

5 Points of information

The first time you watch a debate, you will see something strange.

Every few seconds, someone will stand up and interrupt whoever is speaking. This seems very rude. Sometimes the person speaking will tell the interrupter to sit down. This seems rude too.

It isn't rude. Points of information are a vital, vital part of debating. So vital, in fact, that you can't win a debate without them.

'Points of information' is a rather confusing, perhaps outdated term (but we're stuck with it for now). Points of information do not have to convey any information. They do, however, have a point. Let's look at:

- How to make them as a listener.
- How to receive them as a speaker
- How to make them work for you as a listener.
- How to make them work for you as a speaker.

How to make points of information

Speakers have what is called 'protected' time, usually a minute, at the beginning and end of their speech. Trying to make points of information during that time is against the rules, and is also discourteous and makes it look like you are not paying attention, so is not a good idea. The timekeeper or chair will indicate when protected time begins and ends with an established signal, usually a knock on the table.

Once in that middle period, though, it is time to pounce. You make a point of information by standing up and saying 'On a point of information'. That's all; you don't say anything else yet. If the speaker says 'No thank you', you have to sit down. If the speaker says 'Yes please', you then make your point. It must be brief – maximum 15 seconds. So it has to be concise and, yes, to the point. When you've made your point, you must sit down. You're not allowed to say anything more until your next point of information. It isn't a conversation.

Make at least one point of information a minute, even though they won't all be taken. Don't, however, make them one after another. This is called 'badgering' (see below), is considered discourteous, and may be penalised by judges.

If you make no points of information, you will almost certainly lose the debate.

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How to receive points of information

If you are speaking and someone stands up and says 'on a point of information', you don't have to stop in mid sentence. Finish your point first, then say either 'Yes please' or 'No thank you'. Don't leave them standing too long before you do this. Remain calm and courteous. Let them have their say, and don't respond till they have sat down.

Take at least one but not more than two points of information.

If you take no points of information, you will almost certainly lose the debate.

How to make a point of information work for you as a listener

Debating is as much about finding the flaws in the other side's arguments as it is about promoting your own. Points of information are your opportunity to expose the flaws in the other side's argument while they're in the middle of making it. Think of them as being like a shot at goal in football. That shows how important they are: in football, you might have beautiful passing, but you'll never win a match if you don't score any goals; in debating, you might have beautiful arguments, but you'll never win if you don't make points of information. So you need to be listening to the speech, hard. You need to be thinking hard too. You need to be on the lookout for a crack in their argument, and you need to jump in and prise open that crack as soon as you see it.

There are essentially two types of points of information:

- **Practical:** finding the practical flaws in a proposed course of action.

Like this example, in a debate on 'This house would make the use of homophobic language a criminal offence.'

Speaker for the proposition: 'Homophobic language on social media causes great distress to gay people, and this law would protect them from it.'

Opposition: 'On a point of information'

Speaker for the proposition: 'Yes please.'

Opposition: 'How will you deal with homophobes who post on anonymous, untraceable accounts?'

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