

## **SWITCH-SIDE DEBATE EXERCISE**

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Courses: Introduction to Debate, Argumentation, Advanced Argumentation, Advanced Public Speaking

Objectives: The main objective is to prepare and conduct a series of debates on a particular resolution. For this exercise, students form groups of either three (for one-versus-one debates) or groups of six (for two-versus-two debates). Each student competes on the affirmative and the negative, as well as serving as an adjudicator for at least one of the group's debates. The exercise is designed to enhance research skills, speaking skills, the application of arguments in a specific context, and teamwork.

### **Activity**

The three main parts to consider in designing the exercise are the controversy briefs, the debates themselves, and the judging process.

**Controversy briefs.** Each group of students works together to create "controversy briefs" on either side of a given resolution. After crafting a resolution that features a relatively contentious statement with diverse arguments supporting each side, groups divide up the research and assemble the briefs. For example, if a group decides to debate the topic, "Resolved: The United States Federal Government should dismantle and destroy all of its nuclear weapons," the students will want to collect as much research as possible both defending and challenging the concept of nuclear disarmament. Research materials could come from any number of sources depending on how many weeks are available to prepare. Typically, students are encouraged to find published materials from

a wide variety of sources with diverse claims to credibility. Because debating the relative quality of the sources should come into play, the controversy briefs should include full author or source qualifications in the bibliography and discussion.

The briefs will have far more information and evidence than can be deployed in a single debate because the idea is to have students pick and choose a few arguments from the briefs when preparing for the actual debates. The format can vary, but some helpful guidelines follow:

1. Begin with the resolution or statement of controversy. This should be phrased as a statement that can be proven true or false. A few additional examples include, Resolved: the United States should drastically expand restrictions on firearms; Resolved: we should restrict economic growth to preserve the environment; or, Resolved: Social Security should be privatized.

2. Next, divide the document into two parts, the "Pro" and "Con" briefs. Each side should start with an interpretation of the crucial terms in the resolution that help to support or reject the statement. Students could use dictionary definitions, definitions from experts in the field, or even logical definitions as long as they make sense and help to either prove or reject the resolution. Terms should also play a role in the specific arguments in the brief.

3. Arguments should be numbered and should include as much supporting evidence as possible. Using an in-depth resolution like the examples above, it can take a month or two to complete the assignment if each side puts together 10 or more distinct arguments and each argument includes at least a full paragraph for both analysis and evidence. Some analysis from students is desirable in each argument; briefs are not just a collection of evidence without connections back to the statement. Students

should provide enough reference information with the evidence so that the full citation can be easily located in the bibliography. It also helps to include qualifications for sources and to justify those qualifications where possible.

4. The bibliography should include all bibliographic information for each citation.

It helps students to remember that briefs are not traditional essays or papers, and can include long block quotations. Briefs serve as suggestions and talking points for the debates so that clear analysis and summary statements on the major arguments are readily available.

**Conducting debates.** Timing debate speeches works well if the group has at least an hour of time available, with recognition that more in-depth events can occur with a longer time allotment. Within an hour, the suggested configurations are:

One vs. One debates with at least one judge:

4 minutes First Affirmative

3 minutes CX: The negative speaker cross-examines the affirmative speaker.

6 minutes First Negative

3 minutes CX: The affirmative speaker cross-examines the negative speaker.

5 minutes Second Affirmative

7 minutes Second Negative

4 minutes Third affirmative speech, First aff rebuttal

3.5 minutes Third negative speech, First neg rebuttal

3.5 minutes Fourth affirmative speech, Second aff rebuttal

Running preparation time is usually 3-5 minutes.

Two vs. Two debates with at least one judge:

5 minutes First Affirmative Constructive: This speech is almost fully prepared before the debate starts and is expected to defend the resolution in the most compelling way possible. The format is flexible, but most good 1As will defend an interpretation of the resolution and then establish 3-5 arguments in favor of the resolution.

3 minutes CX of 1AC: The negative team cross-examines the affirmative speaker. This time can be used to clarify information, set up future arguments, expose weaknesses in the speech, etc.

5 minutes First Negative Constructive: The task of the 1N is to refute all arguments presented by the first affirmative and to provide 2-3 additional reasons why the resolution is flawed and should be rejected. In general, the need for a rejection of the resolution can be demonstrated in two ways: by refuting the affirmative's arguments in defense of the topic; and, secondly, by introducing additional arguments against the resolution itself.

3 minutes CX of 1NC

5 minutes Second Affirmative: This speech requires the affirmative speaker to extend the initial defenses of the resolution (by refuting the negative's arguments and re-explaining the original positions) and to refute the new arguments that the negative has raised concerning the resolution. The affirmative speaker may decide at this point that all of the aff arguments cannot be defended. In that case, the affirmative speaker can "pick-and-choose" certain aff arguments to go for, proving that those arguments outweigh the positions that the negative has advanced.

3 minutes CX of 2AC

Note: At this point, the negative will have two speeches

in a row—called the negative block. To maximize two speeches in a row, it is a good idea for the two negative speakers to split up the burdens of the 2NC and the 1NR.

5 minutes Second Negative Constructive: This speech responds to a portion of the 2AC arguments. The 2NC should elaborate on the negative's strongest argument/s and refute the statements made by the affirmative in the 2AC.

3 minutes CX of 2NC

3 minutes First Negative Rebuttal: The “R” stands for rebuttal. The distinction is that the constructive speeches are designed to set up new arguments for or against the resolution. The rebuttal is designed to respond to those arguments. The 1NR is expected to respond to the portion of the 2AC arguments that were not touched by the 2NC.

3 minutes First Affirmative Rebuttal: This speech should refute all the remaining negative arguments against the resolution, extend the reasons advanced in favor of the resolution, and sum up the arguments defending the resolution. Perhaps the most difficult speech in the debate, the 1AR is expected to respond to everything said in the 2NC and the 1NR. This burden requires the 1AR to “group” arguments and to respond to multiple negative arguments with only one or two points.

3 minutes Second Negative Rebuttal: This is the final negative speech. The 2NR needs to respond to all arguments made in the 1AR by setting up a series of reasons why the resolution should be negated. What are the most compelling and major reasons the negative has won the debate? Why is the resolution false? The 2NR also has to close the door on the affirmative and pre-empt things that might come up in the last affirmative speech.

3 minutes Second Affirmative Rebuttal: This is the last speech of the debate—designed for the affirmative to

extend arguments in favor of the resolution and respond to any remaining negative arguments. The affirmative does not have to win all the arguments made in the debate, but still needs to refute each of the negative's main positions and provide a reason to affirm the resolution.

### **Appraisal and Discussion**

The exercise is flexible and can be modified for any context, but consistently provides a way for students to engage in argument clash, group research, and advocacy through public speaking. Judging the debate is an important element, and is a way to introduce “flowing” as a means of taking notes. Further information on judge paradigms and in-depth flowing is readily available, but as a short course, it is a very good idea for the judge and competitors to write down all arguments in subsequent columns for each speech. The direct response to each argument (if there is one—and there should be) is written down adjacent to the position being challenged. A clear argument comparison should emerge in the last two columns, the 2NR and 2AR. Because each student debates on both the affirmative and negative, and has the opportunity to judge, a single group will experience a series of debates. One option is to collect flow charts and ballots for debates conducted outside of class and ask each group to perform a final debate in front of the rest of the class. Students report that they learn a large amount about their particular topic in a number of ways: through the process of switch-side debate, working closely with a group, and delivering an advocacy speech on either side of a particular topic. Feedback suggests this activity is a valuable way to guide students toward a sense of ownership over their research and arguments through both competition and collaboration.

### Suggested Readings

- Buckley, D. C. (1983). A comparison of judging paradigms. In D. Zarefsky, M. O. Sillars, & J. Rhodes (Eds.), *Argument in transition: Proceedings of the third summer conference on argumentation* (pp. 858-869). Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.
- Hample, D. (2010). Argument: Its origin, function, and structure. In D. Gouran (Ed.), *The functions of argument and social context* (pp. 1-10). Washington, DC: National Communication Association/American Forensic Association.
- Mitchell, G. (2010). iSocrates: Student-led public debate as cultural technology. *Controversia*, 7, 54-75.
- Snider, A. (2008). *Code of the debater: Introduction to policy debating*. New York: International Debate Education Association.

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