The Robins Debate 2016: Debate Guidelines

Debate Is a Game
Wait, that’s it? That’s the great definition of debate? Yes. Oh, don’t worry, we’re going to say more about what debate is later. At the beginning, though, it is important to understand that, whatever else debate is, it is a game. It has teams, points, winners, losers, tournaments, and trophies. Like many games, it is not always fair (even though we try hard to make it fair). Most importantly, debate is supposed to be fun. Please keep that in mind. The easiest way to begin understanding debate is for us to describe how the game is played – its basic structure and rules.

The Players
A single debate team is composed of two people. That means that you will work with a partner. A round of debate competition involves two teams competing against each other. The winner of the round is determined by at least one judge who watches the debate. Sometimes there will be more than one judge, and there will almost always be an odd number of judges. The debaters are usually students, and the judge might be a teacher, debate coach, graduate student, former debater, or some other person (like a parent or a community member). Judges may or may not have extensive debate experience.

The Topic
For the Robins Debate, 3 debate topics have been chosen for the competition. Representatives from the debate community pick a topic that is timely and deals with a business issue of national or international concern.

The point is that there is one topic for every debate round. The debate topic is called “the resolution” because it takes the form of a kind of proposal for change that might be made by a politician or a diplomat in Congress or the United Nations. This means that the resolution (the topic) does not look or sound like a question — it looks and sounds like a statement. Instead of asking “what should we do about racism?” (for example) a debate resolution would say “we should pass better laws to punish businesses that have racist hiring practices.” Just to make sure that you know a debate resolution when you see it, we start every topic with the word “resolved.” So, continuing the example above, a debate resolution might be something like “Resolved: that the United States Federal Government should enact a policy to eliminate racist hiring practices in the United States.” Some resolutions deal with problems within the U.S., while others deal with international issues or foreign policy.

The Structure of a Debate Round
The two debate teams who are competing against each other have specific jobs to do. One team’s job is to argue that the Resolution — the statement makes a claim addressing a national or international problem — is a good idea. We call that team “the affirmative” because it is their job to affirm the idea of the resolution. The other team’s job is to argue that the resolution is not true or is not a workable idea. We call that team “the negative” because it is their job to negate the idea of the resolution. One team is for the resolution, the other team is against it.
In regular Policy Debate, an important thing to know is that the affirmative usually proposes a very specific policy called the "plan." So, if the resolution says the U.S. should enact a policy about racism, the affirmative has to come up with a specific proposal, or plan. In the Robins Debate you may simply come up with a well-structured argument that supports or refutes the claim made in the resolution.

Will you be affirmative or negative? Well, there’s the interesting part — in some debate rounds, you will be the affirmative, and in other rounds you will be the negative. We’ll talk about debate tournaments more in just a minute, but get ready for the idea that you will learn to debate both sides of the resolution!

In a single round of debate competition, each person gives two speeches. The first speech each person gives is called a “constructive” speech, because it is the speech where each person constructs the basic arguments they will make throughout the debate. The second speech is called a “rebuttal,” because this is the speech where each person tries to rebut (or answer) the arguments made by the other team, while using their own arguments to try to convince the judge to vote for their team.

The affirmative has to convince the judge to vote for a change or that the resolution is true, which makes their job hard. Because we recognize this difficulty, the affirmative gets to speak first and last.

What do all these numbers and letters mean? Well, each debater on a team is either the first speaker or the second speaker. That is to say, a single debater gives the first constructive speech AND the first rebuttal speech. The other debater gives the second constructive speech AND the second rebuttal speech. The numbers in the list above indicate which debater we are talking about (the first or the second), the letters indicate what team the person is on (affirmative or negative) and what speech the person is giving (constructive or rebuttal). Thus, 1AC means “first affirmative constructive” and 2NR means “second negative rebuttal.”

But wait, there’s more. In a debate round, you don’t just get to give speeches. You also get to ask questions. Each debater gets to spend a (short) period of time asking one of the debaters on the other team questions. We call this question-and-answer period “cross-examination” because it’s a lot like the time during a trial when a lawyer asks a witness for the other side questions. There is one cross-examination period after each constructive speech. The person who just finished speaking answers the questions. That makes sense, since the point of the cross-examination is to talk about the speech that just ended. The person on the other team who is not about to speak asks the questions. So, when the 1AC is over the second negative speaker asks the questions and the first affirmative speaker answers the questions.

Diagram of a Debate Round

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<td>Judge(s)</td>
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**Complicated?**

If this whole situation sounds really complicated, don’t worry. You and your partner will not have to deal with the complicated part. Instead, when you arrive at the tournament, you will be given a piece of paper that tells you who you and your partner are debating in the first debate round, what side you are debating on (affirmative or negative), who is judging you, and what room you are debating in. Before every round, you will receive another pairing that tells you where to go and who to debate.

Pairings will usually tell you when each round is supposed to begin. However, a debate round cannot start until both teams (all 4 debaters) and the judge(s) are present in the room. Most students do not have a clear idea of what to do in the first few debate rounds. If you get confused, don’t hesitate to ask the judge for help.

**Debaters Talk Funny!**

The judge evaluates who wins the debate by comparing the quality of the arguments made by each team — and by deciding how those arguments interact with each other. Judges who have been involved in debate a long time are able to evaluate a very large number of arguments in a short period of time. For their part, debaters have an incentive to make as many well thought out and cogent arguments as possible in the short period of time they have to speak. That does not mean you should try to talk fast. Speak quickly, but clearly. Sometimes your judge is not experienced enough to enjoy or appreciate a fast debate, and some judges don’t like information whizzing by too quickly to understand. The best debaters emphasize more traditional styles of persuasion.

There are two other elements of debate style that you should be aware of. First, debaters tend to use a lot of structure when they speak. That means that debaters organize their speech into individual arguments, and they even organize those individual arguments into larger groups or argument types. Debaters even like to number their arguments. Imagine an argument you’re having with your parents. You want to stay out late and your parents have refused to let you. A normal person might say “but I’m so responsible, come on...” and so on. A debater would say “I have four arguments in favor of letting me stay out. First, I’m very responsible. Second, I have a cell phone so you can call me to check on me. Third, I’ve gotten three As on my report card for three semesters in a row. Fourth, the other kids all get to stay out later than me and I’m worried that your reputation as cool parents will start to suffer if you don’t change your policy.”

Another thing about debate that’s important to know is that debaters rely on evidence when they speak. The word “evidence” can mean a lot of different things, but in debate it generally means arguments made by experts and journalists in published documents like newspapers, journals, political or science blogs, and books. Debaters can copy parts of published arguments to use in their own speeches---BUT they must be VERY careful to tell the judge who wrote their evidence and when it was written. You might hear a debater make an argument and immediately follow it with the name of an expert, a year, and a long quote. This is an example of a debater reading evidence in a speech. Because debate is so reliant on evidence, you will end up reading a lot of things that have been written by experts on the topic. You will even end up doing your own research to add new arguments about the debate topic.
There are definitely kinds of evidence that don’t involve academic experts. Personal experiences, stories written by normal people directly involved with important issues, and even arguments made in music or on film can count as evidence in debate rounds.

**Arguing About Change**
There are many different ways to debate, and every year creative debaters and coaches come up with even more new ideas. Over time, however, debaters have developed some standard kinds of arguments that help them understand how to debate issues of national and international policy. For an affirmative to prove that the judge should vote for them — that the judge should vote for you — the affirmative must address the “stock issues.” The part of the 1AC that addresses these issues is called the affirmative “case” — as in “the case for change” — or the “case to support the resolution.”

**Topicality**
Remember that the affirmative is generally expected to have a specific policy proposal for change called “the plan,” or have a well-constructed argument supporting the resolution. Topicality deals with whether the affirmative’s plan is accurately addressing resolution. If the plan does not support the resolution, the affirmative team may not actually be supporting the resolution. This is unfair to the negative team, who is prepared to debate the resolution and not some random idea the affirmative has. The negative would say that the affirmative is “not topical” and it should therefore lose the debate.

**Significance and Harms**
“If it ain’t broke, don’t x it.” This classic argument rejects the assumption that most people have about change — it isn’t necessary unless something is wrong with the way we’re doing things now.
If the affirmative is using reason and evidence to support the resolution, it will want to demonstrate that there isn’t enough “harm” created to not support the resolution. If the affirmative creates a policy to “fix” the problem in the resolution, it must demonstrate that something bad (“harms”) is happening now, and that the harms are important (or “significant”). If nothing is wrong right now, the judge won’t be persuaded that a new plan is necessary.

**Solvency (non-business definition)**
If you are supporting the resolution, you must make a coherent argument as to why the resolution should be upheld — and that means demonstrating why your argument is correct. If there are huge holes in your argument, it will be easy for the negative to point out the insolvency.
If you decide to create a plan for change, that’s great—but not all plans work. Remember that time when you were 6 and you thought you would make the cat happy by plugging its tail into an electrical outlet? Didn’t work too well, did it? Affirmatives must use evidence to prove that their plan solves the problems they have described as significant harms. If a plan doesn’t solve any problems, the judge won’t vote for it.
**Inherency**
If the government’s argument is short-sighted, and things will resolve for other reasons that may already be in place, then their argument is flawed. Sometimes you don’t need to do anything about a problem because it’s not going to be a problem for very long. One day, you may have a substitute teacher who is really annoying. You think about going to talk to the principal about this problem, but then you realize that your regular teacher will be back tomorrow and the classroom will be stink-free. Inherency deals with whether the significant harms identified by the affirmative will continue to be a problem. Will the problems solve themselves? Are policies, laws, or plans already in effective that will take care of the problems without the affirmative’s new idea for a policy? Is the government already on its way to passing a similar plan to one the affirmative has proposed? If the harms are not inherent to the way we are doing things now, the judge won’t vote for change.

**Fiat**
Sadly, the government does not listen to you. It generally likes the way things are being done now, and is unlikely to change. Debate is not about whether the government WILL do the things the affirmative is recommending. Debate is about whether the government SHOULD do those things. For the purposes of debate, the judge makes a decision based on what would happen if the plan was enacted — even if it is very unlikely that the government would ever agree to do it. “Fiat” is the word for the idea that the judge gets to pretend they have the power to make the plan happen.

*Not all debates involve fiat. If it helps the affirmative or the negative, then you can argue that we should focus on what we can accomplish in the actual debate round without pre-tending we have power over the government.*

**Judges and Winning**
If you haven’t already figured this out by now, you should know that the judge is crucial in determining who wins and loses a debate. In fact, the judge is the only person in the round who gets to decide who wins and who loses. The judge signs a ballot at the end of the debate voting for one team or the other. If you don’t persuade the judge to vote for you, you lose, regardless of how great you thought your arguments were and how bad you thought your opponents were.

Every person sees the world just a little differently. Different judges have different methods for evaluating debates. That said, Judges WILL NOT use their own knowledge or biases to defeat either side in the round — they will let the debaters decide who wins by evaluating only the arguments that are made in the debate.

Generally speaking, judges are persuaded by debaters who do a good job of developing their own arguments AND answering the arguments made by their opponents. This means you have to explain your own arguments very clearly. When your opponents make a point against one of your arguments, you need to explain to the judge why that point is not valid. In addition, you need to answer the arguments your opponents make that are not necessarily related to your own arguments. You must help the judge to understand why, given all the different arguments in the debate, your side should win. It’s a good thing you have two speeches and a partner to help you! Help your partner by listening and taking notes!
Flowing Tips

“Flowing” is writing down a debater’s argument. Use structure. Structure and label all the arguments on your flow the same way that the speaker you are flowing is structuring and labeling his or her arguments.

If you miss a response, go on to the next response. You can always ask the debater in cross-examination for your missed responses. Remember, the more you practice, the easier owing gets.

Be organized. When flowing a disorganized speaker, do not follow his or her example. Write all of his or her arguments in one column on a separate legal pad. Then in your speech, answer all of his or her arguments. Then go back to the structure and point out what you are winning and what your opponent failed to answer in his or her speech.

Use prefloows. Flow all of your arguments clearly before you speak. Before the debate, it is very helpful to pre-flow generic arguments.

Cross Examination

Cross-examination is a series of Q & A periods in a debate round designed to allow debaters to clarify issues, gather information, and achieve strategic advantage. While most beginning debaters (and many judges) say they enjoy cross-examination (a.k.a. “cross-ex” or “CX”) more than any other part of debate, few can say they are truly skilled. With some preparation and basic strategy, you can become one of those few.

Who speaks when?

The basic principle that will help you remember who cross-examines whom is this: the person who just spoke answers the questions, and the person from the other team who is not about to speak asks the questions.

But what do I do?

Cross-examination gives you, the person who is asking the questions, an important opportunity to accomplish several basic tasks. Generally speaking, cross-ex is used to achieve one or more of the following objectives, listed in the order of importance:

1. To clarify points or gather information
2. To expose errors
3. To set up arguments
4. To obtain admissions

Clarifying points and gathering information

It is likely that something will be said by the other team that you do not really understand. Even if you understand the words, you might not understand the meaning. Even if you understand the meaning, you might not understand what the other team is trying to achieve by making a
particular argument. The most important thing you can do in cross-ex is ensure you understand the other team’s arguments. Ask the other team questions. This is particularly useful when you are asking questions of interpretation (“but why is that good?”). Another thing you can do in cross-ex is ask the other team for their evidence or to clarify the validity of their evidence.

Rubuttals
Most debaters, coaches, and judges would agree that rebuttals are the most difficult and yet the most important parts of the debate. Not only is there less time within each speech, but each debater has to sort through all of the issues to determine which ones are the most important ones! What a debater does or does not do in rebuttals will decide who wins the debate. Very few debaters (especially beginners) can hope to extend everything that happened in the constructive speeches. Debaters don’t have to do that and just because a team may have dropped a point or an argument is not an automatic reason to vote against that team. What matters is the type of argument that is extended or dropped in rebuttals—this will determine the winner of the round.

Think about these issues when rebuttals happen:
• Which arguments have more weight at the end of the round?
• What about the quality of evidence?

Here are some other helpful hints:
• Avoid repetition. Don’t just repeat your constructive arguments. Beat the other team’s arguments and tell the judge why your arguments are better.
• Avoid passing ships. Don’t avoid what the other team said. You must clash directly with their responses.
• Avoid reading evidence only. You must be explaining and telling the judge why these issues win the debate.
• Avoid rereading evidence that has already been read in constructives. You can make reference to it by pulling it, but don’t re-read it.
• Avoid “lumping and dumping.” Don’t try to go for everything. You can’t make 12 responses to each argument in a few minutes.
• Be organized. Don’t mindlessly talk about issues at random. Be specific and logical about winning issues.
• Don’t blabber. Speak quickly but not beyond your ability. If you speak too fast, you will stumble and not get through as much.
• Don’t make new arguments. You can read new evidence but you CANNOT offer NEW constructives. You are limited to extending the positions laid out in the constructive speeches.
• Cross-apply arguments. If you dropped an argument in a prior speech that you think was important don’t act like your losing. Cross-apply arguments you made some- where else in the debate.
Debate Delivery

As the previous section on speaking style should make very clear, it is difficult to generalize about exactly how you should speak when you debater. Obviously, what style of debate you choose will do a lot in terms of providing you with appropriate models for good speech. That having been said, there are some tips you should always follow when you speak.

1. Act like you care! This is the most important rule of public speaking. If you don’t act like what you are saying is important, why should anyone else care? Sound passionate, and your audience will follow you.

2. Speak loud enough for everyone to hear you. It’s natural to be a bit nervous in a public speaking situation, and that often translates into less volume. Everyone in the room should be able to hear you without straining. Also, reasonable increases in speech volume are often interpreted as evidence of forceful argument. It’s better to be a bit too loud than a bit too quiet.

3. Stand up when you speak. You may see some debaters who sit down when they speak. Standing up gives you more presence and makes you look bigger.

4. Look at the judge. Although you may spend time in your speech reading from evidence or your own notes, it is crucially important to look at your judge frequently. Eye contact gives people a sense of involvement and makes them think you’re a more powerful speaker. It is also important to see the judge’s face so you can see, for example, if they are giving you the “what the @#$*! are you talking about?” look. You can’t adapt to what you can’t see.

5. Let your body stand naturally. There are a lot of potential landmines waiting for you that can distract the judge or ruin your speaking credibility. Playing with your pen? Pounding the table or podium constantly when you talk? Pacing around the room while you talk? Be mindful of your body and use it to convey emphasis for your points.

You are now ready to debate!
Most importantly: have fun!