

COACHING DEBATE

Acknowledgements

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Chris Harker

Colin Castle, *Debate Coach's Guide*

John Filliter, *The Add Students and Stir Debate Cookbook*

Judith Wyatt, *Basic Instructional Guide*.

Introduction

Some teachers who would like to promote debating worry that they lack the necessary experience. The purpose of this paper is to provide you with sufficient information so that you can coach debate with confidence. Every coach began without experience, so you needn't feel inadequate for this reason.

1. What is a Debate?

A debate, of course, is a structured argument between two teams of debaters. The materials that follow are designed to help you organize educational debates - designed to teach principles of argument (research, speaking, listening and refutation) in an atmosphere of good sportsmanship. Materials dedicated to teaching particular debate skills are cited in Part 5 of this paper.

Let me sketch **some basic rules** of debate:

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|--------------|--|
| Topic | Anything goes, but it should be controversial and worded as an affirmative statement (of fact, value or policy). Usually referred to as the resolution, proposition, or Bill. |
| Teams | Two temporary coalitions (usually of two or three debaters a side) called the Affirmative (Pro, Government or Proposers) and the Negative (Con, Opposition, or Opposers), among other things ... |
| Dress | Definitely. |
| Tools | Facts, charts, pictures, logic, humour, homilies, emotional appeals, dramatic delivery. Words, words, words. But no weapons, please. |

Objective Affirmative must prove the resolution, Negative rebut it. These roles are reversed if the Negative introduces a Counterplan (in which case, the Negative assumes the **burden of proof**).

Officials The **Moderator** (“**Speaker**” in Parliamentary style) calls the debate to order, announces the topic, introduces the debaters and officials, outlines the rules, maintains order, asks the judges to consider (and when desired, announce) their decision, congratulates the debaters, thanks the judges and adjourns the debate.

The **Timekeeper** (“**Clerk**” in Parliamentary style) carefully keeps track of speaking times, advises debaters (with cards or hand signals) how much speaking time remains, and signals (usually by standing up) when the speaking time and any period of grace have expired. Allowances should be made for interruptions.

The **Judges** are usually adults who are expected to be non-partisan and to decide which team won the contest on the basis of what the debaters said, disregarding their own beliefs, prejudices, or special knowledge of the topic. Judges should sit apart from and not confer with other judges before completing their Score Sheets.

Order of Speeches

The Affirmative team enjoys the first speech and the last word. The **constructive speeches alternate** between the teams “Affirmative, Negative, Affirmative ...” while **rebuttals alternate** between the teams “Negative, Affirmative, Negative ...” (In Parliamentary style, only the Prime Minister has a separate rebuttal speech: all other debaters must include any rebuttal in their constructive speeches.) **Intermissions** between speeches are generally not encouraged as they can interfere with the spontaneity of the debate.

Rebuttal

Attacking the other team’s arguments and evidence and defending your own (sometimes called **refutation**). This is the **clash** that characterizes good debating and is encouraged throughout the debate (except during Cross-Examinations). In the **Cambridge** format of rebuttal, each debater has a separate rebuttal speech; in **Oxford** format, only one debater for each team has such a speech.

Speaking Times

Vary, depending on the experience of the participants. It is highly desirable that all debaters have equal speaking time in tournaments.

In most championship debates, the maximum speaking time is eight minutes per debater at the senior high school level.

Styles of Debate

Three of the most popular styles of debate throughout Canada are Academic, Cross-Examination and Parliamentary.

In **Academic** style, each team member gives a constructive speech. Depending on the rebuttal format, one or all members of each team give a rebuttal-defence-summary speech. There is then an opportunity for debaters to complain about rule violations and having been misquoted or misrepresented by their opponents. Heckling may be allowed, though it is probably wise not to permit this practice until after novice debaters acquire some experience. Another optional feature is Worlds Style Points of Information.

In **Cross-Examination** style, the procedures are the same as those in Academic style, though no heckling or points of information are allowed. After each constructive speech, the debater who delivered it is questioned (cross-examined) by an opponent. Strict rules govern the **witness** (debater being questioned) and the **examiner** (questioner). After all speeches and cross-examinations, there is an opportunity for debaters to complain about rule violations and having been misquoted or misrepresented by their opponents.

In **Parliamentary** style, debaters assume Parliamentary roles (such as Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition) as they debate the Bill. Except for the Prime Minister, each debater delivers a speech which is expected to include rebuttal; the Prime Minister has a (shorter) opening speech and an Official Rebuttal. Debaters may **heckle** and raise **Points** of Order and Points of Privilege. Points of Information are no longer permitted.

Role of Debaters

In competitive contests, debaters are trying to **persuade** the judges that their team should be awarded the decision, as well as to score high individual marks.

When a debate team receives a topic, its members need to **analyze** the resolution carefully to determine exactly what an affirmative team must prove in order to discharge the **burden of proof**, then decide how to go about this.

In either an impromptu or a prepared debate, students should divide arguments and evidence among themselves. For a prepared resolution, they should so organize **research** responsibilities among team members that they are thorough but do not duplicate each others' efforts. A deadline should be set for initial research, after which the team members should meet to discuss **both sides** of the resolution. (In tournaments, teams are usually required to argue each side of a resolution the same number of times in regular rounds. Even if they are preparing for a single exhibition debate, however, good debaters try to anticipate what their opponents are likely to say.)

The team members need to consider all possible interpretations of the resolution and adopt one that they are prepared to defend; they must also be prepared to attack other **definitions** that opponents may try to use. If one team attempts to use definitions that would produce a truism or a tautology, the other **must immediately challenge** such an interpretation as unreasonable. The first affirmative speaker has the duty to define terms in the resolution; the negative team is not bound to accept affirmative definitions but if it intends to rely on another interpretation, it must make this clear in its first speech. Then both teams should defend their own definitions.

The team should **decide** the **order** in which its members will speak (not necessarily the same for every debate) and the order in which points will be presented. It should decide what the most **important points** are for each side and how best to prove them. (Unsubstantiated assertions carry little or no weight, so three points with proof are usually better than ten points without.)

Debaters should all prepare their speeches, not writing them out word for word but rather jotting down points on **index cards**. It is wise to use cards of one colour for affirmative points, a different colour for negative points, and to number the cards in case they get out of order. This system allows debaters to rapidly revise their remarks to respond to the position taken by their opponents. Cards also allow speakers to refer to notes without interfering seriously with their eye contact with the audience.

Debaters should **practice** delivering their **speeches** in conditions that simulate the actual debate situation - before an audience, with heckling, etc. They should **not** try to **memorize** speeches - rather rehearse until they are familiar with their material. Debaters should concentrate on communicating when they speak, smile and take a deep breath before beginning to speak, and look at the audience and watch its reactions throughout a speech. They should be careful not to speak too quickly, and pause between points and for dramatic effect. They should not refer to other debaters by their given names (except in Cross-Examination style), rather address them in the third person (or by title in Parliamentary debates).

During a contest, debaters should stay alert and appear confident at all times. (There is a fine line between being confident and appearing to be arrogant: the latter can alienate judges quickly.) Debaters should listen carefully to their opponents and make notes of exactly what they say, to facilitate rebuttal. It demonstrates teamwork if they pass notes or whisper to colleagues (except ones who have the floor, as this is against the rules). Debaters should be polite at all times, even if an official rules against them or an opponent is rude to them.

2. Organizing and Administering your Debate Club

The most important thing to keep in mind is that **debaters learn by doing**. As the old saying goes, “Practice makes perfect.” Don’t take your students to a tournament to observe: take them to participate.

High school debates in Canada usually operate at four levels:

- (a) **in-house debates**, held at your school between different team members;
- (b) **exhibition debates** against other schools, arranged by telephoning another school’s debate coach and challenging its team to come over for a debate;
- (c) **inter-school leagues**, in which schools debate teams from other schools on a scheduled basis;
- (d) **tournaments**, to which a number of different schools are invited, in which teams compete for prizes or the right to represent the area at some other tournament.

Because of the amount of work that organizing a tournament requires, it is likely that there will be only two or three in your area each year (although success at these tournaments may qualify your debaters for other tournaments). Some school debate clubs are content with only two or three debates a year. Most, however, want more than this, and that void can be filled by either in-house debates or exhibition debates against other schools. Neither requires much organization - normally a room, three judges and a time when everyone is free. Attending a tournament is only slightly more difficult: it normally requires that a registration fee be paid, perhaps a form be submitted by a particular deadline, and that the team attend on the date of the tournament.

Accordingly, little effort or experience is required to organize a healthy debate club at your school. Organizing a debate tournament is another story, and is something not usually attempted by novice debate coaches.

In my experience, it is best to have regular in-house debates regardless of what else you do. The debates may occur weekly, bi-weekly, monthly or whatever is to the convenience of the club. If debates are held regularly, debaters reserve the time for the activity and interested spectators know when to come to watch. When tournament dates are near, the regular meeting can be used to rehearse your team. Before sending a team off to a tournament, I would normally see the team debate the tournament topic once or twice and suggest whether I thought that the content needed to be changed or tightened, whether the speaking style was appropriate, and so forth.

3. Judging and Criticizing Debaters

A very important part of your job as a debate coach is to observe your debaters debate and to tell them what they are doing wrong - preferably in positive, diplomatic terms! You will also be called on to judge and critique other debaters at tournaments.

Although you may be completely new to debate, this is nonetheless something for which you are as well qualified as anyone. A debater who convinces you has debated well; a debater who does not, has not. Debate judging is subjective - a debater can expect to find different judges reacting to the same speech in different manners. But this is as it ought to be: debating is not a “closed” subject which only those “in the know” can judge; all members of the public are people whom a debater may, in different circumstances, wish to persuade. Debaters’ ability to fulfill the differing expectations and demands that different judges bring to the debate mirrors their ability to persuade the public at large. So your opinion as a novice is every bit as valid as the opinion of somebody who has been coaching or watching debate for a long time.

What may need refinement, however, is your ability to identify the often subtle things about the debating speeches that you found pleasing or not, so the debaters can make changes in their presentations. The balance of this part is directed to that end. If you want further guidance, consult the teaching materials noted at the end of this paper.

Judges are asked to evaluate a debate awarding about one-third of the marks for each of three categories: the **content** of the speech, the debater’s **presentation** (or delivery or style), and **debating skills**. Content includes the debater’s analysis and understanding of the subject; presentation includes organization. Debating skills include logic, the ability to rebut the arguments of the other team, and technical knowledge and practice of the rules. Of course, the three categories are not quite distinct: for example, poor content may detract from strong presentation, or vice versa. However, it is useful for instructing judges to break the debate into these major parts. These criteria are used on most common debating score sheets.

Keep in mind the following when offering your review of a debate:

Content When evaluating the content of a debater's speech, take the long view. The same debater will never have exactly the same content in two different debates - even if the debates are on the same topic - so he or she will not benefit very much from an intricate discussion of where his or her content succeeded or failed. If the debater has poor research skills, the way to correct this is to show him or her where and how to find relevant information. But this should be done while the debater is preparing for his or her next debate rather than in a post mortem on what has just finished.

You do owe your debaters your assessment of their content after a debate, however, so they can develop an ability to gauge what sort of documentation is adequate. Did each point have sufficient proof? It is also important in my experience that you review your notes of the debate with the debaters. A debater may find it difficult to know when he or she has made a point effectively. For example, one debater on a team will rebut an argument and the same point will then be rebutted (unnecessarily) by a colleague. So tell your debaters what points you thought each team won - established through their reasoning and evidence - and why.

Presentation A debater's delivery is much less likely to change dramatically from speech to speech. You therefore are able to work on weaknesses in this category over time, knowing that you will have a chance to see the debater perform again and be able to evaluate whether he or she has been able to correct any faults you have identified.

A debater must be audible, appear confident, and his or her voice should be interesting, of course. Debaters should appear spontaneous and natural and make frequent eye contact. But it is clear that the ability to speak in public is more complex than that. In this respect, however, your untrained reactions to your debaters are valid guides to whether they are succeeding or need improvement. If you think that a debater is speaking too rapidly, tell him or her to slow down. Tell debaters what they must do to make a better impression on you, but also warn them that different judges may have different expectations. Try to have a variety of people help you to judge debates from time to time. The more, the better, especially those with expertise in pertinent fields.

Analysis This is usually equated on debating score sheets with a debater's ability to understand the arguments made in the debate (by both his or her team and opponents) and the relationship between the arguments made in the debate. The ability to recognize the areas of agreement between the teams and to focus attention on the central issues that are in dispute is part of this. An effective way to teach this skill is to ask the debaters to identify the key issues in the debate. I ask this question before a debate, and again after, and I expect each debater to be able to identify the issues that both teams will raise. In reviewing my notes on the debate with the debaters afterwards, I try to identify the issues I thought were important, especially if they were overlooked by one side or the other, and to show how the issues fit together.

Organization Visible, clear organization is vital to a successful debating speech. The essence of debate is controversy - a disagreement between two teams. It is essential that you as a judge are able to understand exactly what points are being made by a team and which opposition arguments have been answered. The speech should have a clear introduction, middle and conclusion. The transition between arguments should be clear. The conclusion should be both a summary of the team arguments and the debate to that point, and an emphatic appeal for support.

Rebuttal Rebuttal is not really a separate debate skill. It is a specific occasion for a debater to use content, presentation, analysis, logic and organization. But because the key difference between debating and public speaking is the necessity for debating speeches to clash with each other, rebuttal is often singled out for special attention on a debating score sheet.

“Rebuttal” is a compendious term which includes both the re-building of one’s own team’s arguments, and the attacking of the arguments of an opponent. In each case the procedure should be the same, and should consist of two stages. First, the debater should recall for the audience the opposition criticism: “My friend told us that this plan would improve Canada’s credibility with NATO.” (Too often debaters simply launch into their reply and the audience is left wondering what point is being answered). After identifying the argument, the debater must answer it. Does the debater address both parts in rebuttal and does he or she succeed in neutralizing all important opposition arguments?

The rebuttal should generally be the first part of a debater’s speech, although there will be occasions when it is more appropriate later. Pay special attention to a debater’s speaking skills during rebuttal: this is a more spontaneous part of the debate, and relatively strong delivery here can signal that a debater is suffering in his or her constructive remarks by being tied down to a prepared script.

Debate Skills This category is used partly to evaluate a debater’s technical mastery of particular debate rules or procedures. As such, it tends to be cut and dried: a debater either knows the proper way to raise a Point of Order or does not. You should **ensure that you and your debaters are thoroughly familiar with the Rules of Debating** (both the general rules and those for the particular style(s) employed) so that they do not break them and also so that they know how to protect themselves if their opponents break any rules. Myths and misconceptions about the rules abound, mainly because many debaters never bother to read them. Apart from the Rules of Bilingual Debating, there are only six pages of rules, and coaches should review these carefully with their debaters before tournaments.

Not every debate by your students will justify an exhaustive review. Debaters who are new may need to concentrate on basic skill development and be unable to benefit from a detailed critique. In time, however, most debaters will appreciate being offered constructive criticism on these topics. I suggest that you **let different judges in the room deal with different topics during their critiques**. In that way the debaters need not hear long, repetitive critiques but will nonetheless find each topic covered. By having different judges discuss content, speaking style, and so on after different debates, debaters will obtain the benefit of the different points of view that judges bring to a debate.

4. Tournament Etiquette

Sooner or later, you are likely to attend a debating tournament. Let me set out for your information some do's and don't's.

First, realize that the tournament organizer needs your consideration. Submit your registration forms by the deadline, or early; pay your fees when required, and do what you can to make his or her life easier. If you say you are bringing a team to the tournament, show up with one: the entire draw is predicated on your living up to your word. If you let the tournament organizer down, that necessitates substantial changes to the draw, puts the tournament behind schedule, and inconveniences every team attending.

Second, once at the tournament, put yourself in the place of the organizer. He or she may be new at the job and in any event is probably in need of all the help you can provide. Offer to do those things you'd want help with if you were running the tournament and expect to be asked to judge and to supervise certain activities.

Offer your debaters moral support between rounds, but don't coach them. In particular, it is unethical to listen to their future opponents and then brief your debaters on the case they will meet. It is also bad form (and often does more harm than good) to suggest to a debater that he or she should suddenly begin making drastic changes in his or her presentation. Your debaters deserve your support and encouragement, but save the detailed de-briefing until you return home.

During a debate, you must do nothing to indicate to your debaters how they should proceed: passing notes or signalling is improper. (Before the debate begins it is normally proper to counsel your team on which side of the resolution they should choose, if they have a choice, or what style of debate they should opt for. It is improper, however, to help debaters with the preparation of an impromptu debate. When in doubt, ask.)

If during the tournament you see a debate in which a clear abuse is taking place (for example, Points of Order are getting out of hand), in rare cases it may be appropriate for you to interrupt the debate as a judge. With that exception, however, you must not interrupt a debate once it is in progress, and of course you may never interrupt a debate in which one of your own debaters is taking part. You must not attempt to influence another judge how to score a debate - his or her independent opinion is sought - though if you are experienced, you might wish to answer a question concerning the rules or some similar matter. If in doubt, refer questions to the tournament organizer. You must not speak to judges who are judging a debate in which your debaters have taken part until the judges have completed and submitted their score sheets.

Some tournaments solicit a critique of debates you have judged. If this is done, please keep your public comments brief so as not to delay the next round of debates. Debating is intended to be educational, and most debaters appreciate constructive criticism. Please **restrict your public comments to** general remarks and, where possible, to **positive remarks**. Any negative or personal comments you have to offer are best given privately or, when the debate ballot allows, in writing.

Even if you disagree with some aspect of the administration of a tournament, such as judging in a particular case, you should not publicly criticize it, especially not in front of your or other students. This is not good sportsmanship and does not set a good example for them. You are welcome to complain privately to your Provincial or Territorial Co-ordinator, however, and such input is welcome as it helps the debating organization to improve its practices.

5. Other Materials

The Canadian Student Debating Federation is an organization dedicated to promoting and coordinating high school debate in Canada. It has had affiliated organizations in each province and territory.

Please don't hesitate to call on the Federation if it can assist your programme in any way. In addition to offering advice, it will attempt to supply you with the names of schools in your area which participate in our programme.

You may contact your provincial or territorial affiliate at:

John D. Filliter,
Provincial Co-ordinator,
Nova Scotia Debating Society,
56 Lorne Avenue, Dartmouth, N. S. B2Y 3E7
Telephone: (902) 466-8424; Facsimile: 463-4168
Electronic-mail: debate@accesscable.net

The Federation has the following materials which may be of use to you:

Instructional Materials and Resources

01. *Some Elements of Debate* (3rd edition), 24 pages, 1998
02. *An Introduction to Academic Debate*, 8 pages, 1998
03. *An Introduction to Cross-Examination Debate* (3rd edition), 13 pages, 1998
04. *An Introduction to Parliamentary Debate*, 12 pages, 1998
05. *Basic Guide to Bilingual Debating*, 30 pages, 1985
06. *Comment préparer un débat*, 6 pages, 1984
07. *Ontario Basic Instructional Guide*, 24 pages, 1984
08. *How to Prepare a Debate*, 12 pages, 1984
09. *Model Parliament Kit* (revised), 13 pages, 1984
10. *Advanced (Parliamentary) Debating Techniques* (revised), 11 pages, 1984
11. *Novice's Guide to Debating*, 21 pages, 1985
12. *Debate: A Guide for Canadian Students* (4th edition), 38 pages, 1995
13. *The Add Students and Stir Debate Cookbook* (7th Edition), 45 pages, 1993
14. *Sample Debate and Flow Chart*, 7 pages, 1984
15. *Sample Debate Resolutions* (revised), 22 pages, 1984
16. *Demonstration Parliamentary and Cross-Examination Debates* (Video), 1978
17. *Model Bilingual Debate and Introduction to Bilingual Debating* (Audiotape), 90 minutes, 1984.

Not all of these materials may be in stock at a given time but for prices or further information, please contact the applicable Co-ordinator shown above.

Brian Casey
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Revised by
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