

Breaking Down Barriers: How to Debate

Public Forum Section
Sample with Chapter 1 only



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The Public Forum Section

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Public Forum Chapter 1

Introduction to Public Forum Debate

History

The National Forensic League (NFL) first created the two person form of public style debate we now know as Public Forum Debate in 2002 under the name "Controversy." In the early months of 2003 the events name was changed again to "Ted Turner Debate," the NFL having chosen to name its new even after a large donor and former debater: Ted Turner, the founder of CNN. Later in the year the NFL changed the name to Public Forum Debate, and it has officially been called that since then; however on the local and regional level some people still refer to it as "Controversy Debate" or "Ted Turner Debate."

Since its creation, the Public Forum Debate format has been met with a great deal of interest from programs all over the country. Better yet, because of the low cost involved in Public Forum Debate, many new programs have been established around it. While many sing the praises of the event, others consider it a "lazy" form of debate allows for shallow argumentation and demagoguery. While it has both fans and detractors there is no debate about its popularity: Public Forum Debate is an exciting and popular forum for argumentation.

Explanation and Topics

Public Forum Debate can be very closely likened to the CNN program "Crossfire." It pits two teams of debaters against each other and has them engage in debate over what is usually a popular issue of national importance in a fashion that everyday people are capable of understanding. The topic changes every month to keep the debates fresh and to focus debaters critical thinking skills on another area of great importance.

Topics for Public Forum debate usually reflect current national controversies. This means they tend to be taken from the headlines and important issues that people and politicians are debating about. Topics can either be issue-oriented or policy-oriented. An example of an issue-based resolution is "Resolved: The United



States is losing the War on Terror. " While the discussion on this topic would be about a policy (the U.S. War on Terror), the debate would focus on the issue of its success or failure. There are also policy-oriented topics, like "Resolved: The United States should provide universal health insurance to all U.S. citizens." In contrast to issue-based resolutions, this topic is concerned with a policy that would affect the United States.

You will notice that topics about policies will either be about policies that are already in existence, or proposed new policies like the example above. The topic for each month is released at the beginning of the preceding month (at www.nflonline.org). It is drafted and selected by a national topic committee. Once a topic is released, it is time for you to think about and construct arguments that relate to it. It is a good idea to come up with some

general areas or issues that you think relate to the topic. Do this before you go research, since it will make it easier to use your time wisely and find useful information. We will discuss this more in the next sections, when we talk about researching and writing arguments for Public Forum topics.

This list shows some of the topics used in Public Forum Debate from 2013-2014:

- Resolved: Development assistance should be prioritized over military aid in the Sahel region of Africa.
- Resolved: Immigration reform should include a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States.
- Resolved: NATO should strengthen its relationship with Ukraine in order to deter further Russian aggression.
- Resolved: Prioritizing economic development over environmental protection is in the best interest of the people of India.
- Resolved: Single-gender classrooms would improve the quality of education in American public schools.
- Resolved: The benefits of domestic surveillance by the NSA outweigh the harms.
- Resolved: The Supreme Court rightly decided that Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act violated the Constitution.
- Resolved: Unilateral military force by the United States is justified to prevent nuclear proliferation.

Why do Public Forum Debate?

Public forum debate focuses on public speaking skills and analysis of current issues. It prepares you, the student, for many instances in which you will be asked to speak in front of an audience. Additionally, you will learn to grasp both sides of controversial issues quickly and accurately. Understanding how to think through at times complex issues is not a skill that is just for debaters. It will come in handy in a variety of situations throughout your life. Effective communication is also a primary goal of debate participation. Whether it is for a class or convincing someone to hire you, your persuasive skills will be honed by participation in this activity. Let's look at some specific advantages to doing public forum debate.

THE FORMAT – SO YOU WANT TO BE THE MASTER OF SNAPPY RESPONSES?

Public forum debate is an event that focuses on engaging your audience. You will learn to catch your judge's attention and keep it. Short speech times means you will be a master at witty comebacks that decimate the other team's arguments. Your polished performances won't just be fun for your audience – you will have a good time too!

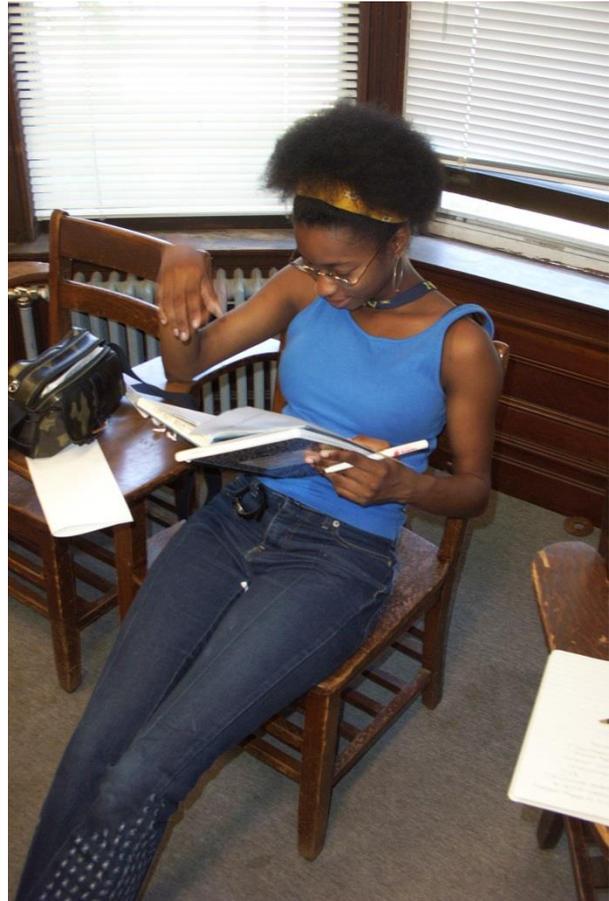
One of the most exciting parts of public forum debate is the Crossfire. You get to grill your opponent on their arguments and practice your smart retorts. Keep in mind that you will be put on the spot too, but knowing your arguments will make that a breeze. Your partner gets to join in the fun in the Grand Crossfire. This part of the round is an exchange between all four participants in the round. You get to ask the other team questions and

challenge their claims. This is also where you engage your audience and the judge and at the same time prove why you should win.

GETTING SMARTER – SO YOU WANT TO GET OUT OF THE LIBRARY?

Not all research is boring or requires hours in the library. Doing public forum debate will expose you to research that can even be fun. You get to read magazines and surf the web. Sure, you'll be looking for pertinent information about the topic, but there will be plenty of time to discuss issues with friends and teammates and come up with new ideas on how to solve old problems.

If you are worried about the research burden, don't be. Once you have your cases written for a topic, most of your research time is over. You will work on polishing your delivery and answering questions. Public forum debate is largely based on thinking on your feet, which means tons of research isn't necessary.



EXPOSURE TO CURRENT EVENTS – SO YOU WANT TO IMPRESS YOUR PARENTS?

Public forum topics change every month, which means you get a chance to discuss many different issues and ideas. Also keep in mind that each team you will face in debate rounds will have a different interpretation of the topic. This means you hear a variety of perspectives and will hopefully learn from all of them. Of course, by researching your own cases, you will be exposed to many different ideas and controversies that can affect the lives of millions of people.

Having a grasp of current events is beneficial in its own right. You can surprise your parents with your knowledge of important topics at the dinner table, for one. But it is also important for your own decision-making. Sometimes you may debate about things that affect your own life. Public forum topics often revolve around domestic policies that have a big impact on people your age. For example, one recent resolution discussed the idea of mandatory national service. Such a policy could significantly impact your future plans, but it also holds implications for communities all over the country.

Even if you think you are not interested in current issues, learning about them builds the foundations of tackling other interests. In public forum debate, you learn how to analyze an issue and get at the heart of the controversy. Since public forum involves short preparation time and relatively short speech times, you will quickly learn how to focus your arguments. A good understanding of how to cut to the chase will come in handy, whether you are writing a paper for a class or discussing a random issue with your friends.

IMPROVING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS – SO YOU WANT TO BE RIGHT?

Have you ever had to speak in front of a group of people? Did you follow the old advice of imagining your audience in their underwear? Either way, you were probably nervous and spent most of your time trying not to faint, instead of remembering what you were about to say. Believe it or not, public forum debate will give you enough confidence never to have to imagine people in their underwear again.

Whether it's getting up in front of a group of people or presenting your ideas in a concise and clear manner, doing public forum will help. Remember that class presentation where you kept hiding behind your poster? There will be no need to hide once you polish your public speaking skills in debate rounds. You may not be talking about the same things, but writing cases and practicing how to deliver them will do wonders for your confidence.

In addition to having more confidence, you will also learn how to express your opinions clearly. Being persuasive isn't just good for your chances of winning debate rounds either. Your parents will notice it as well next time you try to bargain for a later curfew! Just like the research skills will come in handy, expressing what you want to say will make your paper writing easier.



ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS – SO YOU WANT TO FIND YOUR HOMEWORK?

Researching is part of any debate activity and public forum is no different. Participating in public forum means you develop a good grasp of major sources of information and some more specialized ones. Even when your cases are written, knowing the best sources of information will come in handy for schoolwork and other projects. While spending hours researching might not be the most fun activity, it will make writing papers that much easier.

Actually writing cases will help you put ideas into logical order and connect them in an easy to follow manner. This too is a good skill to have for doing schoolwork. Maybe that talent will even let you write less, since you

are so good at expressing your ideas. The worst-case scenario is that you impress your teachers and parents.

If you have ever misplaced your homework, you know how important it is to keep things organized. Putting together evidence and backup for your cases will hopefully sharpen those skills. There is nothing worse than not having an answer in a debate round, when you know that you have it somewhere - you just can't find it. Hopefully you can avoid instances like that by getting used to good organizational techniques.

INTERACTING WITH PEOPLE - SO YOU WANT TO MEET COOL PEOPLE?

By doing debate, you get to interact with lots of people. Your fellow teammates, your partner, coaches, judges and other competitors will soon become familiar to you. Tournaments are social experiences, in addition to competitive and educational activities. Expect to have fun and meet new people, whether in rounds or on the bus ride.

You will have plenty of opportunities to make friends with other people at tournaments. It's a great way to meet students from other schools that you might not have met otherwise. You might get to spend your weekends with your best friends and cheer them on. Don't forget your coaches and judges too. You might think they will be less fun to hang out with, but you will inevitably learn a lot from them.

STRATEGIC DECISIONS – SO YOU WANT TO BE SNEAKY?

Do you reach decisions easily? Is your answer to that maybe? In any case, public forum debate will test your decision-making skills. Each round starts with a coin toss, but you must decide on more than just 'heads' or 'tails.' If you and your partner win the coin toss, you get to choose either to go first or which side of the topic you want to defend. Your choice will play into your strategy and might give you a leg up on your opponents.

Your quick decisions will also help you in rounds. By the time the other team has tested your wits in the Crossfire, you will have to make choices about which arguments to go for. Which ones are you winning the most? Which arguments is the other team ahead on? Making strategic decisions in debate rounds will help with all kinds of decisions you will have to make.



Picking Sides

Whereas in both Lincoln Douglas Debate and Team Debate speaker sides are set with the affirmative speaking first, official National Forensic League Public Forum Debate rules specifically that there will be a flip for sides. When Public Forum Debaters read postings to find out who they are competing against (or "hitting" as debater jargon would have it) there is no indication of whether they will be defending the Pro or Con side of the debate, this is decided by a coin flip minutes before the round takes place. If a team wins the coin flip, they can choose to speak first or second OR they can choose

whichever side of the case they want, but not both. If the team that wins the coin flip chooses to speak second then the other teams gets to pick whether they want to go Pro or Con. And if the team who wins the coin flip decides they go Con then the other team decides if they would like to speak first or second.

In 2007 the National Catholic Forensic League (NCFL) finally added Public Forum Debate to its list of offered events; however in the league you are randomly assigned a side of the debate, and the Pro always speaks first.

Format

- A round of Public Forum Debate includes four constructive speeches in which debaters present mostly pre-written arguments and do a small amount of rebuttal work (usually in the 2nd constructive speech). These speeches are the only time during a round of Public Forum Debate where debaters may bring in new arguments
- Each constructive speech is followed by a "cross-fire" where debaters ask each other questions.
- After the constructive speeches and respective "cross fires" there are two rebuttal where debaters are not allowed to bring in entirely new points, but rather rebut attacks that have been placed on their advocacies. After the rebuttal speeches there is what is called "grand crossfire" where all four debaters go back and forth asking and answering questions.
 - Following "grand cross fire" there are two "final focus" or "final shot" speeches where each team has 1 minute to crystalize their advocacy.



A more in-depth discussion of each speech and "cross-fire" will be covered in their respective chapters.

Judging

Public Forum Debate was designed by the National Forensic League to appeal to common people, as such most (if not all of your judges) will be "lay" judges, meaning that they have no formal debate experience.

Conclusion

Public Forum Debate is an exciting activity that focused on interesting current issues. You'll learn how to research and organize your thoughts into cogent, strong, and appealing arguments!