

up against more experienced debaters. External competitions also offer more opportunities for raising the profile of the debating club (especially if you win!).

Here is a survey of competitions:

English Speaking Union

The English Speaking Union (ESU) (www.esu.org) can fairly be described as the 'original and best' schools debating organisation in Britain. Founded in 1918 in the aftermath of the First World War, with the hope that encouraging effective communication between people would promote mutual understanding, it is a charity whose stated mission is 'to give young people the speaking and listening skills and the cross-cultural understanding they need to thrive.' Debating is a central part of their work. The ESU Mace competition has been running since 1957, and former winners include a number of high profile figures in politics and the media. It regularly attracts over 300 schools from across Britain and Ireland.

The format used in the competition is Mace (see Chapter 2, How Debating Works). It uses long prep, with motions released in advance. It is a good competition for beginners, as the long prep format means it is possible for teachers to offer students a lot of support in preparation, and because the Mace format tends to be slightly more formal and less spontaneous than BP, making it less intimidating for newcomers. Though there is no formal age limit, students taking part tend to be Year 10 and above, mostly Years 12 and 13.

The competition is run on a knockout basis, starting in October / November with local rounds, proceeding to regional rounds covering larger and larger areas (e.g. West London, London, South East, England), culminating in the final in March at Dartmouth House, the magnificent Georgian house in Mayfair that the ESU has as its headquarters. All rounds but the final are hosted by schools. Volunteering to host a round means a certain amount of work setting up the round, but it does give your students home advantage (and also saves you all the paperwork involved in taking students out of school). Rounds are judged by ESU staff trained in how to judge debates, who will give detailed feedback (make sure students listen carefully to this, and act on it; it is one of the best ways for them to improve). The ESU offers a wide range of resources for teachers entering the competition on their website. There is an entrance fee, though that may be waived for schools

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with a large number of disadvantaged students. The knockout format does mean that, particularly for inexperienced schools, there is the risk of being eliminated early on and only getting one outing. However, the fact that the ESU is a well established institution with full time staff, and that the Mace has been running for so long, means that it is a very trustworthy, reliable and well organised competition.

The ESU also runs the London Debate Challenge. This is free of charge, and is open to Years 7 - 9 students at maintained schools in London. It starts in May, with local rounds which incorporate a training session for students before the competition begins. There is then one more round before the final at Dartmouth House in July. The format is Extended Mace and long prep.

Oxford Union and Cambridge Union

These are the most high profile 'university' competitions. The Oxford Union (www.oxfordschools.net) and Cambridge Union (www.cambridgedebating.com) are the debating societies of Britain's two elite universities. Their main focus is on staging debates of their own, in which a vast array of often very high profile public figures take part. They are also famous for being a breeding ground for future political leaders, and an exceptionally high number of politicians and Prime Ministers have been Presidents of the Oxford or Cambridge Union during their student days.

The competitions they run for schools are BP and short prep. As with ESU, they start with local rounds, then progress to regional finals and to a national final, hosted in Oxford or Cambridge. They also offer training workshops. The main competition tends to be dominated by Years 12 and 13 students, but they also jointly offer (taking turns to host it) the International Competition for Young Debaters, for students in Year 10 and below, also BP and short prep. There is a fee for taking part in both competitions. Given the BP format, these are more challenging competitions and are better suited to more gifted and confident students.

For better or for worse, the Oxbridge 'brand' still has a huge amount of power in Britain, and there is quite a thrill for students in taking part, particularly if they make it to the Final and get to compete on the premises of the Oxford or Cambridge Unions. Both these buildings are Victorian Gothic in style, with cosy committee rooms, a well stocked library, and a debating chamber modelled

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