

Questioning and Crossfire

Clash is fundamental to all forms of academic debate. Constructive speeches and cases are an opportunity for debaters to offer prepared arguments under relatively benign circumstances; they often simply read what they have previously prepared. If the debate were to end after the initial speeches, however, it would not be much of a debate; it would be more akin to “dueling oratories.” Instead, to better seek truth and enable the audience and judge to make an informed decision about an issue, debaters must engage one another’s arguments. They must clash. This process begins with the most pointed exchange of ideas in a debate round: the exchange of questions and answers. The structure of this exchange is different in each event, but the goals, standards, and techniques of the exchange remain the same.

Structure of Questioning

In Congressional Debate, every speech is followed by a Congressional questioning period, during which members

of the chamber may ask questions of the speaker. Following the first affirmative and first negative speech is a questioning period of two minutes; after every subsequent speech, the questioning period lasts one minute.

The questioning period is initiated by the presiding officer (P.O.); at the conclusion of the speech, the P.O. will call for questions. Members of the chamber who have questions for the speaker will rise, and the P.O. will call on them one at a time. Once recognized, a member may ask a single question of the speaker. The speaker answers the question, then the P.O. will recognize another questioner. This continues until the time for the questioning period has elapsed.

Public Forum Debate has three crossfire periods, each lasting three minutes. In crossfire, no one controls the time; all participants may both ask and answer questions. The first two crossfire periods involve one speaker from each team; the third crossfire period, also called “grand crossfire,” involves all four debaters.

The team that speaks first in a Public Forum round has the right to ask the first question in crossfire. After the first question is answered, any of the participants in the crossfire may ask questions or provide answers. This exchange of ideas continues until the crossfire period has elapsed.

These differences in structure do produce some event-specific issues in questioning, but, for the most part, the principles and approaches are the same. Therefore, this chapter will refer to both the Congressional questioning period and the Public Forum crossfire as simply “questioning” from this point on; where event-specific points must be made, the terms “Congressional questioning” and “crossfire” will be used.

Goals of Questioning

Despite differing structures, Congressional and Public Forum debaters pursue similar goals during questioning. The structure of a debate round divides these goals into two broad areas: communicative goals and argumentative goals. Communicative goals are what a debater is trying to communicate to her judge; argumentative goals are what a debater is trying to accomplish in the debate. This duality arises from the debater's obligation to argue with her opponent while simultaneously persuading or impressing her judge. This struggle can be aggravated during questioning because, unlike during speeches, students are directly addressing their opponents. By clearly outlining the distinct goals of questioning, a debater can effectively balance these obligations.

COMMUNICATIVE GOALS

Whenever students are participating in a debate, they are attempting to communicate certain ideas to their audience and judges; questioning is no exception. During this time, they hope to achieve several communicative goals: demonstrate poise; establish perceptual control of the room, or appear to be dominant in the debate; and, get face time with the judges.

Demonstrate Poise, or A Mature Presence in the Room.

Because questioning involves direct exchanges between high school students, it can easily devolve into a less-than-appealing shouting match. This is mitigated during speeches, when debaters direct and tailor their comments to an adult judge; when debaters lose this adult filter, they may slip into more colloquial and combative forms of

expression. It is especially important, then, for debaters to maintain their poise during questioning.

In Congressional Debate questioning, questioners can accomplish this in three ways:

1. *Rise to be recognized in a controlled way.* Because there are often more questions than there is time for in a questioning period, participants often feel the need to compete with one another to be recognized. As a result, they may literally leap out of their seats when the P.O. calls for questions, often scattering papers or even upsetting their desk. A good P.O. should address this and make efforts to curtail it, but members should take the initiative and maintain their poise, keeping their roles as members of the United States Congress in mind.
2. *Directly address questions to the speaker.* When recognized by the P.O., a speaker should not immediately launch into his question; instead, he should first thank the P.O. (a simple “Thank you” will suffice) and then directly address his question to the speaker, beginning his question with a title, such as “Senator . . .” or “Representative Smith . . .” This helps participants remain calm and appear professional.
3. *Remain standing until the speaker has completed her answer.* Many questioners immediately sit down, without waiting for a reply; this suggests a lack of interest in the answer and is a sign of disrespect to the chamber.

In Public Forum crossfire, participants have a simpler concern about poise: whether or not to stand during crossfire. Although judge preferences will vary by region, speakers should always default to standing. Doing so is

more likely to produce a more formal exchange of ideas and will also help avoid the innumerable peculiarities of participants sitting in desks (tapping pens, flailing legs, disorganized desktops, etc.). If a judge directs debaters to sit during crossfire, then they should sit (the judge is always right, at least for the duration of the round); but, lacking a clear directive, they should stand and maintain their speaking posture and poise.

Establish Perceptual Control of the Room

An old debate maxim is that to win a debate, one must merely *look* like one is winning the debate. Projecting confidence throughout a debate, no matter how badly the debate may be going, is fundamental to success. Questioning offers debaters an excellent chance to accomplish this.

During a speech, the speaker has sole control over the judge's perception as no direct comparison can be made with other speakers in the room. Judges may indirectly compare a speech to others given during the debate, but the speaker is the only person to whom the judge is listening at the moment. During questioning, however, speakers are sharing time, and so questioning presents a unique opportunity to benefit (or suffer) by comparison.

In all forms of questioning, competitors must take care to project confidence. Frequently, a speaker will appear to be an entirely different person when delivering a speech and when asking a question; debaters often forget that judges consider their entire performance during a debate round, and so their delivery during questioning lacks the polish and care dedicated to their speaking. Additionally, Congressional Debate chambers are often set up with the judge in the back of the room and the seated members of the chamber facing the front; this arrangement makes

asking questions in a confident voice very important since the judge is behind the speaker.

Competitors must also maintain confidence when answering questions; all too often, a speaker will conclude a powerful and passionate speech, only to deliver meek and barely audible answers during questioning. In Congressional Debate, although other members are asking questions, the floor still belongs to the speaker, and the speaker must act accordingly. One excellent way to truly control questioning is to utilize movement. Depending on the layout of the chamber, a speaker may benefit from taking a few steps toward each questioner; the goal is not to confront or otherwise make the questioner uncomfortable, but rather to better fill the empty space at the front of the room. Congressional questioning can be an imposing scene: one speaker at the front of the chamber with as many as 23 other students rising as one, eager to ask questions and attack the speech just delivered. Using movement helps the sole speaker counter the weight of so many bodies standing against her, leveling the playing field and communicating to the judges that, though she must yield to and answer the questions of others, the floor is still definitively hers.

In Public Forum crossfire, establishing perceptual control of the room is more difficult, primarily because students cannot control or predict what their opponents will do or say. In Congressional Debate, questions and answers are controlled by the rules of the event and the P.O.; in crossfire, the flow of questions and answers is much less predictable. Debaters may be faced with opponents who monopolize the crossfire period, who refuse to answer questions, or rapidly jump from one topic to another. The quickest way for a student to *lose* perceptual control of a

crossfire is to let his emotions get the better of him; he may roll his eyes at an answer, grow angry at an answer he disagrees with, snap at his opponent for interrupting him, or whine and prevaricate when pressed on an issue. All of these behaviors communicate to the judge that the debater is an immature high school student, not a policy expert; this undermines the debater's efforts elsewhere in the round to persuade the judge of his position. Instead, speakers should be calm with angry opponents, forgiving of ignorant opponents, and resolute with aggressive opponents. These qualities demonstrate maturity and confidence and resonate with judges.

Get Face Time with the Judges

In Congressional questioning, this is difficult because the judge will often be sitting behind the chamber members. Using the techniques mentioned above to project poise and confidence, however, will help establish the speaker in the judge's mind as a mature and engaged member of the chamber. For speakers answering questions in Congressional questioning, using movement is important to remain visible to judges.

Speakers can employ an additional technique to increase their face time with the judge: when answering a question. They can begin by addressing the answer to the questioner, but finish the answer by addressing the chamber as a whole. This subtle shift in focus can pay big dividends. It communicates that the speaker appreciates the particular question asked and gives the questioner that recognition; at the same time, it demonstrates that the speaker is not subject to the questioner and will continue to be an advocate for her position to the entire chamber.

In Public Forum crossfire, participants should always remember that their primary goal is to persuade the judge to vote for them. Whenever possible, they should address both questions and answers to the judge. Doing so is very uncomfortable because a person's natural instinct is to look at the person she is addressing, and, in this case, she believes she is talking to her opponents. But it cannot be stressed enough that debaters do not win rounds by persuading their opponents—they win rounds by persuading judges. Some exceptions to this rule are covered later, but the overwhelming majority of crossfire ought to be directed toward judges.

ARGUMENTATIVE GOALS

In a debate round, debaters are invested in their arguments; they are attempting to advance a particular position or set of ideas against any opposition. Questioning is an important way to advance their arguments. Questioning has several argumentative goals, but the three primary ones are to:

1. **Clarify an idea, argument, or piece of evidence.** If something in a speech is not clear, either because the speaker is difficult to understand or the argument is just oddly phrased, a questioner may ask for a clearer explanation. These questions should be used when necessary and can often help expose a weak or poorly constructed argument. Here are some examples of clarification questions:

Representative Hannan, could you explain exactly how the Office of Management and Budget reached the conclusion you cited in your speech?

What was the second impact of your argument about poverty?"

In Public Forum crossfire, clarification questions can be especially important because speakers must answer their opponents' arguments. If a team misunderstands or misses an argument entirely, they will have difficulty responding to it later in the debate. Clarification questions are somewhat less important in Congressional questioning, because there is no burden to respond to the individual arguments of each speaker. Actually, as question time is at a premium, competitors should avoid clarification questions because they take time away from questions that engender clash and may actually frustrate fellow competitors.

2. Challenge an idea, argument, or piece of evidence.

If a competitor disagrees with an argument made in a speech, his first opportunity to attack that argument will generally come during questioning. Challenges made during questioning go a long way toward establishing control of the debate, and they put the speaker (who, presumably, was on the attack during her speech) on the defensive. Here are some examples of challenging questions:

Senator Berkman, given the number of jobs generated by these tax cuts, how will you explain the jump in unemployment to your constituents if we repeal the cuts?

If poverty is such a central concern for you, how can you justify cutting welfare?

In Congressional questioning, it can be particularly difficult to formulate effective and challenging

questions that can operate independently of follow-up questions or contextualizing comments because questioners only get one chance to challenge the speaker. In Public Forum, crafting lines of questioning that effectively challenge arguments is easier because debaters can adapt and respond to the answers they receive.

3. **Establish an idea or argument before it has been explained in a speech.** While challenging questions are often confrontational, establishing questions tend to be more collaborative. They explore an idea, and they use the speaker's own words to advance that idea. For example:

Representative Meadows, do you believe that America has an obligation to advocate for freedom in the world?

What do you believe is the most important way to evaluate impacts in this round?

Establishing questions may not pay off right away, but are designed to make later speeches easier or more meaningful.

Let's look at the sample questions more closely. Assuming that Representative Meadows answered it affirmatively, the first question would help establish a later speech detailing the ways in which the United States could or should advocate for freedom in the world. Depending on the answer, the second question would help later speeches focus on an agreed-upon standard for evaluating the round. This could help debaters avoid wasting time discussing impacts that may not factor into the judge's decision.

In Congressional Debate, questions establishing an idea can be hit or miss; participants may not get the chance to speak on a topic, and so any questions asked to establish an argument may be fruitless. In Public Forum, debaters should make liberal use of establishing questions to help focus and control the round. The more agreement that can be generated during crossfire means, somewhat paradoxically, the more *disagreement* can be explained in the speeches. If competitors start from a common premise or idea that is established in questioning, then disagreements are thrown into stark relief and can be easily evaluated by the audience.

In both Congressional and Public Forum debates, speakers need to use establishing questions with care. Competitors who consistently ask this type of question may telegraph their arguments.

Effective Questioning

Effective questioning begins with good listening. The best questions demonstrate that the questioner listened closely to the speaker and adapted to the answers given during questioning. Too many debaters ask questions just for the question's sake; they must remember that the goal of questioning is not to ask questions but to obtain answers that are useful in the debate. A powerful question can be effective on its own, but the very best debaters understand that it is the answers that matter most.

Effective questions have three characteristics:

1. *They are Brief.* Conciseness is tremendously important in questioning. In Congressional Debate, many

participants are eager to ask questions; if a competitor asks a particularly long question, he will draw the ire of his peers who lose the opportunity to ask a question as a result. In Public Forum, concise questions allow debaters to cover the most ground in crossfire and help debaters to avoid misunderstandings.

2. *They are Simple.* That is to say they are grammatically uncomplicated. Questions should have a single independent clause, and, at most, one modifying phrase or dependent clause. If questions become too complex, they fail to communicate clearly to the judge or to elicit the sought-after answer. Speakers should focus on simple sentence structure in all aspects of debate, but especially during questioning.
3. *They are Focused.* Asking brief and simple questions is easier if they are narrowly tailored to address one idea at a time. Questions that address multiple ideas are unlikely to obtain a clear answer; the speaker may jump from one idea to another, or answer only part of the question, or possibly just become too confused by the question's complexity.

Open- and Close-ended Questions

To achieve appropriate focus, debaters must understand the difference between open-ended questions and close-ended questions. Open-ended questions invite the speaker to expound on an idea; close-ended questions force the speaker to provide a simple answer, often merely "yes" or "no." Both question types can be effective, though for very different reasons.

In Public Forum crossfire, close-ended questions tend to be the most effective because crossfire is largely about controlling the flow of ideas. If competitors ask open-ended questions, they offer their opponent the chance to explain himself and fill time. Close-ended questions, though, do not allow the opponent this opportunity; they let the questioner plan and execute a series of questions that may lead to a desired conclusion.

This process is sometimes referred to as the “garden path approach,” wherein a debater will ask initially innocuous questions that have seemingly obvious answers, but result in his opponent trapping himself or eventually being forced to answer a more challenging question from a position of weakness. The questioner has led the speaker down the garden path, and the answerer does not realize the danger until it is too late.

Open-ended questions, by contrast, tend to be more useful in Congressional questioning. Because participants cannot ask follow-up questions, they will not have the opportunity to build on ideas. By asking open-ended questions, a questioner has a stronger chance of uncovering a weakness in an answer or argument; he also gets to perceptually hold the floor for a longer period. A strong question that requires a thoughtful answer showcases the questioner’s insight; a close-ended question that is satisfied by a single-word answer only results in the questioner taking his seat as the speaker comfortably moves on to the next questioner.

Asking Questions

Speakers can ask questions in several ways, some of which are more effective than others. One of the least effective approaches is to ask the speaker if she is wrong; it is surprising how often this sort of question is asked. Imagine that Ben has just spoken for three minutes on the dangers of nuclear energy. When he finishes, Sam rises and asks him “Wouldn’t you agree that nuclear energy is a smart economic investment?” Of course Ben is going to answer no, possibly by making reference to one of the many arguments he just made. This question merely offers him an additional opportunity to make his case. Sam also put Ben on the defensive by leading with a negative; when questions begin with words like “wouldn’t,” “isn’t,” and “aren’t,” they nearly guarantee that the speaker will offer a defensive and unproductive answer.

A more effective way to challenge an idea is to present the challenge as a fact and force the speaker to acknowledge a weakness. For instance, Sam might ask “Given the enormous economic returns that nuclear power generates, how do you justify the lost tax revenues that would result from this bill?” This enters challenge into the debate and forces the speaker into a difficult spot.

Alternatively, a questioner can challenge an argument by pointing out a shortcoming in its construction. For example, if Elizabeth argues that increased pressure on North Korea will produce changes in its behavior but uses evidence that does not take into account North Korea’s recent change in leadership, then Joanna might ask “Does your evidence refer to the previous North Korean regime or the current one?” This question does not explicitly present a challenge to the argument, but it does call attention to the argument’s weakness. It also achieves the ideal result

of a question: putting the speaker in a position where she must offer a simple answer that indicts her own position. Winning a debate is always easier if a debater can force her opponent to make her argument for her.

Effective Answers

Crafting effective answers in questioning involves many of the same elements as constructing effective questions. Strong answers, like strong questions, begin with effective listening. Debaters must give their full attention to the questioner and be sure they understand the question. Too many speakers are easily distracted by their own thoughts or performance and neglect to focus on the question.

Effective answers have three characteristics, two of which are same as the characteristics of effective questions:

1. **They are Brief.** Especially in Congressional questioning, answers ought to be as brief as possible while still being complete. When given the option to answer “yes” or “no,” speakers should do so. This allows for the most questions possible in each questioning period and allows the speaker to demonstrate control over many issues. In Public Forum, brief answers can be effective, but speakers should also keep in mind their goal of controlling the crossfire period. Longer answers may help to swing momentum, capture the judge’s attention, and possibly avoid being led down the garden path.
2. **They are Focused.** Answers should also be focused on the question that is asked. Speakers should try to limit their answers to the subject raised. In crossfire, debaters

may choose to expand the focus to redirect the questioning to stronger ground.

3. **They are Honest.** Speakers should answer questions truthfully and to the best of their knowledge. If a speaker does not know the answer, he should say so; if he does not know how a question is relevant, he should provide an answer and let his opponent worry about relevance.

Speakers worry far too much about appearing not to know an answer and so offer any number of ridiculous sounding prevarications (“I don’t have those numbers with me right now” or “Well, that’s a complicated issue that doesn’t have a simple answer”). These answers are generally transparent to the audience and only draw attention to the speaker’s ignorance and attempt to obfuscate. Instead, a confident “I don’t know” puts the issue to rest and may even imply that the questioner is in the wrong for asking such an unusual question. No speaker is expected to know everything nor be able to answer every question; in any event, audiences respond better to a relatable, flawed speaker than to a know-it-all.

Congressional Questioning Specifics

Congressional questioning is an excellent way for a competitor to both further debate and demonstrate to judges that she is engaged in the chamber. Participants should take advantage of every opportunity to ask meaningful questions of a speaker and should always be engaged during speeches in an attempt to craft intelligent and thought-provoking questions. Once recognized to ask a

question, questioners should remember to thank the presiding officer and directly address their questions, and then remain standing for the duration of the answer.

Despite regional variations on Congressional questioning, debaters should always avoid certain conventions. Competitors should never ask two-part questions; these steal time from other members of the chamber. Members should not preface their questions with independent citations or a brief oration; this, too, takes time away from the debate. Finally, speakers should not call on questioners; this job should always be reserved for the presiding officer. This helps ensure fairness and competitive equity.

One pernicious type of question found in Congressional Debate is the friendly or softball question. These questions simply reinforce the speaker's arguments or perhaps offer her an opportunity to talk some more with no real limits. Because competitors are often rewarded for being active in a chamber, they think that asking questions as often as possible will help raise their ranking. As a result, they ask questions even when they do not disagree with a speaker. Competitors should avoid these questions at all costs. The purpose of questioning is to produce and advance clash; friendly questions do neither. Instead, they waste the chamber's time, produce the appearance of politics, and, in the worst cases, confuse the speaker so much that he ends up disagreeing with himself. If a competitor cannot produce a challenging or interesting question, he should not ask one at all.

When answering questions, members should strive to balance their attention between the questioner and the chamber as a whole. Speakers should give proper recognition to the questioner, but must ultimately remember

that their primary task is to persuade the judge and audience as a whole, not just the questioner.

The final issue specific to Congressional questioning is a relatively new phenomenon known as “direct questioning.” In Congressional direct questioning, the presiding officer will recognize a questioner for 30 seconds; during this time, the questioner may ask any series of questions she wants. This allows the questioner to pursue one or more lines of questioning or perhaps just present several individual questions on different topics; as always, the goal is to produce further clash in the debate. Direct questioning functions like cross-examination and is controlled by the questioner. For a one-minute questioning period following a normal speech, the P.O. will recognize two questioners. Many tournaments have begun to implement direct questioning for semifinal and final sessions.

Public Forum Crossfire Specifics

Public Forum crossfire is unique among high school academic debate because it is an uncontrolled exchange: all participants are on equal footing. Consequently, managing the momentum of the crossfire is incredibly important. Speakers should strive to balance questions with answers.

The team who spoke first always asks the first question. When speaking second, many debaters initiate crossfire by offering their opponent the first question; this offer is unnecessary, as the first-speaking team has, by rule, the right to begin. After the first question though, such niceties can be an effective way to transition from questioning to answering or vice versa. Participants may follow up an answer by asking their opponents if they can ask a

question; they may also respond to an answer by asking their opponents if they have a question to ask. This discussion of the crossfire's flow as the crossfire is occurring is a useful way for students to exercise control over the momentum of questioning—rather than relying on unspoken communication or convention to dictate the flow of the crossfire, participants can more directly manage their shared time.

Participants should also be sensitive to rhythm in crossfire. A series of close-ended questions and answers should be offset with an open-ended question; debaters should not be reluctant to answer many questions in a row nor afraid to ask a rapid series of questions; working within the rhythm of the crossfire is important.

Remaining calm during crossfire is paramount. More than any other part of a Public Forum round, and probably more than any other form of debate, a crossfire can get out of hand very quickly. Participants can become angry because their opponents do not let them finish questions or answers or possibly even because their opponents do not let them *begin* questions or answers. A debater may be tempted to respond to this sort of opponent with anger or an increase in volume; instead, she should remain calm and retain the sympathy of the judge. If a speaker feels he is being bullied, he should trust that the judge notices and will take the behavior of his opponent into account. More practically, he should attempt to make his point or begin his question once or twice so that his opponent knows that he has something to say. If his opponent still does not let him get his ideas out, then he should simply wait for the opponent to stop speaking and then return to his idea.

Finally, debaters need to focus on teamwork during the third, or grand, crossfire. A team can take many possible

approaches to grand crossfire: they may evenly divide their time between them; they may allow one member, who perhaps is especially strong in crossfire, to take the lead; or they may allow the summary speaker to carry the burden so the second speaker can prepare for the final focus. Any of these approaches may work well for a team. However, perhaps the most fundamental rule for grand crossfire is that teammates should not speak over each other—communicating ideas while competing for time with one’s opponent is difficult enough. Participants should allow their teammates to finish questions and answers before adding or clarifying information.

KEY CONCEPTS

- The three communicative goals of questioning are to demonstrate poise, establish perceptual control, and get face time with the judges.
- The three argumentative goals of questioning are to clarify the arguments made, challenge those arguments, and foreshadow any new arguments being made in subsequent speeches.
- Effective questions are brief, focused, and honest.
- In Congressional Debate, competitors should avoid asking two-part questions and softball questions.
- In Public Forum crossfire, debaters must remain calm and respectful and must not attempt to speak over other competitors.