

How debating works

Simon Quinn's debate handbook

Simon Quinn is a hugely experienced debater from Brisbane who won the best individual speaker prize at both the 1999 and 2000 World Schools Championships and has gone on to coach teams, including the Queensland Schools Team in 2002. We would like to thank Simon for allowing us to link to his materials.

Simon has given us his permission to link to his near-definitive guide to debating skills, tactics, and strategies. This provides a wealth of information on every aspect of debate, and although the format of the competitions which Simon refers to is slightly different to ours (please take care - our tournament rules clearly set out our format), we could not find a better source of information on the general approach to debating.

This is also an invaluable resource for coaches, especially those new to coaching, as it gives insight into the detail of debating - allowing you to give the most possible help to your teams.

Read the [debate handbook](#).

Debating has a lot of similarities with politics - be that at Westminster, Holyrood, in a trade union, or in a school student committee.

Motions

A motion, or topic, that needs discussed is put forward to the group. Let's imagine you are on a student committee discussing *This house would make school uniforms more fashionable*. We say 'this house', meaning the group of people you are trying to convince of your point. In our competition, you'll get your motion around two weeks before the first round, and know what side you are speaking on - so there is lots of time for coaches and teams to prepare.

Format

There are various formats but our competition has two teams of two people each taking a different side of the motion. All each person has to do is stand up and deliver a speech - perhaps two to four key points they think will convince people to agree with their side of the argument. The speakers will take it in turns - first a speaker from the proposing team (the people who agree with the motion), then the opposing team (the people who disagree with the motion).

The first speaker - proposing

The first speaker of the first team will probably introduce what they are going to say, introduce what their team member is going to say, make their own arguments (including answering any questions) and sum up.

If you were proposing (agreeing with) the motion above, as the first speaker you might:

1. Introduce what you are going to say

I am going to discuss the direct benefits including why people might be more willing to wear their uniforms if they were more fashionable and how you might design something more practical for the modern day...

2. Introduce what your colleague is going to say

My colleague will later talk about longer terms benefits including that involving students in selecting designs might give them more of a sense of belonging to a school and might improve a school's image in the community and with employers for being forward-thinking and innovative...

3. Make your own arguments

The speaker will then go on to make these arguments. During this period, the other side will also have a chance to ask questions:

So my first point - at the moment a lot of pupils vary their uniform by adding to it, or wearing different styles of clothes and jewellery that are just within the rules but actually means everyone looks very different - sometimes you can't even tell if they are from our school or another...

Asking a question

At this point someone from the other side might try to ask a question (we call this offering a 'point of information'). If you allow them to, they might ask:

But won't pupils do just the same with a new uniform, because everyone wants to look different?

You might reply

We think that is much less likely, we think lots of pupils vary the uniform because it is boring - but if it was more fashionable and there were options built in that still worked overall to give a common sense of identity then we don't think students would vary it so much.

4. Summing up

After you have presented all your arguments and allowed any questions, the next step is to sum up your case - during this bit, the other side aren't allowed to ask questions:

So in conclusion - I have shown why a more fashionable and practical uniform would suit pupils, parents and schools better. While my colleague will continue the case by emphasising the long-term benefits, the points I have already made clearly illustrate why this house should vote in favour of the motion.

The first speaker - opposing

The first speaker against the motion will now start their speech, perhaps by going through the following process:

1. Introduce what you are going to say

I am going to set out the case against the motion, with my key arguments being that school is about preparation for working life - where suits and professional dress will be the order of the day, that 'fashionable' uniforms will go quickly out of date (costing parents more to replace) and that the benefits uniforms bring come largely from them being different to what we wear outside school.

2. Introduce what your colleague is going to say

My colleague will say...

3. Respond to first speaker's arguments

However, before progressing to my main arguments I would like to take issue with some of the comments made by the first speaker for the proposition. They said that students are less likely to vary more fashionable uniform, we on the opposition would like to show that in Storrie High School, where they tried to involve pupils in designing a new uniform, after a year-long trial they found students still wanted to stamp their personal style on what they wore, whatever the basic uniform looked like.

This last example is very important - a debate is about making good arguments, but also about showing you have listened to the other side, understood their arguments, and are willing to challenge them directly.

4. Summing up

The first speaker for the opposition then needs to sum up their case.

Second speakers

The second speaker of the proposition team will now introduce what they are going to say, reflect on what their team member has said, make their own arguments (including answering any questions and responding to what the other team has said) and sum up. Again, the opposition team will do the same.

Floor debate

Once both speakers for both teams have delivered their speeches, there is a debate from 'the floor' - this means anyone in the audience can ask a question or make a short speech in favour of one of the sides of the motion. This part of the debate usually lasts for ten minutes.

Reply speeches

After the floor debate, one speaker from each team gets three minutes to sum up their overall position at the end of the debate. This will include their own arguments and counters to the argument of the other side - and should leave the audience in no doubt as to who is offering the winning side of the case.