

Preparing for Parliamentary Debate

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Introduction

The best time to prepare is before the tournament even starts. Your debate team will have meetings and practices, but these are limited. There are, however, five things you can do on your own to greatly improve your debate skills and your chances of winning: improve your general knowledge, practice speaking, practice listening, read a good debate text, and watch debate videos.

1. Improve Your General Knowledge

There are a variety of forms of parliamentary debate. Some will announce a topic area or a motion a few weeks before the tournament, but these will not be used in all rounds. Others announce the motion an hour or 15-20 minutes before the round starts. For extemporaneous motions—those not announced prior to the tournament—the use of research materials may be limited. Some leagues do permit the use of internet research or material stored on your laptop; others limit debaters to their own knowledge and a few other specified resources.

In CDA we distribute a motion packet at 9AM on the day of the tournament, and debaters have one hour to prepare the cases they will use on both Government or Affirmative and Opposition or Negative. The motion packet has 5-10 pages of articles providing background on the topic. CDA also permits debaters to use a dictionary, an almanac, and a copy of the US Constitution.¹

When you have a short time to prepare a case, it helps if you already have a general understanding of the topic and issues. This provides both a head start on the competition, and a mental framework to organize your efforts.

If you don't read a newspaper or equivalent every day, you're not serious about debate.² Most resolutions are motivated by or refer directly to current events: Ukraine, globalization, the death penalty, healthcare, offshore drilling, space exploration, human rights. The tournament director is probably scanning headlines in the weeks before the event looking for ideas. The CDA packet consists of articles taken from news sources.

¹ A dictionary, almanac or the US Constitution can be very useful, but case prep is not the best time to discover what they contain. Familiarize yourself with them before the tournament.

² The sports section doesn't count.

You want to read a paper with longer, analytic articles that go into a topic in depth. Best choices are “national” papers like The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, The Guardian, The Financial Times, The Economist. All of these are on the web, though many have pay walls. But your high school or local library will have subscriptions available that you can use.³

You don’t have to read every article. Best bet is to spend an hour in the library each week and skim the contents, reading what seems interesting. Like the CDA, many debate leagues publish the motions they have used in past tournaments on their websites. Past topics will give you a feel for what tournament directors like and where you should spend more time reading.

While almost any type of knowledge can prove useful, modern history—political, social, military, economic—provides the examples you need to discuss the topic intelligently. If you haven’t taken a course in modern US history or in modern world history, think about borrowing a textbook from the library and reading it. A good sense of events since the end of World War II is useful for many debate topics.

Finally, topics have a way of reappearing. If you are a freshman or sophomore and you are going to be debating for three or four years—or more if you go on to debate in college—you will begin to see some common themes. CDA has had topics on the justice system, education, inequality, foreign affairs, etc., many of which are sure to come up again in similar, if not exactly the same, form. The supporting packets are on the CDA website. It might be worth your while to read a few of them.

2. Practice Speaking

How good you sound can be as important as what you say. Speaking in full paragraphs and sentences, pronouncing words properly, enunciating so each word can be clearly understood, projecting your voice so it can be heard by the audience, all will help you win debates. It’s hard to schedule full practice debates because they take time and only a few debaters can participate. But you can read aloud and practice short speeches.

Reading aloud is good practice for debate. It exercises your voice. It gives you an opportunity to practice pronunciation and enunciation. Because there is no pressure, you can start speaking slowly and gradually increase your pace. You can “over enunciate” words to get comfortable with them. Reading well-constructed paragraphs and sentences exercises your brain, laying down word patterns that you are likely to use again, even if you aren’t conscious of it.⁴

What you read isn’t important, within reason. If you have assigned readings for a class, then spend five or ten minutes every half hour or so reading that material aloud. Textbooks, plays, poetry, novels, it really doesn’t matter. It’s like physical exercise: you don’t have to run marathons, just get out and take a short walk in the fresh air every day. Similarly, find a quiet place away from other people and read aloud!

Concentrate on saying each word clearly and distinctly, don’t skip any letters or syllables

³ Librarians can be very helpful providing access to information.

⁴ That’s why you take so many English courses and read so many “great books,” to give you enough good examples to follow. It works for speech too.

that are supposed to be pronounced. Work on putting some expression in your voice—no one likes to listen to a monotone. Proper pauses are important auditory signals as you end sentences and paragraphs, or change topics. Stand up while you read, as you would in a debate, and pretend you have an audience. Look up from the page occasionally and practice finding your place again without losing the thread. Make eye contact with your imaginary audience, shifting your gaze about the room as though you were in front of a large crowd.

A variant on reading aloud is to practice making short speeches. Like reading, you don't have to look far for material. If you take notes in class or study for a quiz, why not stand up and turn those notes into short speeches covering some part of the material? Speak, rather than write, parts of an assigned essay.⁵ Saying the material aloud as you read or study helps reinforce your memory as well as improve your speaking ability.

3. Practice Listening

The most important thing you do in a debate is to listen to your opponents. Listening well helps you prepare your own speech. It enables your arguments to clash with those of the other team, and clash is one of the most important factors the judges are told to look for. Most debates are won by exploiting something the other team has said. To do that, you have to know what was said, and organize it a coherent fashion.

Listening in a debate means taking notes. You can't do one without the other. At about an hour in length, you simply won't remember everything everyone says. Your notes will serve as a basis for your constructive (all but the first speech in the round) and rebuttal speeches. They will be your map telling you where you are in the debate and where you need to go. They are your record of what happened in the debate. If you want to discuss the debate or the ballot comments with someone who wasn't in the room, then you need accurate notes that reflect the flow of the arguments.

You should take notes while your partner is speaking: what the two of you planned to say, and what is actually said, may not be the same thing. It's a mistake to sit with your arms folded listening to rebuttals just because you won't speak again. You may never know why you won or lost the round.

You should take notes during debates that you observe, not just debates in which you participate. The final round provides a good opportunity to take notes that you can compare with those of your teammates and coaches. Pretend you are the judge and decide how you would score the round. Would you want to be judged by someone who didn't take notes?

School provides you with almost unlimited opportunities to practice taking good notes, even math and science classes. You probably need to take notes to study from, and good note taking skills are a must for college. You can review and compare your class notes with your classmates, so you can get an idea as to whether you are missing things. You can also see how others take notes to get ideas as to how to improve your own.

Remember, good notes don't simply record what was said; they organize the material in a

⁵ Most laptops and tablets have programs that support speech-to-text recognition. I've never used dictation to write anything, but this is your chance to learn another useful skill!

useful fashion. Anyone can take notes from a well-structured presentation. It's much harder when the speech you hear is so disorganized that you have trouble figuring out what your opponents' contentions are. Listening to what is being said, reflecting on it quickly and then writing down a concise, useful summary is a skill that takes time and practice to master.

Many debaters now take notes using a laptop or tablet. That is to be expected as the devices are ubiquitous. But studies show that taking notes by hand—good old pen and paper—is better in terms of accuracy, comprehension, and retention. Some debate tournaments still forbid the use of electronic devices. The sound of keystrokes can also be disturbing. It may be worthwhile to learn to take legible, handwritten notes.

4. Read a Debate Text

The original, “online”, self-study course was—and still is—a book. The [Training Material](#) page on the CDA website has links to a number of parliamentary debate textbooks that may be found online. Your school or local library may have books on debate or public speaking. Read one, or more! (You can even read some of the material aloud!) Even if the book is not specifically about parliamentary debate, there may be parts on how to structure arguments, research topics, speak persuasively, etc., that you can use.

I prefer to read, but you will also find links to websites with training videos on various debate topics. YouTube has a large number of debate lectures, though finding the best ones can be tricky.

5. Watch Debate Videos

The best education I had as a debater was actually debating against teams that were better than we were, and then staying for the elimination rounds and watching debaters that were better than those who beat us. The [Training Material](#) page on the CDA website has links to other leagues that post videos of tournament debate rounds. YouTube has many, many more, but some may not match the CDA style of debate.

If you can find an hour, you can watch and flow a debate round. If you do this once a week all year, that's 50 more rounds of debate practice. How many times do you get to debate each year, either in tournaments or in practice?

Debate videos didn't exist when I debated. They provide an easy way for you to see some of the best debaters in the country and in the world and learn from them. They let you practice your note-taking skills. Assign your team a round for offline viewing and then use part or all of a team meeting to discuss it.

Conclusion

There is only so much time for team meetings and practices. There are only so many debate tournaments. But there is a lot you can do on your own. And learning to teach yourself is an extraordinarily useful skill in itself!

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