



## Public Debate Manual



<sup>1</sup> The manual was written by Chris Baron in January of 2004. However, much of this material is borrowed from the forthcoming book by Ken Broda-Bahm, Daniela Kempf and William Driscoll entitled Argument and Audience: Presenting Debates In Public Settings, available through IDEA Press.

# BUDL Public Debate Manual

## What is a public debate?

It is a discussion on an issue that has two sides, uses argument and evidence, and engages an audience.

## How can a public debate help us?

- *It promotes the visibility of your team* and can make it easier to get support for things like trophy cases, judges, release from classes for debate, etc.
- *It attracts new debaters and supporters* by getting students interested in debate, breaking the stereotypes about the debate team (too nerdy, too hard, too boring, etc.).
- *It motivates the current debaters* by giving them a new way to use their debate skills. Many debaters who have lost interest in competitive debate can be re-energized through involvement in public debates.
- *It benefits the audience you attract.* Public debates achieve an important purpose when they engage people in the topic being debated.

## How is public debate different from policy debate?

Aside from different time limits and speech order, debating in front of an audience is different from debating in front of one judge. For example, the audience doesn't know what "topicality," "harms" or "solvency" means. There are a couple of things you DON'T need to worry about in a public debate:

- Coverage. If you drop an argument, you don't lose it. The audience isn't tracking arguments to see if they are answered.
- Proving every point with evidence. A well-worded argument goes farther than a quotation.

You DO want to use reasoning, examples, stories and analogies more than extended quotations. If you have a few facts, it can help, too. You want to present a clear, persuasive case more than you want to "outdebate" your opponents on the flow or outcard them.

<b>Tournament Policy Debate Features</b>	<b>Public Debate Features</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participants who are assigned a side</li><li>• Expert judges and recorded winners</li><li>• Long speeches, long rounds</li><li>• A plan</li><li>• Topics that are sometimes long and complicated</li><li>• Use of extensive specialized theory and jargon</li><li>• Reliance on research and on quotations</li><li>• Tendency toward efficient and quick delivery</li><li>• 2 teams, 2 students on each side</li><li>• Multiple rounds</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Audience members can take whatever side they want, debaters may pick side they feel strongly about</li><li>• No judges—audience may or may not be asked to vote</li><li>• Time available for arguments to develop and diversify, while still being easy to follow without taking notes</li><li>• Topic may be policy and have a plan, or it could be a fact or value topic</li><li>• Time for audience interaction</li><li>• Opportunity for debaters to include comments from listeners</li><li>• Arguments will be supported mainly with the debater's reasoning (maybe a couple of short quotes)</li><li>• May be 3-4 or more speakers on each side, debaters may be students, teachers, or both!</li><li>• Usually one round</li></ul>

## **What are debaters committing to?**

- planning in advance (picking a topic, organizing speeches, etc.)
- practicing (alone and as a group)
- learning about the topic
- doing research as needed
- sharing information with “opponents”

## **Steps in Preparation**

Phase 1: Picking the topic and deciding on goals (1-2 meetings)

The group must figure out answers to the following questions. Who is our audience? What is our goal? What do we want our audience to get out of this? What do we want to get out of this? What will our topic area be? Our resolution? Who will debate on which side? How many times will we meet and when?

Phase 2: Developing arguments and research (1-2 meetings)

This is the time to explore the topic in greater detail. What do we know about the topic? What facts do we need to find? What does our audience know? You can use the stock issues to explore what the important issues are. What are the main affirmative arguments? Negative ones?

Phase 3: Preparing speeches (1-2 meetings)

Here, debaters need to organize the materials into speech outlines. Quotations should be selected, structure of speeches chosen, main ideas for rebuttal, etc. Debaters should not write out their speeches word for word except in places where exact wording is absolutely essential and when they can deliver these sections in a conversational way. Debaters should prepare their own materials, with coach feedback and help only where necessary.

Phase 4: Practice (1-2 meetings)

Debaters need to practice all parts of the debate. For those offering feedback: be sure to offer constructive criticism and to provide solutions to problems you see. Take care not to “over script” the debate and rob it of spontaneity. Don’t debate the debaters, but rather suggest how their arguments may be reacted to and discuss ways to deal with these reactions. This should involve at least one complete run-through of the debate and probably more to get debaters seeing the debate from different angles, comfortable with their positions, etc. The round should simulate the real debate as much as possible (audience questions/comments, no “re-dos”, etc). Parts that need improvement can be redone once the debate is finished. This is the last opportunity to try out new ideas or arguments.

## **Goals of a public debate:**

- To inform
- To bring attention to an issue
- To persuade
- To entertain
- To display skills

## Advice about picking a topic:

Are there topics the debaters already know a lot about?

Have there been any recent events that are on people's minds right now?

What are politicians arguing about nationally? State-wide? Locally?

Are there any new or proposed laws that have been controversial?

What topics are in the opinion section of the paper?

These days when acquaintances meet and finish talking about the weather, what do they talk about?

The last time I got into a discussion about social or political topics, what did we talk about?

## Writing a good resolution:

- *Have one central controversy.* Narrow your topic so that there is a clear area for clash
- *Craft one simple declarative sentence.* The topic should be straightforward and easy to read.
- *Make your resolution clearly fact, value or policy.* If you choose to write a policy resolution, you probably want to use the word "should" and identify a clear action. If you write a value resolution, you want to be sure you identify the values you will be debating. Remember that you will need to approach a non-policy topic differently (not with stock issues).
- *Give affirmative the burden of proof.* So that the negative has presumption, be sure that they are defending the status quo. The affirmative should defend change. You need to be sure you know what the current system is on your topic in order to write the topic properly.
- *Make sure the topic is balanced.* Affirmative and negative should have reasonable sides that they can defend without difficulty. Remember your audience—one side can be hard if no one in the audience agrees with them (it might be hard to be affirmative on a topic that says "young people today are lazy," for example).
- *Use neutral terms.* If you write your resolution to sound persuasive, you risk unbalancing the topic. For example, the resolution, "Resolved: That the school system is a corrupt mess and needs to be destroyed" is much harder to be affirmative on than "Baltimore city should substantially reform its school system by making school board members more accountable."
- *Avoid ambiguity.* Unclear resolutions make for unclear debates and confuse audience members about what each side is saying.
- *Agree on what the resolution means* so that whatever it says, the debaters on both sides focus on the same issues (public audiences don't like to hear topicality debates)

## Picking a Format:

- *Be creative:* you can design your own format or modify an existing one.
- *Avoid having same side speak twice in a row* (like in negative block)
- *Avoid lengthy speeches* (more than 6 minutes)
- *Try to come up with a format that ENGAGES the AUDIENCE* (allows them to ask questions, make comments, give speeches, vote, etc.)
- *Things to think about:* how much you want positions to develop, how long speeches should be, whether you want cross examination period or not, points of information or not (where a debate may stand up and say, "point of information"—if the person speaking chooses, she can then allow the opponent to ask a question), preparation time (you don't time where the audience just sits around while others prepare)
- *Have equal amounts of time for each side.*
- *--The side supporting the topic or advocating change should go first.*

### Sample Format: Town Hall

1AC 5 minutes  
C/X 2 minutes  
2AC 5 minutes  
C/X 2 minutes  
1NC 5 minutes  
C/X 2 minutes  
2NC 5 minutes  
C/X 2 minutes

Audience Questions: 15 minutes  
Negative Rebuttal: 3 minutes  
Affirmative Rebuttal: 3 minutes  
Prep Time: None!

Features: Audience interaction, cross-examination, time for developed speeches by debaters, moderator needed for audience section

### Sample Format: Parliamentary

Government Prime Minister's Constructive: 5 minutes  
(with points after first minute & before last minute)  
Opposition Leader's Constructive: 6 minutes  
(with points after first minute & before last minute)  
Government Member's Constructive: 6 minutes  
(with points after first minute & before last minute)  
Opposition Member's Constructive: 6 minutes  
(with points after first minute & before last minute)  
Floor Speeches (2 minutes each): 15 minutes  
Opposition leader's Rebuttal 3 minutes  
Government Prime Minister's Rebuttal: 4 minutes

Features: Points of information (which come out of speaker's time) make for exciting, spontaneous interaction, audience encouraged to give speeches

### Sample Format: Panel

#### Discussion

Affirmative Opening: 3 min  
Negative Opening: 3 min  
Additional Openings: 1 min

Question Period: 20 min  
(Moderator asks question, each panelist has 1 min to answer)

Closing Speeches: 1 min

Features: Can have any number of speakers, can have more than 2 sides, panelists can prepare in advance, allows focus on certain issues.

### Sample Format: The Running Format

This format is worked out by the moderator on the fly. The moderator helps guide the discussion. Speakers do not have set time limits. The moderator is responsible for keeping track of time, making sure each side has equal chances to ask questions, give speeches, and refute points.

Features: very flexible, requires a very attentive, skilled and experienced moderator.

## Advice for Public Debaters

- *Think of the attention of the audience as an obligation, not a right.* Public audience members may not come to the debate excited about listening. They need to be motivated by the speakers. Try to come up with creative answers to the continual question, “Why should I care?”
- *Use clear structure, including introductions and conclusions.* Speeches in public debates need to start with an introduction that gets the audiences’ attention (a startling statistic, a powerful fact, etc.), identifies the position of the speaker (for drug legalization or against, for example), and previews the main points of the speech. Speeches should have a limited number of main points. If you have more than five, it is unlikely that your audience will be able to follow the structure of the speech. The speech also needs a conclusion, where you summarize your points and bring closure for the audience.
- *Display a heightened level of civility* by referring to opponents kindly (by name, as “colleagues”, not “the other side” or “the neg.”) and being positive about opposing arguments (“they have a good point here, but.” or “one of their strongest arguments is that”).
- *Be a respectful listener.* Take notes. Don’t frown during their speeches. Don’t shake your head “no”, or whisper loudly to partner.
- *Don’t focus on winning on the flow.* You should answer your opponent’s main arguments, but since your audience won’t be taking notes, it will be hard to convince them that “they dropped my #3” is important. It is more important to emphasize the key points of clash and what your winning positions are.
- *Choose depth over breadth.* You are better off making a few points well than making a lot of points that the audience will not be able to follow.
- *Choose content over competition.* As you think about your goals, they might include informing or persuading the audience, or even showcasing your skills, but your primary goal is probably not to “win”. If you are too focused on winning, it will be harder to give a strong performance that impresses your audience.
- *Attack the argument, not the person.* Even jokes are often misperceived. Take extra care not to make the debate personal, including in cross-examination.
- *Avoid name-calling, stereotypes, and insensitivity.* You do not want to offend members of the audience. The audience will expect you to behave professionally.
- *Use humor where appropriate.* Audiences like funny speakers. Don’t make fun of your opponents, and don’t try to be funnier than you really are!
- *Flow.* Some debaters take notes a little differently with two columns—one for your arguments, one for the arguments the other side makes. This doesn’t allow you to see how arguments progress, but it does allow you to move quickly back and forth as you take notes and write points for your speech. Be sure to write your answers quickly as you write down the opposing sides arguments—you don’t have much prep time. Also, note any questions you have—you might do this by drawing a circled question mark. You want to be sure you can focus in cross-examination on the points you are interested in.

### Don’t forget everything you learned in policy debate:

- The stock issues are good tools. You don’t want to use the formal terms, but that doesn’t mean the affirmative can’t identify flaws in the current system, show how these flaws have been harmful, and propose a solution.
- Use your note taking, organization, research, and critical thinking skills. This is still about making good arguments. It is similar to policy debate

## Using Evidence

- *Don't use too many quotes.* They need to be introduced carefully and be fully identified and qualified. They should be short. FOR EXAMPLE: You could say, “Baltimore needs to provide additional support for students with disabilities. Mike Bowler, an education columnist for Baltimore Sun, wrote on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2003 that, ‘Typically, we get occasional complaints from frustrated parents, but this has been a record year for unhappiness. Students with autism, dyslexia and other language-related disorders seem to be particularly underserved.’ This suggests Baltimore has been increasingly neglectful of disabled students and needs to focus it’s attention on those with special needs.”
- *Be careful not to present the ideas of others as your own* (It is easy to just start reading from a source. If you are not clear where it comes from, listeners will mistakenly assume it is you!)
- *Identify your sources* (“I would like to support my point with a quote from Bill Kristol, a commentator who was quoted in last week’s issue of Time Magazine as saying . . .”)
- *Use high quality sources* (No—“Well, I got this stuff from some web page . . .”)
- *Take evidence in context* (Don’t just find quotes you can twist to support your point—make sure how you present them is consistent with what the author is saying)

## What happens in the rebuttals?

Speakers summarize their positions. They may bring in issues raised by the audience. They focus on THEIR position, not what their opponents have done (no “they dropped my turn!” arguments). Try to have a strong closing statement.

## Who wins in an audience debate?

The most important thing in an audience debate is that the audience feels it was a close debate with compelling speeches on both sides. The audience likes to see CLASH. Which side “wins” by getting more votes is usually more about what the audience thinks about the issue than which side did the better job of refuting arguments.

## What is the best way to prepare?

Plan out what you want to say but don’t read from a script. You won’t get prep time. You can plan the round if you know your position and some of what your opponents will to say. Use an outline.

## Practicing Delivery

- *Avoid talking fast* (Debaters talk fast. Have an outsider evaluate how fast you are. Have a way to put on “brakes” (a subtle signal from someone in the audience, not a desperate hand waving from the partner), as people tend to speak faster during the actual debate)
- *Avoid technical language* (The general public will not appreciate specialized debate jargon like Harms, Solvency, Counterplan, Inherency, Flow, etc.)
- *Use persuasive rhetoric.* Public debates are where you get to choose your language to reinforce your points. Don’t get carried away, but some vivid and strong wording can help.
- *Adopt a more copious style.* Don’t be so word-economical someone who misses a sentence will miss the point. State your important points several different ways. (Debaters sound fast because they are, but also because they are word efficient. Most listeners are used to getting messages in a slower, more developed form)

## Sample Education Topics

- Resolved: that the school should enforce its ban on cell phones.
- Resolved: that the practice of social promotion should be ended.
- This house would institute a policy of mandatory school uniforms.
- Resolved: that an underfunded Thorton Commission is worse than not having one at all.
- Resolved: that the No Child Left Behind Act should be repealed.
- This house would abolish the grade system.
- Resolved: that the school board should be elected, not appointed.
- Resolved: That school vouchers would improve the quality of education.
- This house would post the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms
- Resolved: that athletics should be de-emphasized to increase the focus on academics.
- Competition is superior to cooperation in achieving excellence.
- Resolved: that public education after high school ought to be a privilege and not a right..
- A liberal arts curriculum is preferable to an employment-readiness curriculum in secondary schools.
- Censorship of student publication by secondary school administrators is justified.
- This house would reject the educational value of competition.
- Resolved: that there should be more public single sex schools.
- Resolved: that school in Baltimore should be year round.
- Resolved: that summer school should not be mandatory.