

# Manchester Debating Union

## An Introduction into British Parliamentary Debating



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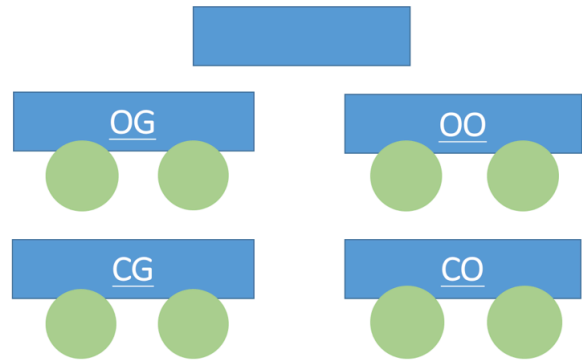
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## 1. The rules and structure of a debate

The format that the UK predominantly debates in is British Parliamentary (BP). In BP, there are two sides, or 'benches', in a debate: the Government or Proposition versus the Opposition who must either support or oppose a given motion. Each bench consists of two separate teams, each consisting of two speakers. This means that each debate has a total of 8 speakers.

All teams are given the motion at the same time and are given 15 minutes of prep-time before the debate starts!

- Two benches: Prop/Gov and Opp
  - Two teams on each bench: Opening and Closing
  - Two speakers on each team
- 7-minute speeches
  - First and last minute are protected
  - Points of Information
- 15 minutes of prep-time



Each team tries to push forward their cases and the most convincing team will win. Even though there are only two sides of the debate, closing and opening teams take different approaches to the motion. For example, in the motion 'This House regrets Taylor Swift as a feminist icon', the opening government may talk about how they regret Taylor Swift appropriating feminism to sell her music and how this commercialisation is damaging to the feminist movement. The closing government may talk about how they regret Taylor Swift as a feminist icon because she and her immediate social circle are all white, conventionally attractive women who don't speak out about intersectional interests. The team that will ultimately be the most convincing will be the team that sustains the least amount of damage to their case by the end of the debate and can prove why their case is the most relevant.

Each speech is seven minutes long. The first and last minute of the speech counts as 'protected time'. In 'unprotected time', teams on the opposite bench can offer points of information. Points of information are targeted questions meant to throw the speaker off balance. The speaker must respond to the point before continuing. It is recommended that each speaker take at least one point of information during their speech.

### a) Motion types

Motions cover a diverse range of topics and can come in many forms and require you to approach them slightly differently.

- This House Regrets...  
Here, proposition teams must give reasons why they regret a certain thing has happened, and must explicitly state what they believe would have happened instead and why they believe it is preferable.
- This House Believes That...  
This type of motion is very common. Teams must simply give arguments generally supporting an idea or phenomenon.
- This House Would...  
This type of motion is similar to the previous, but must contain specific arguments why a certain technical policy is a good idea.
- This House, as X, would do Y...  
Here, debaters must adopt the standpoint of a certain actor within the debate. They must argue why a certain action would be either beneficial or detrimental to an actor's interests. For example, "This House, as China, would abandon all claims on the Senkaku Islands" would require debaters to argue why this action would benefit or harm China's interests. Often debaters must justify why they believe an actor as a certain set of interests.

## **b) Speaker roles**

In a debate, the Opening Government's speaker takes the floor first. Afterwards, teams alternate between benches. That is, after the first speaker of Opening Government has finished, the first speaker of Opening Opposition takes the floor, then the second speaker of Opening Government, then the second speaker of Opening Opposition etc.

Depending on where they are in a debate, speakers have slightly different roles. Don't feel pressured to read through everything below. Every speech besides the Prime Minister's and the whips' is basically the same. They all consist of rebutting previous speakers before you and delivering arguments.

### **Opening Government [OG]**

Prime Minister (1st speaker)

- Lay out definitions & government's policy
- Forward the main case of their team (typically 2 or 3 arguments)

Deputy Prime Minister (2nd speaker)

- Rebut LO speech
- Rebuild the case brought out by PM
- Extend on any analysis or forward a new argument

### **Opening Opposition [OO]**

Leader of Opposition (1st speaker)

- Rebut PM speech
- (If necessary, introduce a counter-policy or challenge any of the PM's setup)
- Forward the main case of their team

Deputy Leader of Opposition (2nd speaker)

- Rebut PM and DPM
- Rebuild the case brought out by LO
- Extend on any analysis or forward a new argument

### **Closing Government [CG]**

Member of Government (1st speaker)

- Rebut LO and DLO
- Bring in new substantive material (arguments, analysis, rebuttals that are notably different from opening)

Government Whip (2nd speaker)

- Summarise the debate into main clashes
- Prove how your team comes out on top (through rebutting and rebuilding)
- Not allowed to bring in new material

### **Closing Opposition [CO]**

Member of Opposition (1st speaker)

- Rebut PM, DPM, Gov Member
- Bring in new substantive material

Opposition Whip (2nd speaker)

- Summarise the debate into main clashes
- Prove how your team comes out on top (through rebutting and rebuilding)
- Not allowed to bring in new material

## **c) Anatomy of a basic speech**

### **Preamble**

Most speeches start with a stylized opening sentence. This sentence serves a couple purposes: it gives context to the debate, highlights a problem that the debate tries to solve, and gives the direction that the rest of the speech is headed. It can be compared to the opening sentence of an essay. It will take a while to master so don't pressure yourself to think of an especially witty one at the beginning.

### **Policy/Model & Definition**

If you're the first speaker on the government team, you may need to give a policy. It's a brief outline of the solution your side is proposing. A definition is what it sounds like, you define a specific term in the motion if you think it needs clarification.

For example, the motion may be "This House would impose criminal laws to crimes committed by users of avatars in virtual worlds (such as 'Second Life')."

- Your definition could be any video game platform whose main purpose is to allow users to interact socially from Club Penguin to Second Life.
- Your policy could be that any and all crimes committed in these virtual worlds will be charged identically to the real world equivalent (i.e. committing murder in Second Life allows you to be charged for real life murder). All users in virtual worlds will have to sign up using a form of valid ID so that they can be tracked by their local police forces.

### **Case Divide**

A case divide is simply telling the judge what your main arguments are going to be. This is like introducing the name of your main body paragraphs in the introduction.

- E.g. "My first argument will be about how we protect people from anonymized harassment. My second argument is about reducing fictionalized fantasies of criminal activity deters real life crimes."

### **Arguments/Rebuttals**

This is where you make your case (or attack someone else's). Make sure to give clear analysis that links to the motion and explain why you win. We will be going into more detail about how to make an effective argument and rebuttal in the later weeks (but it's not so different from writing a persuasive essay, think Point Evidence Explanation).

## **2. How to approach a motion**

What most novice speakers underestimate is how important being selective in what arguments you run is. Due to time pressure, people make the mistake of instantaneously try to think of arguments right away and get easily caught up in superficial issues. In this section, we look at how to best approach a motion.

### **a) How to choose the best arguments**

My coach once told me that debate is not what happens in your head but what happens in your heart. Listen to your instinct. Many novices make the mistake of trying to sound impressive, but remember that whatever argument comes most naturally to you is frequently the most convincing.

But there are some basic things to think about when you are given a motion.

#### **Context and relevance**

When you're approached with a motion, don't start scrambling for arguments. Think around the motion. What have you seen in the news recently? What are the issues surrounding the motion? Who is involved? What do they feel/what are they more concerned about? Which of these issues are the most pressing?

Remember that debates are almost never trivial. They point to large, incredibly difficult problems even if they don't explicitly mention them in the motion. Always problematize the motion and ask why these issues haven't been solved, you'll end up constructing a much more sophisticated and strategic case.

You'll also notice that your ability to understand context and relevance is directly tied to how much you know about the world. Some seasoned debaters argue that you don't need to read a lot in order to good at competitive debating. I disagree. There is a definite ceiling to the complexity of your arguments if you don't have contextual understanding so read up on current affairs, economics, etc.

#### **Predicting future clashes**

If you're stumped, start thinking about what the other side might say and how you will tackle their arguments. This approach is good if you don't agree with your side. By pre-empting what the other side might say and how you would rebut their argument will allow you to come up with a case pretty easily.

#### **Specific terms in the motion**

People who make motions think about them for ages; every word is there for a reason. By putting specific words in the motion, the creator is subtly trying to make the debate about something. Look for phrases that stand out in the motion and think about why they may be there.

### **b) Model prep-time**

All prep times look different, people need different things out of prep time. But a lot of novices make the mistake of talking about many random arguments and wasting valuable time.

1. In the first 2 minutes, take some time in silence and think about the motion. In those 2 minutes, you should have narrowed down the entire debate to the most 'instinctual' arguments.
2. Discuss these one or two instinctual arguments with your partner. 8 times out of 10, they will have come up with something similar. If not, spend no more than 1 minute deciding who is right. Ask yourself which of you is the most relevant and impactful (and whether or not you can actually prove the argument later in your speech).
  - a. Be decisive.
  - b. Once the arguments are decided, talk out the most crucial things you need to prove in order for your argument to be true. (We will talk out how to do analysis in the next session.) Small intricacies like examples aren't very necessary to discuss, keep your discussion streamline.
3. Start writing: I cannot stress how important writing is in debate. My coach once said that as soon as a motion is announced, your pen should never stop moving. Write every crucial link in your case, write important phrases. And don't write in an endless stream of consciousness, write organised arguments with each logical link neatly flowing into the other. You will not remember the most crucial logical links when you're actually speaking on the floor.

### **3. Constructing an argument**

The basic outline of an argument is this:

- Thesis/Claim: The end goal you aim to prove
- Premise: Relatively uncontroversial statement about the situation/foundation of your argument
- Argument: Why are things likely to unfold in a particular way?  
Why are certain actors likely to act in a particular way?
  - Evidence
  - IMPACT: Why does this argument matter? What are the consequences?
- Link: Therefore, why do you win?

#### **a) Mechanisms**

The mechanism is the main part of your argument. This is where you prove how and why your claim is true. In the UK circuit especially, there is a big emphasis on proof and sophisticated analysis. Never take for granted that your argument is true, always keep asking yourself why at every logical step until you boil it down to a few indisputable truths.

There are many ways to do this and with practice, it becomes much easier.

#### **Actor-mechanism**

If you're analysing why someone is likely to do something, analyse what their interests are. If it's a person, they are typically to be motivated by one (or more) of these four things: Money, Influence, Coercion, Ego. Analyse why a certain group of people are more likely to be motivated by one of these factors over the other. This requires you to analyse their psychological influences (e.g. income, race, gender, etc.) Debaters who are sensitive to how people act and feel tend to do very well.

Actors don't have to be just people either, they can't be governments or states. States are motivated by many things: staying in power in their country, having influence over other countries to forward their own interests, money, physical safety etc. Just as importantly, states are motivated by their people— what kind of historical context do countries have that may cause their people to act in a certain way?

#### **Principle-mechanism**

This is probably the trickiest, and brushing up on philosophy would probably help. Here, you have to prove why something is inherently wrong or desirable, and walk through the epistemological roots of those principles.

#### **Economic-mechanism**

Economic mechanisms come up pretty often in debates as well. However, they are more straight forward to do if you have a basic understanding of economics: supply and demand, monopolies, profit-motives, stakeholders in companies etc. The unique focuses are on the interests of companies, investors, and consumers. Private companies are beholden to staying ahead of their competition, making a profit, pleasing their investors/stakeholders, growth etc. Investors are influenced by making a profit in a very volatile market which makes them susceptible to economic indicators. Consumers want to maximise their utility. I don't want to overcomplicate this so just read any economics section in a newspaper or magazine and notice how the writers make a persuasive argument.

Remember, your duty is to prove not only that a particular scenario is possible but also probable. The other side of the debate will be arguing for a counter-scenario driven by equally valid motives. Your job is to prove why your scenario is comparatively more likely. A practical tip is to have someone continuously ask 'why' throughout your prep-time every time someone comes up with an idea for an argument.

Many lines of analysis can be reused in similar debates, take note of good speeches and use them in other debates. Debate, in its initial learning curve, is all about regurgitation and reformatting.

## **b) Impact**

After proving why your argument is true, the next step is proving why it's important. Why should I, as the judge, care about the argument you're making. The impact is the last part of your argument and it's an easy but essential step that many people forget.

Impacts are the consequences of your argument being true. For example, if you manage to prove that homosexuals should be able to adopt children because having children are an integral part to a person's ability to achieve happiness, then the consequence of that is that you have more happy and fulfilled homosexual parents.

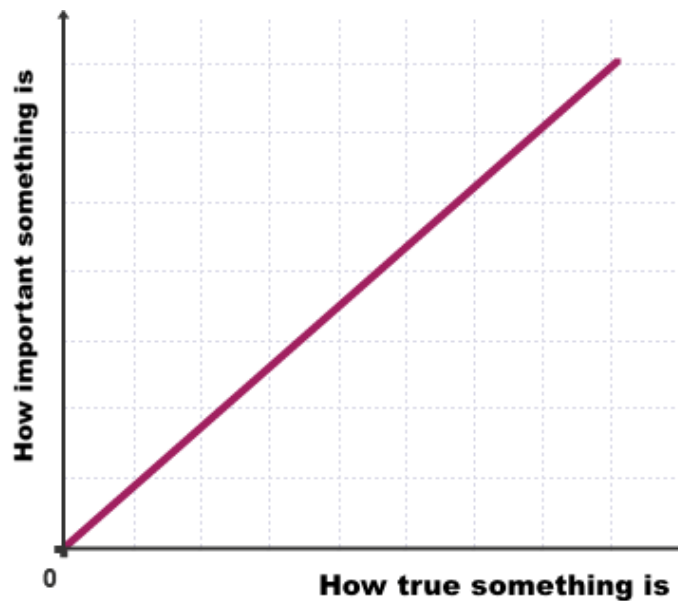
Impacts can include people having more freedom to pursue a good life, people being happier and more fulfilled, less people will dying/suffering etc.

Remember that debate is a comparative activity. The other side will be bringing impacts of their own so you have not only why their argument isn't true, but also why it isn't important. Tell the judge why your impact is more significant than any other impact in the debate. Ask yourself who does the impact affect?

- E.g. If there's a choice between increasing freedom & happiness of working class minorities versus doing the same for privileged upper class white people, you can argue that protecting more vulnerable groups in society is comparably more important.

You can also weigh things up in the long term and short term.

- E.g. Having a quota for women in executive business boards may bring about short term resentment of women in the short term. But in the long term, when men are normalised to the image of female success and competence, that resentment disappears and women will be better able to generate their own income.

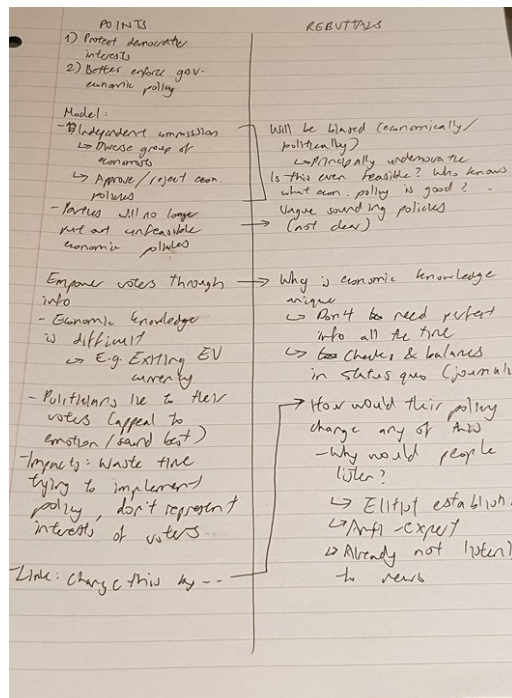


Remember that you only have 7 minutes in a debate and you must prove two things: A) prove why your case is true, and B) prove why your arguments are important (i.e. impacts). Achieving a balance between the two optimizes your persuasiveness.

#### 4. Constructing a rebuttal

Debating is an activity that focuses not just on speaking, but also on listening. The biggest obstacle preventing you from proving someone wrong is not knowing what they said in the first place. Poor tracking skills and a lack of writing are some of the most damaging habits of novice debaters. Speaking can be very pressurizing, and it's likely that you will drop a lot of material unless you have a visual cue. So, don't take the chance and come well-prepared.

There are many ways to track a debate. The most common (and what I've found to be the most effective) is to split a piece of paper into two columns: They said, and Response. Bullet-pointing main links in the opponents speech in one column, and writing notes on your response directly opposite means that you are constantly engaged with the other speakers in the debate, and ensures that you don't drop any material. Remember you are much less persuasive in the debate if you don't engage with the other sides material. So always make sure to listen carefully, and write down everything!



#### a) When and what to rebut

A common mistake is to do too much rebuttal. This is common amongst extension speakers and deputies who devote more than half their time rebutting instead of constructing new material. Always be discerning when you rebut. Ask why you are rebutting that argument and whether it's necessary.

You should only ever be rebutting (i.e. identifying and prioritising which arguments to tackle) based on:

- How likely you think those arguments are going to win the debate for opposing team
- How severely those arguments obstruct any analysis you want to run

#### b) Basic structure of a rebuttal

To be a strong rebuttal speaker, you need to have a strong (almost instinctual) understanding of constructive argumentation. You need to be able to identify what links are weak in a debater's speech, and be able to explain why they are weak. You need to also have a sense of strategy: what arguments are the most likely to win another team the debate, and how do you take those arguments down?

The basic structure of a rebuttal comes in three parts. They said, Not true, and Even if.

#### They said

Obviously, the they said part of a rebuttal is simply stating what their argument is. This requires you to have actually listened to their speech (again, we arrive at the importance of good tracking).



## **Not true**

The not true part of a rebuttal is the most intuitive, you're proving why what someone said isn't true. However, the most common mistake for novices is to respond rather than rebut. A response is stating/explaining an argument that contradicts the opponents or is somehow mutually exclusive to it. A rebuttal attacks the underlying logic of an opponents argument such that it no longer stands on its own

- E.g. If you're trying to rebut the argument: Sexually provocative feminist celebrities are good for the feminist movement because they normalise a woman's sexuality, a rebuttal is not: No they don't, they objectify women. Here, you're just pitting up two equally valid lines of argumentation without telling me why their side is less plausible.

To effectively rebut something, you must go one layer of analysis deeper, and give reasons as to why an alternative view is more likely, or how their argument fundamentally makes no sense once you unravel it. You can do this by pointing out contradictions in their case, or missing logical links. Exploit these fallacies, and show why their whole case falls apart.

Go back to the previous section on the structure on an argument. The claim is the most straightforward to rebut and can be done by simply rejecting it. However, a more sophisticated rebuttal doesn't have to disagree with an initial claim, but needs to deal with the opponent's specific analytical links.

Remember that good responses are typically multifaceted, they take different points of attack and show why an argument is wrong for many reasons. This takes practice, and as you get better, you will find it easier to respond to arguments in many ways.

## **Even if**

This part of a rebuttal is a secondary layer of attack. This is where you assume their argument was true, but why even if it was true, they still end up losing the debate. You do this by proving that their argument may be true, but that it is ultimately unimportant in the debate.

When you come across teams that are equally as strong, it is unlikely you will be able to weaken every important analytical link in an opponent's argument. Therefore, it is comparably more efficient and effective to weigh outcomes. There are several ways to do this:

- Depth of impact: How severely an impact harms someone. (E.g. Punching someone VS Killing them)
- Scale of impact: How many people are affected (E.g. Punching one person VS Punching 500 people)
- Moral significance: Which impact is the most morally significant. Often this boils down to which harm affects a more vulnerable group, but remember that you have to explain why this vulnerability matters (E.g. Punching a murderer VS Punching a refugee)

## **c) How to structure a speech with rebuttals**

When you rebut someone, don't go list off every single they said and go point-by-point why they are wrong. This is time-consuming and incredibly difficult for the judge to follow. Instead, boil everything they say to a 2 or 3 points of clash.

Points of clash are general areas where the two benches present arguments on the same basic theme, but differ in argumentation. It's the substantive matter which is most discussed at that point in the debate. They make up the main areas of disagreement and they can be entire arguments, sub-points, or general principles.

- E.g. This House Believes That social media companies should fact-check posts made by world leaders. Clash areas could be: Would this actually be effective at stopping the power alternative facts has over politics? Will the backlash be significant? How does this change the perception of social media?

The same as you do with your arguments, signpost your rebuttals before you make them. Flag out their titles and the order in which you will do them. For example: "Before I move on to my arguments, let me go through my rebuttals: 1) Why fact-checking won't stop alternative facts, and actually makes them more powerful, and 2) How we lost the perception of social media as a neutral political platform for discourse and why that's bad."

## **5. Framing**

In a marathon or a footrace, the goal of the race is always known before the race begins. All runners know that they must run, maybe, 22.62 miles. In a debate, however, contestants define the very course, length, and finish line of the contest. In so doing, debaters must not only make their best effort to capture the most territory in the mind of the judges, they must advance arguments to justify the very size, boundaries, and existence of that territory.

I don't want to overcomplicate it. Simply put, framing is setting up the boundaries that a debate takes place in (like putting a frame around a painting so the colours don't leak out of the borders). Good framing can not only be advantageous to a team, but can also ensure that a cleaner debate takes place which is easier to judge. By providing context to a debate or argument, you prove the relevancy of your arguments, thus increasing its persuasiveness.

Prospective framing is the framing done typically at the beginning of PM/LO speeches. They aim to provide context to a debate (i.e. the problematise status quo) and set up the initial boundaries of the debate. They can do this by identifying to key questions that are suggested by the motion (i.e. asking why the motion is controversial in the first place), or defining what key terms mean.

The most common way to frame a debate is to provide some "factual" context.

- E.g. "Ladies and Gentlemen, the UK political landscape has seen the rise of right-wing populism based on ethno-nationalism. The rate of hate crime against immigrants has quadrupled over the past decade and has meant compromised physical and mental safety of the most vulnerable in British society."

From that factual context, they then set up key issues or questions they then address in their argument.

- E.g. "With this in mind, we think that by banning extremist political parties, we best protect people's interests."

Both teams may explicitly or implicitly agree to the terms of the debate and simply contest the issues as they follow from those terms. At other times, however, the contest over the ground of the debate is more significant. By prevailing on the framing of the debate, the team essentially guarantees their victory in the round. In this way, framing is incredibly subtle. Many novice teams simply accept a framing set up by other teams because they don't notice their own disadvantage.

## 6. Additional resources

Debating is all about practice! If you would like to learn more outside of sessions, here are some handy resources.

### **Hello Motions**

<http://hellomotions.com/>

This website contains a bank of motions set at previous tournaments. You can have a look through them and have a think about some of the issues, or even practice prepping cases!

### **OrgComm Scotland**

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1Cdkqn2WrTxLaLfm0\\_YxUA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1Cdkqn2WrTxLaLfm0_YxUA)

The organisation committee of Scotland EUDC has compiled videos of debating workshops from some of the best debaters in the world on different aspects of debating. You can find it on their Youtube website.

Some that I highly recommend are:

- ‘Comparative Argumentation and Impacting Arguments’ by Steven Rajavinothan
- ‘Islamic terrorism and radicalisation’ by Ameera Natasha Moore
- ‘Effective rebuttal’ by Owen Mooney
- ‘Development’ by Hannah Tyndall
- ‘Framing’ by Alex Harris

### **Eh Priori**

<https://ehpriori.com/>

Eh Priori is a blog started by two Singaporean debaters about their thoughts and feelings about BP debating. Some entries include techniques on how to train smarter, and specific strategies they use speaking from certain positions.

### **Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy**

<https://plato.stanford.edu/index.html>

When thinking about how to run principle cases or even philosophically justify certain stances in debate or why they are important, this website contains a myriad of resources you can use. They give a good overview of the topic and give some indication of how to think about them. Good places to start are the topics of: citizenship and nationalism, personal autonomy, privacy, freedom of speech and expression, religious freedom, political legitimacy etc.

### **The Cambridge Union’s Glossary of Debating Terms**

Even though debating is quite simple, it has developed to have a specific vocabulary to refer to otherwise very simple concepts. Here is a glossary of some of the things you might hear within the circuit.

**Analysis:** The logical reasoning behind an argument.

**Barrack:** To offer points of information too quickly in succession and be disruptive.

**Bin:** (Being in) a low-ranked room.

**Break:** (To reach) the knockout rounds of a competition as a speaker or as a judge.

**Break Room:** Any room in the final preliminary round from which teams could potentially break.

**British Parliamentary:** The format of the debating competitions we participate in. Now recognised as the international standard.

**Burden:** The strategic responsibility on a team or side in a debate

**Case File:** A collection of written material designed to prepare cases for debates.

**Chair Judge:** The person who controls a debate and manages the adjudication and feedback to teams afterwards.

**Chief Adjudicator:** The person responsible for ranking judges and setting the motions in the competition. Also known as the CA.

**Closed Motion:** A motion which involves a clear policy or statement for the debate.

**Closed Round:** A round where the results of the adjudication is kept secret from teams.

**Composite Team:** A team including two speakers not from the same university.

**Convenor:** The person responsible for organising a debating competition.

**Counterprop(osal):** An alternative policy to that of the definition advocated by the opposition.

**Crash:** Accommodation for speakers and judges at a competition.

**Definition:** The policy or interpretation of the motion created by the opening government team in the debate.

**Draw:** The announcement of team positions, judges and the motion before a debate.

**EFL:** English as a Foreign Language. A category for speakers at Worlds.

**ESL:** English as a Second Language. A category for speakers at Worlds, Euros and some IVs or Opens.

**Euros:** The European Universities Debating Championship (EUDC). Held annually during the summer.

**Extension:** The new material brought by teams in the closing half of the debate.

**IONA:** Islands of the North Atlantic - used to refer collectively to the UK and Ireland.

**IR:** International Relations - the interactions between international actors.

**IV:** A competition involving only teams from universities. Otherwise known as an intervarsity competition.

**Knife:** When a closing team implicitly or explicitly contradicts the opening team on the same side.

**Motion:** The statement of the debate.

**Open:** A competition which allows composite teams along with university teams.

**Open Round:** A round where the results of the adjudication is announced to teams after the debate.

**Outround:** Any knockout round after the break in which only the top teams take part.

**Point of Information:** A short, quick point of rebuttal made during a speech by a speaker on the opposing side. Also known as a POI.

**Preliminary Round:** A debating round where all the teams take part before the knockout outround.

**Prep(aration) Time:** The fifteen minutes between the draw and the start of the debate during which teams prepare for a debate.

**Protected Time:** The first and last minute of a speech during which points of information cannot be offered.

**Pull Up:** To be put in a room with teams on higher team points than you.

**Roll:** When the wing judges overrule the chair judge in the adjudication.

**Speaker Points:** Points allocated to individual speakers based on their speech in the debate. Usually marked out of 100. Otherwise known as 'speaks'.

**Squirrel:** An illegitimate and unreasonable attempt by opening government to restrict or shift a motion.

**Straights:** When teams have the number of team points equivalent to just getting seconds in all their debates. Often used as a reference point for success (e.g. "Plus one" means the equivalent on straights plus a win etc.).

**Swing Team:** A reserve team put into the competition to ensure a multiple of 4 teams or when a team is absent.

**Tab:** The final ranking of speakers and judges in a competition.

**Tabmaster:** The individual responsible for creating and maintaining the tab and draw throughout and after the competition.

**Team Points:** Points allocated to teams based on their performance in a debate. Usually 3 for 1st place, 2 for 2nd place, 1 for 3rd place and 0 for 4th place.

**Wing (Judge):** A person who assists the chair judge in adjudicating the debate.

**Worlds:** The World Universities Debating Championship (WUDC). Held annually during the winter.