



The Cambridge Union Society Introductory Guide to Debating

2011-12

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Cambridge Schools 2011-12

The Cambridge Schools Debating competition is the largest competition of its kind involving 1500 participants and judges. It offers students a unique experience of debating as schools across the U.K compete in regional rounds starting in November, Regional finals in January culminating in finals day being held on the 29th of February 2012.

The format the competition takes is British Parliamentary Debating, which the following document hopes to explain. There is a mixture of pre-prepared motions (motions which have been announced in advance to allow a team to prepare a case) and impromptu motions which are announced 15 minutes before the round of the debate begins.

Year after year, we welcome new schools to the competition and welcome back schools which have previously entered. The quality of debating throughout the competition is of a high standard and judges always look forward to them.

For the first time this year, we are publishing an introductory guide to debating. Our aim is to ensure we maintain and improve upon the high standard of debate we have witnessed over the years.

The following document is useful for all schools that have entered the competition and we believe it gives a thorough guide to improve upon the skills of analysis and persuasion which is essential to debating.

Special thanks must be given to Charlotte Thomas, Doug Cochran, Sam Block and Harish Natarajan for their contributions to this guide.

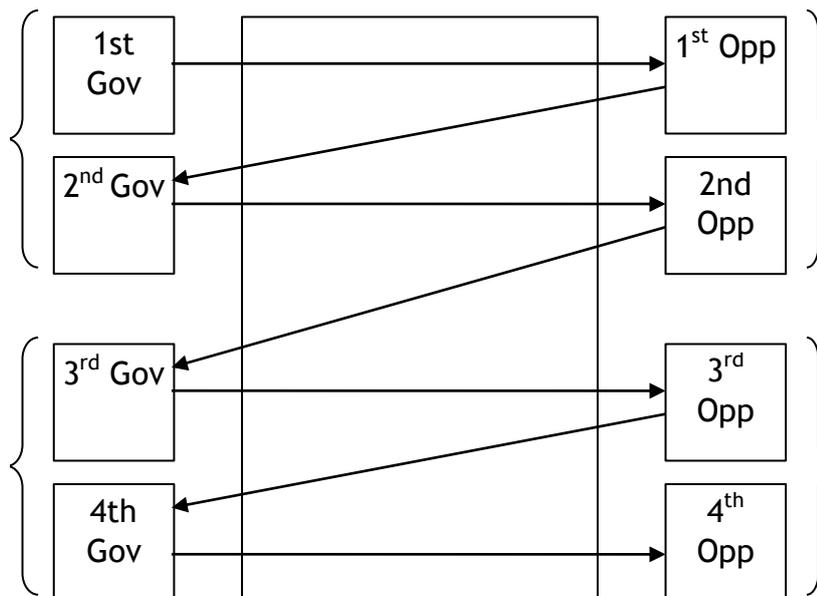
Rules and Basic Principles of British Parliamentary Debating

British Parliamentary Debating

A debate is an extended argument in an organised setting. The form of debating common to school competitions in the United Kingdom (and in much of the rest of the world) is known as 'British Parliamentary' (or BP) debating, modelled loosely on the debating style used in the House of Commons.

One of the unique features of BP is that there are four teams in every debate, each team composed of two speakers. Two teams (four speakers) argue in favour of a policy while two teams (four speakers) argue against it. Each debater speaks only once and the sides (proposition and opposition) take alternating turns giving speeches, which usually last for five or seven minutes (it varies across competitions).

This is what a debate looks like:



Positions in the debate are assigned for each team when the topic is announced, and teams will have fifteen minutes after the announcement to prepare their speeches before the start of the debate. Each team has a specific role to fulfil in order to win the debate; depending on the position they have been assigned.

Side Proposition	Side Opposition
<p>Team Position: First Proposition</p> <p>First Speaker: 'Prime Minister'</p> <p><i>Defines</i> the debate, translating the motion into a concrete policy or idea.</p> <p><i>Argues</i> two or three contentions supporting why the policy ought to be enacted.</p>	<p>Team Position: First Opposition</p> <p>Second Speaker: 'Leader of the Opposition'</p> <p><i>Refutes</i> the proposition arguments, pointing out their flaws.</p> <p><i>Argues Independently</i>, introducing new concepts that may not have been brought up in the prime minister's speech.</p>
<p>Team Position: First Proposition</p> <p>Third Speaker: 'Deputy Prime Minister'</p> <p><i>Refutes</i> the opposition arguments, pointing out their flaws.</p> <p><i>Argues Independently</i>, introducing new concepts that may not have been brought up in the prime minister's speech.</p>	<p>Team Position: First Opposition</p> <p>Fourth Speaker: 'Deputy Leader of Opp'</p> <p><i>Refutes</i> the proposition arguments, pointing out their flaws.</p> <p><i>Argues Independently</i>, introducing new concepts that may not have been brought up in the leader of opposition's speech.</p>

<p>Team Position: Second Proposition</p> <p>Fifth Speaker: ‘Member of Government’</p> <p><i>Extends</i> the debate, offering new arguments and analysis for supporting their side.</p> <p><i>Refutes</i> any outstanding opposition points.</p>	<p>Team Position: Second Opposition</p> <p>Sixth Speaker: ‘Member of the Opposition’</p> <p><i>Extends</i> the debate, offering new arguments and analysis for supporting their side.</p> <p><i>Refutes</i> the proposition extension.</p>
<p>Team Position: Second Proposition</p> <p>Seventh Speaker ‘Proposition Whip’</p> <p><i>Summates</i> the debate, offering a biased summary of the issues involved and showing why the proposition deserve to win.</p>	<p>Team Position: Second Opposition</p> <p>Eighth Speaker ‘Opposition Whip’</p> <p><i>Summates</i> the debate, offering a biased summary of the issues involved and showing why the opposition deserve to win.</p>

Basic Principles of British Parliamentary Debating

1. In brief, your team’s job is to convince the judges that:

- The motion ought to be supported/opposed (depending on your side).
- Your team (as opposed to the other team on your side) has provided the best reasons why the policy should be supported or opposed.

Like a party that has joined a coalition government, your team has an interest in seeing a policy supported or opposed, but also in making your team appear convincing to observers. As a result, the third speaker for each side ought to contribute new arguments (an extension), to distinguish her team from their counterparts on the same side. Similarly, the fourth speaker on each side ought to summarise the debate in such a way as to highlight not only why their side deserves to win, but the primacy of his partner’s arguments in securing the win.

2. You have two main weapons to convince the judges of the strengths of your team:

- **Positive Matter: Arguments for or against a policy.**
- **Negative Matter (rebuttal): Criticisms of the other side's arguments.**

Most speeches will contain both positive and negative material. The exceptions to this rule are the first speaker (prime minister) who will only provide positive material (as nobody else has spoken yet) and the summation speakers, who are not required to bring any new major arguments at all, but are expected merely to summarise what has already taken place. At the beginning of a speech, the debater ought to outline the rebuttals and positive arguments she wishes to put forward.

Points of Information (POIs)

A point of information is a question or comment made by a debater to a speaker on the other side of the motion. A debater may offer a point of information by rising while a speaker for the other side is speaking. Most competitions do not allow speakers to offer points of information during the first or last minutes of a speaker's speech and instruct judges to give time signals to indicate when POIs are allowed.

The debater offering the point of information may say something like, 'On this point' when they rise, so that their opponent and the judges are aware of their request. The debater giving their speech can either accept the point of information or decline it, often by saying 'I'll take your point' or 'No, thank you' or words to that effect. It is also acceptable to dismiss a point of information by waving one's arm in a downward motion, indicating that the offeror should take their seat!

If accepted, the offeror should ask a question or make a comment designed to challenge their opponent's argument. This point should not last longer than fifteen seconds (e.g. 'Isn't it true that nuclear weapons have kept peace between the great powers during the past sixty years?'). The offeror should then resume their seat and allow the speaker to a chance to respond to their challenge.

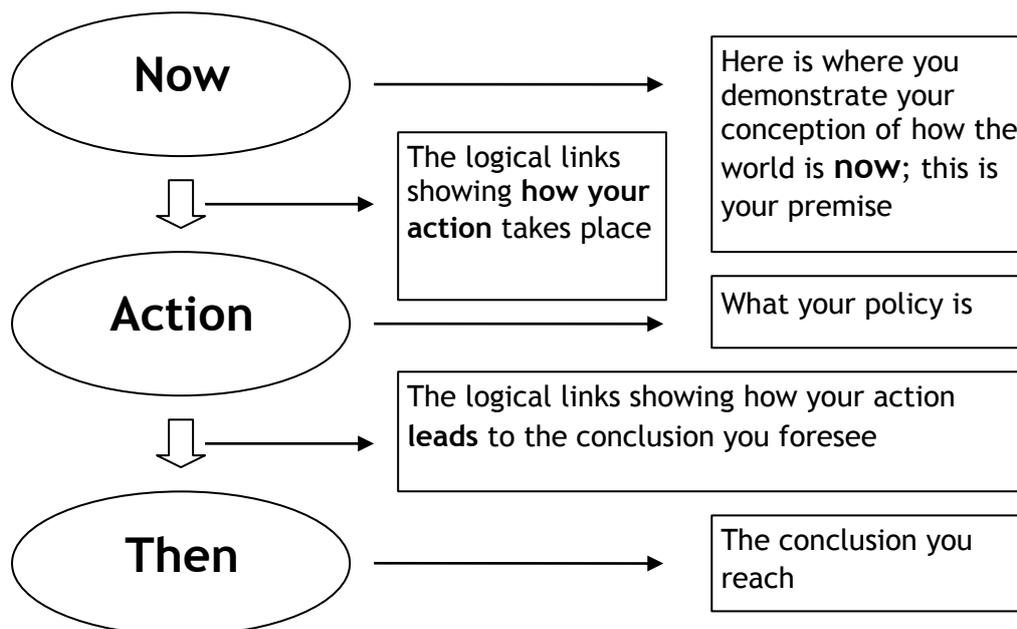
Speakers should aim to take at least one point of information while speaking and offer at least two for every speech on the opposing side. **No points of information may be offered to the other team on your side or to your partner.**

-3- Content

All good debating speeches rely on having well analysed, thorough arguments. Every debater must think about *what* they want to say in their speech to ensure they are persuasive.

What is particular about debating arguments is that no logical step can be taken for granted. Every part of one's analysis must be explained.

A model for good argumentation



This is a way of structuring an individual argument. You can show the consequences you claim will arise from a given policy (good or bad) by putting your arguments into this framework. While simple, it ensures you do all the jobs you need to, and prevents you from spending lots of time describing the problem (the now) and no time at all on how your action actually solves it (the then).

Use of Examples

Examples should not be free-standing entities that show off your knowledge. Rather, they are intended to validate your reasoning. This, then, is what must be kept in mind while using them. After your analysis has been done, examples can be given in terms of that analysis. How your model of reasoning actually came to pass when we, for example, placed sanctions on South Africa would support your analysis on why sanctions work. Not just “it worked in South Africa”. This is where, sadly, some reading can be helpful. The Economist is somewhat ubiquitous on the debating circuit, but is still very handy. But varying your reading is essential. The BBC News website, journals such as Foreign Affairs and so on are all very useful. Try to find out about histories as well as knowing about the world today. Some more theoretical reading is very useful too; *Causing Death And Saving Lives* is a great primer for the practical and important applications of philosophical ethics.

Another Model

RReason

Explanation

Evidence

Link

The above is one way of incorporating more into your arguments and is the one most commonly used. The Reason is simply your headline; the reason you are about to explain as to why we should or shouldn't do the policy being discussed. The Explanation is your analysis as to why this is a good reason; it is normally your **Now-Action-Then**. The Evidence is a set of examples, facts, possibly even fictional illustrations, that serve to validate your analysis and show your reason again to be well founded. The Link shows why this reason is relevant; pointing out why it means the motion should be supported or opposed.

For example, in 'This House Would Legalise Prostitution':

Reason - Legal prostitution will be safer than illegal.

Explanation - If something is legal, it can be regulated. Compulsory contraception, legal protection and other such safeguards can be provided. The legal sector will be more appealing and so will replace the illegal sector.

Evidence - An Australian study shows STIs were 80x higher in the illegal sector.

Link - If the government can make something safer it should, so it should pass this.

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Style

Style is a crucial factor in persuasion. Some of the most effective leaders on the world stage are brilliant communicators; you don't need to look further than Tony Blair or Barack Obama in recent years. But there is also no definition of a "good" style. Different speakers will utilise different styles to equal effect. Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, both British Prime Ministers with brilliant communication skills have starkly contrasting styles. The most important aspects of style, however, are not the isolated moments of brilliance but the **basic skills of communication**.

Volume

Make sure you can be heard. A clear, audible style is crucial to any speech. But you can often adjust your volume at various parts of your speech, perhaps raising your voice slightly as you come to a crucial point or example.

Speed

Altering the pace of your speech can often be a useful tool with which to keep an audience engaged. Altering your speed at the right time will highlight important elements of your speech. For example, at the end of a vital statistic, you can briefly pause, in order to allow the audience to digest its significance.

Engaging with your Audience

Engage with your audience. By looking them in the eye, they look back at you, and more importantly, they listen to what you're saying. **Eye contact can be daunting, but it's vital in order to hold a listener's attention.** In order to ensure that you look up enough, make sure you don't rely too heavily on notes, a couple of brief bullet points for each of your arguments should suffice. Though it might seem scary, the fewer notes you have, the more you are forced to engage with your listeners. Think of some of the leading communicators in the world. Political leaders giving important speeches don't spend their time looking down at their text.

The Argument

Debating requires making arguments, not assertions. In simple terms an assertion is something that is stated as true, without enough reasons to demonstrate that the statement is likely to be true. It's a statement of fact, without proof of validity.

The 'Anatomy of an Argument'

Whereas an assertion is simply a statement of fact (or in slightly more sophisticated terms, an assertion can include simplistic/superficial analysis a proper 'argument' has the following parts:

Idea

Analysis

Evidence

= One argument

Idea

The IDEA refers to the concept or proposition that you seek to prove - it might be a principle, such as "the government has an obligation to provide free education" or it might just be something that would be helpful to your side of the debate, such as "the death penalty is an effective deterrent for criminals". Either way, its nothing on its own - it may be true, or it might not. The point is that you and your team want people to believe that it's true.

Analysis

How do you make them believe it? Well you start with some ANALYSIS of why it is likely to be true - why it is logical and reasonable to believe that it's true.

When formulating your ANALYSIS the key word to think of is because, every time you come up with an IDEA, say "this is (likely to be) true because...." You should keep explaining why or because until you think you are saying things so obvious that they don't need to be said. But assume that the adjudicator is either fairly dumb, or slightly hostile to you, or both. So you have keep explaining the point, keep saying "because..." until its impossible for the adjudicator not to accept your argument as at least valid.

A speaker might say, "banning smoking will actually generate more profits for businesses (IDEA), because (here begins the ANALYSIS) it will attract more customers. At present many potential customers are put off going out to pubs and clubs, or cut short their visits because they are put off by cigarette smoke, which they know is dangerous to them". Etc, etc, you could explain this in more detail but I think you get the point.

Let's be more precise. To completely analyse idea X, you should ask the following three questions:

- Why does the policy (what you are proposing/opposing) lead/not lead to X?
- Why is X good/bad?
- Why is outcome X important?

Every argument you make should (explicitly or implicitly) answer these questions. Sometimes the answers will be obvious (if you should that the policy leads to death, you probably don't need to explain why that's bad)

****For evidence – see "Use of Examples" under Content***

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Rebuttal

Winning a debate requires that the arguments your team makes are better constructed and important than that of the other teams. We have previously looked at how you can make well-constructed arguments. However, showing that your arguments are better than others is assisted by showing that the other side's arguments are flawed. That is, by responding to the arguments of the other side.

Rebuttal is your response to claims and arguments made by the other side. Rebuttal is destructive material aimed at knocking down what the other side has said, while your main points are constructive material which builds up a new case.

Three Important Points about Rebuttal

Once we know the anatomy of a good argument it should be clear what needs to be done to effectively destroy one.

1) Attacking the evidence - it's always easy to dispute the evidence presented by your opposition. But attacking the argument here is a poor strategy. Because the opposition can repair the chain by providing more evidence (which you attack, then they give more and it's a stalemate).

2) Attacking the argument a little higher, at the ANALYSIS, is more difficult but also more effective. If you can demonstrate that the ANALYSIS is illogical or based on assumptions that are not true (or unlikely to be true) then you heavily damage the credibility of the whole argument. This is the most common sort of rebuttal by experienced speakers. However it's usually not a fatal blow. For example you might say that smoking is not really a reason why people choose not to attend pubs and clubs, since less than a quarter of the population smoke, but nightclubs and pubs are full of non-smokers every weekend. Unfortunately for you, a clever opposition can rebuild their ANALYSIS by giving other reasons, or explaining the logical links in a different way, that weakens your rebuttal.

3) So finally we get to the top of the chain, the IDEA. This is usually very difficult to attack since often they are reasonable ideas, it just that your team has to argue that they are not

true in the context of this debate. But sometimes you can attack the idea, and if you can do it effectively, it's a fatal blow to that argument. You can argue that the idea is NOT true. This is distinct from showing that the other side as not provided sufficiently strong reasons as to why the idea is true (an attack at the analysis).

You can attack the idea that banning smoking in pubs will be good for business by arguing that firstly you don't think that's true but even if it is, you say "it's not the most important priority in this debate". If the adjudicator accepts that sort of argument (or any other attack on the IDEA) then the other links in the chain are irrelevant. Obviously its not that simple, the opposition will defend their idea, and you need very good reasons to show that an entire IDEA and the argument that flows from it, is wrong or irrelevant. But if you think the IDEA is vulnerable, you should attack it, because it's effective and it's efficient.

Now you know what to attack here is a non-exhaustive list of the ways you can attack an argument:

- 'We do not agree with that argument'
 - This might occur where you and the other side have different world-views, for example about what the role of government is.

- 'The basis of that argument is factually untrue'
 - Your opponent's argument might rest upon a factual assumption which you know is untrue.
 - Your opponent might be using a misleading example, which seems to provide support for your case, but if you know anything about the example you might be able to distinguish it from the situation in question.

- 'The basis of your argument is logically flawed'
 - You might be able to attack the causal link on which the argument is based. This will be one of the most important kinds of rebuttal you use.
 - You may reject that the premise that the ends are good/bad

- 'That argument is insignificant/There are more important arguments'
 - You might be able to acknowledge that your opponent's argument is true, but counter it by saying that one of your own arguments supersedes it.

- For example, if the other side says X costs a lot of money, it is often enough to concede that argument, but suggest that the advantages make it worth while.
- 'That argument is irrelevant'
 - Your opponent's argument might be true, but might not help their side's case.
- Can you think of examples for each of these types of rebuttal?
- Can you think of any more types of rebuttal?

The key thing to remember is that you have to rebut the whole point, not simply certain elements of it, and that there can be multiple ways of engaging with any given argument

Extension Speeches

The extension speech is the 3rd speech offered on both sides of the debate and is often the hardest to do well.

What is the Role of the Extension?

In order to win a British Parliamentary Debate, you must not only show that your *side* won the debate, but that your *team of two* provided the most important positive contribution to the debate as a whole. This requires you ensuring your material is distinct from what opening proposition or opening opposition has brought.

Ways to Extend

Ideally, what you would like to do in extension is to provide a **new framework** to view the debate which is a change from what the opening half on your side brought but is not contradictory with them. In a “legalise prostitution” debate for instance, the opening government could have argued that a legally regulated industry might be safer for the workers within it and this is why the government bench should win. In extension, you might (instead of view the debating looking at consequences alone) look at the right of prostitutes and customers to freely contract into commercial sex. It is not just principled arguments which can be made in extension - other things are equally as important:

- New facts which are particularly important and affect a lot of the debate
- New pieces of analysis which have wide-ranging implications
- Argumentation about an interest-group that has not yet been considered
- New ways of looking at the principles

Even if you cannot find any of the above in extension, a **plain new** argument, which focuses on the key issue of the debate - or an argument which defines what you think is the key issue in the debate, will often suffice for a new innovative extension that can win your team the debate.

Structuring Extensions

In extensions, it pays to think actively about structure. It is perfectly acceptable to **front-load** your rebuttal, that is to say to put it all at the start of your speech and do it **point-by-point**, but there are other ways in which you can do it. Many speakers find it effective to group their rebuttal thematically in third speeches (and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere), dealing with the material almost like an **area of clash** in a summary, but adding substantive new analysis. Particularly effective extensions are often characterised by a patch of new analysis at the start of the speech giving the new material, argumentation or information which extends the debate, followed by rebuttal and substantive material which flows as a consequence of this extension.

Summary Speeches

Last speakers give a different kind of speech. Their job is to offer a summation of the debate. Ostensibly, they look back and tell us what happened in the debate. In reality, a useful comparison might be with very biased news coverage. Watching a left wing and right wing network reporting the same event, you might see them reach totally different conclusions, despite the fact that both ostensibly offer a neutral perspective.

The important thing to remember is that a summary speaker is free from the need to add new material and instead, has the main objective of providing a holistic view of the debate.

Here are some typical ways of delivering a summary speech:

Areas of Clash

In a debate, there will be various arguments made, usually along particular lines that both proposition and opposition are arguing. Although speakers in the debate may not have explicitly identified this, it is a summary speaker's role to articulate the debate in this way. Identifying what the main contention is in the debate and showing why your side (and importantly your team's contribution) has won the debate is often one of the best ways to structure a summary speech. To ensure you focus on what this contention is, and do not descend into simply repeating arguments from both sides in a list fashion, speakers often ask two questions which they feel central to the debate and proceed to answer them.

Case Construction/Deconstruction

Summary speakers are in a good position to view the debate and identify what must be proven for your side to win and the other's to lose. Once the summary speaker has identified what the **burden of proof** in the debate was, he or she can look at why his/her bench satisfy this and in particular why your teammates contribution was vital. For instance, in a "legalise prostitution" debate, a summary speaker can argue that two things need to be proven for the government bench to win: that there is a right for individuals to engage in commercial sex and that this would result in a good outcome. Using the burden

of proof approach would allow a summary speaker to analyse this burden whilst focussing less on what the opposition bench said and more on what your own team has said.

Important points to remember in a summary speech

1. Summary speakers should always ensure that **they support the extension** speech delivered by their partner! Summary speakers must explicitly rebut the arguments the opposing team have made against the extension and if no such response has been made, point this out.

2. Summary speakers **should not contribute new material** to the debate but can provide new analysis or new ways of conceptualising things already discussed. Explicit new material is discouraged and will be looked down upon. However, new material in response to material on the table is not damaged and can often be encouraged.

3. Both summary speakers (but prop summary especially) **must remember to do rebuttal** and deconstruct the material just presented by the extension speaker on the opposite side. Often, these extensions can be debate winning and responding to them can be THE MOST IMPORTANT thing a summary speaker does in the debate.