

Learning to Debate- A Guide for Primary School Students (Ford Trophy)

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By Jeremy Farrell

Debating can be scary when you are just starting up, and sometimes it's the smallest things that can help you to become a much better speaker. This is a beginner's guide for how to improve as a debater. As you improve however, you should begin to read the longer and more detailed debating documents, which will have further advice on how to improve, as well as the step by step basics of debating.

Don'ts in Debating

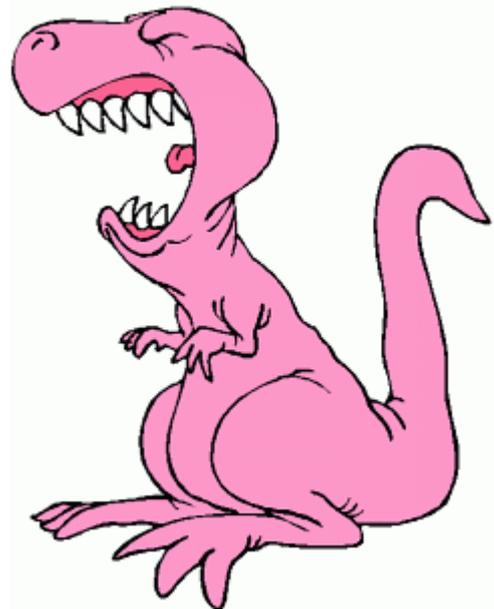
Here are some hints from some friendly creatures about what **not** to do in a debate!

Toby the T-Rex says:

1. "Don't Yell, Jeer, or Lose your Temper!"

Listen to Toby! Yelling at your opponents, calling them offensive names, or making personal attacks on them is **not funny** in a debate. Adjudicators will be seriously displeased with anyone who makes personal attacks on their opponents. Of course in a debate you have a chance to tell the other team why they are wrong, all while being very witty, but you need to explain why their **argument** is bad, not why **they** are bad. If you are unsure if something is offensive, ask a teacher or an adjudicator on the night. Here are some examples of conduct which is not acceptable:

- ? "The first speaker on the other team is a jerk"
- ? "The other team all go to [school X] and that means they are filthy liars"
- ? "The other team are no better than Hitler!"
- ? "The other team are as ugly as they are wrong"
- ? Remember; in the Ford competition, you are **never** allowed to interrupt the other speaker's speeches!



Remember- Nobody likes a sore loser
...or a bully

Jumping James advises:

2. "Don't bother about bringing props to a debate!"



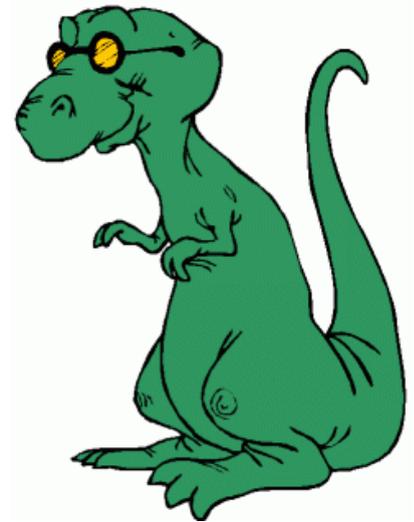
While props can be funny and amusing in some other competitions, or in a play, in debating you will not receive any additional points for using props. In fact, bringing a prop can be distracting, and draw attention away from your speech. Of course, it is completely fine to wear a school uniform and badges to a debate (those aren't props). As long as the prop is harmless and not distracting, you won't lose any points for bringing it, but you are probably wasting time by doing so.

Christopher the

Codger says:

3. "Don't use stories about people you know as examples for your arguments!"

In a debate the best sort of example is a broad one (like a survey, or statistics, or looking at the behaviour of a large group of people). A few personal examples of people you know are unlikely to be a good tool to explain a complex issue in a debate. If Chris got up in a debate, and said "cigarettes can't be harmful, my grandfather smoked them all his life, and he lived to be 100!" it would not be very good evidence of whether or not cigarettes are harmful. Stories can also take up a lot of the time you need to give your speech. Chris had to learn the hard way that telling the audience stories about his nephew and niece would not help him give a good speech.



Timothy the Turgid Troll wants to suggest:



4. "Don't close your eyes, and ignore the arguments the other team made!"

Rebutting the arguments the other team made is an important part of winning a debate. In a Ford debate you should try to have at least 30-60 seconds of rebuttal to explain why the other team's arguments failed, and why your team therefore has won the debate. Timothy used to only spend one sentence at the start of his speech on rebuttal, and he would always repeat the same thing; "the other team made good arguments, but they were wrong". Timothy learnt that he had to spend more time explaining exactly why the arguments presented by the other team were not good enough to win. Remember, **you get the topic 1 week in advance** for the Ford competition (on the website), so you will have time to think of arguments the other team is likely to make, and how to respond to them.

Spare Parts

Pat advises:

5. "Clearly Label your arguments so that the audience and adjudicator can follow the logical structure of your arguments!"

When Spare Parts Pat was built they forgot to build him step by step. Now Pat is a jumble. He has trouble speaking, and they think he might be missing some important parts. When an argument is jumbled, it has the same affect on the audience as Pat does. For this reason, it is important to label (signpost) your arguments before you explain them in more depth. This lets everyone know what you and your team will be arguing, and how you will prove your case. For this reason, you will often hear a speaker get up and immediately say "I have 3 arguments to present in this debate- 1) [argument 1], 2)- [argument 2] amd 3)- [argument 3].... But first, some rebuttal". Pat just gets up and says whatever comes into his head, in no particular order because he can't help it. Don't be like Pat.



Example of good structure in a speech for the 1st or 2nd speakers:

- 1) Open with a funny joke, or a context in which the debate takes place

- 2) Tell the audience what theme you will be discussing tonight (your theme could be any number of things; “The environmental reasons we should do/not do X”, “the practical reasons”, “the moral reasons”, “the economic reasons”, etc.
- 3) Tell the audience the 3(?) points you will be discussing within your theme
- 4) If you have to give any rebuttal (you will obviously be unable to do this if you are the first speaker of the debate), do that after labelling your 3 points, but before you have explained your 3 substantive points in depth.
- 5) Spend the remainder of your speech explaining your 3 pre-prepared points in depth for an approximately equal amount of time, and in a clear, logical order. Make sure the audience knows when you are moving from one point to your next point (“and now on to my 2nd point”)
- 6) When the bell rings a 2nd time, to signal you have reached 4 minutes, you then have 15 seconds to wrap up, and sit down. Nothing you say after 4 minutes 15 seconds will count, even if you keep talking. So **sit down** even if you are not done.

Slow Down and listen to Simone the Slug!



“The 3rd speaker’s structure is different!”

- ? As a 3rd speaker, you should not present new arguments about why your team has won. Instead your entire speech should consist of rebuttal (counter arguments), explaining why the other team was wrong, and trying to do so in a structured way (identifying the key themes or issues that have unfolded in the debate). Because the arguments will not have been presented until the debate happens, it is inadvisable to write down ahead of time exactly what you plan to say as a 3rd speaker. Most, if not all, of your speech will need to be written during the debate, as you listen to the other speakers, and try to identify the key arguments in the debate. For this reason, 3rd is a difficult, but rewarding place to speak.

Birdbrained Bec warns:



6. “Don’t define the debate in a way that ruins the debate!”

In a debate, you will learn that the Affirmative team needs to **define** each topic, to focus the debate. Imagine the topic for your debate was “*That Education should be Free*”. This topic could relate to a number of different forms of education. Does it mean university should be free? Does it mean that all secondary schools (high schools) should be free (which would mean banning private schools from charging fees; therefore abolishing private schools)? There are obviously a number of ways you could define the term “education” in this topic, and as the affirmative team you are responsible for setting the debate up clearly at 1st speaker. If you don’t define the debate, it may be unclear what you are arguing. Are you against free University, but in favour of free high schools?

Defining a topic can be tricky sometimes, and there is a longer explanation of how your team should go about defining topics in the other training materials on this website. But here are some basic hints:

- ? Interpret the motion in a way that is sensible, and **in the spirit of the motion**. If there is a topic “*That we should reintroduce the cane in schools*”, then it is inadvisable to

define “cane” to mean “cane toads” or “cane plants”. The teams will no longer be debating the topic they have both prepared for, which will in turn ruin the debate, and make it hard for your team to win. There is a scope for being clever in defining a debate, but this is not a way to be clever because the topic obviously has nothing to do with cane toads or cane plants.

- ? **If a motion is open, you should try and close it.** What does that mean? Think about the topic “*That we should fear China*”. The topic has too many issues within it. It could be a debate about why we should fear China’s growing prosperity. It could be a debate about why we should fear China’s military power. It could be a debate about why we should be concerned about China making global warming worse. You might be concerned about China’s record on human rights. Any of these issues would make for a good debate, but you would not have time to cover all of them in enough depth a single debate. Therefore you should pick one of the major issues, and make the debate about that.
- ? Don’t limit the debate in a way that is unfair, so there is no longer an issue to debate. If you are unsure about this, ask your teacher, coach or a parent. ACTDU committee members can also provide advice on how to approach topics.

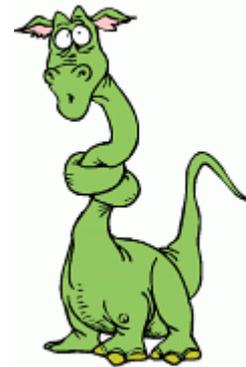
Dan the Dragon

says:

- 7. “Don’t get your neck out of joint, debating should be fun!”

Debating is a learning activity, and the more you participate, the more you learn. Don’t be disheartened by early failures. Everyone starts out as a novice, with a lot to learn, and good debaters who you’re against had to work very hard to attain the skills they have now. Debating is about learning to speak in public, to argue a point logically, and to make new friends. Winning is only a small part of debating. So remember:

- ? Always shake hands with your opponent after the debate. If you won the debate, you should congratulate the losing team for giving you a fun debate.
- ? Listen to what the adjudicator has to say, and get feedback from them after the debate. This is the best way to improve. Don’t be afraid to ask the adjudicator how to improve, that’s what they’re there for. If you don’t understand what they said, keep asking until you do, they won’t mind.
- ? Prepare for the debate in advance with your team, teachers, parents, and anyone who is willing to help you prepare. This is part of the learning experience. If you try to prepare by yourself, you might have the same arguments as your other speakers, or you could contradict one of the arguments your team mates plan to use. Debating is a team sport.



Sarah the Snake says:

- 8. “Be ready for surprises!”

Palm cards are a great idea, so you can read off your arguments, while maintaining the attention of the audience. However, remember that if you type out all your palm cards word for word in advance, you might find it more difficult to adapt your arguments. The debate may develop in a way you did not expect it to. If the topic was “*That we support single sex education*” and the

affirmative team defined to topic to be about “single sex classrooms, but a co-ed playground environment” then all the arguments you have prepared about “why co-ed playground environments are important” will no longer be relevant in the debate. If you have it all typed out, and are used to relying on your notes, you may find it difficult to adjust your arguments. Debating is about thinking on your feet as well as preparation. Always be ready for the unexpected!