

Ten ways to improve your debating

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Rule 1: Introductions matter – start your speech in an interesting way

- First 30 seconds is so important - capture the audience and adjudicator's attention; set them up for the rest of the speech
- Particularly important at 1st Affirmative and Negative – frames the case for your side and the direction of the debate
- Starting by stating the motion is NOT interesting
- No need to introduce yourself (“My name is Sarah, and I am the...”)
- Some common devices at 1st speaker:
 - An excellent example for your side
 - Contrasting examples (your side/other side)
 - A compelling statistic
 - Your best argument summarised very succinctly
 - Summarising the imperative behind the case
- Key thing is to link back to the topic, and the case you will present – using strong, perhaps emotive language (if appropriate).
- 2nd and 3rd speakers also need to use introductions well – the adjudicator will definitely listen at the start of the speech – so use that time.
- Some common devices at 2nd and 3rd speaker (in addition to the above)
 - Concessions and/or contradictions made by the other team
 - Puncturing the other team's best example or statistic
 - Quoting particularly damaging sentences back at the other team
 - Picking up on damaging POI responses
- 2nd and 3rd speakers should crystallise the difference between the teams
- Craft your opening in advance. Dedicate time for this in prep.

Rule 2: Models are mechanisms not arguments

- A model is a plan about how you will implement a policy in the motion
- Often the basis of your model is the motion e.g “That we should ban smoking”, “That we should reintroduce the death penalty”
- Purpose of a model is to set parameters for the debate; not to become the focus of the debate. Debating is fundamentally about arguments and ideas.
- Should be simple, short and understandable. Don't cover everything you can think of but rather, what questions would an ordinary reasonable person ask about how your model would work in practice?
- Always helpful if your model has been implemented somewhere and been a success – reference that.
- Once established, need to defend throughout the debate.

Affirmative:

- Move from model to your arguments. Model is a platform for *arguments*.
- Don't:
 - Split your model to second (unfair)

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- Introduce model too late – should be in first 2-3 minutes of speech
- Make it too detailed/complex – 3 or 4 points is all that is necessary

Example of model: “That we should legalise marijuana”

- Marijuana will be legal to purchase and sell
- Minimum age of 18
- Will be taxed by government and sold at licenced outlets only

Negative:

- Attacking the model can be effective; but only when that is phrased as an argument.
 - e.g “The affirmative said that a legal market for marijuana would allow the government to set quality standards; but all that will happen is that gangs will undercut the legal market”.
 - e.g “The affirmative model of paying teachers based on students’ test scores is unfair and will result in teachers “teaching to the test”
- “Nit-picking” or “question-raising” attacks on models get you nowhere e.g “will the affirmative vaccinate people who are allergic?”, “will you subsidise vaccinations for the poor?”
- Should always remember the task is to attack the ideas underlying the proposal
- Look for mileage out of a super-safeguarded model eg in euthanasia debates.

Rule 3: Think in terms of arguments

- Asking the “why” question in preparation – why should we adopt what we are proposing? What benefits come from what we are proposing? Why is the proposal a bad idea?
- Individual then group brainstorming is helpful for this
- Don’t get hung-up on the “problem/model/solution” formula – often see people list all the problems, then the model, then all the benefits (which just recapitulate the problems). Better to go, model – arguments.
- “Problems” are just arguments – e.g “By legalising marijuana we will improve the quality and safety of marijuana, because it will be out of the hands of criminal gangs, and sold by responsible retailers”
- Should try to have 3-5 arguments. There is no magic number – whatever is appropriate
- No point in having an argument if it cannot be fully developed
- Each argument should answer the “why” question in relation to the topic.
- Create a “tag-line” for each argument – easily repeatable, succinct but compelling phrases that can be repeated by each speaker
- Team splits: divide material up by tag-lined arguments. Splits are often vague and give impression case will not develop/be fleshed out.
- Don’t:
 - Split on “economic/social/political” grounds
 - Split material to 3rd negative

Rule 4: Structure your speech

- Adjudicators often talk a lot about “structure” – for good reason.
- Structure just means having an organisation to your speech – no more than that.
- The easier your speech is to follow, the more likely it is it will be followed
- “Tell us what you are going to say, say it, then tell us you’ve said it”.
- Sign-posting: makes sure everyone knows where you are going
 - Signal you are turning from introduction to rebuttal, rebuttal to substantive, substantive to conclusion, etc.

- Signal which point you are rebutting
- Signal which substantive point you are making
- Third speakers: Don't rebut speaker-by-speaker or in a scattergun way
- Instead, rebut the major arguments of the other side, and how they clash with yours (ie, the major "issues" or the major arguments of the debate)
- Introduce those issues at the start of your speech and move through methodically.

Rule 5: Allocate your time effectively and fulfil your speaker role

- Timing is crucial and an important part of strategy.
- 1st affirmatives: don't fall into trap of spending too long on the set-up – you must put matter onto the table.
- 1st negatives: you must develop a case as well as rebut, so you must only spend 2-3 minutes on rebuttal – *no more*.
- 2nd affirmatives: very easy to spend too long on rebuttal and not advance the affirmative case – *don't do it*.
- 2nd negatives: the trickiest position. 4 mins of rebuttal and 4 mins of substantive. Often the 2nd negative substantive is the debate turner.
- 3rd speakers: ideally should have no substantive material. Rebut major issues/arguments in terms of importance.
- All speakers should try and finish as close to 8 minutes as possible.

Rule 6: Always prioritise and develop your rebuttal

- It is common to see speakers respond to an argument in only one or two short sentences only
- In rebutting a point you need to
 - Answer the point: provide the succinct initial response to the point
 - Explain what you mean in further detail / bolster your response with an example or analogy
 - Link the rebuttal back to the case: "so what this shows us..."
- Don't forget to listen to the points made at the back end of a speech – these can often be overlooked. Make your team mates help you.
- Prioritise: move through points in descending order of importance.
- Get maximum value from your arguments – if your opponents can't respond or choose not to – point it out.
- Particularly important for 2nd speakers but 3rd speakers and reply speakers should weave this into their material.

Rule 7: Don't neglect manner

- Three C's: confidence, clarity, and control.
- Be confident: counts for so much. Confident speakers are good to listen to and persuasive. Use eye contact, avoid over-use of notes, look professional and polished (even if you are a nervous wreck!)
- Clarity: be clear about what you are saying. Choose your words carefully. Pause. Light and shade.
- Control: Try and avoid verbal crutches ("ladies and gentlemen"). Don't speak too quickly.
- Try and feed off the crowd – if you have one!
- Always make it seem like you care about the issue – even if you don't!
- Humour is great. "Ridicule rebuttal" can be very effective.
- Never get personal with the other team.
- Don't "meta-debate"

Rule 8: Make your points of information count

- POIs are a scarce resource – you will likely get only 2-3 per speech of the opposition, so you need to make them count.
- The best POIs:
 - highlight a contradiction in the opposition's case
 - highlight a fatal weakness
 - deliver an example which thoroughly undermines their argument.
- Avoid asking POIs to clarify a point being made by the speaker
- POIs are a chance to force your opponent onto the back foot by forcing them to deal with something unexpected – so don't just use spontaneously in response to a point being made (although tempting) – save for rebuttal.
- 3rd speaker in prep room should think up 3-5 “killer” POIs. Have them on a sheet that all team members can use (this also means you will think in prep room about critical issues, opposition weaknesses, etc).
- Know exactly what you are going to say before you stand-up – delivery is important – even write out a POI word for word if necessary
- You have only 15 seconds – be succinct. If you can't get it out in 15 seconds, think about it as a rebuttal point instead.
- Always phrase as a question – “do you accept...”, “Isn't it true that...”

Rule 9: Control the floor

- Most important principle when accepting, answering and declining POIs from the opposing team is *control the floor*.
- Take two POIs.
- Rough guide: 1st speakers should take both after set-up and rebuttal; 2nd speakers should take one during rebuttal and one during substantive; 3rd speakers should just space them out.
- Take them on your strongest material
- Take them at appropriate times: at end of a sentence, or (ideally) at the end of a point (although don't leave speakers hanging for too long)
- Make sure you actually *answer* the POI
- Techniques for when you can't: “yes but the real question is”, “but that is outweighed by”, “I don't think that is the main issue”.
- Declining POIs: Waving people down is fine (politely), “no thanks”, “declined”, etc. Wait until end of sentence or end of point.

Rule 10: End your speech well

- All speeches should end with a brief summary of what you have said.
- Best speeches summarise at what point the debate is at and the status of the teams at that point.
- Summaries should point out the deficiencies in the opposition's case, the best points of your case and leave challenges for the next speaker to take up – this sow seeds of doubt in adjudicator's mind.
- It can be effective to link back to your introduction if it was particularly effective – “Let me return to where I started. This debate is about...” etc.
- Try and finish on the 8 minute bell – this looks particularly effective.