

Unfamiliar motions deal with issues beyond students' experience, and may require very specific knowledge to make sense of them. Students debating these motions have to extend themselves by doing some research / using their general knowledge. (For some of this useful general knowledge, see Chapter 10, What Debaters Need to Know About the World; for advice on research / how to extend your general knowledge, see Chapter 15, Onwards ...). These motions can work particularly well for long prep debates, or within the curriculum as part of subject-specific study (see Chapter 13, How Debating Can Be Used in Lessons).

Examples of **unfamiliar** motions are:

- This house would introduce proportional representation in UK General Elections.
- This house believes nuclear power is the answer to our energy needs.
- This house would introduce term limits for Prime Ministers.
- This house would ban genetically modified food.
- This house believes globalisation is a force for good.

Topical motions

Some of the most exciting and compelling debates can arise in response to very immediate, unforeseeable events and issues. I vividly remember, early in my debating career, running a debate shortly after the terrorist attacks in America on September 11th, 2001, commonly referred to as '9/11'. The school I teach in has a large number of students with American connections, and the school community was still reeling in shock from what had happened, trying to make sense of it (as was the whole world). I set the motion 'This house supports the invasion of Afghanistan'. Normally, I was doing well if the numbers in the audience got into double figures. That day, there were over a hundred students crammed into the room. As much as anything else, that debate was a cathartic experience, allowing students to speak and think about an issue that had affected them very deeply. The debate I staged on the Brexit referendum in 2016 (see Chapter 1, Why Do

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Debating?) had a similar impact, as have more informal, but very well attended, discussions on the issues raised by the #MeToo movement, school shootings in the US and climate change.

I also recommend staging debates as part of mock elections to coincide with General Elections. You can stage these in whole school assembly, with one speaker for each of the main parties (with instructions to focus on issues rather than personalities), followed by an immediate opportunity for everyone present to vote in a secret ballot. The results of this vote can be very revealing, and are often surprising! This is an example of how debating can perform a public, civic function, by engaging all students actively in politics.

Be sensitive, of course, when staging these very public debates to what it is appropriate to discuss in a school. If in doubt, consult senior leadership.

Obviously, what is topical changes. 'This house would ban smoking in public places' and 'This house would legalise same-sex marriage' were once hot topics, but now that smoke-free pubs and gay weddings are firmly established in both the law and the culture of Britain, these motions no longer make sense. Part of being a successful debater (and a successful debating coach) is having finely tuned antennae for what the big issues of the moment are, and how they can be approached.

One last word about motions. There is not an infinite number of them. If (as I hope you will) you have a long career in debating, it is likely that you will come across the same motion more than once. If this does happen, do not think 'Great! I won that debate last time, so I can reuse my preparation.' Approach each motion as if for the first time. This is partly because it will make your performance fresher; partly because your opponents this time will not be the same as your opponents last time; and partly because, even if you won last time, you should have learnt something from the judge's feedback on that occasion, and should be adapting your approach in response to that feedback.

**What is
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