

# **Manchester Debating Union Schools Learning Resource Beginners**



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<sup>1</sup> Any external sources will be referenced in footnotes

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## 1. Introduction

This document is designed to provide some useful information for schools or students who may be new to debating or remain unclear about some aspects of the rules. This document will outline exactly what debating is, how it works and how to make better arguments and speeches.

Should you have any questions about the contents of the document please feel free to contact the schools officer, Rose Black, who will either answer your enquiry or pass it on to one of the trainers in the Manchester Debating Teaching Programme for them to respond. Rose can be contacted at [schools@mdu.manchester.ac.uk](mailto:schools@mdu.manchester.ac.uk).

Should you feel that any thing in this document is inappropriate or causes offence please do not hesitate to contact the equity officer, Elizabeth Chloe Romanis, at [equity@mdu.manchester.ac.uk](mailto:equity@mdu.manchester.ac.uk).

## 2. What is Debating?

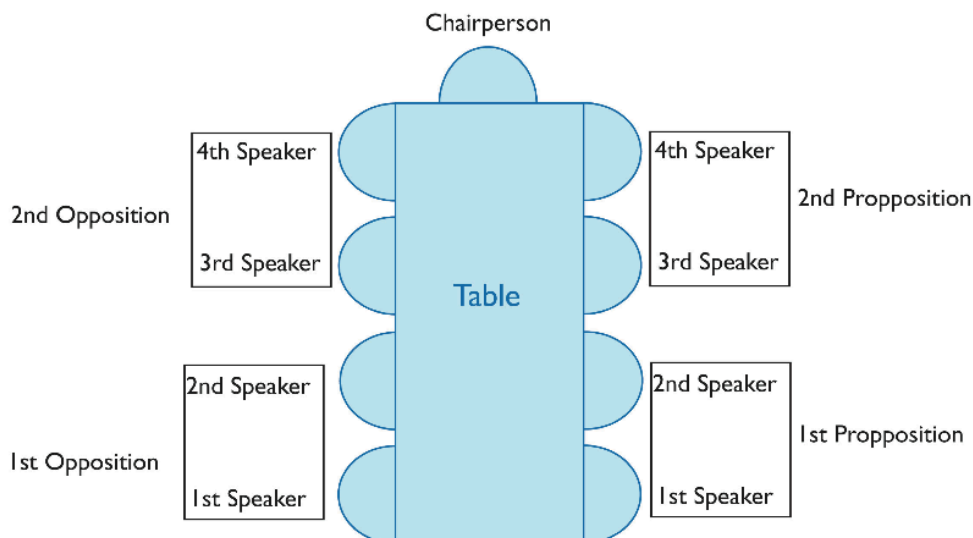
A debate is a formal argument that takes place following a particular set of rules. In a debate all the participating speakers are given equal opportunity and time to present their case to the judges and observers of the debate to try to convince them their ideas are better than the opposing side. Debating is a competitive activity and at the end of each debate the teams involved are ranked.

There are several different formats of debating. The most common format and the format that the Manchester Debating Union, and most other universities, use is British Parliamentary Debating. MACE debating is another common form of debating that, although not explained in this document, we can teach in training sessions ([schools@mdu.manchester.ac.uk](mailto:schools@mdu.manchester.ac.uk)). British Parliamentary (BP) debating is named as such as it is intended to emulate the formal argumentation in Parliament.

## 3. The Rules of British Parliamentary Debating

### a) **The Format of the Debate**

A BP debate consists of eight speakers from four teams. There are two speakers per team. There are two teams (four speakers) on the proposition side of the debate and two teams (four speakers) on the opposition side of the debate. All the teams sit around the table, the proposition on one side and the opposition at the other with the chairperson and other judges on one end of the table. Each speaker speaks from the other end of the table. The table looks like this:



It must be emphasised that although there are two proposition teams and two opposition teams they are separate from each other. This means that although they are arguing the same side of the motion they do not work together as they are completely separate teams.

The four teams in the debate are 1<sup>st</sup> proposition also known as opening government (OG), 1<sup>st</sup> opposition also known as opening opposition (OO), 2<sup>nd</sup> proposition also known as closing government (CG) and 2<sup>nd</sup> opposition also known as closing opposition (CO).

The proposition teams are in favour of the motion presented and the opposition teams are against the motion presented. For example if the motion was THW (this house would) ban gambling, the proposition teams would be arguing that gambling should be banned and the opposition team would be arguing that gambling should not be banned.

### **b) The Proceedings of the Debate**

Speakers take it in turns to deliver their speeches. The first speaker from the 1<sup>st</sup> proposition team speaks first; this speaker is known as the prime minister. The next speaker is the first speaker from the 1<sup>st</sup> opposition team known as the leader of the opposition. The next speaker is the deputy prime minister from the 1<sup>st</sup> proposition team followed by the deputy leader of the opposition from the 1<sup>st</sup> opposition team. The next speech is by the extension speaker (the first speaker from the 2<sup>nd</sup> proposition team) and then the opposition extension speaker (the first speaker from the 2<sup>nd</sup> opposition team). Then the proposition whip (second speaker from the 2<sup>nd</sup> proposition team) closes the debate for the proposition team and then the opposition whip (second speaker from the 2<sup>nd</sup> opposition team) closes the debate for the opposition team and is the last speech of the entire debate. Each speaker has a slightly different role; this is discussed in detail in 4 below.

After the motion is announced the participants are given fifteen minutes to discuss the motion in their team and prepare their speeches.

### **c) Speech Length and Protected Time**

Depending on the competition speeches can be either five or seven minutes in length, however the majority of schools competitions have five-minute speeches.

Speeches can be broken into three parts. The first minute of a speech is referred to as protected time and this means that the speaker cannot be interrupted by POIs (explained below in 3 d) from any other individual taking part in the debate. After this minute there are three minutes of unprotected time, this means that the speaker can be offered POIs. After these three minutes are up there is another minute of protected time where no POIs can be offered whilst the speaker concludes their speech. This combination of protected-unprotected-protected time totals five minutes.

The timing of a speech will be kept by a member of the judging panel who will indicate (normally by a bang on the table) to signal the change from protected to unprotected time at one minute into a speech and the change from unprotected to protected time at four minutes into a speech. When a speaker has reached five minutes there will be a double bang on the table to signify that that speaker has used their time and must wrap up their sentence and sit down. Ideally speakers will end their speech within approximately 15 seconds from the final double bang if they do not finish their speech within five minutes. Judges will not make notes and credit any arguments made after five minutes and fifteen seconds as this is over the allocated time per speech.

### **d) Points of Information**

A Point of Information (POI) is an essential characteristic of a debate as they allow participants to directly challenge a speaker from an opposing team to undermine or fluster them. POIs can only be made against opposing

teams, for example, a proposition team can only make a POI against an opposition team and an opposition team can only make a POI against a proposition team.

POIs can only be offered after the protected time at the beginning of a speech and before the protected time at the end of a speech (this is discussed above in 3 c).

When offering a POI, participants must stand and raise their hand. This is so the speaker can see that a question is being offered. The participant offering the POI must also say 'Point of Information' or 'Question.' Other terms can be used such as 'sir,' 'madam' or 'respected speaker' (when using gendered language we ask participants to respect our pronoun introduction policy listed in the Manchester Debating Union Schools Policies document).

Speakers are entitled to refuse offered POIs. This means that when a participant offers a POI they must wait for the POI to be accepted before they speak. To refuse a POI speakers should wave participants down politely or say 'no thank you.' Speakers should do this quickly to avoid participants standing for a while waiting for POIs to be accepted. If a speaker accepts a POI the participant should speak briefly (for no more than 15 seconds) and then sit down. POIs should be genuine questions for the speaker to answer and not mini-speeches. No follow up questions are acceptable, once a participant has asked their question they must sit down. There is to be no exchange unless another POI is offered and accepted. Speakers should endeavour to answer the POI briefly and then return to their main speech.

Speakers are encouraged to accept at least one POI during their speech if POIs are offered. Speakers should not accept more than two POIs during their speech.

## 4. The Role of Each Speaker in the Debate

### a) **The Prime Minister (OG)**

The main role of the Prime Minister's speech (the first speaker of the first proposition / opening government team) is to:

1. Introduce the debate by defining the motion
2. Show why implementing the motion is good by making two or three arguments

The definition is where you tell the teams you are debating against, the judge and the audience what the debate is about. Once you have defined the motion all the other teams have to stick with your definition (if you are the 2<sup>nd</sup> prop team in a BP debate you can never contradict the definition that 1<sup>st</sup> Prop has given – to do so is called knifing and is very highly penalised by the judges.) A bad definition kills a debate before it has even started and it can even mean losing the debate BUT it is very unfortunate that a good definition will never win you the debate, as it is the minimum expected from the proposition side.

The first thing to do is check that you understand all of the words individually and that you have the wording of the motion written down correctly. The next thing to do is make sure you understand all the words collectively – some things are fairly obvious so don't worry about giving dictionary definitions of words that can be assumed to have their obvious meaning. But where you have a motion about, for example, criminalizing something you will need to explain what kind of punishment you mean – do you mean sending someone to jail or imposing a fine on someone?

The definition should come at the start of your speech – make it very clear that you are giving the definition and try to make sure you spend no more than 30 seconds defining the motion. By the end of this 30 seconds everyone in the room should understand what you are talking about so try and be very clear! Try and be as bold as possible – debates that take the hardline are always the most compelling – don't try and avoid arguing what the motion is asking you to do. If the motion is THW introduce the death penalty don't try and swindle out of it by defining it as only applying to serial killers as it is much more sensible and more impressive to define and argue your side as say all murders, rapists and violent criminals. Trying to stay on the safe side of a definition doesn't impress the judge and make for boring debates!

Here are some general pointers about thinking of a mechanism for the definition:

- A mechanism is just another general name for the definition
- This is the actual policy you are implementing
- Try and be thorough but it doesn't need to be very complicated or of the same standard as a government proposal that people spend ages working on!
- Think about... Where? When? Who? How? E.g. If the motion was something like the death penalty – think about who is being killed and for what crimes? What is the method of death? Is there an appeals process?

### **b) Leader of the Opposition (OO) / Deputy Prime Minister (OG) / Deputy Leader of the Opposition (OO)**

The role of these speakers is to rebut the previous speaker and to present new arguments of their own. For example the leader of the opposition (the first speaker for the OO team) should rebut the points made by the prime minister and then present arguments of his/her own. The deputy prime minister (the second speaker of the OG team) should rebut the points made by the leader of the opposition, reinforce the arguments of their partner that have been rebutted and then present arguments of his/ her own. The deputy leader of the opposition (the second speaker of the OO team) should rebut the points made by the deputy prime minister, reinforce the arguments of their partner that have been rebutted and then present arguments of his/ her own.

#### **Rebuttal**

This is a really important part of debating as it shows that you are able to understand the other teams arguments and respond to them. It is really important to take on the biggest points of the team opposite you – what are they really trying to say?

Why is it not true? Explain your rebuttal like you would explain your point, for advice on this see 6 below.

If you think their point is true it might be worth looking at the effect they think their point will have? This is called a word schools reversal an example would be if the motion was THW introduce positive discrimination to get more kids from low socio-economic backgrounds into good universities, the proposition might argue that its bad that lots of such kids aren't getting those opportunities – its ok to agree with this statement but you could argue that the mechanism / solution they have set out won't solve the problem and will make it worse for lots of different people.

There are lots of different ways to effectively rebut the opposing team; it all depends on the situation. Good debaters will be able to listen to the speeches of other participants and identify the best way to rebut their arguments. This is something that comes with practice.

### **c) Extension Speakers (CG / CO)**

The extension speaker's role is to thoroughly rebut the opposing team before them (around 2-3 minutes of the speech should be used to do this) and then present their own arguments (around 2-3 minutes of the speech, whatever is remaining). For rebuttal see above 4 b. The arguments presented by the extension speech should be something new and different from what has been said by the team before them on the same side. The only exception to this rule is where the team before has mentioned a point but not explained as well as it could be as in below 6. In this case a point mentioned by the previous team can be picked up and explained well.

Despite the material generally needing to be new material cannot be introduced that contradicts anything that has been said by the previous team on the same side as this is called knifing. Despite the fact that teams are competing against teams on the same side they are not doing so directly.

If you are the extension speaker you may want to consider what the team before has missed or if they have covered all of the obvious arguments consider new ways of thinking about things. Advice about this can be found below in 5.

A good extension speech should be very well analysed and explained so make sure you follow the advice in 6 below.

#### **d) Summation Speakers (CG/CO)**

This is the last speech for your side of the debate and this means it is the last chance for your team and your side to get their point across. There are some rules on what summation speakers are and aren't allowed to do during their speech, if you forget / misunderstand these rules you will not automatically lose the debate but you may not get as high a score as you would want.

Summation speeches should explain what the main points in the debate were and show why their side of the debate won those arguments. Summation speeches should do this without introducing new points, however new analysis may be used to explain existing arguments.

It is important that a summation speech does not just list what happened in the debate in the order that it happened as this would be boring and the judge already knows this, it is important to therefore find a way to condense the information of the debate into an interesting way of looking at the debate. We do this by looking at what the key areas of contention in the debate were. Good summation speakers look at everything that was said and look for the key themes of the debate – what two or three general broad themes emerged and were discussed.

These themes will often change from debate to debate but some key ways to look for themes are:

1. The Burden of Proof
2. Who is affected by the motion e.g. groups of people such as parents, criminals etc.
3. What is affected by the motion e.g. the environment, culture etc.
4. How will the motion affect people e.g. long term or short term harms / benefits

It is best to think about a summation speech as a biased news report – it summarises the debate around key themes in a way that explains why one side lost and why one team won. It also emphasises their partner's speech and makes it sound like it was the most important part of the debate.

The best way to think about analysing in this way is to take one broad theme at a time – look at what the opposition said then look at what your team said and explain then why a) your team is right and the opposition is wrong and then b) why what your team was said was very important and proves why you are right about the motion.

## **5. How to Think of Arguments**

### **a) Proposition Points**

The first thing to think about is why the motion is up for debate. This is probably because there is a problem that exists in society that the definition you have given might be able to solve. It can be useful to think of the debate in terms of:

1. The problem the motion is trying to solve
2. What is the government's role in this particular motion?
3. Why the definition you have given will solve the problem?

**The Problem**

Spend some time when you are preparing for the debate talking with your partner about what the problem in the debate is. Why is it that you are proposing compulsory organ donation? Is it because there are three people a day that die waiting for organs? Is it because people are fundamentally selfish and aren't willing to act selflessly to save the lives of other people in society? Identify the problem in the debate – this may not always be obvious and there may be more than one problem that you think the motion is trying to deal with. If there is more than one you might think that one problem in particular is the most important and might want to focus on this.

You may not think there is a specific problem but that the motion is just trying to make the world a nicer place – this is also ok so long as you spend time when talking about why your mechanism / definition will make the world a nicer place – why was it not as nice before.

Try some examples:

- In THW ban extremist political parties – what harm do extremist political parties cause? Why is this bad?
- In THW introduce the death penalty – what harm does not having the death penalty cause? Why would the death penalty make things nicer in Britain today?
- In THW give two votes to the poor – what harm exists today that means that the votes of the poor are less important in our political system? Why is this bad?
- In THW ban alcohol – what harm can alcohol cause to individuals and why is this bad?

**The Government's Role**

The government can be said to have a duty to intervene in two situations:

1. Where there is a significant harm to an individual
2. Where there is a significant harm being caused to others

Talking about the role of the government is really important in debates as you are acting as the government in the debate and so explaining why you have a right or a duty to intervene is really important.

In the case of drug use can you see why it is illegal with reference to the harm to the individual? And the harm caused to others?

Make sure you explain these harms and why you think they are sufficiently serious to warrant government intervention.

**Solution**

How does the mechanism improve society and address the problems you have identified?

Think about whether the solution is moral – are we achieving something morally right by intervening?

Think about whether the solution is practical – can our definition actually solve the problem and if so, how?

**b) Opposition Points**

Some things to think about if you are the opposition team and you are responding to a solid proposition team who have laid out a mechanism, a problem and a solution:



**1. Is there a problem?**

- Does the problem exist?
- Does the thing first prop are banning / tackling actually cause the problem or is there actually another cause?
- Is it a problem? Maybe it's a good thing.

**2. Does prop solve the problem?**

- Is it feasible? Does it cost too much? [Avoid talking about cost in most debates as it tends to be an unconvincing argument]
- Is it effective?
- Does it target the right thing?
- Does it help the people who are worst off?
- Does it affect only the wrong people?
- Can people get round it?

**3. Does prop cause other problems?**

- Is it morally just?
- Does it place an unfair burden upon some people?
- Etc.

Remember that you don't have to disagree with everything the proposition says, if they dislike genocide, chances are you do too but maybe they haven't approached the problem in the right way? Maybe their mechanism won't address the problem?

**c) Closing Teams**

The closing teams have to make different arguments from the opening teams. Sometimes the opening teams can take all of the material we discussed above and can sometimes discuss all of the obvious points. If they have missed some obvious points, you can discuss those, and if they haven't but they haven't made them very well (see 6 below) then you may be able to use the point and explain it much better. However if they are very good opening teams and you are struggling for something to say it helps to do an umbrella analysis of the situation.

What this means is considering all the groups that are affected by the motion and how they are affected – if you are the proposition teams you want to consider how certain groups of people are benefited by the motion. If you are the opposition team you want to consider how certain groups of people are disadvantaged by the motion.

For example in the motion THW ban the BNP groups to consider would be ethnic minorities, BNP supporters, the general public, LGBTQ individuals – are they affected positively or negatively by the removal of the BNP and why? Think of as many reasons as possible to develop this into an argument.

Try another example – THW ban alcohol – who is affected by the motion? How? Is this a good or a bad thing?

**6. How to Make a Good Argument**

It is really important in debating that you thoroughly analyze your points – this means that they are very explained and consequently difficult to attack. The easiest way to do this is through linear argument – the key to this is ensuring that everything is fully explained and that you follow your thoughts through step by step.

A good way to make sure you can do this is to keep asking yourself why something is true, for example in a THW introduce the death penalty argument I could be trying to argue that the death penalty is a deterrent:

The death penalty is a deterrent - BUT WHY – because the punishment imposed is much greater and criminals will be more concerned about this and so will commit less crime – BUT WHY- because the threat of prison is not as significant as the threat of losing your life – BUT WHY – because people recognize their lives as intrinsically

valuable – BUT WHY – because without being alive they are unable to do everything they enjoy doing, some of this is still possible in prison and there is the possibility of them getting out, this is not the case when they know they will be punished by death – BUT WHY – etc.

The idea is to keep asking yourself why until it is no longer obvious that there is an answer to the question why? At this point you should explore why the point you are making is important to the motion. Why is it a good thing that the death penalty might be a better deterrent? Make sure this is explained at the end of your point.

This way of arguing is very similar to PEEL (something you may have come across in English or History lessons in school) – Point, Evidence, Explanation, Link. So firstly outline your point – what are you going to discuss? Secondly is there any evidence that this is likely to happen i.e. has this happened somewhere before (don't worry if you miss this bit out). Thirdly, explain your point with the why analysis we discussed above. Fourthly, link your analysis back to the motion so that the judge can see that the argument is relevant and is impressed!

## 7. How to Make a Good Speech

This section is for debaters who have a good understanding of the basic rules. Debating is often assessed on three things: content (60% ish), strategy (20% ish) and style (20% ish).

### a) Content

This is an assessment of how relevant your arguments are to the debate and how well analysed and explained they are in the debate.

- **Burden of Proof** – good content often addresses the burden of proof. This means that teams have thought about what logically has to be proven in order to show that the motion must pass. What this burden is depends on the debate and can either be a practical consideration i.e. that the motion will solve a particular problem well or philosophical i.e. we, as the government, have a duty or right to do something. In some situations the burden of proof can be a combination of these things.
- **Well-explained Arguments** – the arguments that teams with good content make will always be well explained using the linear method of explanation explained above in 6. Really good arguments will consider how the motion will affect lots of individuals and will often use precedents and examples to explain their arguments.
- **Winning Content** – this is where there are good arguments that are still standing at the end of the debate. This means that they have not been rebutted effectively and therefore still stand as a compelling reason to agree with your team. Teams that have winning content are very good at reinforcing each other points to make sure they are still standing, for example if someone has rebutted your partner's point you should rebut their rebuttal and quickly and concisely remake your partner's point to make sure it still stands. In addition strong teams will restate key points in POIs to try and bring the debate back to their best arguments.

### b) Strategy

Strategy is how a speech is organised and presented. There is also a great deal of teamwork important in presenting a good case as a team.

One of the key points of strategy is making sure that your speech is easy to follow so that the judge can follow what you are saying and make notes easily. One way of doing this is to signpost. This means when you introduce

your speech you should say something along the lines of 'Today ladies and gentlemen I have two arguments, the first is X and the second is Y, but first I will start with some rebuttal.' Then as the speaker moves on from rebuttal they can say 'Now on to my first point X...' and this makes the speech easier to follow and well structured.

There are other things that can really make a team's strategy stand out, for example:

- **A Strong Definition** - this only applies to the OG team but is really important. Teams that argue what the motion is really about have good strategy. Teams who try to make the debate too narrow will often be looked down on for shying away from the real debate. Think about what the motion is asking you to talk about and don't try and shy away from it.
- **Division of Points** - it is really important that points are divided up in a way that works. It is a good idea to always place the most important points in the first speaker's speech (in opening teams) - for example the burden of proof. It is also important to place the most important points in a speech first as this means you have more time to talk about them and should you run out of time in your speech you won't miss out the most important things. At the end of each point remember to tie back the point to the motion. A good way to make your team look organised is to have the first speaker from each team introduce the entire case well and then have the second team conclude the case well. The second speaker concluding the case should take 30 seconds to explain what the team has said well.
- **Rebuttal** - it is really important, in terms of strategy, to make sure that you attempt to rebut the key points on the other side of the table. Look for the strongest points that the opposing teams have made and then try to attack these points, spend more time on them than weaker points.
- **POIs** - make sure that your team offers one POI between you every 30 seconds in unprotected time. This shows that you are active in the debate even after or before your speech. Being engaged in the debate is a good way to impress judges without speaking!
- **Summation Speeches** - it is really important to make sure the points of clash are the right ones! Think carefully about the debate and what has been discussed and make sure your points cover the most important arguments that are made. Always make your first point of clash your burden of proof and show why you have won on this argument.

### c) Style

This is a very individual part of debating- every body has a different speaking style and this should be embraced. If you are funny - be funny (in appropriate situations, offensive jokes are not ok), if you are a combative speaker with a strong tone this is also good. This is all about finding how you feel most comfortable speaking but here are some general pointers:

- **Tone** - try not to speak in the same tone throughout your speech as it can sound boring, make sure you emphasise the most important part of your speech.
- **Hand Gestures** - these can show you are an animated speaker but try not to make hand gestures all the time as it can be distracting for the judge
- **Metaphors, Imagery** - a really successful way of getting your point across can be to make the judge to think about it differently with a metaphor or using certain imagery.
- **Language** - it is good to vary the kind of language you use, this does not mean that you have to use long words; some of the very best debaters use simple language.

## 8. Interested in Learning More?

If you are interested in learning more please contact Rose Black, the Manchester Debating Union Schools Officer, at [schools@manchester.mdu.ac.uk](mailto:schools@manchester.mdu.ac.uk). Any general enquiries about the above are welcome and in addition Rose can be contacted to organise training sessions in schools taught by Manchester Debating Union volunteers.

In addition, one of the best ways to improve your debating skills is to attend competitions – the Manchester Debating Union runs a schools tournament annually, information about this can be found on our website or by contacting the Schools Officer.