

Public forum debate is team debate, meaning that a two-person team competes for each school. Each round of public forum debate requires about thirty-five minutes to complete—about the same as Lincoln-Douglas debate, but much less than a round of policy debate. A round of public forum debate consists of eight speeches (some of them as short as one minute) and three “crossfire” periods.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN DEBATE FORMATS

In all three forms of competitive debate, students must be prepared to switch sides. This means debaters must be prepared to support the resolution as well as to oppose it. Suppose, for example, the topic is “Resolved: The private ownership of handguns should be banned in the United States.” A debater must prepare a case for banning handguns as well as a case opposing such a ban. You will not know for sure which side you will be called upon to support until shortly before the round of debate begins.

The structures of all three types of debate tournaments are similar regardless of the format. The most common format for a two-day tournament is five or six preliminary rounds of competition, in which each round involves a competitor from one school meeting a competitor from another school. In each such round, a neutral judge declares a winner and a loser while also assigning speaker points. At the end of the preliminary rounds, competitors are seeded into an elimination bracket. If the first elimination round is octafinals, only the top 16 teams continue debating; the remaining teams are eliminated. Seeding means that the top preliminary round competitor meets the 16th, the 2nd meets the 15th, and so on in toward the middle of the bracket. In elimination rounds, there are typically three judges for each debate; the winner of each round advances and the loser is eliminated. This process continues until only two competitors remain, competing against each other in the final round.

In all three forms of debate, competitors give speeches and participate in cross-examination (questioning) of their opponents.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHOOSING A DEBATE FORMAT

Which type or types of debate does your school sponsor? To enter tournaments, you must have the support of your debate coach and your school. Not all schools compete in all three forms of debate.

How much time do you have to commit to debate competition? Policy debate is the most time-intensive form of competition because it requires the greatest commitment to research and pretournament practice.