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Policy Debate Overview

The broader topic

It all starts with the resolution, or the prescriptive claim that serves as the basis for all of the debates. The resolution is the same for every student nationwide. Here are two examples:

- **Resolved** That the federal government should establish a program to substantially reduce juvenile crime in the United States.
- **Resolved** The United States federal government should substantially increase its public health assistance to Sub-Saharan Africa.

The specific proposal

Students then spend the year researching and debating plans that fall within the scope of that year’s resolution; this is their policy advocacy. Here are two examples based on above:

- **Plan** The Department of Education should design and mandate a 3-year drug prevention class for all public middle school students.
- **Plan** The United States Congress should triple funding for the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

Taking sides

Throughout the year, teams—made up of 2 students each—debate the merits of these plans. In any round, a team can be either the affirmative or negative. Each team must therefore be prepared to both affirm and negate the resolution.

What’s your source for that?

Because students are debating policies, they rely on expert evidence to support their arguments. This forces students to become experts themselves as they engage with the material. In the RI Urban Debate League, students are given evidence and research to use throughout the year, which they can then supplement with their own research.

Substance over style

With all of the evidence involved in a round, policy debate focuses on quality of argument more than quality of presentation. Students will spend much of the first half of the debate reading their evidence, so something like eye contact is not very important. It’s not until the later speeches, when the debaters have to step back from the evidence and tell you—the judge—why they won, that presentation becomes more important.

You matter most

Policy debate can be complicated and full of jargon, but keep in mind that the debaters can’t win unless they convince you. If you know nothing about debate, feel free to tell the debaters before the round starts. They are there to tailor the round to your needs and wants. After all, they want to win!
**Round Structure**

**The different parts**

Every debate round is set up the same way. These are the constituent parts of the round, which all serve unique functions:

- **Constructive speeches**: Debaters build their case for or against the plan presented 8 minutes.
- **Cross-examination**: Debaters ask questions of each other for clarification, to press them on their advocacy, or to set up future arguments 3 minutes.
- **Rebuttal speeches**: Debaters clarify why they should win, i.e. why you should vote for them, and new arguments are *not* allowed in rebuttals 5 minutes.
- **Prep time**: Debaters look for evidence and organize their next speeches 8 minutes. Divvied up and taken at the discretion of each team in between speeches, not before CX, and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORDER of the ROUND</th>
<th>PURPOSE of EACH SPEECH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1AC First affirmative constructive 8</td>
<td>Present the affirmative case that deals with the resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CX</td>
<td>Ask questions of the affirmative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1NC First negative constructive 8</td>
<td>Present arguments against the case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CX</td>
<td>Ask questions of the negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2AC Second affirmative constructive 8</td>
<td>Answer negative attacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CX</td>
<td>Ask questions of the affirmative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2NC Second negative constructive 8</td>
<td>Answer 2AC arguments and build up negative attacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CX</td>
<td>Ask questions of the negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1NR First negative rebuttal 5</td>
<td>Answer 2AC arguments and build up negative attacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1AR First affirmative rebuttal 5</td>
<td>Answer block arguments and rebuild the affirmative case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2NR Second negative rebuttal 5</td>
<td>Explain why the negative should win</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2AR Second affirmative rebuttal 5</td>
<td>Explain why the affirmative should win</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Each team has its advantage**

Notice that the debate round starts and ends with the affirmative team. You hear them first and last because they have the burden in the round; they present a plan and have to convince you it is worth voting for. On the other hand, the negative just has to give you enough reasons why the affirmative’s plan is no good. To help them, the negative speaks for a long block of time; the 2NC and 1NR happen back to back, so the affirmative team goes 13 minutes without debating.
Parts of an Argument

Dissecting the 1AC

In the first speech, the affirmative team lays out their plan and their justification for it. The justification for the plan (proof and reasons why to pass it) has three parts:

- **Inherency**   Why the plan is not happening in the status quo
- **Harms**       Why the plan is necessary (i.e., the problems)
- **Solvency**    Why the plan will fix the problems

Going on the defensive

The negative should respond to all of the affirmative’s contentions. Answers to the inherency, harms, and solvency arguments are called on-case responses. For example, a team could say that the plan is already happening in the status quo; that the affirmative has exaggerated the problems; and/or that the plan will not solve the problems.

Let’s hear some offense

The negative (in all divisions except for novice) will also run off-case arguments that are more offensive. Off-case arguments are unique reasons why the plan is a bad idea—rather than just not a good idea. There are two very important off-case arguments, discussed below. Off-case arguments should be the arguments the negative teams start with.

But what about this!

The heart of the negative is often the disadvantage (aka, disad) (aka, DA). A disadvantage, like the name suggests, argues that something bad will happen if we pass the plan. A disadvantage has three major parts, similar to the 1AC:

- **Uniqueness**  The status quo is good
  - *e.g.* The China and the US have good relations right now
- **Link**        The plan messes up the status quo
  - *e.g.* US involvement in Africa makes China upset
- **Impact**      The plan leads to something bad
  - *e.g.* Upset China starts war with Taiwan, ultimately causing nuke war

Accusations of foul play

The negative team might also argue that the affirmative team’s plan does not fall within the resolution, meaning it’s not topical. A topicality (aka, T) argument will define the resolution in terms that make the affirmative plan look off-topic and demonstrate why an off-topic plan is unfair and worth voting against. This type of argument is less common and only rarely a key voting issue.
How to Determine the Winner

Did you get that down?

What will help you most when reaching a decision is having great notes taken throughout the round. In policy debate, note taking is called flowing. Follow these simple instructions to flow well:

1. Turn your paper landscape.
2. Divide both sides of the paper into columns, one for each speech.
3. Flow the on-case arguments on the front.
4. Starting with the 1NC, flow the off-case arguments on the back.
5. Write down the response to a given argument right next to it.
6. If there’s no response, draw a box.

This method will help you keep track (visually) of all the arguments in the round and how they interact with one another. There are a lot of arguments in policy debate, so it’s hard to keep them all in your head!

Dropping the ball

In policy debate, when your opponent does not respond to one of your arguments, you say they dropped it. Dropped arguments can and will cost you the win, because it means you concede it to your opponent. Keep an eye out for dropped arguments; the boxes should help!

Tipping the scales

In the rebuttal speeches, good teams will weigh the round for you. For example, the negative team might say that the harms they have proved in their disadvantage outweigh the harms that the plan might solve, so we still shouldn’t do the plan. Weighing can often take place in three ways:

- **Timeframe**  Which harms will happen sooner?
- **Probability** Which harms are more likely to happen?
- **Magnitude**  Which harms are bigger (e.g. affect more people, affect people worse)?

Being hands off

The mark of a good judge is one that will let the debaters do the debating. So the most critical part of judging is not letting your own opinions get in the way. In short, do not intervene in the round when coming to your decision! *Look at what the debaters said.* Vote for the team that better explained to you and justified to you (by weighing, for example) why they won – why it is important for you as the judge to vote for them. So, if an affirmative team forgets to answer a disadvantage and then the negative team does not point it out, do not count it against them. If the negative team does point it out, however, it would be a safe bet they won. If one team drags an argument all the way across the flow without having it answered, they will almost surely win.
What to Do After the Round

Because not everyone can win

After you deliberate with all your new knowledge about policy debate, you will pick a winner and write down your reason for decision (RFD) on the ballot. Your RFD should be specific, e.g. The negative won because they demonstrated the plan had no solvency.

In my opinion,

After the round, the debaters want to hear from you what you thought! You should not disclose your decision about who won, but you should offer constructive criticism for each debater (which will supplement what you write down on the ballot). And remember to stay positive when you are talking with the debaters. What is most important is that they stay enthusiastic about debate and want to come back! Here are some examples of feedback:

“Raphael, nice job asking aggressive questions on CX, but watch your tone!”

“Ari, I liked how in your speech you pointed out which arguments had been dropped.”

“Juanita, your arguments were strong, but make sure they clash with your opponents’.”

“Jenny, I want to see more evidence next time; that’s when you were most convincing.”

Assigning point values

On top of comments, you will be ranking the four speakers in the round from 1 to 4 (1 = best, 4 = worst) and assigning them between 26 and 30 points (26 = fair, 30 = superior). Ties are allowed, and you can give points in increments of .5. Remember that just because a team had better speakers they did not necessarily win the round.

The chart below lays out the point values and some things to consider when scoring the debaters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>26 = Fair</th>
<th>Analysis: Did debaters get to the heart of the question with logic?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The second rarest score</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>27 = Average</th>
<th>Reasoning: Did debaters clash intelligently with their opponents?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The most common score</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>28 = Good</th>
<th>Evidence: Did debaters understand and use evidence effectively?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>29 = Excellent</th>
<th>Organization: Were speeches clear and logically ordered?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>30 = Superior</th>
<th>Delivery: Did debaters speak well, e.g. eloquently and persuasively?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The rarest score |
1. Introduce yourself to the debaters. Make sure both teams write down your name so you can be eligible for a judging award.
2. Get everyone settled; start the round as soon as possible.
3. Keep time; give hand signals. 8-minute constructive speeches, 3-minute cross-examinations, 5-minute rebuttals, 8 minutes total for prep.
4. When the round ends, offer oral feedback to every debater. Some of this constructive but also positive criticism should be written on the ballot, too. Consider: What could each team have said and done to better persuade you they won the debate?
5. When reaching a decision, do not intervene. Only judge the debaters on how and what they argued, not how or what you would have. Consider: Which team did a better job convincing you they won the round?
6. Rank each debater from 1-4. Also assign points to all debaters based on their holistic performance on a scale of 26 (below average) to 30 (incredible) in increments of .5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AFF TEAM NAME:</th>
<th>NEG TEAM NAME:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1A:</td>
<td>1N:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RANK _____</td>
<td>RANK _____</td>
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<tr>
<td>POINTS _____</td>
<td>POINTS _____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2A:</td>
<td>2N:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RANK _____</td>
<td>RANK _____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POINTS _____</td>
<td>POINTS _____</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In my opinion, ____________________________ won the round on the AFF / NEG. My reasoning is:

______________________________
Team Name

_________________________  _______________________
Judge Name  Judge Affiliation