

**The Debating Handbook**  
*by Alexander Deane*

*A guide to British Parliamentary Debating and  
the World Universities Debating Championships*

*Every time you have to speak, you are auditioning for leadership*

James Humes

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## **INTRODUCTION**

British Parliamentary debating features eight speakers to a debate: there are two teams of two speakers on each side. It is a team sport: debates are won and lost by teams, not by individuals. It is a subtle art. It involves competing with a team on your side, without appearing to disagree with them. Positions are allocated on a random basis: teams do not choose the side of the debate they are on. Often this will lead to speaking in favour of things you don't believe in, and against those that you do.

The World Universities Debating Championships ("WUDC") is the largest and most prestigious debating competition in the world. It is held in the British Parliamentary format and occurs during the post-Christmas holidays. Over the first three days of debating, nine debates are held, three on each day. All the teams compete in all of these nine debates. At the end of the third day, New Year's Eve, the 32 best performing teams "break" away from the rest. These 32 teams go on to debate against one another in the New Year, in a series of knock-out debates: two teams from each of the eight debates (octo-finals) progress to quarter finals; two teams from each progress to semi-finals, and two teams from each of the semi-finals progress to compete in the Grand Final. The team that wins that debate wins the World Championships.

There is also a separate post-break competition for the 16 best-performing teams that speak English as a Second Language. Teams that break in the main break are not eligible to compete in the ESL break.

## **BEFORE THE DEBATE**

### *The Draw*

Whilst the topics for debate for some competitions (or for those for specific debates in competitions) are announced in advance, generally topics are announced 15 minutes prior to the debate itself. This is the case at the World Universities Debating Championships, which is held in the British Parliamentary format.

Competitors gather together for the “draw” before each round, which is shown on a screen or series of screens. The draw says which teams will be in which debates (or “rounds”).<sup>1</sup> This will show:

- The room number for each debate
- The four teams and their positions
- The judges in the rooms

After the draw is shown, the subject of the debate will be announced. This is called the “motion” and is expressed in the format “This House...” followed by a statement of belief or will, which the proposition teams will support and the opposition teams oppose.

Teams should not be judged by adjudicators from their own institutions, or by boyfriends/girlfriends/husbands/wives/relatives. Both judges and competitors will have registered such “conflicts” with tournament organisers before the competition begins, but it is incumbent upon both judges and adjudicators to tell the organisers immediately if they are nevertheless allocated to rooms in which such conflicts occur. In some formats of debating, competitors may declare that they do not wish to be judged by a particular adjudicator or adjudicators (this is sometimes called “striking” or “scratching” a judge). However, there is no right to avoid being judged by

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<sup>1</sup> This draw is constructed at random for the first debate, and puts teams with the same number of team points in debates together after that. This is done by reference to team points and without reference to individual speaker points. If there are an insufficient number of teams on a particular number of team points, teams on one point less are “pulled up” until a sufficient number of teams are obtained for a full debate. If there are not enough teams with that number of team points, then the teams on one point less than that will be eligible to be pulled up, and so forth. Teams are pulled up on a random basis, without reference to speaker points.

adjudicators who do not fall into one or more of the “conflicts” outlined above in the British Parliamentary format generally, or at the World University Debating Championships in particular.

After the motion is announced, teams go and prepare for the debate. The team in first proposition is entitled to use the room in which the debate is to be held for their preparation: if you are not in the first proposition team, you should allow that team to take the room even if you get there before them. All teams should go straight to the room. 1<sup>st</sup> proposition go in. The rest remain nearby.

When a team does not arrive for the debate on time, adjudicators call for a runner from the organising team who will supply a dummy/swing team to fill their place. If the team has not arrived five minutes after the round was due to start, they are replaced and may not enter the round after this time. When this happens, the adjudicator draws a line through the name of the absent team and the individuals within it and replaces their team name with that of the dummy team and their individual names with the names of the individuals on the dummy team. The dummy team can win the debate. The team not there will receive zero team points and zero speaker points for the round. The judges adjudicate the round as they see it without reference to the fact that one of the teams is not a registered competitive team.

#### *Pre-debate preparation*

Plan what you’re going to say = what are your arguments?

Attempt to predict what they’re going to say = what’s their rebuttal?

Plan your response to that = what’s your rebuttal to their rebuttal?

Which points for your team will be delivered by you, and which will be delivered by your partner?

How will your speech be structured?

These are questions you should have answers to by the end of your fifteen minutes.

Fifteen minutes is not enough time to prepare speeches of very high quality. Competitive debaters therefore assemble material that might be relevant to future

debates. There will always be topics that you hadn't predicted which prompt scrambling for thoughts right up until you walk into the room. But you should work to make the number of them as low as possible. Your ultimate aim should be to use that preparation time merely to brush up on facts and arguments you've already collated, to structure them and divide them between you and your partner.

Teams on the same side do not prepare with one another. Nor may teams from the same institution "group-prep" together, or receive assistance from coaches or others. A team prepares by itself – the point of this team competition is that it is the efforts of your team alone that decides your performance, not assistance from anyone else.

Speakers may use whatever printed material they wish to prepare. There is no limit on the amount of notes speakers may use to prepare or take into the debate. Electronic dictionaries are allowed. All other kinds of electronic equipment (e.g. laptops) are not allowed.

## **IN THE DEBATE**

### *Order of Speeches*

Speakers speak in the following order:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Speaker, 1<sup>st</sup> proposition team (the “Prime Minister”)
- 1<sup>st</sup> Speaker, 1<sup>st</sup> opposition team (the “Leader of the Opposition”)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Speaker, 1<sup>st</sup> proposition team (the “Deputy Prime Minister”)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Speaker, 1<sup>st</sup> opposition team (the “Deputy Leader of the Opposition”)
- 1<sup>st</sup> Speaker, 2<sup>nd</sup> proposition team (the “Member of Government”)
- 1<sup>st</sup> Speaker, 2<sup>nd</sup> opposition team (the “Member of the Opposition”)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Speaker, 2<sup>nd</sup> proposition team (the “Government Whip”)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Speaker, 2<sup>nd</sup> opposition team (the “Opposition Whip”)

### *Timing*

Speeches are of five or seven minutes in length, depending upon the competition: at WUDC, they are seven minutes. The first and last minute of each speech are ‘protected time.’ The end of the first minute and the beginning of the last minute will be indicated by a single knock on the table or sounding of a bell by one of the adjudicators. The end of the last minute will be indicated by a double knock or bell.

There is a grace period of no more than 30 seconds after this. Even 30 seconds is pushing the boundary of acceptability. This is important to note, particularly for teams from different formats (such as the American Parliamentary Debate Association) where debaters may speak significantly over their allotted time without incurring a penalty. In British Parliamentary debating, speaking over time is a serious breach of the rules and the marks such a speaker is awarded will reflect that breach.

### *Points of Information*

British Parliamentary debating features no audience participation or intervention by judges. However, between the first and last minute of a speech, debaters on the other side may attempt to interject by offering a ‘point of information’ (“PoI”). The debater

giving the speech has total control over their speech: they choose whether or not to accept the point of information and if not accepted the debater offering it should sit down immediately. If accepted by the speaker, the debater offering the point may deliver a brief interjection (never more than 15 seconds). Points of information cannot be offered to your own side.

The first and last minutes of a speech are “protected time:” the speaker is allowed to begin and end his speech without interruption. The end of the first minute and beginning of the last are indicated by a bell or knock and attempting to offer points during that time (making points “out of time”) is bad form. Such points will be ruled out of order by the adjudicators.

Points of information are extremely important; along with discussing the matter raised by other speakers, they are the prime method of showing involvement throughout a debate, and are one of the most obvious distinctions between debating and public speaking.

Speakers should always stand up to make PoIs. They should not be offered in any way other than variations on the conventional ‘On a point of information’ or ‘on that point.’ To deliver a point such as “on Brazil” – saying the point, so it’s delivered even though you’re not accepted – is to unfairly inject the thrust of your intervention without the current speaker, who controls the floor, and should have the choice of accepting you or not. It is cheating. Whilst some judges don’t take this view, many judges will heavily penalise the practice. You won’t know what your judge thinks – so play safe. Don’t do it.

PoIs should be offered frequently. But be aware that ‘badgering’ is to be avoided – this is a sensitive judgement that will become easier with experience (delivering PoIs in the conventional way also diminishes the possibility of judges viewing you as badgering your opposition).

PoIs should be offered to each member of the opposition team: don’t attempt to get your ‘quota’ in to just one or two of them – this will be apparent to those watching.

They can be positive: Offering a new argument or example for your side

Highlighting an argument already delivered by your side that they have ignored

Or negative: Displaying inconsistency in an opposition speech or between speeches

Giving a fact or precedent that stands against their argument

Pointing out something they've got wrong

Taking points: whilst the speaker giving the speech has the absolute right to accept or decline points just as he wishes, he should aim to accept two points during a seven minute speech. Not taking any points of information during your speech is a serious fault.

On the other hand, taking three POIs undermines your time and any more will seriously damage a speech.

It is very obvious if speakers are unwilling to take points of information from stronger teams or speakers and are waiting for points from weaker ones. Don't be afraid to accept POIs from your strongest opponents – when it suits you to. Good points are rewarded – dealing well with them is too.

## **SPEAKER ROLES**

Positions in the debate come with different responsibilities. Do your job. Fulfilling your role in the debate is the fundamental yardstick by which you will be judged.

### *Position-Specific Responsibilities*

#### **Defining**

The first speakers define for their sides and delivers arguments for their teams. They also point to (“flag”) the points their partner will deliver. The roles of the first speakers differ somewhat so they shall be dealt with in turn.

#### First Proposition

The first proposition team speaker (the Prime Minister) has a particular job to do: he defines the debate. He sets out what the “line” of the proposition in the debate will be. Whilst in doing so, there is no obligation to propose a policy by which that “line” would be implemented, debates are often poor if you don’t and it is never wrong to deliver one.

Things you shouldn’t do:

#### *Status quo definitions*

Normally, the proposition proposes a change and the opposition opposes it – they defend the current situation (the “status quo”). Proposing a status quo policy is not fair on the first opposition team. The 1<sup>st</sup> prop team has had 15 minutes to prepare their arguments. If you simply defend the status quo, you are asking the opposition to prepare a policy in the round, during your speech, in perhaps five minutes. Very occasionally, motions will force you into proposing the status quo. This does not happen at WUDC. Whenever you have a choice as the proposition team between a change and the status quo, and opt for the status quo, your marks will suffer.

### *Truisms*

There are three truisms, and all are to be avoided: First, the self-evident: “Wednesday is after Tuesday.” Secondly, the self-proving: e.g. the President should have the power to do x because the power to do x rests with the President. Thirdly, most common in debating, the moral truism, something to which no real opposition exists: “genocide is bad.” Think when you’re defining: what’s the opposition to this? It’s not fair to take *too* much of the moral high ground: you cannot ask the opposition to take a position that is unarguable or absurd.

### *Squirrels*

When a motion has an obvious meaning and you twist the wording of the motion to define onto something else, you are “squirreling.” Some formats have more sympathy for this practice than others. The British Parliamentary format has little sympathy for squirrels, and WUDC has none at all. The “obvious” debate is the one you should have. You can have an innovative policy for it, an approach others won’t have considered, material others don’t know about: that’s great. But defining on something other than the plain meaning of the motion is not right, especially at WUDC where ruining somebody else’s round by offering an off-topic debate can lead to them suffering through no fault of their own, perhaps to the extent of not breaking. It forces the opposition to debate against something they’ve had no time to prepare for, or to challenge the definition which always leads to a horrible debate. It’s not wacky or fun – it’s childish and unfair. Don’t do it.

### *Time/Place setting*

“Time setting” means defining the debate to be held at some point in the past or in the future. It is never acceptable to time set in British Parliamentary debating.

“Place setting” means defining the debate as occurring in a particular geographical location or region. In national or regional competitions, it is acceptable to place-set in the relevant nation/area. At WUDC, it is not: it is a *world* championship and it is not fair to define the debate on a particular geographical area (normally chosen because

you know a lot about it). Exceptions may arguably arise where all four of the teams in the round are from a particular place/region but as a matter of good practice it should simply be avoided per se.

### *Don't "hang your case"*

The whole of the philosophy, and the central case offered by your team, must be in the first speaker's speech. If it's not, you've "hung your case" – it's left hanging, incomplete until the second speaker's speech. It's not fair, because a speaker on the other side has had to oppose your team without knowing half of what you stand for.

Beyond these strict rules, there are also two related "inadvisables." Defining a very narrow change often leads to a minimal-clash debate that runs out of steam – you'll be blamed for it if so. On the other hand, extreme positions that might be of philosophical interest but of no realistic application lead to theoretical debates with no real-world application. Such debates are of very limited worth.

Finally on defining for the proposition, don't over-complicate. Your arguments can be tremendously complex: but the issue being debated should be straightforward.

The point of proposing is to set up a good debate. Put forward a decent proposition and stand by it. Tell us the principle you wish to establish. Tell us the grounds of debate as you see them.

### First Opposition

The first opposition speaker sets out the opposition to the proposal. A frequent question is, should I challenge the proposition's definition? (This is allowed, at least in theory). A good rule of thumb is, *don't do it*. If the definition is good, it will count against you that you don't just get on with it. If it's bad, you'll be given credit for ensuring a debate can nevertheless occur. Debates about the definition of the debate are bad and horrible to watch and even the winners get low points. You don't want to be in one. Normally, the definition is bad because the prop team is bad – so just beat them, don't waste time on definitional challenges. Only the first speaker of

the first opposition team is allowed to challenge the motion. If they do not, the rest of the opposition bench is bound by that decision.

It is legitimate to define where no definition has been offered. Here, the first opposition speaker takes on the burden of establishing the debate, at short notice. Credit will be given to him for this problem. The opposition remains the opposition, though: the opposition continues to oppose change to the status quo.

It's first opposition's job to set out the opposition's "line." Whilst first proposition should have put forward a case with broad, contestable principles, it's down to first opposition to show what the disagreement is between the two sides: to establish the "clash" in the debate.

One vital part of doing that is ensuring that you oppose the proposition that's given, not merely the one you were expecting. First opposition is the place where people are most obviously caught out, unprepared and unable to be versatile in the face of the unexpected. *Listen* to what first prop says, and tell us why you disagree with it.

You can oppose the *principle* of the proposition, the *policy*, or both. If opposing only the policy the proposition have advanced, you can recommend an alternative policy.

Opposing on very narrow grounds (accepting most of what the proposition says, and only opposing a bit of it) is dangerous. It can lead to a bad debate, about very little, for which you will be blamed. Normally, defending the status quo is the right thing to do in opposition.

The words of caution above about "hanging your case" apply equally to first opposition.

### *Beyond defining*

Having set out the basis of their side's position first speakers also deliver arguments for their team and flag the points their partners will make. It's not enough merely to

define: indeed, if your definition takes two minutes of your seven minute speech, it's too long. The first speakers also deliver substantive material for their side.

The first opposition speaker also rebuts the arguments advanced by first proposition.

### **Seconding**

Speakers in the second position on the table will have (should have) been allotted points by the first speaker. These points *must* be delivered: it is a serious teamwork flaw if a point to come is promised by one member of the team and not delivered by the other.

They also rebut the material provided by the speaker(s) on the other side that have spoken before them. A fault common to speeches made in the second positions is giving too much time to rebuttal and not enough to substantive material: though there are no hard and fast rules as to the division of a speech, if more than half a speech is spent rebutting, usually not enough time is left for substantive arguments.

If a definitional challenge has been made by 1<sup>st</sup> Opp (remembering that they almost always are *not* and should be avoided), the second proposition speaker must set out the proposition's position on it: defending the original definition, or accepting the new one. Though the usual approach is to defend the original definition, because obviously damage is done to the standing of a team which advances a definition that gets "left behind" and drops out of the debate, this is a decision that is context-specific. If on hearing 1<sup>st</sup> Opp you realise that there really is something terribly wrong with your definition, then accepting theirs is the right thing to do. This would salvage something for your team and lead to a better debate, which judges will appreciate.

### **Extending**

Speakers in the third position on the table have an interesting job. In essence, their task is to show what their team has to offer that is new. Importantly, the second half of the table is not a new debate. The nature of the 3<sup>rd</sup> speaker position reflects the

subtlety of the British format: material must be new, but not too new; different, but not too different.

3<sup>rd</sup> speaker approaches can take two forms:

- New arguments/examples
- New analysis of arguments and examples that have already been delivered

Both are legitimate. For this reason, the term ‘extension’ is in some ways unhelpful, as a successful ‘extension’ can be to do substantively the same thing as the team before you, but do it better. For example, a legitimate new contribution from the second team on the bench can be to rebut well an opposition argument that has previously been rebutted badly.

In framing your own positive material, something that’s been mentioned by the other team on your bench can be enlarged. The fact that they’ve glancingly said it doesn’t mean the point belongs to them. You can make the point your own by expanding it and analysing it more fully.

Third speakers on either side do not have to say the word “extension.”

Third speakers for the opposition have a particular responsibility to deal with the extension given by the third speaker for the proposition. They also contribute their team’s positive material in the same way as the third speaker for the proposition.

The second teams in BP debates must not contradict the material set out by the first teams on their sides (neither the principle, nor the policy, nor the examples, nor anything else). If done to a significant extent, it’s called “knifing” and will greatly harm your team. It is difficult to beat a team on your side without contradicting them: but that’s part of the subtlety of the format. Teams going first will often try to deliver as much material as possible, starving the second teams of new ground: but they don’t make that overt. Similarly, teams in the “back half” will advance material that seeks to advance their side’s position more effectively than the first team did; it may be chosen or flagged in a way that reveals faults in the first team’s material, but those faults aren’t to be explicitly pointed out by the team in second. Being on the same

side is more than a formality: it has real meaning in the debate and though you're trying to beat the team alongside you, you must do this by being better, not by arguing against them.

### **Summating**

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. Alternatively, think of a summary as a biased adjudication, highlighting the strengths of the winners (your side) and the weaknesses of the losers (theirs).

Given this, whilst new examples are always welcome, summary speakers **should not advance new arguments.**

The constitution of the World Universities Debating Championships currently states that the last proposition speaker *may* offer new material. This is contrary to understanding and practice in the UK so need not trouble those debating domestically. Speakers competing at the World Championships should receive clarification of this issue at the full briefing.

Obviously the last opposition speaker shouldn't deliver new material – that would be very unfair, as no-one speaks after him to rebut them.

Summary speeches may be delivered by addressing the debate speaker by speaker, or by themes, or in another way you prefer: it's really a matter of personal choice. Most speakers prefer that a "thematic" summary: going through six substantive speakers (and rebutting the last summary, if you're in opposition) means taking things very quickly in a seven minute speech. But in some debates, you might find that a speaker by speaker approach helps highlight contradictions on the other side. It's up to you.

## Roles: A Summary

So going by position, speakers must carry out the following responsibilities:

### **First Speaker, First Proposition Team** (*1<sup>st</sup> Prop/Prime Minister*)

- Defines the grounds of the debate
- Delivers own substantive material
- Flags the arguments to be delivered by his partner

### **First Speaker, First Opposition Team** (*1<sup>st</sup> Opp/Leader of the Opposition*)

- Defines the opposition's grounds
- Rebuts 1<sup>st</sup> Prop
- Delivers own substantive material
- Flags the arguments to be delivered by his partner
- *Doesn't challenge the definition if he's got his head screwed on*

### **Second Speaker, First Proposition Team** (*2<sup>nd</sup> Prop/Deputy Prime Minister*)

- Rebuts 1<sup>st</sup> Opp
- Delivers own substantive material, using the labels his partner gave for it, and makes reference back to partner's material

### **Second Speaker, First Opposition Team** (*2<sup>nd</sup> Opp/Deputy Leader of the Opposition*)

- Rebuts the arguments of the 1<sup>st</sup> Prop team, with particular responsibility for rebutting 2<sup>nd</sup> Prop
- Delivers own substantive material, using the labels his partner gave for it, and makes reference back to partner's material

### **First Speaker, Second Proposition Team** (*3<sup>rd</sup> Prop/Member of Government*)

- Delivers own substantive material
- Does not have to say the word 'extension'
- Rebuts the arguments of the speakers before him, with particular responsibility to rebut 2<sup>nd</sup> Opp

**First Speaker, Second Opposition Team** (*3<sup>rd</sup> Opp/Member of the Opposition*)

- Rebutts the arguments of the speakers before him, with particular responsibility to deal with the extension from 3<sup>rd</sup> Prop.
- Delivers own substantive material
- May deliver an ‘extension’

**Second Speaker, Second Proposition Team** (*4<sup>th</sup> Prop/Government Whip*)

- Summates for his side
- Shouldn’t offer new material (subject to discussion above)

**Second Speaker, Second Opposition Team** (*4<sup>th</sup> Opp/Opposition Whip*)

- Summates for his side.
- Definitely, definitely offers no new material.

*Universal Responsibilities*

The universal responsibilities are rebuttal, structure, timing, points of information and teamwork.

*Rebuttal*

All speakers except the first speaker on the proposition have a responsibility to rebut (i.e. attack the arguments of) the speakers before them on the other side. They have a specific responsibility to rebut the speaker who has spoken immediately before them.

Unlike kinds of debating, for instance those favoured in the United States, British Parliamentary debating doesn’t (or shouldn’t) feature point-by-point judging, where each and every argument – no matter how trivial or stupid – must be rebutted. Instead, you should look to hit the other side’s good points, not just their weak ones: your biggest responsibility is to knock down their important arguments. Whilst points are naturally to be had in knocking down obviously poor arguments, such reward is limited: strong arguments must be attacked, their best points combated. Reasons for this stress are twofold: firstly, without such an approach, rebuttal will be lacking;



The selection of those three points, and more precisely the labels you give them, is more important than it might appear. Even when the substance of a speech is extremely good, the first three things most judges will have written down will be the three points you've promised:

- The arguments you deliver should fit happily into those titles, and satisfy the promise made by the point's title to attempt to convince the audience on the ground it states.
- If you promise a point, you must give it. Flagging a point and not delivering it is a major error.
- Whilst absolute parity of time allocation is obviously not necessary, each point must be developed fully in its own right: dwelling on one point for four minutes and delivering two in 30 seconds would imply bad time management, or that you've chosen the wrong points to stress. If one point encapsulates pretty much your whole case, and the others are makeweight, you're mispackaging: break the big one down, and include the others within the new labels.

### *Timing*

People often find that they are 'finished' with time left on the clock. If you don't use your full time, it sends the message that you don't have much to say in this debate. You really must try to get to the end of the allocated time period.

Almost invariably, people end their speeches early because they haven't gone into their points in sufficient depth.

As noted above, timing is affected by the need to deliver a properly structured speech.

### *Teamwork*

Debating is a team sport. Plenty of individuals speak very well and still lose. It may happen to you. There's no point blaming your partner: you lost as a team.

You should tell your partner what you're going to say in a debate. You should know what they're going to say. If you're speaking second, your plan for your speech

should be shaped in the knowledge of what your partner is going to say, and then in the debate it should be reshaped in light of what he actually said. If you're speaking first, your speech and your mindset to the debate should be shaped by the knowledge of what your partner is going to say. Never, ever walk into a debate with a partner who says 'just back me up.' You both have a responsibility to ensure that each understands the points the other will give. You should talk a lot to your partner before the debate, and write notes to one another during the debate as things change, noting new lines of argument and agreeing responses.

If you have a good point, you shouldn't think 'this is my point, I'm making it.' You should tell your partner about it. Very often, speakers deliver good arguments well but are marked down – because the argument is in the wrong place. Big, principled arguments belong in the first speech – this is logical for teams in the first half of the debate, since the first speaker is setting out the grounds for the side, and a rule in the back half since the second speaker shouldn't have new material. If you're speaking second and you think of such an argument, don't keep it to yourself. Not only is it bad teamwork, it won't do you any good: your team will get vastly more credit if the argument is delivered in the right place, i.e. in your partner's speech. Your point or not, that's where it belongs – it's a team sport. If you're the person that should be delivering this point, you should *still* tell your partner about it – so they can plan and structure their speech. This is one of the interesting things about debating – the interaction not only across the table, but also along it, between team members.

Points of Information should be shared between speakers, too. It may be that your partner will be taken, rather than you. It may be that they will deliver a point that isn't as good as yours unless you tell them what yours is; or yours may not be as good as theirs. You should write the point down and refine it together until its delivery is just so. you only need to get (and if the speaker is any good, won't be allowed to get) more than two points in during the speech, and the other team on your bench will be trying too – so make sure that your point is good when you get to deliver it.

**Flagging points:** The teamwork element of debating is also represented in a formal, structural sense: in the top half of the table, the first speaker should refer (or 'flag') in his speech to points the second will deliver. The second speaker should refer to points

his partners has made – particularly if a suggestion can be made that they have not been dealt with adequately by the opposition.

If you're speaking second in your team and your first speaker has said that you will make certain points, they must be given. **If material is promised, it should always be delivered.** If as the debate has developed during the opposition speech between the first and second speakers, the new, more appropriate material should be shaped to fit the labels that have been promised, and the labels distorted so as to appear that the points are being given just as promised. Otherwise, it's not just bad strategy and bad structure (in that speeches have been structured on the basis that points have been promised, but then they've not been given) – it's also bad teamwork: your teammate has promised you'll do something and you haven't done it.

The points or 'labels' used by the 2 speakers should not be the same, or be too similar.

**Buzz terms:** Team mates should use the same kind of language, the same terminology – the aim is to develop in listeners a feeling that a continuity of thinking exists within the team.

### *Style/Manner*

Debating is a persuasive art. Worlds is not an essay-reading competition. Your manner is important.

Delivery: speed is a great problem at WUDC every year. One naturally speaks more quickly when one's nervous. Take this into account. People often tend to drop the volume, as if they don't want to be noticed. Presumably, you're at a debating tournament because you want to be heard! Avoid overcompensating though – especially in small rooms. Some take comfort in their notes – beware. Reading is very irritating for the listener. Eye contact is important. Avoid ums and ers as much as you can; you'll find that slowing down a bit helps with that as you'll start to be less worried about filling every second of empty air with noise! Pauses can be very effective – don't be afraid to use them. Don't monotone; vary the pitch of your voice as well as the speed.

Modes of address: the chairman may be called Mr Speaker, Mr Chairman, Mr Chair – it really doesn't matter. Other speakers may be referred to by their position (e.g. 3<sup>rd</sup> Opp), their role (e.g. Deputy Prime Minister), by their first name, by their last name – it really doesn't matter. Don't call people "the honourable." They're not.

Profanity: it's a Parliamentary competition. That may mean different things in different countries. But you are not going to help your cause with profanity. On the other hand, you could greatly damage it. You don't know how judge will react. It's therefore poor strategy. Err on side of caution.

Finally, the vast majority of debates at WUDC are conducted in a perfectly decorous manner. However, every year there are one or two instances of someone going beyond the bounds of what is decent behaviour. Debaters have a right to compete without being abused. This is the sole area in which adjudicators will intervene in the debates: they may simply end the speaker's speech. Adjudicators have the power to award punitively low (on no) marks to speakers behaving in this way, and in extreme cases teams may be removed from the competition. Please bear this in mind.

### *Miscellaneous*

Speakers may not use props of any kind.

## **AFTER THE DEBATE**

After a British Parliamentary debate, the judge/s deliberate, and a discussion occurs between the panel of judges if there is more than one judge (note that this is different from other formats, where the judges may vote on a result without conferring). At Worlds, there are always two and normally at least three judges to a room, so there will always be a discussion. The chairman controls and directs the discussion. This discussion always aims for unanimity. If unanimity is impossible, then a majority is sought. If a majority cannot be reached, then the chairman of the panel decides. All judges have an equal vote.

In the discussion, adjudicators rank the teams and then allocate speaker points. They may not award “low point wins,” meaning that the two speakers on the team that wins must have more combined speaker points than the combined speaker points of the team that came second, which must have more than the team that came third, which must have more than the team that came last. Where team A beats team B, an individual on team B may have higher speaker points than one or both of the speakers on team A, but the combined points of team A must be greater than those of the combined points of team B. A handout explaining the allocation of speaker points will be circulated to all judges before the commencement of the competition.

Teams may receive zero team points if adjudicators unanimously agree that a team member has harassed another debater on the basis of religion, sex, race, colour, nationality, sexual preference, disability, or simply been gratuitously and excessively unpleasant. Teams may also receive zero points if they arrive at the debate more than five minutes late.

Some debates have “oral adjudications” after the judges have reached their decision. At Worlds, there are always oral adjudications for the six debates held on the first two days, and none for the three debates held on the last day.

In these oral adjudications, one of the judges will tell teams the positions they have been given but not the points allocated to individual speakers. He will also give a brief rationale for the result, which should not be interrupted. He may give

constructive criticism if he wishes. This adjudication is given by the chairman of the panel unless he is dissenting, in which case the adjudication is given by a member of the panel nominated by him. Speakers are welcome to seek individual or team feedback in private from one or all of the adjudication panel after the debate. In obtaining that feedback competitors must be polite and non-confrontational.

Participants may feel that the feedback they have received is extremely good. Exceptionally, participants may feel that the result they have received is wrong. They should consider the experience held by judges and the objectivity they possess before acting on that feeling. In either case, competitors are welcome to fill in feedback forms, which are considered by the organisers. There is little point in filling in such forms unless one's attitude about the round conforms to either of these extremes.

## **SOMETHING YOU DON'T WANT TO HEAR**

Debating is hard work. In the laudable enthusiasm that motivates those that encourage others to take it up, this is often overlooked or underplayed. But it's best to be open about it: if you want to be a serious, successful competitive debater, you're going to have to hit the books. You will have to work at researching information and facts on current affairs, moral principles, basic legal rules, and so on.

This is because the reality of competitive debating is very different to the theory suggested by a 15 minute preparation time. In order to be prepared to a maximum possible level, teams [should] compile files of material on debates that might conceivably be had. Ideally, the 15 minute prep time should be used by team mates to discuss the issues that arise out of the debate's specific motion, to allocate points between the speakers, and to decide the structure of one's speech – not frantically trying to think of the basic principles and facts.

On the other hand, plenty of knowledgeable people lose debates every week of the debating year to people entirely ignorant about the issue in question. This is because the latter understand an important fact: that debating is a game, and like any other game it has rules (obviously, the ideal is to understand the rules, *and* know the material). Beyond the stated, formal requirements – length of speech, scores for manner and matter – there are also formulas that must be followed to deliver high-scoring speeches. As Elle Wood might say, the rules of debating are simple and finite. These rules are rigid – debating is like any other game in this; the fact that it's played by speaking doesn't mean that the rules are any more relaxed.

For some reason, most debaters aren't taught these rules. Many of those that are don't heed them, and get the same feedback from judges week after week. You should avoid this. The rules are here. Learn them if you want to win.

Much of the material above is unglamorous. But there are some things in rounds that simply *must* be done. A surprisingly high number of debaters lose rounds because they don't do them. Debates *ought* to be won or lost based on argument and persuasiveness, which are more interesting and are normally the reasons we start

debating. But this text is meant to help people over the hurdles that must be crossed even before people start considering those things.

The most useful thing you can do to get better at debating is to debate more. Experience of the way a debate works, an instinct for what to say and when, the confidence to advance a point under attack: these things come with time spent “on your feet.” Your notes from debates can be invaluable; you’ll often have the same debate again: they should be included in the file referred to above.

One of the reasons that experience is so valuable is that every so often, there will be times when any number of the “rules” set out should be put to one side. A disastrous debate may need you to redefine, though you never should. Or you might need to devote six minutes to one point. Or you might have to depart quite considerably from the line taken by your side, even though normally this will greatly harm your performance. This is because a great deal in debating is context-specific. Furthermore, what lines to take, the decisions about your approach: these are *judgment calls*, not rules. In both of these areas, you can’t really be taught what to do.

## **SEEKING FURTHER INFORMATION?**

The author of this document is willing to provide further information via email:

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It should be understood that neither this document, nor anything discussed via email by him by email, or by other members of the University of British Columbia Organising Committee, shall bind the Committee at the XXVII round of the Championships. Whilst this document sets out general principles that shall certainly carry force at the XXVII round, it should be understood that the definitive position on rules and requirements of that tournament shall be set out at the full briefing before the competition begins.