

Viewing the Debate as a Whole

The reader of this or any book on debate might easily come away with the sense that a debate consists of several distinct parts, each requiring the individual speaker to play a certain role. There's a degree of truth in such an assessment, but it's a long way from the whole story. These roles are not ends in themselves; rather, they exist to ensure that both the Affirmative and Negative teams, as well as the debate as a whole, hang together to produce a result that is considerably more than the sum of its parts.

This chapter examines how that works in practice, looking at the debate holistically and outlining how members of each team work together to present a complete picture to the audience. We will also examine the importance of speakers keeping their remarks clearly focused on the adjudicator and understanding the debate from the perspective of an external observer rather than that of a participant.

Structure

Formal debates have a strict structure that sets out the order and time limits for all speeches, as well as the responsibilities of each speaker. The specific structure depends on the particular format used, but in broad terms:

- Opening speakers set out their team's case. They sketch an image of the world as they wish the adjudicator to see it.
- Middle speakers present or elaborate on arguments, attack the other side, and defend their case against challenges. They fill in the details, adding emphasis, color and tone as necessary, to help the adjudicator see the picture clearly and focus on those details that are most persuasive.