
Basic Debating Skills.

- What is a debate ?
- What is a topic ?
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- The Team Line
- The Roles of the Speakers
- What is Matter ?
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- What is Method ?
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A DEBATE.

A debate is, basically, an argument. That is not to say that it is an undisciplined shouting match between parties that passionately believe in a particular point of view. In fact the opposite is true. Debating has strict rules of conduct and quite sophisticated arguing techniques and you will often be in a position where you will have to argue the opposite of what you believe in.

THE TOPIC.

If a debate is a form of argument then it logically follows that there must be something to argue about. This is called the TOPIC. The topic changes from debate to debate. They are often about current issues of public importance ("That Canberra should have self government") or about general philosophies or ideas ("That beauty is better than brains"). All topics begin with the word "That". As in other arguments there are two sides to any topic. The team that agrees with the topic is called the AFFIRMATIVE (or the 'government' in parliamentary debating) and the team that disagrees with the topic is called the NEGATIVE (or the 'opposition' in parliamentary debating). When organising a debate it is important to

select a topic that is appropriate to the age and education of the debaters concerned. Often topics will cover areas that the debaters have a specific interest in or, in the case of school debates, that have been covered in classes or are current news items. [Click here](#) for a list of possible topics from the Queensland Debating Union.

DEFINITION.

If a debate is going to take place then it must be agreed in advance what the debate is going to be about. Thus it must be agreed what the topic means. This may seem obvious in a topic like "That Canberra should have self government" but with something like "That a cabbage is better than a rose" is might not be so clear. Deciding and explaining what a topic means is called 'defining the topic'. The job of defining begins with the AFFIRMATIVE. The first speaker of the affirmative must explain in clear terms what they believe the topic means. In deciding this the affirmative team should always try to use the "person on the street" test. That is if this topic were presented to the average person on the street - is this what they would take it to mean. Where the topic is too obscure to allow this test then apply the 'reasonability' test. The affirmative team should ask themselves "Is this definition reasonable ? Is it something the average person might expect ? Does it allow for both sides of the debate ?". If you can answer yes to these questions then the definition is probably reasonable, if not search for something more reasonable. Try to avoid the dictionary, except in cases where you don't understand a word. In your definition explain the meaning of the whole topic rather than each separate word.

The negative team may agree with or choose to challenge the definition presented. The negative team should be very careful about challenging as it is difficult to continue the debate with two definitions. Challenges may be made if the definition given is unreasonable or if it defines the opposition out of the debate. If the negative team chooses to challenge the definition it should be done by the first speaker who should clearly outline why the negative is challenging and then propose a better definition.

TEAM LINE.

Because debating is a team event it is important that the three speakers work together as a team. The TEAM LINE is the basic statement of "why the topic is true" (for the affirmative) and "why the topic is false" (for the negative). It should be a short sentence, presented by the first speaker of each team and used by the other two speakers to enforce the idea of teamwork.

THE ROLES OF THE SPEAKERS.

In a debating team each speaker has specified roles that they must fulfil to play their part in the team. They are laid out below in the order that the speakers will speak.

1st Affirmative must:

- define the topic.
- present the affirmative's team line.
- outline briefly what each speaker in their team will talk about.
- present the first half of the affirmative case.

1st negative must:

- accept or reject the definition. If you don't do this it is assumed that you accept the definition.
- present the negative team line.
- outline briefly what each of the negative speakers will say.
- rebut a few of the main points of the first affirmative speaker.
- the 1st negative should spend about one quarter of their time rebutting.
- present the first half of the negative team's case.

2nd affirmative must:

- reaffirm the affirmative's team line.
- rebut the main points presented by the 1st negative.
- the 2nd affirmative should spend about one third of their time rebutting.
- present the second half of the affirmative's case.

2nd negative must:

- reaffirm the negative's team line.
- rebut some of the main points of the affirmative's case.
- the 2nd negative should spend about one third of their time rebutting.
- present the second half of the negative's case.

3rd affirmative must:

- reaffirm the affirmative's team line.
- rebut all the remaining points of the negative's case.
- the 3rd affirmative should spend about two thirds to three quarters of their time rebutting.

- present a summary of the affirmative's case.

- round off the debate for the affirmative.

3rd negative must:

- reaffirm the negative's team line.

- rebut all the remaining points of the affirmative's case.

- the 3rd negative should spend about two thirds to three quarters of their time rebutting.

- present a summary of the negative's case.

- round off the debate for the negative.

Neither third speaker may introduce any new parts of their team's cases.

REBUTTAL.

In debating each team will present points in favour of their case. They will also spend some time criticising the arguments presented by the other team. This is called rebuttal. There are a few things to remember about rebuttal.

1. Logic - to say that the other side is wrong is not enough. You have to show why the other side is wrong. This is best done by taking a main point of the other side's argument and showing that it does not make sense. Because a lot of the thinking for this needs to be done quickly this is one of the most challenging and enjoyable aspects of debating.

2. Pick the important points - try to rebut the most important points of the other side's case. You will find that after a while these are easier and easier to spot. One obvious spot to find them is when the first speaker of the other team outlines briefly what the rest of the team will say. But do not rebut those points until after they have actually been presented by the other team.

3. 'Play the ball' - do not criticise the individual speakers, criticise what they say. To call someone fat, ugly or a nerd does not make what they say wrong and it will also lose you marks.

TECHNIQUES : THE INDIVIDUAL SPEAKER.

There are many techniques that each speaker can use in their speech but there are three main areas that you will be marked on and they are matter, method and manner.

MATTER.

Matter is what you say, it is the substance of your speech. You should divide your matter into arguments and examples.

An argument is a statement "The topic is true (or false depending on which side you are on) because of x", where the argument fills in for the x. For example in the topic "That the zoos should be closed" an argument may be: "the zoos should be closed because they confine the animals in an unnatural environment".

An example is a fact or piece of evidence which supports an argument. If our argument is: "that zoos should be closed because they confine the animals in an unnatural environment" then an example might be: "that in the lion cage at Taronga Park Zoo in Sydney the animals only have about 200 square metres where in the wild they would have 2000 square kilometres to roam in."

Any examples that you use should be relevant to the topic at hand. Examples which have very little or nothing to do with the topic only make a speech look weak and lacking substance.

Matter cannot be just a long list of examples. You do not win a debate by creating the biggest pile of facts. Facts are like bricks in a wall, if you don't use them, cement them together properly then they are useless. Similarly you cannot win a debate solely by proving that some of the facts of the opposition are wrong. It may weaken their case a little, the same way that removing some of the bricks from a wall will, but you really need to attack the main arguments that the other side presents to bring the whole wall crashing down.

Many debates are on currently important issues so it is good for any debater to keep themselves informed of what is happening in the world around them and what are the issues involved. Watching the news helps (but watch a credible broadcast like the ABC, you are hardly likely to get a topic on some heartwarming story about a lost cat in western Sydney) as does reading a good paper or periodical like the Canberra Times or the Sydney Morning Herald.

METHOD.

Where matter is what you say method is how you organise what you say. There are many delicious pieces of the method pie; here are a few tantalising crumbs.....

1. TEAM. Good team method involves unity and logic. Unity is created by all members being aware of the definition, what the other speakers have said and what the team line is. Each member of the team needs to reinforce the team line and be consistent with what has already been said and what will be said by the other members of their team. You may as well shoot yourself in the foot as change the team line mid debate just because you think it isn't working. Your team will look poorly organised and will be severely penalised by the adjudicator.

2. INDIVIDUAL. You must structure your own speech well. The first step is to have a clear idea of your own arguments and which examples you will be using to support those arguments. As you speak make a clear division between arguments and let the audience know

when you are moving from one argument to the next, this is called sign posting and is a very important debating tool. The key thing to remember is that although you know exactly what you are saying the audience has never heard it before and will only hear it once so you have to be very clear about it.

When you are presenting one particular argument make sure that the argument is logical (makes sense) and that you make clear links between your team line and the argument, and between the argument and the examples that you will use to support it.

Rebuttal should be organised the same way. Attack each argument that the opposition presents in turn. Spend a little while on each and then move on to the next. That way the other team's case is completely demolished.

Also organise your speech well in terms of time. Adjudicators can pick up when you are waffling just to fill in time and can see when you've spent too long on one point and then have to rush through all your other points and rebuttal just to finish your speech in time. Whew!! You will probably make a few mistakes with this early on but practice makes perfect.

MANNER.

Manner is how you present what you say and there are various aspects of manner that you need to be aware of. There is no one prescribed way of presenting your argument. It is not true, no matter what Paul Keating thinks, that the best way of being convincing is to shout and thump on the table. The best advice you can get is to develop a manner style that is natural to you. Here are some tips and pointers.

1. CUE CARDS. Do not write out your speech on cue cards. There is even a current, and indeed deplorable, trend towards computer generated cue cards. Debating is an exercise in lively interaction between two teams and between the teams and the audience, not in reading a speech. Use cue cards the same way you would use a prompt in a play, they are there for reference if you lose your spot. You can tell when someone is reading.. remember the television announcements by the politicians in the recent ACT elections?

2 EYE CONTACT. Is very closely related to cue cards. If you look at the audience you will hold their attention. If you spend your time reading from cue cards or looking at a point just above the audience's head they will lose concentration very quickly. When you've got them by the eyeballs their hearts and minds will follow.

3 VOICE. There are many things you can do with your voice to make it effective. You must project so that you can be heard but 4 minutes of constant shouting will become very annoying very quickly. (Like a butcher shouting out the daily specials). Use volume, pitch and speed to emphasise important points in your speech. A sudden loud burst will grab your audience's attention while a period of quiet speaking can draw your audience in and make them listen carefully.

4. BODY. "Work it baby, work it!". (Although any other links between the movie Pretty Woman and debating end here ! Your body is a tool for you to use. Make hand gestures deliberately and with confidence (a fine example of someone who can't is that idiot on the Canberra Toyota ads at the moment). Move your head and upper body to maintain eye contact with all members of the audience (although automatically moving your head from side to side makes the adjudicator want to pop a ping-pong ball in there). If you want to walk up and down do so but move with effect and deliberately, don't wear worry lines into the carpet. If you are going to stand still, stand with confidence. Don't let your body apologise for your presence by appearing nervous.

5 NERVOUS HABITS. Avoid them like the plague. Playing with your cue cards, pulling on a stray strand of hair, fiddling with your watch, bouncing up and down on the balls of your feet or bouncing your cue cards off the nose of the nearest audience member as you are finished with them only distracts from your presentation. Use your whole person to effect, don't let any one thing detract from your ability to persuade the audience.

6 ELOCUTION AND OTHER BIG WORDS. This is not an exercise in grammar or elocution. Try to avoid being too informal but don't go overboard the other way. There are no marks to be gained from trying to use big words you don't understand or can't pronounce. In the same way it is a huge mistake to let someone else write your speech. People that do that aren't entering the spirit or developing the skills of debating and end up looking really silly getting stuck on a word they just can't say.

THE MARKING SCHEME.

Every adjudicator marks to a standard. You will get a mark out of 40 for matter, 40 for manner and 20 for method, a mark out of 100 total. The average for any speaker is 75 and most marks won't go much outside 6 or 7 marks either side of that. Don't spend your debating life worrying about numbers, like most statistics they are meaningless unless you understand the reasons behind them. Adjudicators are friendly people who will happily speak with you after the debate and tell you about your individual performance.
