

Debates

A debate is an organised contest in which two teams of speakers present opposing arguments, supporting or refuting a controversial claim. In university study, debates provide an opportunity to:

- explore and analyse controversial issues in the discipline
- consider different aspects and viewpoints
- practise organising and expressing arguments clearly and persuasively
- critically analyse the arguments presented

The aim of the speakers is to win i.e. to convince the adjudicator (and audience) that your team's arguments are more substantial and more persuasive than those of the opposing team.

Organisation of the debate

Teams may contain three speakers and a fourth 'silent' speaker. The silent speaker helps prepare the team's case and sits quietly during the debate making notes of the opposition's arguments, ideas for rebutting them (showing or proving them wrong), and passing the notes silently to the appropriate teammate(s). The chair(person) controls the debate, introducing the topic and the speakers e.g. 'I now call on the first speaker to begin the case for the affirmative'. The speaking order is:

1. 1st speaker for the affirmative
2. 1st speaker for the negative
3. 2nd speaker for the affirmative and so on



Speakers take turns to speak and have a strict time limit (e.g. 3 minutes for first speakers and 5 minutes for second speakers). No one may interrupt them during their speeches. The chair usually acts as the timekeeper, ringing a warning bell one minute before time up and again at the end of the allotted time. Speakers who continue to speak after the final bell lose marks.

The debate is judged by an adjudicator who sits at the back of the audience. The chair (person) allows a few minutes between each speaker for the adjudicator to make notes. At the end of the debate the adjudicator announces the winning team and comments on the arguments and performance of the speakers.

The Teams

Teams argue a case for the affirmative or the negative. Therefore, there should be a consistent argument, which runs through both speeches, begun by the first speaker and developed by the second. Speakers can develop different aspects of the argument/issue but there should not be two completely separate speeches, prepared in isolation, which present unconnected points

Roles of Speakers

The first speaker for the affirmative presents a fully-prepared speech which

- introduces/interprets the topic and defines terms if necessary
- introduces the affirmative team's case
- indicates how it will be divided between speakers
- presents the first half of their arguments for the affirmative case

The first speaker for the negative:

- accepts or modifies affirmative team's definitions/interpretation of topic
- presents the negative team's case
- indicates division of arguments between speakers
- rebuts (refutes) some of the previous speaker's arguments
- spends about one quarter of their time rebutting
- presents the first half of their arguments for the negative case

The second speaker for the affirmative:

- restates the affirmative team's line of argument
- rebuts arguments of 1st speaker for the negative
- spends about one third of their time rebutting
- presents the second half of their arguments for the affirmative case

The second speaker for the negative:

- restates the negative team's line of argument
- rebuts arguments of 2nd speaker for the affirmative
- spends about one third of their time rebutting
- presents the second half of their arguments for the negative case

The third speaker for the affirmative:

- reaffirms the affirmative team's line of argument
- rebuts all the remaining points of the negative case
- spends about two-thirds of their time rebutting
- presents a summary of the case for the affirmative
- strongly concludes team's case

The third speaker for the negative:

- reaffirms the negative team's line of argument
- rebuts all the remaining points of the affirmative case
- spends about two-thirds of their time rebutting
- presents a summary of the case for the negative
- strongly concludes team's case

*Note: the third speakers should not present any new arguments

All speakers except for the very first one must include rebuttal of the opposition's points in their speeches: therefore, they need to be flexible and able to 'think on their feet'. They should prepare solid arguments in advance but be able to combine these with responses to possibly quite unexpected points. It is important to remember to attack the arguments not the speakers, and avoid personal attack, ridicule, and insults in your rebuttal.

Criteria for judging the debate

Speeches are judged according to substance - sound academic argument and form - structure and persuasive techniques. A typical weighting in judging is:

- 40% matter - content of argument, evidence, facts etc
- 40% manner - the way the arguments are presented, style, delivery, persuasive techniques
- 20% method - structure of speech, logic, quality of argumentation

Preparing for the debate

- analyse the topic, identify the issues, define terms
- prepare your team case, decide how you will organise the case, divide the points
- try to anticipate the arguments which the opposition will advance and think about how you will rebut them so that you will not be totally unprepared
- do some research so that your arguments are supported by examples, evidence etc
- think about interesting and persuasive ways to deliver your arguments to the audience e.g. use of rhetorical questions, repetition, analogies, humour
- practise - use teammates as audience and critique each other's performance, make suggestions and practise 'thinking on your feet' and rebutting
- write your points on palm cards or neat pieces of paper

During the debate

- try to sound confident - speak clearly and not too quickly, look at the audience and try to address your speech directly to them (ignore the adjudicator)
- use your cards to keep you on track but don't simply read from them
- when not speaking, listen closely to the opposition and note points which you or your teammates can rebut - remember to take writing materials and pass notes to each other when necessary
- try to stay within time limits so that you don't lose marks