

PUBLIC DEBATES

Public debates provide opportunities to enhance public discourse, to engage the community at large, to showcase the work of your students, to connect your program with other programs at your institution, and to link your institution with other institutions. This document provides suggestions and guidance to assist you in developing and executing successful public debates.

Format

There is no ideal format for a public debate, but there are some important things to consider when setting the format. The most important consideration is the audience. Their ability to understand and engage the material should precede other considerations about format. To this end, the following should happen:

- Focus on clarity - Most people expect a debate to have two clear sides. Avoid formats that have more than two teams engaging the topic, such as the British Parliamentary style.
- Build the audience into the structure - Audience Q&A should be a primary part of the debate, not just an afterthought. Consider allotting a significant amount of time to this (as much as half of your total event time).

Participants

The debate can feature only students from your institution, students from yours and another institution which debate each other, or which are on mixed teams, or blended teams of students and faculty (or guest speakers) from one or more institution. Some debates have featured one faculty member and two or three students on each side.

Point of View

It is an important principle of debate that participants need not have the point of view that they are defending. Their task is to argue a side. While there may be overlap between a person's position and the task that they have been handed, this is not necessarily the case. It is important, particularly on controversial topics, to clarify to the audience that the views articulated during the debate do not necessarily reflect the actual view of debaters.

Two sides

One team should act as the Proposition (in favor of the topic), and another should act as the Opposition (opposed to the topic). The following suggestions are based on keeping things simple for the audience:

- The Proposition should speak first, and the Opposition should speak last.
- The order of speakers should alternate between sides for each speech (Prop, Opp, Prop, Opp, etc.).
- There should be no preparation time between speeches. Keep things moving/avoid lulls.

Time

The total event time should not exceed two hours. The actual debating should take at least half of this total time, and the rest should be allotted for audience interaction.

- Include 3-4 speakers per side to stay within a reasonable time window but still involve a good number of speakers.
- It might be wise to allow more time for the first speaker on each side to make sure that the debate is set up effectively.
- It might be wise to make the last speech on each side a bit shorter than the others.
- Here is an example:
 - 8 minutes for the first speaker on each side
 - 7 minutes for the next two speakers per side
 - 4 minutes for the last speaker per side
 - 30 minutes to one hour of audience Q&A

Speaker-to-speaker interaction

Direct engagement between/among speakers is exciting. You should consider building questions into the structure of the debate. These questions could either be in-the-moment, or could immediately follow each

speech. Whichever method you choose, it is wise to allow questions in all speeches except for the final ones. The final speeches should provide closure/clarity/summary, and thus should be somewhat different from the others.

In-the-moment questions could be handled as Points of Information (like those used in parliamentary formats of debate). You can read more about Points of Information at [https://www.uvm.edu/~asnider/citizenadvocacyanddebate/Snider Questions POIs in Debate.pdf](https://www.uvm.edu/~asnider/citizenadvocacyanddebate/Snider_Questions_POIs_in_Debate.pdf).

Questions immediately following speeches could be limited to one or two questions, or they could take the form of cross examination within a set time window. You can read more about cross examination at <http://www.speaking.pitt.edu/student/public-speaking/crossexamination.html>.

Moderator

You should have a moderator who facilitates the actual debate and audience interaction. The moderator should:

- Provide introductory comments about the format of the debate.
- Introduce individual speakers.
- Explain to the audience that the views articulated during the debate do not necessarily reflect the actual view of debaters.
- Keep and strictly enforce time.
- Direct audience interaction with speakers.
- Maintain order.

Audience

Debates should be engaging and fun. Encourage the audience (within reason) to express support or displeasure with speakers through, for example, stamping their feet. Lead them to applaud after each speaker.

Topics

Setting a good topic is essential to the success of your debate. It is the thing that gets the audience interested, makes the debate exciting, and illustrates the importance of your program in engaging current events on campus.

Debate topics are sometimes called resolutions or motions. There are three basic types:

- Fact - Is this phenomenon true?
- Value - Two values are in conflict; which should we prefer?
- Policy - What ought we do to remedy this problem?

Any of these types could work for a public debate, although policy topics tend to be the easiest to understand and to prepare.

We sometimes word our topics as resolutions (“Resolved:”) or parliamentary-style motions (“This house”). These details are, however, not necessary and are just convention.

In general, topics should be timely, clear, and balanced.

Timeliness

The topic you select should engage a current controversy.

Clarity

A strong topic will prioritize clarity over other concerns. A clear topic seems inviting to potential audience members, and situates the debate within obvious parameters. As you draft your topic, keep the following suggestions about clarity in mind:

- A topic should be a statement, not a question.
- The topic should provide the Proposition with a clear advocacy/position. It should be evident, to some extent, what they will defend before the debate begins.
- Simple is best. A topic that forwards one statement for debate is preferable to one that lists several possibilities.

Balance

A good topic should have adequate ground on both sides. Avoid topics that lean toward one side or the other. Use your best judgment with this, and attempt to map the arguments on both sides before settling on a final version of your topic. If you are drafting the topic with other people, such as your students, keep in mind that participants might not end up defending the side with which they most agree.

Some examples of public debate topics set by the Bard Debate Union over the past few years include the following (more can be found at (http://debate.bard.edu/?page_id=471):

- Resolved: Voting in national elections should be compulsory.
- Resolved: Drones do more good than harm.
- Resolved: The President of the United States should be elected by popular vote.
- Resolved: NATO should be immediately disbanded.
- Resolved: The US should move faster than the Paris Agreement to cut global warming pollution.
- This house believes that governments should heavily restrict the use of antibiotics.
- Resolved: National security is more important than the individual right to privacy.
- Resolved: The rapid rise of “safe space” rhetoric on college campuses has done more harm than good.

Preparation

Debaters should be encouraged to research the topic that they will be discussing and to meet as teams prior to the debate, so that they can fix a strategy. Even if debaters gather an hour before the debate they can consult with each other, plan a general strategy and synchronize arguments.

Judging

Audiences want resolution, so providing some indication of the winner of the debate is important. Here are two ways to do this:

- Audience shift: Poll the audience prior to the debate. Determine how many audience members agree with the topic and how many disagree. Then, poll the audience immediately after the debate. Calculate any movement between the initial vote and the second one, and announce the result.
- Judging panel: The panel should consist of an odd number of individuals in order to avoid a tie. The panel can either attempt to reach consensus and have spokesperson announce the decision and provide explanation for the result, or they can each make an individual call and provide explanation.

Post Debate

Public debates are social events, and it is important that they do not end immediately after the last speaker has concluded. After a poll of audience members, or while judges are judging, it is a good practice to turn to the audience for comments and questions. Incorporating audience Q&A is a great way to include audience members in the discussion. Using the time immediately following the debate for audience questions of the debaters can further the conversation in a variety of ways, and it may also provide you a moment to collect your thoughts before providing your feedback. The questions might focus on claims made during the debate, the nature of arguments, or the views of debaters.

Logistics

Space and Place

You will obviously need to book a room large enough for the debate, and you will want to ensure that audience members can see the debaters (on a dais or stage, for example). Consider relevant audio/visual needs as well. Microphones are often necessary in a larger space. Book everything well in advance so that you secure an ideal space and have time to effectively advertise the debate.

Publicity

Publicizing your event is crucial to its success, and should happen well in advance of the actual debate. You should communicate about your debate through multiple channels. Emails to faculty and students, the establishment of a Facebook event, and printed flyers/posters are all excellent ways to generate interest in your debate. In addition to the basic details (time, place, topic), you should also provide some kind of brief justification for the debate/topic. Why is this a timely intervention? Why should people care this debate is happening? Why should people feel compelled to attend?

Food

Debate is a social event and serving some food and drink never hurts.