

SFDebate Speakers Guide

SFDebate operates in a format similar to British Parliamentary debates. This guide will give speakers an idea of what to expect during one of our debates, and tips on how to prepare a compelling argument.

We will usually try and line up two people to speak for the motion (the proposition) and two people to speak against the motion (the opposition), before opening up the debate to the larger group. In hot debates we may allow three speakers on either side, and in others there may be only one speaker for each side.

1. Opening Speaker (Proposition) 6 mins
2. Opening Speaker (Opposition) 6 mins
3. Second Speaker (Proposition) 6 mins
4. Second Speaker (Opposition) 6 mins
5. Floor Debate (45 mins)
6. Closing Arguments (Opening Speaker Proposition)
7. Closing Arguments (Opening Speaker Opposition)

Opening Speaker (Proposition)

As opening speaker, you have the privilege and responsibility to define and frame the debate. While the motion that will be debated is given to you, the precise nature of the policy to be implemented is down to the 1st speaker.

Motions

A typical motion might be '**This house would ban hunting**'. It is clear what this debate is about in general terms – hunting. However, various things are not yet clear:

- what type of hunting this house wants to ban
- what animals are involved
- where the ban would apply

These are some of the questions that the **definition** of the motion needs to deal with. A good definition will present clearly and simply *how* the motion relates to the specific policy that is to be pursued, and should tie down *what* the debate is to be about.

Policy

A useful way of viewing a debate is as a specific policy debate between a government and an opposition. The government side wishes to implement a policy; the opposition does not. The policy proposal put forward should:

- Identify a **problem** in relation to the motion

- Propose a clear **solution** to the problem
- Explain the **outcomes** of the solution that is proposed

An alternative way of viewing the proposal is to ask a series of questions:

- **What** policy do we wish to pursue in relation to the motion?
- **How** will the policy be pursued?
- **Why** should this policy be pursued?

After you have identified the problem with relation to the motion, your solution should incorporate a **mechanism** suitable to solve the problem (this is the **'how'** of your proposal). After you have laid this out it will be necessary to give arguments in favor of your solution (this is the **'why'** of your proposal).

Arguments

Once you have defined your motion – said *what* you want to do – you should give arguments in support of your case. If you are in opposition, you need to give arguments against the case that has been put forward. Arguments give reasons *why* the side you are on should win the debate. This means that there has to be a connection between the argument you are giving and the case you are arguing for.

Good arguments are:

relevant – your argument must be linked to your conclusion, not just to the general area of debate.

internally consistent – your argument must make logical sense.

consistent with your side's other arguments – two arguments can make sense on their own while contradicting each other: be careful.

fully explained – if you have thought of an argument you should then explain it. It is not adequate to cite an argument without explaining how the argument works and how it supports your side of the debate.

properly justified – any part of your argument which is controversial has to be argued for, otherwise it will be an easy target for the other side: take your argument as far as it needs to go to be

Bad arguments:

"Hunting should be banned because foxes are cute furry animals" – even if this is true, so what?

"Women should be banned from employment in the army because they wouldn't pass the entry tests" – if they won't pass the tests then you don't need to ban them because none of them will qualify anyway

"We want to take action against the Taliban in Afghanistan in because [1] they have no respect for other religious groups and [2] Islamic fundamentalism is irrational and dangerous" – are these two positions compatible?

Simply stating, *"The recent US Presidential election compromised fundamental principles of democracy"* is inadequate – which fundamental principles of democracy did it compromise, and how?

"We want to ban abortion because the foetus is a human being" – many people believe this, but it is controversial and is not recognised in law. You need to argue for it before you use it as the basis of an

convincing.

argument.

All of these things combine to make an argument **persuasive** – above all else debating is about convincing other people that what you are saying is right. Arguments should be appealing and compelling.

Arguments can focus on various areas, of which the most important are:

results – what will happen if the proposal is enforced?

principles – what values underpin the proposal, and do they make sense?

precedent – has anything similar been tried before, and if so what happened?

enforceability – is it practically possible to do what is being proposed?

These can be used in different ways for the different sides in the debate:

Proposition

You are trying to show that your particular proposal is the one which should be adopted. Always relate your arguments to your proposal.

Results

your proposal will have certain beneficial consequences (you may need separate arguments to show why these consequences would be beneficial)

“Introducing stricter controls on adoption would make it more difficult for potential abusers to obtain children.”

failing to adopt your proposal will have harmful consequences (again, you may need to show why they are harmful)

“If the EU does not admit more countries it will be breaking its earlier promise to let them in; this will damage the EU’s credibility.”

Principles

your proposal upholds (and the opposition undermines) certain values which are shared by all in the debate

“We want to abolish the monarchy because we do not believe that you should qualify for a particular position of responsibility purely because of who your parents are.”

Precedent

something similar to your proposition has been tried before or elsewhere and it worked (you need to show that your example is relevantly similar)

“We should continue to enforce sanctions on Iraq because sanctions were a major factor in removing the apartheid government in South Africa.”

It is usually inappropriate for the proposition to use enforceability arguments – the fact that a proposal is enforceable should be part of the mechanism, not an argument in favour of your proposal.

Opposition Speaker

The opposition uses similar kinds of argument, but focuses them in the opposite direction. It is usually easier for the opposition than for the proposition to employ enforceability arguments.

Results

the proposal will have unintended negative consequences	<i>“Allowing more immigration will result in resentment of minorities and racial tension.”</i>
the intended consequences are undesirable	<i>“Introducing PR would indeed ensure that governments had smaller majorities, but this would reduce their ability to govern effectively.”</i>
the intended consequences will not result from the proposition	<i>“Reintroducing the death penalty will not cut crime, because criminals do not consider the penalty while they are committing crimes.”</i>

Principles

the proposal goes against principles which ought to be preserved	<i>“Cancelling third world debt sends out the message that irresponsible management of resources should be rewarded.”</i>
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Precedent

something similar to the proposal has been tried before or elsewhere and has failed or had bad consequences (again, you need to show that the example is relevant)	<i>“When hardcore pornography became more widely available in the USA in the 1970s, police reported the use of new practices in rapes and sexual abuse which had been almost unheard of until they were depicted in pornographic material.”</i>
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Practicalities

the proposal is unworkable or unenforceable – even if it is desirable in principle	<i>“You can introduce as many legal controls on biological weapons as you like, but the countries most likely to be producing such weapons won’t let your inspectors in.”</i>
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Rebuttal

Rebuttal is your response to claims and arguments made by the other side – a way of showing that *the other side is wrong* in what they are saying, independent of the substantive arguments you want to make to prove that *your side is right*. A good way of distinguishing between rebuttal and argument is to say that rebuttal is **destructive**, while arguments are **constructive**. In other words, good rebuttal is enough to suggest that the other side should lose, but is not yet enough to show that you deserve to win.

Your opponents’ arguments may be vulnerable to rebuttal through being:

untrue

“Rent Control in San Francisco limits the incentive for new housing development.”

deny the claim being made, but try to justify your denial – simple contradiction will not help you, even if you’re right

Rebuttal: “But rent control laws don’t apply to housing built after 1979”

based on a flawed analysis of facts or statistics

“George Bush won the 2004 election, giving him a clear mandate to continue the war against terror.”

explain why the facts the other side is using do not lead to the conclusion they want

Rebuttal: “But Bush only won 49% of the vote, representing less than 25% of the total electorate – his mandate is not convincing at all.”

reliant on misleading examples

“We should enforce sanctions on Iraq because sanctions helped to remove apartheid in South Africa.”

show why the example they are using doesn’t back up the other side’s case

Rebuttal: “But those sanctions were supported by South Africa’s black majority – most Iraqis oppose sanctions.”

based on a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of your side’s arguments

“If we allow euthanasia, doctors will encourage people with minor illnesses to kill themselves just to save money.”

restate your side’s arguments clearly and simply, showing why the opposition is wrong

Rebuttal: “Our definition included safeguards to ensure that euthanasia would only be allowed in the case of incurable terminal illness.”

It is a good idea to place rebuttal at the beginning of a speech, before the constructive arguments. This means that the speech’s basic structure is:

“This is what the other side said, and this is why they’re wrong” – **rebuttal**

“Now here are some additional reasons to support our side” – **arguments**

Second & Third Speakers

The 2nd Prop and 2nd Opp speakers will have to add something **new and distinctive** to the debate while remaining **consistent** with everything which has already been said on their side. Think about:

- What **has been said** in the debate so far?
- What **has not yet been said** in the debate so far?
- What **still needs to be said** to sway audience opinion?

In other words, you need new analysis and new arguments. In general, you should aim not only to have different arguments from your predecessors, but different *kinds* of arguments. Make it clear that you are doing something new.

The debate so far

Mostly focused on **results**

Mostly about **principles**

Second/Third Speaker

Look at the wider **principles** involved

Narrow the debate down to a discussion of the **results** of the proposal and any relevant **precedents**

A good (but by no means universal) rule of thumb: *if the focus of the debate so far has been narrow, widen it; if it has been broad, narrow it.*

You will not be expected to have as many different arguments as the speaker who went before you. You will, however, have to speak for the same length of time. This means that the arguments you give should be explained in more detail than the arguments of the previous speakers: where they probably all had around three arguments, you should usually aim to have one or two. For later speakers, quality is more important than quantity.

Points of Information

Points of Information are direct interjections made during speeches by other speakers in the debate, or members from the floor. They are subject to the following rules:

- To offer a point of information you must raise your hand and state “*On a point of information*” or simply “*Information*”.
 - If the speaker declines your point of information you must re-take your seat and you may not give a point at that time.
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- Points of information should last no more than fifteen (15) seconds and ideally should be as short as possible.

If you are the principal speaker it is expected that you will take *some* but *not all* points of information that are offered to you. As a rule of thumb in a five-minute speech, you should always take at least one and never take more than two. In a seven-minute speech you should you should always take at least two and never take more than three.

When to use points of information

Points of information are a good way to gain ascendancy in a debate. If you do not deal with them well in your own speech, you will look unconvincing, and if you do not offer good points of information you will look weak. A good point of information is short, succinct and puts the main speaker off balance. You should try to offer points that will expose the other side of the debate's weaknesses.

Types of point of information:

- **Clarification** – if what a speaker is saying is not clear, or the full scope of their argument is not revealed, ask for clarification
- **Factual objection** – if a speaker uses a fact that is erroneous, or you can offer a competing fact that undermines the speaker's example, challenge it
- **Argumentative objection** – offering a counter-argument to a point that the speaker is making creates difficulties for that speaker. If they do not respond well they will look weak (be careful though, because you only have a few seconds!)
- **Argumentative challenge** – if you can offer an argument for your side that has not been made yet it will create difficulties for the speaker. If your team is speaking second on either side this is a good way of pre-empting what the first team might say – and gives you the credit for saying it first! However, remember that the 1st team set the theme of that side of the house – do not contradict them. Remember also that you are competing against them, so do not help them by offering too many new arguments.
- **A Joke** – a well timed and witty line relevant to what the speaker is saying can throw them off balance and make you look good

Resources

To get an idea of how our debates should work, you might want to listen to one of the debates run by IntelligenceSquared and broadcast on NPR. While these debates do not open to the floor, the speakers usually demonstrate good rhetorical technique. They are available as a podcast, or you can listen to them on your computer.

<http://www.intelligencesquaredus.org/>
