.

Participants can take three steps to ensure that they are as awake and aware as possible throughout a tournament.

1. **Get enough sleep on the night before the tournament and during the tournament.** Debaters who don't will inevitably be exhausted before the tournament is over. This can lead to sloppy performances from even the most talented and prepared debaters. At some point, there are diminishing marginal returns to the work a debater can do the night before a tournament. It is usually in a debater's best interest to maximize the time he has to sleep instead of writing that one last argument or reading that one last article.

2. **Ensure that they are well-hydrated and fed throughout the tournament.** Debaters should bring a refillable water bottle to the tournament and fill it frequently. Because competitors speak so much over the course of a tournament, their mouths will become dry at some point. Being well-hydrated can combat this and can ensure that a debater has the fuel to continue with the tournament. Debaters should not compete on an empty stomach. They should eat something before arriving at the tournament, even if it's something small. Hunger can distract a debater, preventing her from turning in the best performance she possibly can. Participants should bring money to a tournament, as many tournaments require them to purchase their meals. Many tournaments will include a meal or two with registration, but many more do not.
3. **Perform verbal warm-ups before the tournament begins.** Most teams have a warm-up ritual that involves repeating various phrases and playing various word games. Warm-ups get the vocal chords prepared for a day of speaking, and they assist with both energy levels and overall enunciation. If a team does not have a warm-up ritual, then individual members can observe what members do. This will give them ideas that they can use to form a ritual for their team. At the very least, all competitors should follow this cardinal rule: do not let the first speech given at a tournament be one that the judge hears. Competitors should always practice a speech on the day of the tournament before walking into the first round. This minimizes the number errors made in the first competitive speech.

## KEY CONCEPTS

- When at a tournament, debaters should behave professionally at all times.
- Most tournaments have preliminary rounds, which every debater participates in, followed by elimination rounds, for which only certain debaters qualify.
- Final elimination rounds in Congressional Debate are often called “Super Sessions” and may involve a scenario.
- Debaters should always behave with respect: respect for their opponents, for the judges, and for the tournament host.
- Debaters should limit their interactions with judges when not in rounds and should always assume that a potential judge is nearby.
- Debaters should engage in healthy behaviors while at tournaments: get enough sleep, stay hydrated, and eat regularly.
- Debaters should warm up before the first competition of the day.