

What Happens During a Debate?

While every debate is unique, most debates will follow a general pattern. This is a discussion of what should happen during a debate. It starts with a big picture, looks at the individual speeches, and covers cross-examination, teamwork and prep time. The details are specific to extemporaneous debate under the rules and practices of the Connecticut Debate Association. For reference, an annotated table presenting the timing of the debate is attached at the end.

1. An Overview of a Debate

You can look at a debate a number of ways. I like the old “pig in a python” view. Then ends are small and narrow, but it gets very wide in the middle. You can think about that bulge two ways.

One way is that it represents the range of arguments introduced. The debate starts out with a narrowly focused constructive speech with two to four contentions in support of the resolution (there is no required number). Then the negative introduces its contentions and counter arguments, followed by affirmative counter arguments and so on. By the rebuttals, the debaters should begin to narrow their focus to a few key issues, with the final negative and affirmative speakers summarizing the debate from their own perspective. That summary should provide the judge with an explanation as to why he or she should decide in their favor.

A second way is to view the bulge as representing the complexity of the arguments introduced. By the middle of the debate, each contention—and I mean the arguments you are really fighting over, not simply the arguments introduced—should have several layers of point and counterpoint. Evidence, facts, logic, and responses from cross-ex will have been introduced by each side, so the judge will have a lot of material to sort through to decide which side will prevail. But you don’t want to leave that decision to the judge! The rebuttals, and in particular the final speeches, should try to simplify the arguments so that the judge has an easy time of it. You want reduce the debate to a few key issues, and explain why those key issues fall to your team.

2. Organizing Your Speeches

Listening to a speech can be like driving around a strange neighborhood. Unless you have a map and the streets are clearly marked, you don’t have any idea where you are. If you, as the speaker, don’t provide the map and the signposts, the judge will be lost and your arguments will be ineffective. If the map and the signposts don’t follow a logical order, then your speech will appear to ramble about to no point. Like a winding country road, the scenery may be beautiful, but it may not take you anywhere. You can’t use presentation materials like handouts or slides or overheads in a debate, so you must learn to do all of this verbally.

The map in a speech consists of two parts, the outline you give at the beginning to explain what you intend to do, and the summary you give at the end to explain what you’ve accomplished. You plant the signposts every time you start a new topic when you refer back to your outline and tell the judge what you are about to discuss next. Even if you have presented a good outline at the beginning of the speech, it doesn’t help if you don’t use it during the speech and indicate when you are moving from one area of argument to the next.

The outline isn’t only for the benefit of the judge. It’s very easy to get lost in your own words, especially if you have a lot of ground to cover. The outline should guide your own progress. If you lose your place while speaking, you should be able to look down to your notes, and, from the outline, quickly recover your place. You should never get up to speak without having that outline written clearly on a single sheet of paper so you always know where you are and where you intend to go.

Finally, the outline also serves as a skeleton for all of the details you need to present to make each argument convincing: facts, evidence, logic, common sense, references to previous speeches and answers obtained in cross-ex. The most important use of prep time is to make sure that you have a proper outline fleshed out with the details of the arguments you intend to make.

3. One Speech at a Time

In this section we will look at each speech, and what the speaker should, ideally, be doing. As you go through this material, remember that many of the comments apply to all of the speeches. Don't be afraid to apply a technique mentioned in one speech to any of the others if fits the debate you are in.

First Affirmative Constructive

This speech sets the tone for the debate. The speaker should start by introducing himself and his partner and the school they represent. He then introduces the resolution in a positive fashion. Note, you do not have to reintroduce yourselves at the beginning of each speech. Nor do you have to repeat the resolution again, though it may be useful to do so in the last rebuttal. Repeated introductions or readings of the resolution take up time you could be using to make an argument.

This is usually followed by a definition of the important terms. Terms should be defined according to the context in which you intend to use them. Even if you don't think you need any special definitions, it is important that you briefly paraphrase the resolution to establish your intended interpretation. This will preempt any attempt by the negative to box you in with an odd or narrow definition.

The First Affirmative then presents the affirmative case. In extemporaneous debate this is usually in the form of three contentions, plus or minus one, though there is no required number. (We'll talk about case and contention structure another time.) This is a prepared presentation. It should be clear and well organized. You should start with a summary of your contentions that makes it clear how they compel acceptance of the resolution. Then present each contention in detail, with supporting arguments. Make sure that you have time in the last 30 seconds to summarize them at the end.

First Negative Constructive

The First Negative has to do two things. First, the negative contentions must be introduced into the debate. Second, there must be a response to the First Affirmative speech. These tasks are equally important. If you fail to present the negative contentions, you have no case of your own. If you fail to respond to the First Affirmative, then the Second Negative can spend his entire speech attacking your case.

Like the First Affirmative, the First Negative should introduce himself, his partner and school they represent. Again, remember that you only have to do this once. Don't waste time repeating the introductions in every speech.

This should be followed by a brief statement against the resolution. Any definitions the negative wants to introduce should given here. Be certain that you have heard and understood any affirmative definition of terms, and, if they are unusual or overly restrictive, challenge them here. If you let the affirmative definitions go without comment, you must live with them for the rest of the debate. On the other hand, remember that the affirmative have a right to set a reasonable definition of terms, and a reasonable interpretation of the resolution. Don't quibble over slight differences of meaning or introduce alternative definitions unless you really intend to use them!

The remainder of the speech has to cover a lot of ground, about half of the time presenting the negative contentions, and half rebutting the affirmative contentions. Remember to provide a brief outline of what you intend to do before you do it. The speech should be organized as follows:

- State that you intend to present the negative case then in the time remaining rebut the affirmative case.
 - Outline the negative contentions
 - Present each contention in detail
 - Summarize the negative contentions
 - Outline your objections to the affirmative contentions
 - Present your rebuttal to the affirmative contentions in detail
 - Summarize your objections to the affirmative contentions
- Sum up your speech in a concise indictment of the resolution.

It is likely that you won't have time at the end to recite all of the contentions. The trick to effective summary is just that: summarize! You have to find a sentence or three that captures the essence of your case.

Second Affirmative Constructive

At this point the both cases are out in the open. While the Second Affirmative and the Second Negative can introduce additional contentions, this is rarely done. The Second Affirmative should present a point by point refutation of the first negative constructive speech. There are two things to keep in mind when you do this.

First, "point by point" does not require you to follow the same order as the previous speech. There should be a good deal of overlap in the affirmative and negative contentions, in the sense of one opposing the other. If you link these in opposition, you can cover more than one contention at a time. This not only makes your presentation more efficient, but it highlights the class between you and your opponents.

This linkage has to be done carefully if it is to be effective. If you don't begin with a outline of how you intend to proceed and end with a summary of what you have done, you may simply confuse the judge. The comments in section 2 above about organizing you speech are particularly important if you intend to rearrange the affirmative and negative contentions to make a more effective presentation. Since you, as the affirmative, have the burden of proof, it's probably better to use your own contentions as the outline, and contrast the negative contentions to your own as appropriate.

Second, remember that simply repeating arguments is not debate. At the beginning we noted that both the number of arguments and their complexity should increase as the debate progresses. If the First Negative has done a good job, you will be faced with a response for each of your contentions. You have to do more than simply restate your contentions to answer these arguments. You need to reply to those arguments in a way that indicates they you heard them, understood them, analyzed them, and have a reason for the judge to reject them and accept your original point and the resolution.

Finally, there is no point in spending a lot of time repeating or expanding on the affirmative contentions if all that the First Negative has done is to present the negative contentions. Simply note the fact that the affirmative contentions have gone unanswered, and spend the remainder of your speech attacking the negative contentions. End with a summary of the affirmative case. In this case the negative team has given you a gift. Be sure to take advantage of it!

Second Negative Constructive and First Negative Rebuttal

The Negative can really shine in a round if they effectively coordinate these two speeches—the "Negative Block"—as one. The Negative team has ten minutes, interrupted only by cross examination to build its case against the Affirmative. The First Affirmative has only four minutes for rebuttal.

The Negative needs to recognize the differences between the two speeches to take advantage of them. The Second Negative Constructive is the last point in the debate at which major new arguments can be added. It's always hard to decide what constitutes a "new" argument. Certainly a new contention qualifies as a new argument, though, as noted above, this is rarely done. A reply to or extension of an existing argument should not count as a new argument. However, if your response to the affirmative team is going to explore topics that have not been brought up in the debate before, then it is best to play safe by introducing them in this constructive speech. So the Second Negative should focus primarily on extending major lines of arguments, either against the affirmative case or in favor of the negative case.

The First Negative Rebuttal should focus on replying to rebuttal points made in the Second Affirmative Constructive, and dealing with anything raised during the cross examination of the Second Negative. The First Negative should also try to end with a "to do" list for the First Affirmative, of all of the outstanding negative points against the affirmative: both those arguments the Second Affirmative responded to (and which presumably the negative has countered) and arguments the Second Affirmative has dropped. The purpose is to provide the judge with a checklist to measure the First Affirmative Rebuttal (and ideally find

it lacking). When you summarize this speech, make sure you have a list of things for the First Affirmative to do, and try to make it a long one.

The hardest thing for the two negative speakers to do is to avoid repeating points. This means that the Second Negative must consciously leave certain issues for the First Negative, and the First Negative must not fail to address them. It is often hard for one debater to leave good arguments alone, even for their partners. But this is what teamwork is about, and this is where it most obviously affects the individual speeches. Prep time taken before the Second Negative Constructive should be used by the negative team to lay out who will do what. The Second Negative should begin the constructive speech by informing the judge of how issues will be divided with the First Negative Rebuttal

First Affirmative Rebuttal

This is a critical point in the debate for the Affirmative team—some consider it the most difficult speech in the round. You have 4 minutes to respond to 10 minutes of negative constructive and rebuttal. The final rebuttals should largely focus on summarizing the debate. You can try to reply to everything that has been presented in order, but that is likely to sound superficial as you will barely have time to repeat the arguments much less respond to them.

You need to be selective. This is the point in the debate where you have to start reducing the number of arguments and their complexity. Most debates resolve themselves into a few key issues. You should start this speech by identifying those issues and organizing your rebuttal around these points. Basically, you want to answer the question, “What does the affirmative need to do to win the debate?” Your contentions are important, but the debate may have moved beyond them. What did the second constructive speeches spend most of their time on? What have been the major points of contention? What has the negative team missed in the affirmative case?

Try not to get lost in minor issues. Debaters often spend a lot of time squabbling about little things that don’t really matter in the final result. Think about how these details relate to the main arguments of the debate. If they are significant, then it is important to respond. But if they aren’t significant, they can be sidestepped or put into context, and you can move on.

Second Negative Rebuttal

This is the last speech for the Negative, and it should be used to summarize the debate from the negative perspective and provide the judge with a clear rationale for a negative ballot. This is not a time to get lost in minor issues. What are the key issues in the debate? What affirmative points need to be answered to win those issues for the negative? What is the best way to present these issues so that they compel rejection of the resolution?

As the Negative, you are not required to prove anything. You simply need to show the Affirmative does not have a case that favors adoption of the resolution. However, having strong disadvantages to the resolution or to the Affirmative plan doesn’t hurt. But remember you can be selective, and need only retain what you need to win.

Remember that the affirmative team has the last word. The negative rebuttal has to end with a compelling summary of the negative case, one that is proof against whatever the Second Affirmative may say. As in his constructive, try to leave the affirmative with a list of things to do.

Finally, the Second Negative has to make it easy for the judge to decide against the resolution by laying out a reason to reject it. Don’t leave it to the judge to decide—give him a summary that is easy for him to accept. And remember to ask for a decision in your favor!

Second Affirmative Rebuttal

The Affirmative Team has the burden of proof. Like the prosecution, the Affirmative gets the first and last word, a powerful advantage, to compensate for that burden. The Negative Team will not get a chance to respond to anything the Second Affirmative says in this, the last speech of the debate.

This is not a speech to recite all the contentions or worry over minor issues. Like the Second Negative, you have four minutes to explain the debate to the judge and why the resolution should be accepted. You do not need to win every point. Emphasize the points that the Affirmative has won, and explain why they are sufficient to compel adopting the resolution. If the Negative has won some points, explain why they are not significant, or not relevant to the final Affirmative line of argument.

Like the Second Negative, you must make it easy for the judge to decide in favor of the resolution by laying out a reason to adopt it. Don't leave it to the judge to decide—give him a summary that is easy to accept. And don't forget to ask for a decision in your favor!

4. *Thinking About Cross-ex*

Good cross-ex is hard. It takes a lot of practice and experience. But it is useful to review what you should be doing during cross-ex. How to question effectively is a topic for another time.

Cross-ex should be used primarily to set up arguments for your team's next speech. You want to focus on the areas that you believe are likely to be weakest in your opponents' position, and probe for answers that bring out those weaknesses. Questions should be short, and have obvious and simple answers. If you ask an open-ended question, you are giving your opponent an opportunity to make a speech and waste your cross-examination time. Ideally, you should know the answer, or possible range of answers, when you ask the question. You should also know what your follow-up question will be depending on the answer you get.

Be realistic about the answers you expect. Your opponent is unlikely to admit that his case is wrong and yours is right, and he will resist making any such statement. It's a waste of time for you to try and pressure him in to it. If you've backed your opponent into a corner, the judge will likely notice, and you have enough to use in your next speech. You have a right to ask for a short answer, but only if you ask a question that can reasonably be answered with a short answer. If you ask a question requires a complex answer, you will look foolish trying to force your opponent into a short answer, or to answer "yes or no."

Cross-ex is not a time for reading evidence or introducing new arguments. It's against the rules, and besides, reading evidence or making an argument wastes time. Cross-ex is the only time you get to confront the other team directly. Spend it asking questions! If your opponent reads new evidence or a quote and asks you to comment, you are justified in saying that you would be happy to do so once the evidence or quote is introduced in a speech. If your opponent makes a new argument and asks for a response, point out that the argument is new, and again, that you would be happy to consider it when it has been properly introduced.

CDA cross-ex is "open," in that both members of the opposing team may question the speaker. Be sure to take turns, so that each of you handles about the same amount of questions. Don't repeat each other. You should have agreed before starting on which areas you will each concentrate.

Finally, the best cross-ex is wasted if you don't use the answers in the next speech. The strongest arguments you can make in a debate are based on the statements, admissions and arguments of your opponents. Points made in cross-ex don't count if you don't use them in a constructive or rebuttal speech. Points made in cross-ex also have a very short half-life. You should use them in the next speech. If you wait, the judge, your opponents and you yourself will probably forget about them.

5. *Teamwork*

Remember that you are a team. To win debates, you have to work together to make sure both you and your partner are fully prepared when it is your team's turn to speak. You should know what your partner is going to say when he gets up to speak, because you worked with him to decide what would be in that speech.

You and your partner should rarely repeat each other, because there is always something new to say, or a new way to explain what has been said before. You should never keep an idea from your partner, or save it, figuring you will use it later in the debate. Arguments become useless if presented too late in the debate. Get it out on the table so you can both decide the best time to use it.

How do you communicate with your partner when you have to listen to the other team, take notes, think about cross-ex and your next speech, and avoid making too much noise so you don't distract the other team or the judge? One way is to take good notes that your partner can look at and read. As you take notes on what your opponents say, you should also begin to note down counterarguments, even if you aren't speaking next. Your partner can pick up the ones he wants to use. You or your partner can point to things in each other's notes to indicate approval, disapproval or acceptance. This means that you must take good notes, and write legibly and large enough for your partner to read them.

A variation on this is to place a piece of paper between you and draw a line down the middle. You write on one side and your partner writes on the other. When your opponents are speaking, use the paper to communicate. You can each indicate whether you've seen and approve of an idea by putting a check mark next to it. You might indicate good areas for cross-ex by placing a question mark next to an item. As noted above, good cross-ex sets up arguments for the next speaker. You may want to lay out lines of cross-ex for both you and your partner to use.

Part of your prep time before each speech should be used to go over the outline of that speech together. You should both agree on what needs to be said, and in what order. You may have to be selective, choosing to use some arguments and not others, choosing to reply to some things the other team said and not others. The speaker should show his partner the outline he intends to follow and get agreement. The person who is going to speak ultimately has the right to decide what he is going to say. But if your partner strongly disagrees, then you should discuss it before going ahead anyway.

You win or lose as a team. Anything you can do to help your partner ultimately helps you.

6. Using Prep Time Effectively

Prep time was invented to remedy the problem of debaters stalling before getting up to speak. Having an extra 30 seconds to organize your thoughts before you start can be a tremendous advantage in a close debate. Unfortunately, I see too many debaters get up before they are ready to speak, and too many teams hoard their prep time until the end when it won't do them any good. Whether you're losing or winning, four minutes of prep time before the final rebuttal is not going to change the result; an extra minute before each constructive and rebuttal speech just might. The trick is to allocate your prep time evenly over the course of the debate.

Each team has six minutes of prep time. Each team also has precisely three times when prep time can be useful. For the affirmative, those times are just prior to the Second Affirmative constructive, the First Affirmative rebuttal, and the Second Affirmative rebuttal. For the negative, those times are just prior to the First Negative constructive, the Second Negative constructive, and the Second Negative rebuttal.¹ This works out to an average of two minutes in each case.

You should never get up to give one of those speeches without using at least one minute of prep time! No matter how good or well prepared you think you are, you can always use an extra minute to review what you intend to say and make sure it is well organized, complete, and appropriate to that point in the debate. Make sure your partner looks it over and agrees with you—remember, teamwork!

Prep time also gives you a chance to take a deep breath, sit back and take a few seconds to slow down and think. It's very easy to miss things when you are swept up in the emotion and rush of a debate. You want to slow things down and make sure that you haven't skipped a critical argument. You should never get up before the prep time you asked for is over. If you are completely prepared and certain about what you have to do, and you still have some prep time left, then sit up straight, close your eyes and take a deep breath and make sure you are calm and focused before you get up to speak.

¹ Remember what was said above—the Second Negative Constructive and the First Negative Rebuttal are not two separate speeches, they are one long speech!

Timing for CDA Extemporaneous Debate

Speech	Duration	Comment
1 st Affirmative Constructive	6 minutes	
Cross-examination*	3 minutes	
1 st Negative Constructive	6 minutes	Negative should take prep time
Cross-examination*	3 minutes	
2 nd Affirmative Constructive	6 minutes	Affirmative should take prep time
Cross-examination*	3 minutes	
2 nd Negative Constructive	6 minutes	Negative should take prep time
Cross-examination*	3 minutes	
1 st Negative Rebuttal	4 minutes	Should be coordinated with 2 nd Negative Constructive
1 st Affirmative Rebuttal	4 minutes	Affirmative should take prep time
2 nd Negative Rebuttal	4 minutes	Negative should take prep time
2 nd Affirmative Rebuttal	4 minutes	Affirmative should take prep time
Affirmative Prep Time**	6 minutes	
Negative Prep Time**	6 minutes	
Total	64 minutes	

* Cross-ex is “open”—both debaters on a team may ask questions, but only the most recent speaker may answer questions.

** Prep time may be taken by a team only prior to one of its own speeches. Prep time is taken in one-minute blocks.

ejr Jan-07
ejr rev Sep-10