### The Anatomy of a Debate Round

#### Who is in the room?

There will be at least five people in the room: the two affirmative debaters, the two negative debaters, and the critic/judge. Very rarely, there will also be observers (usually students looking to learn about debate or parents of the other team). Don’t fret: you don’t have to speak in front of an audience.

#### Who do you debate?

You will generally be competing against two high school (and occasionally middle school) students from other local private and public schools. Sometimes schools come from other states as well, but this is less common. In the novice division, all of your competitors will also be new to the activity.

#### The Role of the Judge

The job of the judge is to decide who won or lost the debate and how many speaker points to assign to each debater. These are two separate questions; judges generally decide who won or lost the debate and then assess the technical and persuasion skills of each of the students. For this reason, the winning team may occasionally have fewer points than the losing team.

The judge will also give verbal comments to each team at the end of the debate where they will tell you who won and lost the debate and why. It is important to carefully write down and save these comments; you should keep a section of your notebook or a document on your laptop for judge comments. Your coaches will often ask you what the judge said for use in future practices, so write everything down! You can ask a *polite* question if you need something clarified, but it is critically important to remain respectful even if you disagree with a judge’s decision. You will be judged by the same people many times over your debate career; you must maintain a professional relationship even when you disagree.

Occasionally a judge may decide not to give verbal comments; he/she will instead write a written ballot. If a judge says that they do “not give oral decisions,” you should thank them and leave the room; you will get your comments and decision later.

Judges will sometimes leave the room during preparation time or before the decision; don’t worry — they will be back!

#### Who judges debates?

Most debate critics/judges are either high school teachers or former debaters, usually college-aged. Some judges are more qualified than others but all are deserving of your respect; they get paid very little, receive little hospitality, and sacrifice their Saturdays to help the activity. Always be respectful of your judges.

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#### Where do debates take place?

Debates take place in high school classrooms. It is very important to be respectful of these rooms. Under no circumstances should you use a teacher’s desk, move anything off of a surface, or unplug anything. The only way debate tournaments can take place is if we are respectful of rooms; we expect you to be diligent, even if others are not. Leave the space better than you found it — this means throwing away trash, putting back desks, etc. even if you didn’t create the mess.

It is generally okay to move student desks to create a workspace, but you should not move any teacher materials or use desks that have things on them.

#### What to do Before the Round

When you find your team on the pairing you will see an associated room number. Go there with your evidence: that’s where you’ll be debating. When you get there, disclose your case if you are affirmative (see Disclosure, below). Then sit down at desks or tables and unpack your evidence, paper, pens, etc. The judge will sit down and do the same. Please see the attached diagram for a better idea of what the room looks like before a debate.

You should take out your aff or neg accordion depending on the side. If you are aff, get out the 1AC. If you are neg, take out the 1NC materials that you need for the case that the team said they are reading. (If they didn’t disclose, just make sure you have your neg accordion ready so that you can get things out efficiently once the 1AC starts and you know what case they are reading).

When everyone is ready, the first affirmative will get up and move to somewhere that s/he can speak from so that both the opposing team and the critic/judge can hear. Then the debate begins.

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**THE LAYOUT OF A DEBATE**

This is just a general guideline – it doesn’t matter which side you sit on.

Speaking Podium or Desk/Table

Critic/Judge

(Desk/Table)

The Negative

(Desks/Tables)

The Affirmative

(Desks/Tables)

#### Disclosure — When You Are Affirmative

When you are affirmative, you should go to the room and immediately tell the other team what affirmative case and advantages you will read. They may also ask to see the plan text; you should show it to them. Even if you have debated the team before and they chose not to disclose, you should always disclose.

#### Disclosure is for the aff only — you should not ask the other team what negative arguments they will read.

#### Disclosure — When You Are Negative

When you are negative, you should go to the room and *politely* ask the other team what affirmative case and advantages they will read in the debate. Most teams will immediately tell you this information. Some teams choose not to disclose; *that’s fine*. In the novice division you will be prepared to debate all of the possible cases, so if a team does not disclose you should not worry. You should instead think about what you would say to each of the cases. Remember, disclosure is only for the aff- if the Aff asks you what arguments you will read, *politely* say that we do not disclose negative arguments.

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#### What to do After the Round

When the 2AR is finished, the two teams shake each other’s hands and exchange well wishes (“good luck” or “great job”, etc.) The debaters then put away their evidence, making sure to keep everything organized. Occasionally the judge may ask to read a piece of evidence from the debate — give it to him/her.

The judge will then tell the debaters who won and give comments on the debate (see: The Role of the Judge). Once the judge is done talking, and you have taken *copious* notes on his/her comments, it’s time to pack up, clean up the room, and head back to the cafeteria to look for pairings for the next debate

#### Results at a tournament

At the end of each debate, one team is awarded a win and the other is awarded a loss. Your overall record is the sum of your wins and the sum of your losses. A team that won two rounds and lost three rounds, then, would be said to be “2-3” in the tournament.

The win is given to the team that better persuades the judge about both the quality and importance of their arguments. This is not based on how the judge personally feels about the issues, but rather which team does a better job advancing the arguments in the debate.

#### Points

Points are awarded on a 30 point scale based on the overall skill of the debaters, not necessarily the differential between the two teams. Points are not used to keep score; they are used to communicate how well the judge thought you performed above and beyond the decision. In fact, a team can win with fewer points than the losing team if they have done an overall better job but lost a critical argument.

#### Power Matching

Many tournaments use “power matching” to determine which teams will debate each other in debates later in the tournament. This means that each team is paired against another team with the same record. A team that wins the first two debates will be paired against another team that won the first two debates. A team with a 1-1 record will similarly debate another team that has won a debate and lost a debate. This ensures that each team is given competitive debates throughout the tournament. Tournaments that use power matching usually have two random rounds, called “presets”, as the first two rounds. After that, they begin power matching the debates.

#### Elimination Rounds

Some tournaments have elimination rounds in addition to the preliminary debates. Like a tournament in most sports, elimination rounds feature the top X number of teams by win-loss

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record with the highest seed debating the lowest seed (and so forth). Teams usually flip for sides before the debate and the loser is eliminated from the tournament.

#### Flipping for Sides in Elimination Rounds

Unlike preliminary rounds where the side (aff or neg) is assigned for each debate, elimination rounds are “flip for sides.” This means once the pairing is released, the teams meet at the room and exchange aff information (see Disclosure). Then a coin is flipped. The team that wins the coin flip can choose whether they will be affirmative or negative. If the teams have already debated in the prelim rounds, they will reverse sides for elims; no coin is flipped

#### How to Read Ballots

#### Written Comments

In the novice division, most judges provide written ballots that teams receive at the end of a tournament. Ballots include each debater’s speaker points as well as (usually) comments and a brief RFD (or “reason for decision”). Good debaters use these ballots to improve. The following five tips will help you make the most of your written ballots:

1. Verbal feedback is most instructive. Most judges will disclose the winner and provide comments after the debate. This is the best feedback students will receive because it is immediate and more in-depth than the written ballot. For this reason, it is extremely important to take notes during the judge’s decision. The best debaters take very comprehensive notes—they “flow” the decision as completely as possible. These notes allow students to have more productive conversations with coaches and to better adapt to judges in future rounds. As you move up to higher divisions, most judges will not provide written comments. [Note: sometimes ballots are lost and most judges do not write comments in elimination rounds. It is *very* important to take notes after each debate.]
2. Don’t overreact to individual comments. A single debate is a small sample size. So is a single debate tournament. While you should review all judge comments, it is important to place any single set of comments into the larger context of a tournament or series of tournaments. Are you getting the same comment over-and-over again? Is the comment an outlier? Are you mostly being complimented for something that one judge is criticizing you for? It is important to maintain perspective and keep working hard to improve in all areas instead of overreacting to comments.

1. Know the difference between *specific* and *universal* advice. After almost every round, judges tell students that they should have done something differently in the debate. Good debaters learn to figure out whether this advice applies only to the specific round or to all rounds. Bad debaters take specific advice and universalize it, doing the thing the judge told them to do in a *specific* round in *every* round. Learning the difference between these kinds of advice is difficult and requires asking the judge questions, strong critical thinking, and conversations with coaches.

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1. Remember that you don’t know everything. Judges will often provide comments or suggestions related to things that we haven’t yet covered (or haven’t covered in-depth). We are teaching you the fundamentals of debate and are doing so in a particular sequence for a reason. It is okay to file a comment away as “something I haven’t learned yet but will return to later”. As you continue to improve, more and more of your comments will make sense and it will become easier and easier for you to put judges’ advice into practice.

Read all comments, not just the ones directed at you. Obviously, the comments that judges make on *your* performance are most helpful. But good debaters read and consider the comments that judges give to *all* participants because the same comments also often apply to them, too. Reading the comments that a judge provides to a negative team, for example, can help you improve on the negative even though you were affirmative in that particular debate. These comments can also tell you which traits of opposing debaters judges liked and disliked so that you can mimic the good qualities and avoid the bad ones.