

Moderator Guide for SFDebate

Thank you for volunteering to moderate one of our debates. Moderation may appear to be one of the easier roles in a debate, but it is usually the most difficult, requiring a good understanding of the topic, and how to draw out the issues from a large crowd of people. It's hard to do well. We've noted down some tips that might help you. PLEASE READ IT!

Before the meeting

SFDebate ideally runs like a parliamentary debate. The debate starts with 2-4 members giving opening speeches for and against the issue. Well before the meeting, you should think about who will open up the debate, and the path the debate is likely to take.

Finding Speakers

You'll need to find 2-4 speakers to start the debate. If the issue is based on moral or ethical issues, you can leave it up until the night to nominate some speakers. If the topic is technical, or requires insight or knowledge into the issue, it is best to look for speakers well in advance.

For example :

"This House believes Religion does more harm than Good" – It's ok to wait until the night to find speakers for a topic like this.

"This House would repeal Prop 13" – Because of the technical nature of the subject it is best to find some volunteers to do opening speeches on this topic and start the discussion.

If you need to find speakers in advance, we recommend you start asking at the previous meeting. Alternatively, nominate someone to do this for you. You can also email other SFDebate members directly from the meetup website, or ask James or Caroline to help.

For technical debates, consider looking outside the group for a couple ‘experts’ or ‘authorities’ on the topic who can add experience and insight into the issues. You might invite them to be a leading speaker or just contribute to the discussion part of the meeting.

Prepare speakers by sending them... speaker guides (which can be downloaded from the website)

Prepare a Strategy for the Floor Discussion

If you haven’t already done so, spend some time learning about the topic. The discussion part of the meeting requires an insightful hand to guide the discussion through the key points.

It helps to have a strategy for how the floor debate will run before the meeting starts. Usually an issue will have key areas that need to be discussed, and you’ll want to be active in getting the group to these areas.. It is a rare meeting where the audience steers themselves through the key points. That’s where you come in.

For example :

In “This House Would Repeal Our Right to Bear Arms” the moderator led the discussion in the following direction :

- 20min discussion on what the framers meant by the second amendment and ‘right to bear arms’
- 20mins discussion on who should have the right
- 20mins discussion on what sort of arms they should have the right to bear.

In : “This House Believes Israel is a Terrorist State”

- 10mins discussion on what is a terrorist.
- 15mins discussion on what is a terrorist state and what other countries might be terrorist states.
- 30mins discussion on whether the description applies to Israel
 - o House Demolitions
 - o Targetted Assassinations
 - o Ghettos.

For your topic, you’ll want to figure out which are the issues that should be covered, and guide the group there. You can guide the group by preparing questions for the meeting.

Starting the meeting

Introductions (5mins)

Introductions should last no more than 5 minutes. They are a good way to get the group comfortable talking with each other. They're a chance for you to learn people's names.... Pay attention in this part, and write down names on a piece of paper.

If the meeting is less than about 25 people, it's possible to quickly go around everyone in the room and ask them where they stand on the motion before it starts. If the group is much more than that, one idea is to throw out a ball and pick select people in the audience and get them to talk. You could ask them about the motion or something related to the topic.

Describe the debate format to audience.

At any given meeting we may have numerous guests who have never been to one of our meetings and who won't know what to expect. When you start, give a quick

Introduce the speakers

If it hasn't already been done, you should introduce the audience to the speakers. You may want to find out a little background about each individual before the meeting, to make them more than one-line introductions.

The speakers should go in the following order :

- First Proposition Speaker (4-6mins) Start @ 7.12
- First Opposition Speaker (4-6mins)
- Second Proposition Speaker (4-6mins)
- Second Oppositions Speaker (4-6mins)

- Floor Debate (Approx 45min)

- Summary from Opposition (3mins) Start @ 8.17
- Summary from Proposition (3mins)

- Round-up summary.(10mins Max) Start @ 8.25 – End by 8.35

Ask speakers to Stand while they give their speeches.

Floor Debate

The floor debate often turns into a moderated discussion. This is where you bring in your strategy, and meeting facilitation skills.

Clarifying the Motion

The opening speaker is responsible for defining and expanding on the motion. Sometimes they don't do a very good job.

If the definition of the motion is still unclear after the speakers have gone, your first priority should be to get the group to decide and agree on what is meant by the motion... ie get a proposal on the table. In some cases you may just need to do it yourself.

For example :

In "This House Would Use Force to Prevent Iran Acquiring Nuclear Weapons" – The opening speaker hadn't defined under what circumstances , and how we could use force to prevent Iran acquiring Nuclear weapons. This left room for only a philosophical discussion. The moderator, needs to get the group to discuss what types of force we might consider... for example targeted missile attacks on installations, commando raids, or full-scale invasion? – This brings things back to reality.

Keeping the conversation on-topic.

The most important art of the moderator is to keep the 'conversation' running and on-topic. Probably the easiest way to do this is to only call on people who have their hands up when you're ready to call on them.

This can be particularly challenging. Watch out for the 'yo-yo effect'. This happens when you call on someone to speak, long after they wanted to speak, and after the conversation has moved on. They will then take the conversation back to where it was 5mins previously. This gets confusing... and even more confusing when the next speaker wants to return back to the next topic.

Constantly scan the room. When someone says something provocative and many hands go up, recognize one of those hands over someone who had their hand up a few minutes ago. – Even though it may seem unfair.

Encourage but don't force people to speak.

We want to encourage all people who come to a debate to have their say at some point. The moderator can help this by acknowledging new speakers in preference to people who've already spoken. Don't however feel you have to force everyone to speak during the debate. The end-of-the-meeting summary is the time when you can pull out these last speakers.

Timing

Floor speakers shouldn't speak for more than 2 mins. You don't need to be strict about time limits, but you do want to avoid the 'bore' who talks and talks and talks. Basically follow your gut, and don't feel bad about cutting someone off.

If you've got someone who is going on and on and the audience is losing interest,, signal the 'wrap-up' signal, wave the red card and move the conversation on. Frequently, people lose track of time and themselves when the pressure is on them, so you may even have to interject yourself to thank them, and move the conversation on.

On the other hand, If you've got someone sharing interesting information, to whom people are listening, it's ok to let them continue, even if it is going over 2 mins.

Points of Information

To keep the conversation moving, audience members may offer points of information to whomever has the floor. It is up to the person who holds the floor whether to accept the point of information. As moderator, you should make sure the point of information is short and brief. Also, it shouldn't lead to a back and forth conversation.

Points of Order

It hasn't happened yet, but don't let anything obscene or rude slip by you. The audience should be debating the topic, not each other. If things get too heated, tame it, and then remind us to note how you did it here.

Debate Wrap-Up

After the speakers have delivered their closing arguments, it is time to wrap up the debate, and get a vote.

If the meeting is less than 30 or 40 people, you can go round each person individually and get their comments with a vote. This is usually very fun. Depending on the number of the people in the room, each person should speak for no more than 15 or 30 seconds. Be ruthless about keeping people to their limit.

In the wrap up you occasionally get first time speakers who have something valuable to say, you can be a little more lenient on them.

Wrap-up should last no more than 10mins MAX. – Your portion of the meeting must end at 8.35

This document is a work in progress.... Feel free to add your own comments and mail them back to James : info2@dilworth.org

Other Notes that Might Be Useful....

I picked these up from an online moderator guide. Some good tips that are relevant to the discussion part of our meetings. - J

The facilitator's role is to help a group to its best thinking. A good facilitator is helpful when a group is trying to deal with new or difficult issues. In the main, a facilitator helps people persevere as they confront the inevitable confusion and frustration associated with trying to integrate different views and approaches with their own. The more people who learn to facilitate, the better. If you accept the role of facilitator you must be neutral. You should also use the following techniques.

Watch group vibes

If people seem bored or inattentive, you may have to speed up the pace of the meeting. If people seem tense because of unvoiced disagreements, you may have to bring concerns out into the open.

Make sure everyone gets a chance to speak

Invite quiet people to speak. If necessary, use the clock: "We have fifteen minutes left. I think we should hear from people who haven't spoken for a while." Another way to get quiet people to speak is to initiate a round, in which you move around the table, with everyone getting a few minutes to present their views.

Encourage open discussion

Try to encourage people to speak up if they seem reluctant to disagree with a speaker: “On difficult issues, people disagree. Does anyone have a different point of view?” Another way to encourage open discussion is to ask participants to avoid using critical language for a period of time.

Draw people out with open-ended questions

Open-ended questions require more than a yes / no answer. Some examples:

“We seem to be having trouble here. What do you think we should do?”

“Could you say more about that?”

“What do you mean when you say . . . ?”

Inject humor

Humor is one of the best ways of improving the tone of meetings. It makes meetings seem like friendly get-togethers.

Paraphrase

When you paraphrase, you try to restate briefly the point that someone has just made: “Let me see if I’m understanding you . . .” If paraphrasing doesn’t convince a person that he or she has been heard, you may have to repeat what was said verbatim.

Learn to deal with difficult behavior.

- Flare-ups: When two members get into a heated discussion, summarize the points made by each and then turn the discussion back to the group.
- Grandstanding: Interrupt the one-person show with a statement that gives credit for his or her contribution, but ask the person to reserve other points for later.
- Broken recording: Paraphrase the contribution of someone who repeats the same point over and over. This lets the person know they have been heard.
- Interrupting: Step in immediately. “Hold on, let Margaret finish what she has to say.”
- Continual criticizing: Legitimize negative feelings on difficult issues. You might say, “Yes, it will be tough to reduce traffic congestion on Main Street, but there are successful models we can look at.”
- Identify areas of common ground.

- Summarize differences in points of view, then note where there is common ground. For instance, you might begin, “It seems we agree that . . . ”

Suggest options when time runs out.

Identify areas of partial consensus, suggest tabling the question, or create a small subcommittee to deal with the matter at its convenience.

Consider a round at the end of the meeting.

Going quickly around the whole group at the end of the meeting gives people a chance to bring up matters not on the agenda. You can also use a round to evaluate the meeting. With more than ten people, though, a round can become tedious.

Learn more about facilitating.

Good facilitating is something to behold, but it is not magic. Learn more about facilitating by getting a good how-to book on the subject, such as Sam Kaner’s *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision Making*.

Also

<http://www.sabes.org/resources/facilitationguide.pdf>

<http://www.tenant.net/Organize/meetings.html>