

Training Your Debate Team

This is some advice for new and returning coaches as to how to train their debaters for their first tournament and beyond. You should be familiar with the [Training Material](#) page on the CDA website, which serves as an entry point to material we have collected over the years. In addition to purpose written pieces on debate, you can find links to 15+ years of CDA resolutions and 4+ years of CDA packets and commentary. There are also links to several external resources, including debate texts, videos and presentations from other coaches and leagues. Unfortunately, this is not as well organized as it might be. This piece will refer you to some of the more useful items, and frame them in a way useful for the start of the year.

Starting the Year

I will assume that you will start an organizational meeting for students interested in debate. The [CDA Brochure](#) has information about debate in general and the CDA in particular that will help you explain to your students what they are getting into.

At the end of the meeting there are three additional pieces you could either refer your students to or print out and distribute to them so that they have something to read and think about for the next session:

1. [How to Prepare for Debate](#) explains the three critical skills of speaking, listening and studying, and how they can practice them on their own. Your students will probably read this and say it is too simple but working on these three skills are the most important thing they can do on their own to become good debaters.
2. CDA doesn't announce the resolution until 9AM on the tournament day. Debaters then have one hour to prepare for the first round. The [Coach's Notes for November 2008](#) has an article titled "60 Minutes" that provides a strategy for using the one hour period efficiently. You will also find on the Training Materials page templates for [Definitions](#) and for [Contentions](#) that are aids to developing cases during this time.
3. The piece [What Happens During a Debate](#) walks through each speech in a round and explains what a debater should be doing. It includes section on preparation, asking and answering questions, and teamwork. Short of watching a debate, it is the best way to get a feel for how to debate in CDA.

These three items can serve as basic texts for the next several debate meetings, where you will work with the students to build up to an actual debate.

For the next several meetings, you will want to pick a topic for the students to work on. The Training Materials page has a file with CDA resolutions going back to 1995, and CDA packets going back to the 2006-07 season. The CDA distributes a packet of articles with the resolution to give the debaters background material on the topic. Debaters are not permitted to bring their own research material. You could pick one of the past CDA packets, or, reviewing the CDA packets, put one together yourself. The New York Times web site has a section called [Room for Debate](#) where they print short articles from five or six experts on a topic, usually a new one topic every day, that ran from 2009 to 2017. If you don't tell the students and hide the source, they will think you are really brilliant coming up with ideas for debate topics.

Once you have selected a practice resolution and put together a packet, I recommend the following sequence to review the materials and develop debate skills:

1. Explain what happens during a CDA tournament and the format of CDA debate. Leave them with a copy of the resolution and packet to read before the next meeting.
2. At the second meeting go through the “60 Minutes” piece and the templates and let the students come to an agreement as to what their strategy they want to use for the one-hour preparation period. They should apply that knowledge and work with the packet to come up with some definitions and contentions for both Affirmative and Negative sides.
3. At the next meeting, go through the “What Happens During a Debate” piece using the work they did on building cases at and since the last meeting. Have a cooperative “walk through” debate where they build a flow chart on the board filling in each speech with contentions, rebuttals, likely Points of Information (POIs) they might try to introduce. If you use one of the CDA packets from the last few years, there should be a copy of an actual flow chart from the final round at the tournament. You can use for comparison or guidance if you find it valuable. At the end of the meeting, get four volunteers to debate next time.
4. At the next meeting have your four volunteers take the material from the last meeting and have a formal timed and judged debate, with you and all those not debating taking notes and judging. Then have a collaborative critique at the end. (This will probably take at least two hours done properly, and it does need to all happen at one go. Your students won’t remember enough of the debate to be able to discuss and critique it if they wait a week.)
5. Finally, at the next meeting (probably 3 hours) go through the whole thing. Hand out a new package with a new resolution, give them an hour to work on cases, and then have them debate. If you can get some additional adults to judge, you can have everyone debate. You will need judges to bring to the tournaments, so if you plan on bringing parent volunteers, it’s a great way for them to learn about the process.

If you can get all this done before the first tournament, great. Step 5 could be the first tournament—it probably is for most debaters. The most important thing at this point is to get your team up on their feet and talking. Get them to the tournaments, and you will be amazed at how quickly they will improve.

Team Meetings During the Year

Teams should hold regular, weekly meetings. Here are four suggestions for things that you can do. You can either devote an entire meeting or do a little bit of each at each meeting.

Debriefing. The first meeting after a tournament you should spend time discussing the resolution, your students’ cases, the cases they saw from their opponents, their ballots and judges’ comments, and the final round. Debaters should be required to explain why they won and why they lost each round, and what they would do differently if they debated the same round again. Being required to explain what happened is an incentive for debaters to learn to take good notes and to become their own best critics.

One of the most valuable things you can do—and admittedly I haven’t been able to get my kids to do it consistently—is to flow (take notes on) the final Varsity round. It’s the only debate the entire team will see together. You can compare the quality of your notes, compare their case to your case, the quality of the rebuttal and cross ex, in short discuss every aspect of the debate.

Casing. “To case” is a verb I picked up from the Yale Debate Association. They do parliamentary style debate which is extremely extemporaneous—you don’t know what the topic is until you walk into the room. They practice by developing cases and then trying them out on each other.

CDA tries to stay reasonably close to the news. Make every debater responsible for bringing one balanced (or two opposing) short articles to the practice and write a motion based on the material. Pick one, read, develop short cases for and against that motion. Discuss and repeat. You can probably do two or three topics in an hour, or do one every meeting along with other things. The point of the exercise is to teach them to read material quickly and to convert it into useful arguments. The secondary benefit is to introduce them to potential topics they might see in future debates. As mentioned above, the New York Times web site has a section called “Room for Debate” where they print short articles from five or six experts on a topic, usually a new one topic every day, and they go back to January 2009.

Skills Practice. This is tough, because most of the important skills can be hard to practice outside the context of a full debate. But you can design drills that focus on one skill and can be done in a short period of time. For example, casing is really a drill focused on the preparation period. You can take one contention (or one Aff and one Neg contention) out of a casing example and use them for a drill on extending arguments. Divide the team into two sides. One side presents a contention, the other side replies, the first side replies to the reply and so forth. The process ends and one side loses when they either fail to include a summary of the chain of argument in their reply or use a previously presented argument as a reply. It challenges the debaters’ creativity and teaches them that repetition is not rebuttal. An alternative drill would be to have one student present a contention and then have the other students in turn ask a question suitable for cross-ex. Each student should try to improve on the question asked by the previous student. A third drill would focus on summary: one student presents a contention, a second student presents a rebuttal, and the third summarizes the debate. You can probably come up with other exercises of your own. A full debate takes an hour and only involves five students, four to debate and one to judge. You need activities which take a lot less time and involve the whole team.

Full Debates. It is difficult to have full debates during team meetings because they take so much time. There is the hour to prepare cases from the packet, which you can finesse by letting them do that on their own outside of practice. Then the debate itself is close to 1.5 hours with speeches, cross-ex, prep time and critique. It is probably best to do this outside of the team meetings. You could require that everyone arrange a practice debate each week, on their own time, with one of the students judging. They should be required to come to you with a summary of the round, and explanation of the decision, and recommendations for their own improvement. This is why going to the tournament and actually debating is the best thing students can do: it’s the only way to get a realistic practice in for all of your debaters at one time.

Last Bit of Advice

In my experience, inexperience is no reason not to debate. You can always spend more time preparing. Get over it, get on your feet and debate.

No one wins every round, and everyone gets crushed once in a while. But you probably won’t lose every round either. If your students have a reasonable level of self-confidence, they will be able to handle the

losses. More to the point, they will learn so much more debating than they ever will observing or practicing. I speak from personal experience because that is how I learned to debate. The best thing you can do as a coach is simply enter them into as many tournaments as you can manage and let them go at it. The more often they debate, the more opponents they see, the better they will get.

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