

HOW TO DEBATE

What is Debating?

A debate is a structured argument. Two sides speak alternately for and against a particular contention usually based on a topical issue. Unlike the arguments you might have with your family or friends, however, each person is allocated a time they are allowed to speak for and any interjections are carefully controlled. The subject of the dispute is often prearranged so you may find yourself having to support opinions with which you do not normally agree. You also have to argue as part of a team, being careful not to contradict what others on your side have said.

Why debate?

It is an excellent way of improving speaking skills and is particularly helpful in providing experience in developing a convincing argument. Those of you who are forced to argue against your natural point of view realize that arguments, like coins, always have at least two sides.

The Basic Debating Skills

Style

Style is the manner in which you communicate your arguments. This is the most basic part of debating to master. Content and strategy are worth little unless you deliver your material in a confident and persuasive way.

Speed

It is vital to talk at a pace which is fast enough to sound intelligent and allow you time to say what you want, but slow enough to be easily understood.

Tone

Varying tone is what makes you sound interesting. Listening to one tone for an entire presentation is boring.

Volume

Speaking quite loudly is sometimes a necessity, but it is by no means necessary to shout through every debate regardless of context. There is absolutely no need speak any more loudly than the volume at which everyone in the room can comfortably hear you. Shouting does not win debates. Speaking too quietly is clearly disastrous since no one will be able to hear you.

Clarity

The ability to concisely and clearly express complex issues is what debating is all about. The main reason people begin to sound unclear is usually because they lose the "stream of

thought" which is keeping them going. It is also important to keep it simple. While long words may make you sound clever, they may also make you incomprehensible.

Use of notes and eye contact

Notes are essential, but they must be brief and well organized to be effective. There is absolutely no point in trying to speak without notes. Of course, notes should never become obtrusive and damage your contact with the audience, nor should they ever be read from verbatim. Most people sketch out the main headings of their speech, with brief notes under each.

When writing notes for rebuttal during the debate, it is usually better to use a separate sheet of paper so you can take down the details of what the other speakers have said and then transfer a rough outline onto the notes you will actually be using.

Eye contact with the audience is very important, but keep shifting your gaze. No one likes to be stared at.

Content

Content is what you actually say in the debate. The arguments used to develop your own side's case and rebut the opposite side's. The information on content provided below is a general overview of what will be expected when you debate. **The final logistics of how long you will be debating, how many people will be in your group, and how the debate will unfold (ie: which team speaks first etc.), will all be decided by your tutorial leader.**

Case (argument)- the whole

Introduction - The case your group is making must be outlined in the introduction. This involves stating your main arguments and explaining the general thrust of your case. This must be done briefly since the most important thing is to get on and actually argue it. It is also a good idea to indicate the aspects of the subject to be discussed by each of the team members.

Conclusion - At the end, once everyone has spoken, it is useful to briefly summarize what your group has said and why.

Case (argument)- the parts

Having outlined the whole of your argument, you must then begin to build a case (the parts). The best way to do this is to divide your case into between two and four arguments (or divide your case based on the number of people in your group). You must justify your arguments with basic logic, worked examples, statistics, and quotes. Debating is all about the strategy of "proof". Proof, or evidence, supporting your assertion is what makes it an argument. There are a number of ways of dividing up cases according to groups of arguments (eg political/economic/social or moral/practical or international/regional etc.) or just according to individual arguments if you can't group any together. Under each of these basic headings you should then explain the reasoning behind the argument and justify it using the methods outlined above. It is usually best to put the most important arguments first. Here is an example of a case outline:

"The media exert more influence over what people think than the government does. This is true for **three** reasons. **Firstly**, most people base their votes on what they see and hear in the media. **Secondly**, the media can set the political agenda between elections by deciding what issues to report and in how much detail. **Thirdly**, the media have successfully demonized politicians over the last ten years so that now people are more likely to believe journalists than politicians."

All of the arguments in this case outline are debatable (almost immediately you can see the counter-arguments), but they give the case a wide range which cover all kinds of issues. The trick is not to come up with a watertight case, but a well argued one. Think: "Can I argue that?"

Rebuttal – the parts

Arguments can be factually, morally or logically flawed. They may be misinterpretations or they may also be unimportant or irrelevant. A team may also contradict one another or fail to complete the tasks they set themselves. These are the basics of rebuttal and almost every argument can be found wanting in at least one of these respects. Here are a few examples:

1. "Compulsory euthanasia at age 70 would save the country money in pensions and healthcare." This is true, but is morally flawed.
2. "Banning cigarette product placement in films will cause more young people to smoke because it will make smoking more mysterious and taboo." This is logically flawed, the ban would be more likely to stop the steady stream of images which make smoking seem attractive and glamorous and actually reduce the number of young people smoking.
3. "My partner will then look at the economic issues..." "Blah..blah..blah...(5 minutes later and still no mention of the economic issues)" This is a clear failure to explain a major part of the case and attention should be drawn to it. Even better is when a speaker starts with, "to win this debate there are three things I must do...". If the speaker fails to do any of those things you can then hang her or him by the noose by repeating their exact words – by his or her own admission he or she cannot have won the debate.

Rebuttal – the whole:

It is very important to have a good perspective of the debate and to identify what the key arguments are. It isn't enough to rebut a few random arguments here and there. Of course the techniques used above are invaluable but they must be used appropriately. There are a number of things you should do to systematically break down a team's case:

1. Ask yourself how the other side have approached the case. Is their methodology flawed?
2. Consider what tasks the other side set themselves (if any) and whether they have in fact addressed these.
3. Consider what the general emphasis of the case is and what assumptions it makes. Try to refute these.
4. Take the main arguments and do the same thing. It is not worth repeating a point of rebuttal that has been used by someone else already, but you can refer to it to show that the argument has not stood up. It is not necessary to correct every example used. You won't have time and your aim is to show the other side's case to be flawed in the key areas.

Sources

The information included in the document "How to Debate" was adapted from:

Kidd, A. (2002). The Oxford Union rough guide to debating. *The English Speaking Union*. Retrieved August 26, 2002 from the World Wide Web:

http://www.britishdebate.com/resources/hb_oxfordguide.htm