

# Preparing for Extemporaneous Debate

At best, the topic area for an extemp tournament is given out a few weeks before the tournament. The only time you can count on to prepare is the hour between the time the resolution is distributed and the first round begins. So how do you prepare?

Three areas you can work on are general knowledge, speaking and listening.

## 1. Improving Your General Knowledge

If you don't read a newspaper every day, you're not serious about debate.<sup>1</sup> The resolutions all refer to current events: Iraq, the death penalty, healthcare, offshore drilling, space exploration, human rights. The topic is taken from a story in the papers in the weeks leading up to the debate. 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 Washington Post or The Los Angeles Times. These days you don't even have to subscribe to the paper—most have web sites where all you have to do is register to get access to a large amount of content.

If possible, you should back up the daily paper with a weekly news magazine. The Economist is far and away the class of this type of publication, followed by Time, Newsweek and US News and World Report. All of these are pricey, and access to their web sites is limited to subscribers. Best bet is to spend an hour in the library each week and skim the contents.

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 modern US history or modern world history, think about borrowing a textbook from the library and reading it.

Finally, in extemp debate, 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, you will begin to see some common themes. We've had topics on the justice system and foreign affairs, both of which are sure to come up again. It might be worth you while to do some background reading in these areas.

## 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, all will help you win debates. While it's hard to schedule full practice debates, there are some things you can do on your own: reading aloud and practicing 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. 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.<sup>2</sup>

What you read isn't important, within reason. If you're reading for a class, then spend five minutes every half hour or so reading the 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 20 minute walk in the fresh air every day. Similarly, find a quiet place away from other people and read aloud!

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<sup>1</sup> The sports section doesn't count.

<sup>2</sup> That's why you have to take so many English courses and read so many "great books," to give you enough good examples to follow. It works for speech too.

Concentrate on saying each word clearly and distinctly, don't skip any letters or syllables that are supposed to be pronounced. Work on putting some expression in your voice—no one likes to listen to a monotone. Remember that proper pauses are important auditory signals as you end sentences or paragraphs, or change topics. If you can, 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, and have to 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, answers to essay questions. You study the material, you reinforce it in your memory by saying it aloud as well as reading it, and you build answers to essays you just might have to write on a test or quiz.

### **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. But in order 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. Your notes will serve as a basis for your cross examination, constructive (all but the First Affirmative) 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 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 have the opportunity to review and compare your class notes with your class mates, so you can get an idea as to whether you are missing things. You can also see how others take notes, and 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 useful fashion. Anyone can take notes on 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 in your mind and then writing down a concise, useful summary is a skill that takes time and practice to master.