

Speech Construction in Congressional Debate

While Congressional Debate is dynamic and multifaceted, no single aspect is more important than the speech. The speech is where a competitor conveys his position and answers the positions of others, all while speaking effectively and persuasively. Doing so is no easy task. This chapter will cover the goals of a speech, the proper approach to constructing speeches, and the key elements of delivery and style in Congressional Debate.

Goals

A Congressional Debate speech has three goals:

1. **Educate.** An effective speech educates the audience in some unique way. Debate is inherently an educational activity; though winning is nice, students and coaches are also trying to learn as much as possible about the world around them in a fun and engaging format. As such, each speech in Congress should bring something new to the table: a new argument, a piece of evidence

not previously cited, a new spin on an old argument, or a refutation of an opposing argument. The speaker must do at least one of these to avoid repeating what has already been said. When multiple debaters make the same argument with no additional insight, it is called “rehash.” In addition to being uneducational, rehash will likely be frowned on by judges and competitors alike.

2. **Engage.** An effective speech will engage the audience. Neither judges nor competitors want to listen to a boring speaker, so presenting an interesting speech is important. An interesting speech begins with the introduction, which must grab the attention of the audience in a meaningful way, and continues with the body of the speech, which must effectively employ a variety of tones to keep the audience interested. Finally, it ends with the conclusion, which must compellingly summarize the argument.
3. **Persuade.** Congressional Debate is, after all, a debate event; accordingly convincing the audience that a position is correct is important. Debaters persuade both through compelling content and effective style. A persuasive speech makes arguments that are well-delivered and full of well-reasoned content. Key to persuasion is the language used in a speech. Merely saying a bill is “good” is less persuasive than delivering a vivid description of the way in which the bill has a positive impact. Debaters ought to be meticulous in choosing the words they use. In doing so, they will be able to craft arguments that compel the judge and their fellow competitors to believe them.

The rest of this chapter will focus on the ways in which debaters can craft a speech that educates, engages, and persuades.

Speech Structure

While the times for Congressional Debate speeches can vary by tournament and league, the National Forensic League rules allot three minutes per speech. Most tournaments allow for a grace period, or time allowed above and beyond that allotted for the speech, at the end of each speech and give the presiding officer discretion over enforcement of the grace. Typically, students may have five seconds past their three minutes to finish their speech; beyond that, the presiding officer will begin to gavel them down. To maximize the efficiency of their three minutes, students should follow a fairly common speech structure: an introduction, followed by a body, ending with a conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Every speech should begin with an introduction. It is the first thing that the judge hears, and it is often more determinative of scores than most competitors believe. Speakers have brief windows in which they can grab an audience before the audience members tire, lose interest, and stop listening. This makes the introduction perhaps the most important part of the Congressional Debate speech. A speaker must do whatever she can in a very brief period to capture the attention of judges and competitors.

An ideal introduction is between 15 and 30 seconds long and does not merely parrot the arguments that the

Speech Structure in Congress

Introduction-

Attention-Getting Device
(AGD)
Thesis

Argument 1

Claim
Warrant
Data
Impact

Argument 2

Claim
Warrant
Data
Impact

Argument 3

Claim
Warrant
Data
Impact

Conclusion

speaker is about to deliver. Each introduction should begin with an attention-getting device, or AGD, and end with a thesis, which, in Congressional Debate, should always take the form of the speaker encouraging the audience to vote a particular way on the legislation (to affirm or negate). Always place the thesis at the end of the introduction, never at the beginning; an introduction ought to open with as compelling a statement as possible.

Many debaters believe that offering a menu, or a preview, of the speech's arguments is a good introduction. It isn't. These kinds of introductions are predictable and boring. A good speech begins with something more exciting. A menu does not get the audience's and judges' attention and, in fact, can cause judges to stop listening because they now know what the speech will include. Additionally, because the speech time in Congress is relatively short, a menu both consumes valuable time and is unnecessary for an audience to follow along.

The introduction must compel the judge to continue listening. It begins with the attention-getting device, which ought to be the first thing a competitor says in a speech. Usually the AGD is a vivid, strongly worded statement of a competitor's position on a piece of legislation. It can also be a particularly compelling piece of information or an evocative question. Many competitors use quotations as AGDs, but quotations are often ineffective as they can be generic and overused. AGDs should be unique and fresh; ideally, you should never use an AGD that you've used before. As with the rest of the introduction, AGDs should have a narrow focus, use strong, exciting language, and be specific to the legislation being debated.

Ideally, introductions should focus on only a single issue and stress its importance. An introduction should

not contain a complete argument but, rather, highlight the impact of the arguments that the speaker is about to make. It should not include extensive warranting, since warrants are typically the driest part of a Congress speech. Instead, introductions should focus on the tangible effects that the legislation will have on the world, even if the reasoning for those effects will not come until later in the speech. Impacts are ultimately what is going to compel a judge to believe a position is correct, so they should be what the judge hears first.

The key to an exciting introduction is language. The words selected for an introduction must be powerfully crafted and designed to yield an emotional response from the audience. The more descriptive the introduction, the better. An introduction that posits that the bill will “create millions of jobs for hardworking Americans” will always be superior to one that merely claims that the bill will be “good for the economy.” By that same token, an introduction that dictates that the bill will “revive steel mills, revitalize farmers, and create millions of dollars in new infrastructure, putting millions of hardworking Americans back in the workforce” will always be better than the introduction that only talks about jobs. The specificity of an introduction is a key to its success. The more specific an introduction, the more vivid the picture of the world it presents, the better the speech.

Introductions should be narrowly tailored to the legislation being debated. They should not focus on the broad topic area of the bill, but on the action specific to the bill. Introductions that are bill-specific demonstrate that a competitor is engaged with the debate and not merely recycling something that has been said before. For example, consider a bill lifting economic sanctions on Iran. An

introduction that focuses on the impact of sanctions will always be superior to one that only discusses the authoritarian nature of the Iranian government. The former is specific to the bill, the latter could be delivered on any bill or resolution concerning Iran. Never use an introduction twice or reuse an introduction that someone else has used. Be original and construct a powerful, unique introduction every time.

Below are two examples of good introductions and two examples of bad introductions on a bill to fund embryonic stem cell research.

Good introductions:

For years, the world has been searching for an answer to health problems that have decimated our society and torn families apart. Today, we are given the opportunity to come one step closer to solving those problems by embracing a new technology that will allow doctors to heal damaged organs and cure diseases in a way we've never seen before. I implore you to vote affirmative.

Nothing is more paramount than human life. If we pass legislation that funds the destruction of human life merely for the purpose of science, then we have become a tyrannical society. Because I cannot watch this Congress descend into tyranny, I urge a negative ballot.

Bad introductions:

Because this bill will help improve the health of Americans, I urge an affirmative ballot on today's legislation.

For the following three contentions, we should negate this bill: First, this bill destroys embryos, which can lead to human life. Second, stem cell research is still very controversial, and third, we have a massive budget deficit.

Notice that the strong introductions are vivid, descriptive, and use powerful language, whereas the weak introductions are general or use an ineffective menu.

BODY

After the introduction, the speaker moves into the body of her speech. This consists of two or three arguments that support her position on an individual bill. All Congressional Debate arguments should follow the Claim/Warrant/Data/Impact (C/W/D/I) format described in Chapter 3. That said, some issues unique to Congressional Debate deserve special attention here.

First, three different constructions are commonly used for the body of a Congress speech; we recommend all three. Each of these constructions is acceptable—which one an individual competitor uses should be based on his comfort level and the research he has available to him. Some topics will lend themselves to some structures, while others will lend themselves to different ones.

The first two structures—two- and three-point speech constructions—are fairly straightforward. A two-point construction consists of two complete arguments using

the C/W/D/I format. The three-point construction is the same, except with three arguments instead of two. While earlier in a speaker's debate career, the three-point construction may have seemed easier, the two-point construction is generally more effective. If a debater makes three distinct arguments, she will have difficulty giving appropriate depth to each as there is just not enough time in each speech. The two-point construction allows for more depth because a speaker has more time to devote to each argument. That said, a three-point construction is perfectly acceptable; competitors should just be sure to note its limitations.

The final construction is a two-by-two construction. This consists of two arguments, each of which has two distinct sub-points, i.e., each claim has two distinct warrants. Each of the warrants must link back to the same overarching claim. Let's look at an affirmative speech on a bill to decrease taxes on small business. A debater could make a claim that the bill would improve the economy and that claim could have two distinct warrants: first, the bill will create more jobs, and, second, the bill will increase spending by small businesses. Each of these links back to the overarching issue of economics, yet they are two distinct reasons why the claim is true. Arguments can include multiple impacts or only one if the speaker chooses. The two-by-two structure is often the most dense construction as it provides both breadth (the speaker is making four different arguments) and depth (the speaker is exploring two issues very extensively).

For speeches to remain fluid and cohesive, they must have effective transitions between arguments. Each argument can end in one of two ways: either the last line of the impact can be the end of the argument or the speaker

can end with a call for the audience to either affirm or negate. Each new argument should begin with some iteration of the phrase, “the first/next reason to affirm/negate this bill is . . .” This makes clear to the audience that one argument has finished and a new one is beginning. Many speakers do not effectively demarcate their arguments, and so one idea just blends with the next. This lack of clarity can cripple an otherwise effective speech. A judge who does not know where a debater is in a particular speech is unlikely to score him well.

Finally, debaters should always be concerned about time allocation within the body of a speech. Roughly the same amount of time should be devoted to each argument. If using a three-point construction, each argument should last about 45 seconds. If using a two-point or a two-by-two construction, each argument should last between one minute and one minute and fifteen seconds. Spending too much time on one argument makes the others seem comparatively rushed and underdeveloped. An equal distribution of time avoids these problems.

CONCLUSION

Conclusions are the grand finale of a Congress speech and should package everything the debater has just explained into one cohesive, passionate statement. The criteria for a good conclusion are largely the same as for a good introduction. Like introductions, conclusions should be 15 to 30 seconds long and should focus more on impacts than warrants. The more specific the description of the impact, the better the conclusion. If anything was particularly noteworthy about the introduction (if a quotation was used or if the language was particularly strong and

evocative), then the conclusion should attempt to harken back to the attention-getter. Much like the introduction, the conclusion should end (not begin) with a statement of the debater's position on the legislation.

A key difference between introductions and conclusions is the use of quotations. For a number of reasons, quotations are generally much more effective when used at the end of the speech than at the beginning. First, while using quotations at the outset of a speech has become clichéd from years of overuse, quotations used to conclude speeches have not. Additionally, quotations lack meaning at the beginning of a speech, when the audience has not yet been exposed to the context in which they are being used. On the other hand, at the end of the speech all relevant context has been explicated. Thus, the audience can fully experience and understand the quotation.

Below are two examples of good conclusions and two examples of poor conclusions on a bill to lift the Cuban embargo:

Good conclusions:

It is time that we once and for all abandon a failed policy. A failed policy that has allowed thousands of innocent Cubans to starve. A failed policy that has only entrenched the Cuban people further into dictatorship. A failed policy that has done absolutely nothing to destroy Castro's regime. We have to affirm this bill.

We, as the United States, have a moral obligation to uphold democracy and destroy autocracy in the world. By abandoning the

Cuban embargo, we would only fuel the dictatorial Cuban government that has led the Cuban people into poverty. We would reward a regime that denies basic rights to its people. Because of that, we must negate this bill.

Poor conclusions:

For the aforementioned reasons, we must affirm this bill.

Because Castro's regime is still in power, I urge a negative ballot on this legislation.

Note that the effective conclusions employ strong language that describes specific phenomena, whereas the weaker conclusions are short and either completely non-specific or excessively broad.

The most common mistake Congressional debaters make is to rush the ending of their speeches; every session is replete with students offering one-sentence conclusions or no conclusion at all. Speakers should also always leave time for a fully developed conclusion.

Sponsorship Speeches

The first affirmative, or sponsorship, speech, which is delivered by the author of the bill or a sponsor, differs from other speeches. Unlike regular speeches, a sponsorship must completely introduce the audience to the topic. Additionally, because it is the first speech on a piece of legislation, it is entirely scripted and needs to be completed before the session begins. A sponsorship speech has two

goals: to introduce and to advocate. A sponsoring debater must introduce some global or national problem to the audience and explain how her bill or resolution addresses that problem. Then, she must advocate for her plan by explaining to the audience why her proposal is the best possible solution.

The rules for the sponsorship speech vary by league and geographic location. The National Forensic League rules dictate that the speech be the same length as every other speech, three minutes. One of the chief differences between the sponsorship and other speeches under NFL rules is that the sponsorship is followed by two minutes of cross-examination as opposed to only one. This requires the author to be more prepared to defend both her bill and her specific reasons for advocating the bill. Other leagues may require the sponsorship to be a four-minute speech, with varying cross-examination times. Regardless of the specific format, the sponsor must convey a large amount of information in a relatively short time.

On a very basic level, the structure of a sponsorship speech is the same as that of a typical speech: it begins with an introduction, follows with two or three arguments, and then ends with a conclusion. That said, the content of a sponsorship speech and a typical affirmative speech differ in important areas. Differences begin with the introduction. The introduction to a sponsorship must be both informative and persuasive because it introduces the entire topic to the audience. The introduction must include a broad overview of the issues most central to the bill. Consider the way in which an acceptable introduction to a sponsorship on a bill to abolish the death penalty would differ from an acceptable introduction to a regular speech

in support of the bill. The regular affirmative introduction could be:

For too long, we have allowed a policy that has killed the innocent, that has been a manifestation of racism in our criminal justice system, and that is abhorrent to justice. We must affirm this bill.

This language is persuasive, but it is not informative. It does not tell the audience the extent of the problem nor does it give them any background information about the death penalty. It would be insufficient as the introduction to a sponsorship speech. The sponsorship introduction might say:

Since the death penalty was reinstated in 1972, at least 130 innocent people have been placed on death row. The courts have ruled that there is a massive racial disparity in the ways in which the death penalty has been applied, with African Americans and Hispanics being given the death penalty far more than whites convicted of the same kinds of crimes. The only way we can solve these problems is by abolishing the death penalty once and for all. That is precisely what my bill does. Therefore, if we wish to rid ourselves of a system that kills the innocent and a system that is remarkably racist, we must affirm this bill.

This statement first offers concrete information that tells us the status quo of the death penalty and then transitions to language aimed at persuading the audience to pass

the bill. Hence, it accomplishes the dual function of the sponsorship's introduction: it both informs and advocates.

After the introduction, the differences between the sponsorship and other affirmative speeches are less pronounced. A sponsorship should make two or three arguments that convince the audience of the effectiveness of the bill. Because the sponsorship speech is entirely prepared before the tournament, the expectations in terms of evidence and persuasiveness of argumentation are significantly higher than for the average speech. The arguments in a sponsorship come at the very beginning of the debate, so no adaptation is required. Thus, the sponsorship should contain the most-well-supported arguments in the entire round. To meet this higher standard, competitors need to take more time preparing the sponsorship than they do preparing their other speeches. Each argument should be significantly sourced (ideally, with two or three sources per argument). Speeches later in the round are less dependent on evidence, but rely far more on responsiveness. Judges will understand if arguments do not have perfect sourcing later in a debate when competitors are more concerned with refuting others or weighing the claims made by each side. On the other hand, with the sponsorship, there is no burden to weigh or refute that would make sourcing less necessary. Accordingly, the arguments made in a sponsorship need to be supported by significantly more published evidence than speeches given at other points in the round. Sponsors should also attempt to anticipate the strongest objections to the bill and answer them. This indicates to the judges that the debater is being responsive and is giving a complete view of the topic at hand.

While regular affirmatives must focus on the main issue of the bill, a complete sponsorship ought to defend the

bill as a whole. A sponsor should defend specific sections of the bill that others would not normally discuss. While a typical affirmative speaker would not defend the enforcement mechanisms or payment methods of a particular bill (as it would be considered minutia), a sponsor should do so, especially if those sections will have significant impact. For example, consider a bill that seeks to create tax credits for those who purchase hybrid cars. Say the bill attempted to pay for the tax credit by increasing income taxes for those making more than \$1 million per year by 1 percent. It would be fine, and possibly necessary, for a sponsor to defend this taxation system. However, a regular affirmative speaker should not do so as she would be ignoring the key issue in the bill (tax credits for hybrids).

The conclusion to a sponsorship should look exactly the same as a conclusion to a regular speech. It should focus entirely on persuasion and should attempt to evoke an emotional response from the audience. Overall, the sponsorship has the potential to be the most persuasive speech in the round. The best arguments are always available, and the speaker has the opportunity to write, perform, and perfect the sponsorship speech before the session begins. If done properly, sponsorships should stand out from other affirmative speeches.

Role-Playing

Competitors can remain credible, and even stand out, in Congressional Debate by embracing the role-playing aspects of the activity. Unique to Congressional Debate is students actually filling the roles of U.S. senators and representatives. When in the chamber, the competitors

should pretend to be a legislator representing her constituents. Making reference to how her constituents would be affected by a bill is very effective because it demonstrates an understanding of the nuances of the issue at hand. Additionally, attempts at humor based on the role-playing aspect of Congressional Debate are welcome, though debaters should be wary of making jokes that trivialize the issue or their bill. The same rule for introductions applies to humor: never use a joke that has been used before—keep things fresh.

Debaters must never abandon their fictitious roles as members of Congress by breaking the fourth wall. A competitor should never mention that he is a high school student. A debater who breaks the fourth wall instantly loses credibility, reminding the judge that he is young and inexperienced. If debaters are to be taken seriously, they must always embrace their role as a lawmaker.

Finally, as a general rule, avoid personal stories and anecdotes. They remind the judge that the debater is a high school student, leading to the aforementioned credibility issues. Additionally, crafting a personal story in a way that does not make the speaker seem unprofessional is difficult. Narratives about important political figures are acceptable, but only if they are distinctly tied to the bill at hand.

Style in Congressional Debate Speeches

Even a brilliantly constructed speech can be ruined by stylistic flaws—while effective style can turn a competent speech into a compelling one. Five elements of style are inherent to Congressional Debate: eye contact, tone and

speed, movement, gesturing, and pad orientation. If debaters master each of these, they will encounter few barriers to success in the activity.

EYE CONTACT

The easiest stylistic element to master is eye contact. Participants in Congressional Debate typically speak with the assistance of notes usually made on a legal pad. Although they have notes with them, a debater is expected to make as much eye contact with the audience as possible. Looking up from the notes not only allows a speaker to form a connection with the audience, it also demonstrates that the speaker understands the material well enough to present and discuss it extemporaneously. Many judges will give otherwise excellent speeches lower scores merely because the majority of the speech was delivered while the debater was looking down at her notes. Speakers should maintain eye contact with the audience throughout at least 50 percent of their speech. Additionally, debaters should not haphazardly scan the room; constantly shifting eye contact from one person to another prevents the speaker from forming a meaningful connection with the audience. A debater should maintain eye contact with a single person until one complete thought is finished and then move on to another audience member.

Tone and Speed

Debaters must make effective use of tone and speed. These elements are the most difficult to grasp and use correctly, however, and many speakers unconsciously err when using them. In utilizing tone, debaters need to strike a balance

between passivity and anger. Judges will be put off if a debater seems ambivalent about a bill, but they will also be turned off by a speaker who yells his entire speech. An effective speech falls somewhere in the middle: its tone is conversational for the most part, but fiery and passionate when it needs to be.

Effective intonation is difficult to write about because each speech requires something different. That said, speakers should follow two general rules:

1. **Most important, sound natural.** Never put on a fake voice or go into “speech mode.” Altering natural voice or speech patterns sounds awkward and reminds the judge that she is listening to high school debaters.
2. **Adapt tone to content.** Sounding fiery or passionate is most appropriate during introductions, conclusions, and impacts. These are the parts of the speech where a speaker really wants the judge to take notice, so the speaker’s tone should become more modulated and serious. On the other hand, sounding infuriated while giving an explanation of economic theory would be nonsensical. Thus, warrants should take on a more conversational and didactic tone that listeners find accessible.

Changes in volume can be just as effective as changes in tone. If a speaker suddenly goes from loud to quiet, the audience will inevitably look up and take notice. This maneuver can be just as effective at conveying the importance of an impact as an increase in volume and a more aggressive tone.

Suggesting the appropriate speed of a Congress speech is also difficult because speed varies depending

on circumstance. Ideally, a debater will speak no faster than she does in everyday conversation. Speed can also be used for emphasis. While at its fastest, a speech should be delivered at a conversational pace. Debaters can slow down to emphasize particular phrases or sentences that they deem to be extremely important. Such slowing should happen the most during impacts, where a competitor is really attempting to persuade the judge with the strength of her argument.

One of the most common difficulties debaters face is pausing—some debaters pause far too much, leading to an awkward speech pattern, while others rarely pause, making their arguments difficult to understand. As a rule, debaters should pause only where there would be commas and periods in their speeches. If correct pausing is a problem, one effective drill requires the speaker to say the words “period” and “comma” where periods and commas fall in his speech; this teaches him the appropriate moment to pause.

MOVEMENT

The rule about moving and walking is straightforward: do not move without purpose, do not walk during the introduction, each of the arguments, or the conclusion. During each of these phases of the speech, the speaker should stand in one place with her feet shoulder-width apart. Walking is only acceptable between the introduction and the first argument, between any subsequent arguments, and between the final argument and the conclusion. The debater should start in the middle of the room, take about three steps either left or right after the introduction, walk in the opposite direction after the first argument (and continue to move between any subsequent arguments),

and then eventually conclude in the middle of the room. This transitional movement reinforces the transitions of the speech and helps the debater fill the space at the front of the room. Speakers who stand frozen to one spot will seem small by comparison.

GESTURING

Gestures are hand motions used for emphasis when delivering a speech. They ought to be used at particularly important points, as a means of stressing their importance to the audience. Gestures can be especially effective when comparisons are being made, or when a particularly shocking fact is being revealed. When used effectively, gestures make a speaker more dynamic and polished.

The majority of debaters have issues with over-gesturing. This happens when a debater constantly moves his hand(s) while he is speaking. Over-gesturing defeats the purpose of the gesture, which is to emphasize a particular point. If everything is emphasized, nothing is emphasized, so speakers should gesture only when necessary.

Additionally, many speakers gesture too low. As a rule, gestures should be about chest high unless a specific part of a speech calls for a low gesture (for example, if a competitor is comparing something high to something low, a low gesture is appropriate when discussing the latter). Keeping gestures at chest height makes them more noticeable and makes the speech feel “bigger” and more grand. Debaters should avoid gesturing while their hands are at their side. These gestures are meaningless and distracting. Finally, speakers should never gesture with the pad; in addition to being distracting, this kind of gesture looks disorganized and sloppy. The speaker should rely on her

“off-hand” to do most of her gesturing, keeping the pad still and unassuming.

Remember that every gesture should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Gestures should not be rushed nor should they hang in the air indefinitely. Students should make strong choices about when and how to gesture, and then follow through. They should pick the moments in a speech that they most want to emphasize and make a complete gesture to signal that importance to the audience.

PAD ORIENTATION

During a Congress speech, all notes should be contained on a legal pad. Avoid loose-leaf paper and spiral notebooks; they look unprofessional. While delivering a speech, the speaker should hold the pad at her side, where the arm naturally falls. When she needs to refer to the pad, she should raise it to the top of the stomach or the bottom of the chest. If a speaker holds the pad too high, she runs the risk of blocking her face and losing her connection with the judge. Moreover, she should avoid switching the hand that the pad is in, which can distract a judge. Try to have all notes for a particular speech on one page to avoid having to turn pages.

KEY CONCEPTS

- A speech in Congressional Debate should educate, engage, and persuade the audience.

- Each speech should have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.
- The introduction should be specific, and it should get the attention of the audience while also persuading them to vote a particular way.
- The body should contain two or three arguments that support a position on the bill or resolution.
- Conclusions, much like introductions, should be brief but engaging, using specific and strong language to compel the audience.
- Sponsorship speeches must introduce the audience to a topic in addition to persuading the audience.
- Debaters can be creative and engaging by embracing their position as a Congressperson and role-playing at appropriate times.
- Debaters must make effective eye contact, gesture appropriately, and move at opportune times to have the greatest stylistic effectiveness.

