AN INTRODUCTION TO
Pro Con Challenge

Pro Con Challenge at a Glance

Event Description
Students select a debate topic on which they will write a pro and a con speech. Typically, the topic choices include the current NSDA topics in Policy, Lincoln-Douglas, Public Forum, and legislation from the tournament’s Congressional Debate docket. Competitors will write a three- to five-minute pro speech and a three- to five-minute con speech on that topic and present both sides within one 10-minute speech. This event allows students to explore debate topics in a new and exciting way while showing off their writing, research, and delivery skills.

Considerations for Selecting a Topic
Students get to choose from a variety of topics. Consider what type of topic you like. Lincoln-Douglas topics tend to be more philosophical in nature. Public Forum topics typically consider a current event or hot button issue, and Policy topics ask students to consider an overarching governmental policy issue. Congress dockets tend to have more narrow subject matter, and they may range from expressing opinions about what should be done or mandate some action by the federal government.

Consider your interest and familiarity with the topics. You may choose a topic that you’ve already researched or could utilize your teammates as a resource to learn more about, or you could choose something new! Do you want to address a broad topic or something more narrow? Do you have enough content to fill up a five-minute speech with arguments on both sides of that topic?

Choose a topic you care about. Delivery can improve when you are passionate about the arguments you are writing! A good topic offers two sides that are balanced, equally engaging to your judge, explores larger themes and impacts, and presents a whole story and different perspectives on an issue. Can you be balanced in your presentation? Judges will look for compelling arguments on both sides of the topic.

Traits of a Successful Pro Con Challenge Speech
Judges will evaluate the structure, arguments, evidence, and speaking abilities of each competitor and rank them against each other. Organization, analysis, and delivery are all key components of a successful Pro Con Challenge speech.

Judges and competitors come from a variety of backgrounds and experience with speech and debate events. Consider avoiding technical terms, debate jargon, and acronyms that may be common in the style of debate topic you have chosen. Your judges may not have experience in that format of debate!

Finally, consider that judges may be judging speeches on a variety of topics or the same topic in your rounds. A topic and speech that stands out is one that is balanced, engaging, and demonstrates an understanding of multiple perspectives on the topic.

Learn More!
The National Speech & Debate Association is the leading provider of competitive and educational resources to aid students and coaches as they explore our competitive events.

Find Your Voice

“Pro Con Challenge is fundamentally an exercise in empathy, listening, and shaping a common mind. The skills we learn in Pro Con Challenge are foundational for building our communities.”
— Bill Harris, Coach
Basic Understandings
Pro Con Challenge is an exercise in intellectual humility. Competitors will select a debate topic and write a three- to five-minute pro speech and a three- to five-minute con speech on that topic. Students will likely not select the same topic as all of the other competitors in their round, so judges may observe speeches on a variety of topics within one round. Judges will evaluate the structure, arguments, evidence, and speaking abilities of each competitor and rank them against each other. The event’s goal is to demonstrate that students have the ability to convey multiple perspectives on an overall issue.

Instead of asking the judge to make a decision on which side of the topic was “won,” judges will be asked for consideration of the quality of the speech in its entirety. Judges will rank the quality of the overall presentation against other speeches in the round.

Research
Speeches should be geared toward an audience member who is a generally informed member of the public. Start by reading about the topic to gain a basic understanding. Unlike a debate round, your judges may not have adjudicated many rounds and have background knowledge on the topic, so your role will be to provide them with enough context for your arguments to make sense! Your topic choice should build an understanding for the issue and why it is up for debate.

Next, dive into researching advanced discussions of the topic. Pro Con Challenge speeches should include a variety of evidence that can range from scientific studies and academic journal articles to philosophical texts. Students are expected to cite evidence in their speeches the same way a debater would. Rules surrounding evidence ethics, citations, and paraphrasing apply to these speeches. Check with your school’s Media Center/Library Services Department for research tips and information about what you have access to through your school. Don’t forget that NSDA members have free access to the HeinOnline research database!

When planning your research and how to use it in your speeches, consider questions that the judges will use to adjudicate your performance. Does the speaker display solid logic and reasoning? Does the speaker advocate a position, utilize evidence, and communicate clear ideas? Are both sides of the topic well defended?

Structural Components
There are a number of choices that competitors are free to make with regard to the structure of their Pro Con speeches. For example, they may run a plan if they chose the Policy topic, but no particular structure is required. During their con case, they may refute their pro case, but it is not required. It is important to remember that these speeches will be judged against any of the given topic areas in one round. Judges will evaluate the structure, arguments, evidence, and speaking abilities of each competitor and rank them against each other.

For each argument you make, you must first clearly establish a claim. This is a statement that concisely summarizes the point you will make. Next, you must justify why your claim is true or based in fact and logic. This is known as the warrant for an argument. You will need to go beyond asserting or explaining your claims and back them up with analysis explaining why the argument is valid. The warrant can come in many forms, such as logic or research. Research from a well-established source is often necessary. Once you have summarized the point you are making and justify it with logic and/or evidence, you will provide an impact for your argument. This means you have established why the argument is significant in the round.
Pro Con speeches are presented back to back. Competitors will present their pro speech and then immediately move on to presenting their con speech. The con speech does not have a dedicated rebuttal period in which the speaker is expected to directly refute the pro arguments they presented; however, students may choose to select con arguments that clash with the pro arguments read in the speech.

**Organization**

While there is no rule requiring a specific structure for any debate event’s constructive speech, there is a traditional approach to constructing this pre-written speech. Often, a constructive begins with a thesis statement as an introductory lead-in to the position. Next, you will define key terms and discuss the metrics for successfully evaluating the topic (sometimes called “framework” or “weighing mechanisms”). Following this introduction, you will offer your main arguments following the claim, warrant, and impact structure for each. Each main argument is called a “contention.” Contentions may include quotes from qualified authors, scientific studies, or your own analysis. Given the five-minute time limit, your constructive will likely have two to three substantial contentions.

There is no particular time limit on each individual pro or con speech, only an overall 10-minute time limit for the whole presentation. However, consider how much time you devote to each side’s arguments and plan your transition from pro to con speech. Speeches should be balanced in terms of argumentation and evidence.

Judges will measure not only the strength of the arguments in your speech, but also their presentation. They will consider questions such as: Does the student have a clear structure to their speech? Are transitions used to move effectively between each part of the speech? Does the development of the speech make sense?

**Performance Tips**

Students should practice presenting this speech as if it is a constructive being delivered in a debate round. Constructive speeches are pre-written, not extemporaneous. Constructive speeches are not memorized; however, eye contact and other aspects of nonverbal communication are important considerations. Students may speak from notes in any format—legal pads, notecards, or electronic tablets, for example, are all permissible. Because community judges will likely adjudicate many rounds, the speed of delivery should be tailored for their comprehension.

Pro Con Challenge speeches are fundamentally persuasive in nature. While presenting your pro speech, you will be asking judges to believe in your side of the topic. When presenting your con speech, you will be asking them to be persuaded on this side of the topic. Invite the judge to consider their own beliefs about the topic. Consider how your rate of speech, tone, use of space, and rhetorical devices can impact persuasion. Are you using voice, movement, and expression effectively? Are you presenting your arguments with confidence? Is your rate and volume appropriate?

Pro Con Challenge is often offered as an online event. Students may choose to present their speeches while sitting or standing, but they should adjust their gestures, eye contact, and facial expressions to the online world.

**Resources**

We have many great resources for Pro Con Challenge, including a webinar specific to helping students prepare to compete in Pro Con Challenge for the first time. Review final round videos of Pro Con Challenge from past National Tournaments. Observe the rounds not only as entertainment, but also for effective organization, research, and performance techniques. Ask yourself, how can I apply similar techniques to my performance? The best way to learn Pro Con Challenge, outside of actively doing it, is by watching and learning from other performers.