

DEBATE GUIDE: RESOURCE 7

Designing Debates

Designing an engaging and informative debate involves choices about the focus of the topics, desired groupings, sequence and protocol, and timing.

While there are many long-standing formats of debate that carry extensive histories of tradition, you should also feel free to design an experience that best fits your group or the focus of your practice. Even if you are already on an established debate team, it can be helpful to temporarily try out a different format so that you can approach specific skills in a different way.

Focus of Debate:

Depending on the purpose of debate, you can choose topics that focus on the following:

- **Silly topics:** good for working on new skills or learning a new format
- **Value topics:** good for exploring philosophy, world views, and hypothetical examples
- **Policy topics:** good for outlining concrete plans of action and using evidence
- **Fact topics:** good for practicing argument construction and using concrete examples

Common Protocol Elements:

Regardless of the topic, most debate protocols are structured by these common elements:

- **Preparation Time:** Debates can either be fully prepared over several days or months or they can be largely spontaneous with 10-20 minutes of preparation. Preparation time can also be woven in throughout the debate before different speeches.
- **Opening Cases:** Debates always begin with a presentation of initial arguments by each side, although these can vary in total length.

- **Cross-Examination or Questioning:** Not every debate includes a time for questioning, although this can help facilitate better understanding and improve the quality of debate. Most “cross-ex” periods are split up so that one side has dedicated time for questioning followed by the other side having dedicated questioning time. This can also be woven in throughout the debate in a more spontaneous fashion.
- **Rebuttals:** The middle of the debate is made up of speeches where debaters pick apart the other side, known as the “line-by-line”. Rebuttals include time for debaters to defensively argue against the other side and then offensively support their arguments. Rebuttals are usually completely spontaneous, although they may involve a few minutes of preparation time.
- **Closing Remarks:** The end of the debate includes speeches that summarize the central issues of the round, usually without being able to mention any new arguments. These remarks are sometimes combined with the rebuttals or can also be separate speeches with “voting issues” for what they thought they won in the debate.
- **Possible Groupings:** Debates can be one vs one, two vs. two, three vs. three, a group vs. another group, or an entire class. Decisions about groupings can also include thinking about how people group up to prepare their side.

