

WHAT IS DEBATE?

Competitive debate involves two students or teams (two students) debating a resolution provided to them. One of the students or teams will be arguing in favor of the resolution (the affirmation) and the other student or team will be arguing against the resolution (the negation).

Each competitive debate event follows a specific format of speaking times and cross examination (questioning) periods. All debates begin with constructive speeches, in which each side presents its main arguments and supporting evidence. Depending on the format of the particular event, the students will then cross-examine each other and give rebuttal speeches in which they will address their opponent's arguments and counter arguments. The round concludes with final speeches, where students summarize the major arguments made in the debate (also known as voters, clash or clash points) and make their final appeal to the judge.

It's important to remember that academic debate is an intellectual activity. It is not about personal advocacy, the judge or the student may or may not agree with the points being made—but this does not matter. The winner of a debate is the student or team who debates the best, regardless of personal worldview. The student or team who debates the best is the student or team who most effectively defends their arguments while disproving those of their opponent. In fact, the students will likely debate both sides of a resolution at a tournament, and they may not have picked their side for the debate either.

The "Flow"

Competitors and judges should closely follow all arguments, rebuttals, counterarguments and evidence presented. To successfully track, a specific style of notetaking called "flowing" is used. At the end of a debate, the flow should contain all major arguments made by both sides, how each side responded and which side ultimately won on each point or argument brought up in the debate. Students should use their flow to formulate rebuttal speeches and responses, and judges should use their flow to determine the winning side based on the outcome of all major arguments or points made.

It may be helpful to view a debate round as a game of shuffleboard: when each side presents their initial arguments (called constructive arguments), they are putting pucks on the board. The opponent will also give constructive arguments and spend their rebuttal speeches providing counterarguments to knock their opponent's "pucks" (arguments) off the "board" (flow). Students may also spend time explaining why their opponent's counterarguments do not hold up to get their arguments "back" on the flow (note: in practice, you never really erase an argument from the flow, but you consider it lost/won by a side – think chess pieces).

At the end of the "game" (round), the judge reviews the flow to see which constructive and counterarguments remain on the board for each side and which have been effectively refuted or neutralized. To determine the winner, the judge must decide whether certain arguments or responses were effectively countered or not and the relative importance of each remaining argument. Students may use speeches at the end of the round to explain why they won the major clash points of the debate and why their remaining arguments are more impactful and should carry greater weight in determining the outcome.

When flowing, it is helpful to know what to look for and document about each argument. Every effective argument must include a **claim** or short description of the argument, a **warrant** or reasoning that explains why the claim is true and an **impact**, which are the effects of the resolution on stakeholders (people) as proven by the argument. Evidence helps reinforce the truth of the warrant and analysis ties the components together and to the resolution, but the focus when flowing arguments should be on the warrants. Warrants are where most of the clash should be, so it's a good idea to know how to identify and track them.

Reason For Decision

Also known as an RFD, the reason for decision is the specific argument(s) or clash made by the winning or losing side that the judge based their decision on. For example, an RFD could be that the winning team made a particularly effective argument that neutralized the main arguments of their opponent, or that the losing team did not respond sufficiently to an important point made by their opponent (note: a comprehensive RFD usually cites multiple arguments made).

The ballot will include a space to enter an RFD. Judges are encouraged to be as specific as possible when writing an RFD.

RESULTS

Results in debate are determined by win-loss record. Speaker points may be used in tiebreaks (see [Tiebreaking](#)).

RESOLUTIONS

The resolution is the topic that the students are debating. Resolutions may come in the form of a statement of fact (i.e. all is fair in love and war), a value judgement (i.e. privacy outweighs safety) or a policy (i.e. a healthcare public option). Different kinds of topics require the use of different skills and strategies. Students should be prepared to debate all types of topics.

- ◆ The resolutions for Public Forum, *Lincoln-Douglas* and *Ronald Reagan Presidential Debate* are available on the SpeechWire general information page for each tournament and on the FCDI website (see [Tournament Rules](#) for more details).
- ◆ The topic areas for Extemporaneous Debate are available on the SpeechWire general information page for each tournament and on the FCDI website. Students will receive the topic and their side 30 minutes before each round. Unlike in other debate events, competitions in Extemporaneous debate will debate a different resolution each round.

ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES

- ◆ Students may use devices and internet during debate rounds, except in Ronald Reagan Presidential Debate (no electronics permitted, only timers). The use of AI is never permitted.
- ◆ Speeches and cross-examination periods must adhere to the time limits.

- ◆ Debate events include prep time. Prep time is time each debater can use to pause the debate between speeches (similar to a time out). Students may allocate prep time throughout the round as desired for the maximum time permitted by the event (except Extemporaneous Debate— prep time is pre-scheduled in the format). Competitors must communicate to the judge when taking prep time. Both the judge and competitors should track speech and prep times.
 - When requesting prep time, a competitor may ask for a specific amount be “deducted from their bank of time” or ask for “running prep”, meaning they would like the clock to run down until it’s empty or the competitor is ready — whichever comes first.
- ◆ Judges and opponents may request to review evidence sources to verify authenticity. Competitors should be prepared to quickly provide links/access to all evidence. These requests should not delay the round for more than 5 minutes total.
- ◆ In most debate events, students are assigned a side (affirmation or negation) prior to the round. In PF, students will toss a coin to determine which team selects their side and speaking order (see [Public Forum](#)).
- ◆ Students must debate the resolution as intended. Kritiks and tricks (or other forms of evasion) are not permitted.
- ◆ Spreading (speaking very fast as a competitive strategy) is not permitted.
- ◆ New arguments or information should not be introduced after the first rebuttal speeches.
- ◆ During periods of cross examination, competitors have the opportunity to ask each other questions directly.
- ◆ Competitors must time themselves (competitors in RPD must do so with a timer, not a phone or computer).

VOCABULARY

Debaters may use the following terms throughout the debate:

Definition: An explanation of how a key word or phrase in the resolution should be understood.

Advantage or disadvantage: A benefit that supports a debater’s position or a harm that results from the opposing position.

Burden: What each debater must prove in order to win the debate.

Plan (or model) or counterplan (or countermodel): A specific proposal for how the resolution should be implemented, or an alternative proposal offered by the opposing side.

Framework: A structure a debater proposes to explain how the judge should evaluate the round, including what standards or criteria matter most and how contrasting arguments should be weighed.

Weighing: Debaters often explicitly or implicitly ask judges to “weigh” arguments. This means to evaluate the significance of arguments by comparing their impacts on the world.

- *Example:* The affirmation argues that the policy in the resolution would save lives. The negation argues that it would cost a lot of money. The affirmation may ask the judge to consider their argument as more important by arguing that lives are more important than money.