

Judging Debates

The Middle School Public Debate Program Judge Certification Manual

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Judging Manual
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Introduction to Debate

In a middle school debate, there are two teams competing against each other. Every debate has a different topic. The topic is otherwise known as the *motion* for debate. Once the motion for the debate is announced, debaters will have 20 minutes to prepare their arguments. This 20-minute period is known as preparation time, or *prep time*. Before the topic is announced, *pairings* are posted in a public area used by the tournament for administration and collective announcements. The pairings tell teams which side they will represent in the upcoming debate, which room they will debate in, and who their judge will be. A pairing sheet might look like this:

Claremont McKenna Invitational, Round 3 – Topic Announcement at 1:30 PM

Room	Proposition	Opposition	Judge
1	Desert Springs ABC	Frisbie DEF	B. Walters
2	Townsend GHI	Canyon Hills JKL	K. Couric
3	La Contenta MNO	Northview PQR	T. Brokaw
4	Nicolet STU	Eliot VWX	P. Jennings

Once you find your name on a pairing, collect your ballot from a tournament administrator. Several sample ballots are included in this packet. The ballot is your primary means of evaluating the debate you are assigned to judge.

As you can tell from the sample pairing above, there are two sides in every debate. One team is called the “proposition” team. They argue *for* the motion for debate. They do this by making a case for the motion. It is important to note here that the proposition team does not have to defend that the motion is true in all cases. They just have to provide a case for the motion and defend that case successfully against opposition attacks. To win the debate, this team needs to prove a case for the motion.

The other team is called the “opposition” team. As their name suggests, this team opposes the case made by the proposition team. To win the debate, this team needs to disprove the case made for the motion.

Every team has three debaters. Each debater gives one speech, so there are six speeches in each debate. The first four speeches in a debate are called *constructive* speeches. In these speeches, debaters work to construct their arguments while refuting the arguments of the

other side. The last two speeches are called *rebuttal* speeches. These speeches are each side's last chance to show why their side should win the debate. These speeches should continue the process of refutation. The best rebuttal speakers deal with all of the arguments that have been made in the debate so far and show why the balance of the arguments mean that their side should win.

The order of the speeches is as follows:

First Proposition Constructive- 5 minutes
First Opposition Constructive- 5 minutes
Second Proposition Constructive- 5 minutes
Second Opposition Constructive- 5 minutes
Opposition Rebuttal- 3 minutes
Proposition Rebuttal- 3 minutes

Points of Information

One of the unique features of this kind of debating is the use of *points of information*. A point of information is a request to the speaker who holds the floor to yield some of her time for a point by the opposing team. Debaters must apply for points of information. Usually, the way this works is a debater will rise during an opponent's speech. This act of standing indicates that a debater is applying for a point of information. This is not the only way to apply for a point of information – debaters may also rise and extend a hand, or rise and say “point of information,” “on that point,” or “information, please.” All of these attempts are acceptable.

The speaker may then choose to accept or reject the application for a point of information. If she does not want to take the point, she says “No, thank you.” This means the person applying for a point of information must sit back down, as she does not have the floor. If the speaker chooses to take the point, she may say, “Yes, I'll take your point,” or “Your point?” or just “Yes?”

Once the speaker has accepted a point of information, the person making the point has 15 seconds to ask a question of the speaker or make a statement. Once the person making the point has made her point, she must sit down, as she no longer has the floor. It is important to note that the speaking time of the debater with the floor *continues* during the point of information.

There are no limits to the number of points any side may try to make during a debate. There are also no rules about the minimum or maximum number of points a speaker must accept during her presentation.

There are, however, two rules about points of information that you must remember when you are judging:

- Points of information are only permitted in the constructive speeches.
- In the constructive speeches, points of information are only permitted in the *middle three* minutes of each speech. The first and last minute of each speech are called *protected time*, and debaters may not make points of information during this time.

Other than these rules, there are no other rules about points of information.

Heckling

Heckling is permitted in middle school debates. Heckling, done well, improves debates by increasing interaction among participants and making the debate more dynamic. Debaters may use positive heckles – they may, for example, knock on the table or say, “hear, hear” to signify their support for an argument made by the speaker. Positive heckles should be done judiciously and used with care. Debaters should avoid disruptive behavior during the debate. If debaters do behave in a disruptive manner, you may deduct *speaker points* from their total (more on speaker points later in this document).

Debaters may also use negative heckles, although they should use them judiciously. They may, for example, say “shame” in a low voice to signify their strong feeling that a speaker has misrepresented one of their arguments. Debaters should, however, *not* use negative heckles when they simply disagree with a speaker – that’s why we have debates, after all.

Refutation and the Importance of Clash

Good debates are debates where there is an abundance of *clash* between arguments and opposing sides. It is not enough for debaters to simply deliver impassioned speeches about their side of a motion. Debaters must also directly refute the arguments made by the other side and show why the balance of arguments means that their side wins.

To this end, we teach debaters to use a simple process for four-step refutation. Debaters should take care to address the arguments made by their opponents, and they may choose to employ this simple process of refutation:

1. “They say...” (briefly repeats the argument of the other side)
2. “But we disagree...” (answers the argument of the other side)
3. “Because...” (gives a reason for her disagreement or counterargument)
4. “Therefore....” (explains what the consequence of winning this argument is)

Good debaters engage in refutation throughout the debate, as arguments develop and evolve in response to responses by each team. Debaters must engage the arguments of the other side throughout the debate if they hope to win. Thus, the process of each debate is a process of clashing with the arguments of the other side.

Argument Extension

The twin of refutation is argument extension. Argument extension is what happens in debates when an argument is developed by subsequent speakers. Let’s say that one team

makes the argument that the proposed plan will cripple the economy. Then the proposition team answers that argument. Argument extension occurs when the subsequent speaker *extends* the original argument by answering the objections to the argument and re-iterating the argument, possibly developing it through new examples.

Debaters should extend the arguments made by their teammates, although they are of course free to make their own new arguments and to offer new examples to prove their side of the debate (the exception is new arguments in the rebuttal speeches – see “New Arguments” for further explanation).

In good debates, arguments grow through the process of extension – debaters answer the objections from the other side and use those objections as springboards to flesh out their side’s position.

Use of Evidence in Debates

In middle school debates, debaters are encouraged to use evidence. Evidence is critical to making a good argument. One of the skills we are trying to teach debaters is using facts, examples, and other evidence to prove their points. This is an important skill because it teaches students to make informed arguments with good reasoning and grounding in facts and experience.

Debaters may conduct considerable research on topics and topic areas before a tournament. They may also receive considerable coaching prior to a debate. However, any published information (dictionaries, magazines, etc) that may have been consulted before the debate cannot be brought into the debating chambers for use during the debate. No published materials may be used during debates. Debaters may use any notes or outlines they create during the preparation time between the announcement of the topic for debate and the start of the debate.

In other words, debaters may have pre-prepared speeches on topics but they *may not* use those pre-prepared speeches or issue briefs in the debate itself. They may, however, use their prep time to transcribe relevant parts of those notes for use in debates.

New Arguments

Debaters should not make new arguments in the rebuttals. This is a rule, but is also a strategic concern. Entirely new arguments made in the last proposition speech are unfair to the opposition team, as they do not have a subsequent opportunity to answer these arguments. In other words, it would not be fair for the final proposition speaker to present entirely new arguments justifying their case in the last rebuttal – the opposition team would have no opportunity to respond to these arguments.

Now we need to ask: what is a new argument? If an argument has a foundation in the constructives, it is not a new argument. If this is the rebuttal speaker’s first opportunity to answer an argument, their response is not a new argument. A new argument is an entirely

new line of reasoning without any foundation in the constructive speeches that is presented in the rebuttal speeches.

If there is an argument introduced one of the opening speeches of the debate, and that argument is abandoned until the rebuttal speeches, when it is brought up again, that is also considered a new argument.

What should you do, as a judge, when you hear new arguments in the rebuttal speeches? The best thing to do is to take note of the newness of the argument as it is delivered. Then, you should not let new arguments factor into your decision.

Guide to Judging Debates

Introduction to Judging

One of the things that distinguishes debate from simple argument is that in debate, you are trying to persuade a third party – sometimes, many third parties, if there is a panel of judges or an extended audience. In competitive debates, the judge is the person who is responsible for deciding who wins and loses a debate. The judge also assigns a range of points to individual debaters or teams of debaters.

After the debate, the judge tells the debaters how they voted and why they voted that way. The judge also explains her decision on a paper ballot. These ballots are distributed to the participating teams and their coaches at the conclusion of the tournament.

There are as many ways of judging debates as there are ways of debating. Judges should work to cultivate their own styles and methods of evaluating debates. They should work with debaters to create a learning community that will benefit everyone.

The Fine Art of Judging

When you judge a debate, you are usually asked to decide which team won the debate and why. It is important to remember that the team that wins the debate may not always be the better debate team – instead, they were the better debate team *in the debate that you watched*. Even the best world-class debate teams have critical slip-ups every now and again. You should try to be fair and judge each debate based on its own merits, rather than on speculation, past performances in debate rounds, or other factors.

It is easy to be intimidated by the enterprise of judging debates. You may feel unprepared or under-experienced, especially compared to the debaters, who may seem very professional and experienced. In reality, you are (no matter what your experience level) perfectly prepared to judge a debate. Even if you have never seen a debate before, you can still render a thoughtful and informed decision based only on your engaged participation. Middle school debates are meant to be entertaining and accessible to judges and audiences of all experience levels, so even if you are a novice judge, you will fit right in. You will also learn to be a better judge as you watch and judge more debates. You have to start somewhere, so don't be intimidated. All you have to do is make the best decision you can make.

Everyone recognizes, though, that some decisions are better than others are. Debaters have a tendency to be opinionated. Judges also hold opinions. In fact, just about everyone is likely to be opinionated about something. Holding opinions is normal, healthy, and in the interest of building lively communities. There is, however, a difference between having opinions and

forcing them on others at the expense of reasoned debate and discussion. We recommend that when you judge you make an effort to maintain an open mind about the arguments and examples used as evidence in the debate. Open-mindedness is not so much an issue of surrendering convictions as it is a matter of respecting the debaters' opinions and efforts. It is important to remember that middle school debate is switch-side debating. That means that, on occasion, you may have the opportunity to watch debaters defending a side contrary to what they (or you) might otherwise agree with.

**Be open-minded
and fair to both
teams.**

What do we mean when we say that some decisions are better than others are? A good decision is one that relies on a consistent, fair method of deliberation. In order to judge fairly, you need to keep a few things in mind:

- *Identify your biases* and resist them rather than surrender to them.
- *Apply reciprocal standards* for evaluating arguments. In other words, don't identify an error made by one team and hold it against them when the other team or teams makes the same error. Make your judging standards relevant and fairly applied to all debate participants.
- *Presume that the debaters are acting in good faith.* Resist the temptation to read intention into their perceived mistakes. If a debater makes a factual error in the debate, she may not know that she is wrong. Do not assume, for example, that she is being deceitful or is in some way trying to put something over on you.
- *Be patient.* The debaters may, during the course of a given debate, do a good many things to annoy or otherwise irritate you. They are probably not doing these things on purpose.
- *Give debaters the benefit of the doubt* about their choices – they may not make the choices you would, but that's okay. Debates are an opportunity to create a place where bright critical thinkers can imagine, analyze, and innovate. If you do not give them the benefit of the doubt, you could end up stifling their creativity or substituting your sense of creativity for theirs.
- *Do not pre-interpret the topic.* Debaters get a topic for debate and then it is *their* task to interpret that topic. It is their interpretation that gets debated. When you hear the topic, you might think that the topic should be interpreted a different way. Do not impose your opinions about this issue on debaters. If they do not choose to interpret the topic in the manner you would have interpreted it, that should not be relevant to the outcome of the debate.

Good decisions are reached fairly with appropriate and adequate deliberation on the issues and arguments that are presented in the debate. Good judges know and follow the rules of the particular format and tournament.

How should you conduct yourself in a debate? We have already told debaters that they should not treat the judge as if she were merely a passive info-receptacle propped up at the back of the room with a pen and a ballot. Just as the debaters should conduct themselves appropriately towards the judge, so too should you conduct yourself appropriately towards the debaters. The following is a list of “Don’ts” for aspiring and experienced debate judges:

- Do not talk about how the debate is going during the debate. Although you are a participant in the debate, your role should be primarily nonverbal until after it is finished.
- Do not penalize debaters who speak in accents other than your own. Take into consideration that for some debaters, English may not be their native tongue.
- Do not usurp the role of the judge for personal whim (e.g., "you must use the words ‘x, y, z’ in the course of your speeches”; or "Tell an joke and I will give you 30 points"). The course and content of the debate is not yours to dictate.
- Do not arbitrarily manufacture rules (e.g., "Points of information must be in the form of a question," "New examples are prohibited in the rebuttal speeches.").
- Do not write the ballot during the rebuttal speeches. This practice conveys a disregard for the competitors and for the integrity of the process. Wait until after the debate to make your decision and wait until after the debate to write the ballot.
- Do not ignore the rules to suit your own preferences.
- Do not use marginalizing and discriminatory rhetoric or practice (anti-Semitic commentary; sexual harassment; voting against participants for fashion, hairstyle, body piercings, etc.). This rule should go without saying.

This list of “Don’ts” may seem long, but it all boils down to a few basic suggestions: Be respectful of the debaters and be fair in your conduct and evaluation of the debate.

What to Bring to A Debate

- ✓ **Paper and a pen**
- ✓ **A timing device (stopwatch, kitchen timer, or watch with a second hand)**

When you go to judge a debate, you should always bring paper and pen. We encourage you to *flow* the debate, i.e., take notes in the form adapted specifically to middle school debating. There is a sample flowsheet in this booklet. During the course of an average debate, many complex arguments are exchanged and refuted, and you will need notes to be able to follow and resolve these arguments for yourself and later in revealing your decision to the debaters.

No matter how reliable your memory, if you don't take notes, you risk missing some crucial example or answer that might aid in making the best possible decision. Good note taking will always help you decide who wins and how to best explain your decision.

You will also be responsible for timing the debate. This means you will have to give time signals to debaters during their speeches. The most important time signal is the one that tells debaters when "protected time" begins and ends. In the previous section, we explained that "protected time" is the first and last minute of each constructive speech. The best way to signal the end of "protected time" (when the first minutes has elapsed) is to **slap the table** in an audible fashion so that debaters know they can now attempt points of information. Similarly, you should slap the table when the last minute of the constructive has begun so that debaters know any points of information will be out of order.

The easiest way to give time signals is with your hands – just hold up 2 fingers when the speaker has 2 minutes remaining, and so forth. When time is up, hold up a fist to show that the debater should stop talking.

Getting to the Point: Deciding Who Wins and Why

Of course, the critical question is this: how *do* you decide who wins the debate? The best answer is that you should decide the debate based on the criteria offered by the debaters in the round. Every debate is about different issues, is conducted differently, and thus should be decided on its own merits. Different teams will offer different kinds of arguments. You will have to decide whether or not the proposition team has made a case for endorsing the motion for debate. The opposition team will make arguments about why the proposition team's case is inadequate or dangerous or otherwise misguided. You will have to evaluate the merits of these arguments and decide whether the proposition team's rejoinders are adequate and satisfactory.

During the course of the debate, debaters may offer different criteria for your decision. They may even address you directly, saying that your vote should or should not be based on a particular argument set or on certain kind of arguments. They are not trying to order you around; rather, this is common practice. They are trying to assist you and influence you in your decision making process.

Do not decide the debate based simply on the *number* of arguments won by each side. You will also need to evaluate the qualitative significance of each argument on the overall outcome of the debate. Take this common scenario: The proposition wins an advantage conclusively, while the opposition wins a disadvantage conclusively. Who wins? You can't decide based on the information we have given you. To answer this question, you need to know the relative significance of the advantage and disadvantage. This relative significance can have both quantitative and qualitative aspects. You may be tempted to decide based simply on the "biggest impact." For example, you may decide to vote for the proposition team because they claimed to avert a war, while the opposition team was "only" able to prove that the government team's proposal would cause the deaths of hundreds of children.

You also need to take into account questions of risk and probability when deciding who wins in complicated debates. In the above example, your decision would doubtless change if you decided, based on arguments advanced and won by the opposition team, that there was a very low probability that the proposition team's plan would be able to avert a war. However, this does not mean that you should interject your own risk calculation into the debate at this point. The debaters may have *weighed* the round for you – they may have made the best case as to why their arguments outweigh or are more important than or more instrumental to the decision than those of the other team. If the debaters do compare arguments to each other, you need to take that into account.

One common mistake that judges make is voting for the opposition team on the basis of partial solvency arguments. A partial solvency argument is an argument advanced by the opposition team that says the proposition team's case will not solve the problem *completely*, or that the harm or existing problem is not *quite* as bad as the proposition team claims it is. These are good defensive arguments for the opposition team, but they should *almost never* be reasons to vote for the opposition team. The only thing these arguments prove is that the proposition case is not as good as it was claimed to be. Big deal. It is rare indeed that arguments advanced in debates turn out to be just as triumphant as their authors predicted they would be. The proposition team can still win if their case can be shown to be *comparatively advantageous*; that is, if they can show that it is, on balance, better by some increment than the present state of affairs.

Don't vote based on your personal opinion on the topic. Sometimes, when the topic is announced, you may read it and think that you know what the debate will be about. Often, the government team will choose a case that may be different from one *you* would have chosen. This choice does not mean that you should then disregard their case or use the opposition's topicality argument as a thinly veiled excuse to vote against the government team's case. You may also have strong opinions about the subject matter of the topic. Perhaps you are a committed opponent of the death penalty and have to judge a debate about this subject. You may find that your personal presumption lies with the team that opposes the death penalty, but do not hold the other team to a higher burden of proof. The teams do not have to persuade you *personally* of the correctness of their position; *the debaters are debating each other and not you.*

Track arguments as they proceed and develop through the debate so you can evaluate the debate in the fairest way possible. Some judges make the mistake of deciding the debate more or less solely on the quality of the final rebuttal speech. This is a mistake because the proposition rebuttal needs to be evaluated both as a response to the opposition block's arguments and as a summation of the proposition team's final position. When deciding the debate, you need to figure out if the proposition rebuttalist dropped, or failed to answer, any opposition arguments. You then need to decide how to weigh those conceded arguments in the context of the other arguments in the debate.

Often you will have to consider dropped, or conceded, arguments and decide what to do about them. Some conceded arguments will not impact your decision. Others will. If an argument is conceded, it means you must assign the full weight of that argument to the side that argued it. This concession phenomenon should not mean that if a team concedes some

arguments, they should automatically lose the debate. All arguments are not created equally. Some arguments can be safely ignored.

Other arguments may be introduced in the debate, only to have the team that introduced them later back down on their original claim. This is smart debating and is not a reason to look askance at a team. It is common practice for opposition teams to argue a wider variety of arguments in their first speech than in their subsequent speeches. This tactic is called argument selection and is good debate practice. Do not penalize teams for not extending all of their arguments through the entire debate.

Speaker Points

In addition to deciding the winners of the debate, you will have to fill out your ballot and assign points to individual debaters. Speaker points are a measure of performance by individual debaters. Most tournaments give speaker awards, which are trophies given to individuals based on their aggregate point accumulation during the course of a tournament. Usually, you will be asked to rank the debaters on a 30-point scale, although there are other kinds of scales. You may choose to assign a *low-point win*. A low-point win is a circumstance where the team that won did not get the highest points. This circumstance arises occasionally, when judges feel that one team did the better job of speaking but did not win based on the arguments.

The total number of points does not decide who won the debate.

We suggest the following guidelines for assigning points:

For a 30-point scale:

- 30: Almost no one should get a 30. A perfect score should happen every few years with a really brilliant speech.
- 28-29: Brilliant.
- 26-27: Strong, well above average.
- 25: Above average
- 23-24: Modest success as a debater
- Points below 23 should be reserved for people who are both unsuccessful as debaters and are also obnoxious and mean-spirited.
- Points should never drop below a 20, even if a debater was particularly bad. Lower points frequently exclude a debate team from elimination rounds, so if you give points below 20, you are saying that a debater has no chance of rehabilitation in any other debates.

You may assign half-points (27.5, 25.5, etc.)

After assigning points and ranking the debaters, you should write your ballot. We recommend that you use the space provided on the ballot to explain the reasons for your decision. Why did you vote the way you voted? What arguments were most persuasive to you? Why? Give advice and constructive criticism to the debaters you watched. What did they do well? How could they improve their performance or their arguments? Try to use as much of the ballot space as you can. Debaters and their coaches save ballots, and often refer back to them as references and resources. Do not use writing the ballot as an excuse not to deliver an oral critique, however brief, to the teams that you judge. Whatever interaction you have with the debaters after the debate will always be more valuable than the comments you write on the ballot.

Using the Sample Flowsheet

Taking notes in debates is called “flowing.” On p. 17 of this manual, you will find a sample flowsheet from part of a hypothetical debate about school uniforms. Notice that the flowsheet is divided into columns. Each column is labeled for a speech (or speeches- more on that in just a second) – “1PC” is the first proposition constructive, “1OC” is the first opposition constructive, “2PC” is the second proposition constructive, “2OC” is the second opposition constructive, “OR” is the opposition rebuttal, and “PR” is the proposition rebuttal. “2OC” and “OR” are in the same column because the speeches are back to back and function as a kind of unified front for the opposition.

Students and judges use each column to keep track of arguments made in that speech. Let’s say that the proposition team makes a brief case for student uniforms. They might advance three basic arguments:

- Cost. Many students can’t afford to look sharp every day for school, and students get embarrassed if they don’t have the latest fashions.
- Uniforms aren’t as distracting, and will help students focus on their classwork, not their clothes.
- Uniforms reduce violence, because students can’t wear gang clothes or gang symbols.

As the first proposition speaker makes their case, everyone else should take notes on their flowsheet.

Then the first opposition speaker refutes the case. She might begin by bringing up the issue of freedom of expression. She could say that uniforms are a bad idea because students need to be able to express their individuality in schools. Then she would move on to answer the arguments made in the proposition’s case. On the “cost” point, she might say that uniforms are expensive, too, particularly since people have to buy a bunch of them at once. On the “distraction” point, she could say that there are always things to distract students, and that districts have dress codes in place to deal with distracting clothing. Finally, on the “violence” point, she could say that dress codes already prevent gang clothing, and that uniforms won’t reduce the gang problem because students who want to be in gangs will be in them whether or not they have to wear uniforms.

Then the second proposition speaker has to answer the opposition’s arguments while rebuilding and extending on the proposition’s case. The flowsheet will help her do this, as she knows what arguments she has to answer and extend upon. She should begin by answering the freedom of expression argument by saying, for example, that students have many ways to express themselves, and that clothes are a shallow and unimportant method of expression. Then she can move on to rebuild her team’s case. To extend on the “cost” argument, she should probably reiterate it briefly before beginning her refutation: “We said that many students can’t afford to keep up with the latest trends, and that’s embarrassing. Now, they said that uniforms are expensive to buy, but they’re cheap compared to the latest pair of Nikes or Hillfigers, and that means that poorer students won’t be made fun of for

their clothes.” She could repeat this process by moving through the other opposition arguments and rebuilding her case.

So you can see how this process works. Arguments are refuted, extended, and compared through the debate. Every speech, therefore, has a rebuttal component. There should be new arguments as well, but only in the constructive speeches.