

In some formats, speakers may deliver more than one speech; in some, they can interrupt opposing speakers at certain times to ask a question or raise a short point; in still others, they have opportunities to cross-examine speakers from the other side. Regardless of the format, the basic predicate of any debate is that it must be fair—all teams should have an equal chance to argue their case.

The debate is largely decided on the basis of the clash of ideas. Teams first set out their case in a series of arguments that attempt to prove that their position is the most reasonable way to address the motion. Affirmative speakers try to demonstrate that the course of action or set of beliefs required by the motion is logical, moral, and practical; conversely, Negative speakers try to demonstrate that such actions or beliefs are inconsistent, ethically questionable, or simply unworkable. Speakers for the Affirmative need to demonstrate that their proposal would be an improvement on the status quo, whereas speakers for the Negative have the choice of demonstrating either that Affirmative's proposal would be worse than the status quo or that a different course of action is available that would be better still. Speakers also rebut the arguments of the other side, trying to show that their opponents' arguments are inconsistent, contradictory, or based on questionable evidence.

The objective of a debate—how you win—is to persuade an impartial observer (usually called an “adjudicator” or a “judge”) that your team has the better case. The decision about who has won is made on the basis of which team presented the most persuasive case rather than preconceived ideas in the minds of the adjudicators.

This, in large part, will relate to the quality of your evidence and the logic of your arguments. However, it would be impossible to cover every aspect of the available material in the allotted time or answer every conceivable question that your listener might have. As a result, you are also seeking to attract the adjudicator to your case by demonstrating that your perspective is the most reasonable; that your overall approach sees to the heart of the issue more clearly than the other team(s). You want the adjudicator to feel that the other side may have made many interesting points about, for example, political feasibility or economic development but that your perspective—that the issue under debate is really one of democratic renewal or social justice—most clearly addresses the framework by which the debate should be understood.