

credibility and confidence. The best policy debaters bring all their persuasive powers to bear in the final rebuttals.

What about speed of delivery? Debaters who win consistently are those who go fast when necessary but can also adapt to a judge who does not like speed. Policy debate tends to be fast because of the premium placed on making arguments the other team cannot answer. If one team drops an argument, that argument is considered won by the other team. Accordingly, policy debate becomes a game in which some teams try to make as many arguments as possible within the shortest amount of time; the calculation is that the other team will not be able to get to everything. The resulting speed contest has educational benefits as well as detriments.

One benefit of speed is that debaters are trained to think very rapidly on their feet; they have to process a great deal of information in a short amount of time. A second benefit of speed is the premium placed on word economy. Policy debaters quickly learn to express themselves succinctly. This training in economical expression pays off in the real world. No one enjoys listening to a public speaker who takes ten minutes to say something that could have been expressed in a paragraph or two.

The drawbacks to the *speed-and-spread* methods of policy debate are, however, significant. Outside observers of policy debates sometimes (incorrectly) assume that the activity has little value because the speeches sound to them like mere jibberish. This sometimes causes school principals or debate coaches themselves to discontinue policy debate because they doubt its value as a training ground for public speakers. Many policy debaters themselves get frustrated when they realize that well-reasoned arguments often get lost when attacked with a rapid-fire, brain-dead barrage of responses. Yet this potential weakness of policy debate can also be its strength. The best debaters learn how to sort out persuasive, winning arguments from the chaff that makes up a typical policy debate round. The best policy debaters are able to bring the whole round down to one or two dominating arguments as they approach the final rebuttal. This ability to bring order out of argumentative chaos is a vital skill in real-world decision-making.

FURTHER READING

Burgett, Cynthia. *Policy Debate*. New York: Rosen Central, 2007.