

What is Debating?

Debating is a structured discussion where teams argue opposing viewpoints on a specific topic. It usually involves presenting arguments, counterarguments, and rebuttals in a respectful manner, aiming to persuade an audience or judges of the validity of the team's position. Debates in secondary school or university often follow established formats, rules, and time limits, and they encourage critical thinking, public speaking skills, and the ability to articulate and defend ideas effectively.

Who is involved?

"A debate has a Chairman who conducts the debate and a timekeeper who records the time of each speaker. There are two teams:

- An Affirmative- the team that agrees with the topic; and
- A Negative- the team that disagrees with the topic" (Debating SA 2021)

Each team consists of three people: first, second and third speakers. Each speaker gets a set amount of time to debate. Your lecturer will inform you of your time limit, but time frames are usually 8 minutes for first and second speakers, and 6 minutes for third speakers.

Preparing for the Debate

The topic for the debate will have two opposing viewpoints. Your lecturer may provide the topic for you or allow you to collaboratively choose the topic yourself. Once the topic is set, you will be placed into a team to affirm or refute the topic.

You may have your own opinion on the topic, but within the debate, you may be required to provide arguments against your own opinion. This encourages students to think critically.

Before you begin to debate, it is important to prepare adequately by:

- **Researching the topic:** define any concepts that you may not know or need to understand further. Gather facts, statistics, examples, and expert opinions that may support your argument
- **Brainstorming arguments** that support your team's side
- **Identifying the key arguments** you want to make in support of your position
- **Organising your points:** structure your arguments logically, using a clear introduction, body and conclusion
- **Assigning roles:** decide who will be the first, second and third speakers
- **Practicing your arguments** with your team members
- **Rehearsing rebuttals:** anticipate any opposing arguments and prepare rebuttals to refute them

Structure of a Debate:

The typical structure of a debate involves the following order of speakers and their respective roles:

- **First Affirmative Speaker** (1st Speaker for the Affirmative Team) (8 minutes):
Introduction: Provides an overview of the team's position on the topic and sets the tone for the debate. Presents the affirmative team's main arguments in support of the topic. Each argument should be clearly stated and supported by evidence and reasoning.
- **First Negative Speaker** (1st Speaker for the Negative Team) (8 minutes):
Presents the negative team's main arguments against the topic. These arguments should directly address the points made by the affirmative team. Rebuttal: Begins to refute the arguments presented by the affirmative team, highlighting weaknesses or presenting counterarguments.
- **Second Affirmative Speaker** (2nd Speaker for the Affirmative Team) (8 minutes):
Builds upon the arguments presented by the first affirmative speaker and introduces any additional points or evidence.
Rebuttal: Responds to the arguments presented by the negative team in the previous speech, addressing any new points raised and reinforcing the team's position.
- **Second Negative Speaker** (2nd Speaker for the Negative Team) (8 minutes):
Continues to develop the negative team's arguments and introduces new evidence or analysis.
Rebuttal: Engages with the arguments presented by the affirmative team, refuting or undermining their claims and reinforcing the negative position.
- **Third Affirmative Speaker** (3rd Speaker for the Affirmative Team) (6 minutes):
Rebuttal and Summary: Provides a summary of the affirmative team's arguments and reinforces their position on the topic.
Rebuttal: Responds to the arguments presented by the negative team throughout the debate, emphasizing the strength of the affirmative case.
- **Third Negative Speaker** (3rd Speaker for the Negative Team) (6 minutes):
Rebuttal and Summary: Summarizes the negative team's arguments and reiterates their position on the topic.
Rebuttal: Offers final rebuttals to the affirmative team's arguments, highlighting key weaknesses and providing a strong conclusion for the negative case.

Timekeeper

During the debate, the timekeeper (who may be your lecturer) will inform you when you have 30 seconds to go before the end of your speaking time (usually by ringing a bell). They will then tell you when you need to finish speaking. In official debating rules, you may be given 30 seconds after the final bell to finish your argument.

Results

Once the debate is finished, the judge or adjudicator (usually your lecturer) will give feedback and decide which team has won

Further resources

If you require more assistance with debating, please talk to your lecturer. They can explain their expectations and requirements.

This guide may assist further with debating:

Debating SA 2021, *Debating: a brief introduction for beginners*, viewed 19 March 2024, <<https://www.debatingsa.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Debating-A-Brief-Introduction-for-Beginners.pdf>>.