

How to prepare for a debate?

Debate is a series of formal spoken arguments for and against a definite *proposition*. A proposition is a carefully worded statement that makes clear the positions of both the affirmative and negative sides.

Debate differs from discussion. *Discussion* is the process by which a problem is recognized, defined, and investigated, and then solutions are explored. *Debate* is the process that evaluates a probable truth, a judgment, a causal relationship, or a single solution.

Formal debate. In formal debating, the same number of people speak for each side. They have the opportunity to reply directly to opposing speakers. Affirmative and negative speakers usually alternate, and all the speeches are limited in time. In informal (as in conversation) and in legislative debating, though there is the same opportunity to reply to opposing speakers, the speeches are not necessarily limited in time. There may be no attempt to alternate opposing speakers, and the number of speakers on each side may be unequal.

Propositions. Subjects for debates are expressed in the form of propositions. Propositions should be:

- (1) Appropriate to the knowledge, experience, and interests of both speakers and audience.
- (2) Debatable—that is, not obviously true or false. The statements should involve an honest difference of opinion, with arguments and evidence on both sides.
- (3) Phrased in the affirmative. Positive statements prevent confusion by making the issue clear-cut.
- (4) Restricted to set forth only one idea. This policy keeps the debate within narrow limits.
- (5) Worded clearly. The words should be ones that can be defined exactly, so the debate does not become a mere quibble over the meaning of words.

There are four kinds of propositions: (1) propositions of fact, (2) propositions of value, (3) propositions of explanation, and (4) propositions of policy.

A proposition of fact is a statement to be proven true or false as the evidence is gathered. For example, the proposition, "Resolved, that Main High School will defeat East High School in varsity football next week," is neither true nor false at the present time. After the game, the proposition is no longer debatable. It is a fact that Main High School either won, lost, or tied. Propositions of fact are usually resolved in debate by awarding the decision to the team that presents the best evidence and that establishes probable truth. A proposition of fact is not a fact. *Facts* are truths proved only through such means as experiment, testing, measurement, or scientific observation.

A proposition of value contains a relative term that makes a value judgment. For example, in the proposition, "Resolved, that John Jones did a good job as student council president," the word *good* cannot be precisely defined. The meaning of *good* depends on the value that is given to it. It may have several meanings: (1) John was kind to council members, (2) John was politically successful, (3) John achieved his agenda, or (4) John was moral. In order to debate a value proposition, debaters must define the value term, convince the audience that this definition is reasonable, and apply it to the subject of the proposition (John).

A proposition of explanation attempts to determine whether a cause and effect relationship exists between two actions or events. For example, the proposition, "Resolved, that oily rags left in the attic caused the fire," asks whether the rags were a necessary and sufficient factor to produce the fire.

A *proposition of policy* evaluates potential courses of action. It answers the question, "should we change?" A proposition of policy may argue for a new program: "Resolved, that the federal government should finance elementary and secondary public education in the United States." A proposition of policy may want to end a policy: "Resolved, that trial by jury should be eliminated in civil cases." It may also want to substitute one policy for another: "Resolved, that tackle football should be replaced by touch football."

Analysis. After a subject has been selected and the proposition carefully worded, the next step is analysis of the proposition by both debating teams. Analysis of the proposition begins with a broad understanding of it. As a team member, you should know as much about your opponents' case as you know about your own side. Good debaters study the origin and history of a proposition, define its terms, and survey carefully all the arguments and evidence for and against it. Policy analysis usually follows one of two outlines:

Does a new condition exist in the present system?
Is that condition harmful to people or nations?
Is the harm significant in scope and/or intensity?
Is the present policy the cause of the harm?
Can (or will) the present policy solve the harm?
Will the proposition solve the harm?
Will the proposition produce new harms?

or

Will the proposition create a new situation?
Is this new situation advantageous?
Are the advantages significant or widespread?
Are the advantages unique only to the proposition?
Will disadvantages result from adopting the proposition?

The case. Both affirmative and negative sides need to prepare a *case*. A case is a group of arguments. Two common affirmative cases are the *need case* and the *comparative-advantages case*. The need case attempts to show that a significant harm exists, that the present policy either has caused the harm or cannot solve it, and that the action proposed will solve the harm. The comparative-advantages case argues that there is an opportunity for improvement. The affirmative side argues that the action urged in the proposition will yield significant advantages that the present policy cannot produce. The negative approach to the affirmative case may defend the present policy as being good. The negative side may also reject both the present policy and the proposition, and present an alternative.

The plan. The affirmative side needs to present a workable procedure to put the proposition into effect. Such a procedure usually focuses on four steps: (1) the goal, (2) administration, (3) funding, and (4) enforcement. The negative side usually will raise one or more objections to the plan. Examples are: "The plan will not work." "The plan will not solve the harm." "The plan will create new harms."

The issues. The chief points of difference between the affirmative and the negative are the *main issues*. These may have divisions called *subordinate issues*. There must be a clash of opinion on both the main and the subordinate issues. A good way to help find the issues is to list the opposing arguments in parallel columns. In the subject, "Resolved, that the United States should abolish the Electoral College and adopt a system that would provide for the election of the president by direct popular vote," a listing of opposing arguments might lead to the following two main issues and six subordinate issues:

- I. Would electing the president by direct popular vote correct flaws in the present system?
 - A. Would it be more democratic and give each voter an equal voice in choosing the winner?
 - B. Would it assure that the candidate with the most votes is elected?
 - C. If no candidate receives a majority of the votes, would this system reduce the chances of political

deals and an electoral crisis?

II. Would electing the president by direct popular vote have disadvantages?

A. Would it weaken the power of the small states and threaten the federal system?

B. Would it encourage the formation of small political parties and make it difficult for the winner to receive a majority of the votes?

C. Would it reduce the power of minority groups to influence an election?

The evidence. After the issues have been determined, the next step for the debaters is to find the evidence that will prove the issue true or false. Evidence can be in the form of *factual evidence* or *testimonial evidence*. Factual evidence consists of current and historical examples (true incidents), statistics, physical evidence, and facts. Testimonial evidence consists of opinions of experts on the subject being debated. To evaluate testimonial evidence, the debater should ask: "Is this authority an expert and, thus, in a position to know the truth?" and "Is this authority biased, and, thus, in any position to tell the truth?"

Rebuttal. Next, the debaters must select the arguments and evidence of their opponents that they believe can be successfully attacked. Finally, they must prepare their own arguments and evidence that will be used in the attack.

Format. In the *traditional* form of debate, there are two speakers on each side, each of whom makes both a *constructive* speech and a *rebuttal* speech. The speaking order is:

Constructive speeches (10 minutes each)

1. First affirmative
2. First negative
3. Second affirmative
4. Second negative

Rebuttal speeches (5 minutes each)

1. First negative
2. First affirmative
3. Second negative
4. Second affirmative

Another type of debate is the *cross-examination* form, which was developed at the University of Oregon. Each constructive speaker is cross-examined by an opposing speaker. The speaking order is:

Constructive speeches (8 minutes) and Cross-examinations (3 minutes)

1. First affirmative
2. Cross-examination by second negative
3. First negative
4. Cross-examination by first affirmative
5. Second affirmative
6. Cross-examination by first negative
7. Second negative
8. Cross-examination by second affirmative

Rebuttal speeches (4 minutes)

1. First negative
2. First affirmative
3. Second negative
4. Second affirmative

The decision. If a decision is to be given, one or more judges listen to all the speakers. Each judge decides which team made the most convincing argument and votes for that team. The team with the most votes wins.

Competitive debate. The National Forensic League sponsors debate competitions for high school students. The Cross-Examination Debate Association and the National Debate Tournament Committee of the American Forensic Association sponsor college debate tournaments.

Contributor:

- James M. Copeland, M.A., Executive Secretary, National Forensic League.

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