

For Students

How can you get better and better at debating?

Being a debater is not only about practising all the skills we have covered in this book. It is also, to a certain extent, a state of mind.

A truly great debater isn't only a debater when they're in the debating chamber. A truly great debater takes the outlook of a debater into wider life. This doesn't mean disagreeing with anything anyone ever says on principle (that won't make you popular). It means having an attitude to the world that is open, curious and intelligently critical.

How can you cultivate this attitude?

First of all, you need to be informed about the world and what is happening in it. Reading Chapter 10, What Debaters Need to Know About the World is a start, but the world is of course constantly changing, and you need to be constantly learning about it.

When I was at school, there were three TV channels and not many more radio stations. Television started in the afternoon and stopped at 11 pm (with the national anthem). News came from bulletins scheduled at fixed times in the day, and from hard copy newspapers printed overnight and delivered in the morning. If something really exceptional happened, programmes might be interrupted for a 'News Flash'. This happened about once every five years.

It's different now. It's a bit like food. In the early twentieth century, many people in Britain were made ill by not having enough food to eat. In the early twenty-first century, almost nobody in Britain does not have enough food to eat, but many people are made ill by only having bad food to eat. Rickets doesn't kill people any more; obesity related illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes do. So it is with information. There's no shortage of it, but it isn't all good, and if you consume the wrong sort it can damage the health of your understanding. So you need to be discriminating.

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Social media is a wonderful invention for certain things. It is a superb tool for connecting people with like minded interests, for organising people, and for disseminating certain kinds of factual information. I'm not convinced that it is very useful for educating yourself about the world. There is a natural tendency for it to form into echo chambers of like minded people who simply reinforce one another's prejudices without being challenged. The brevity of the medium also means that it is very hard to develop arguments with the length and complexity necessary to understand them properly. The anonymity of the medium means that anyone can post anything, without having to take responsibility for its accuracy or fairness. Moreover, there is substantial evidence that social media can be manipulated in a very sophisticated way to distort the outcomes of popular votes or to spread malicious and false conspiracy theories.

The advantage of what is sometimes dismissively referred to as 'the mainstream media' is that it is more accountable, and more controlled. Anything printed in a newspaper or broadcast on a mainstream TV or radio channel will have been fact checked and edited. That does not mean, however, that they will be free of bias, and part of being a good debater is being able to detect and take into account that bias.

TV and Radio

The BBC has consistently been criticised for many years from both left and right for being biased, which I think is a very good sign. It is not without its flaws, but I still believe it is up there with the NHS as one of the institutions of which British people should be most proud. It is mandated by law (as is the case for all TV and radio broadcasters in the UK) to be free of bias. The accuracy and impartiality of its journalism is generally of a very high standard. The *Today* programme on BBC Radio 4 and *Newsnight* on BBC 2 can both be highly recommended. Its website offers a lot of longer articles; its 'explainers' are great sources for researching debates. The BBC also broadcasts many excellent programmes on current affairs, some of which I recommend as podcasts (see below).

Sky News is very good for deeper analysis, as is Channel 4 News.

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