

SOUND AS THOUGH YOU MEAN IT

Nothing is more likely to leave an audience or adjudicator unmoved than a speaker who lacks conviction. It's very difficult to affect this, but, inevitably, you'll be in debates where you will have to. This, again, is a skill that comes with practice; relatively quickly, you will find yourself boldly declaiming ideas that you would have dismissed half an hour before. Displaying conviction isn't just a process of mouthing the words, however. You need to find ways of convincing yourself that these words are true, at least for the duration of the debate. Fortunately, the desire to win the debate usually carries any speaker a long way in this direction; having the other side contradict or misrepresent what you said will work wonders on your ability to exhibit an authentic attitude of moral outrage.

Try to get into the mindset of someone who might hold the views you have to defend. Debate is, after all, an exercise in seeing things from the perspective of another. If you approach the issue with a genuinely open mind—an acceptance that the perspective to which you are giving voice might just be a valid one, even if it is not the one that you held previously—the impression that you believe it will come far more naturally.

The words you use are important in this process. Avoid phrases such as “Proponents of this view believe . . .” in favor of “We believe . . .” The more you can convince yourself for the duration of the debate, the more you can convince others.

Contrary to popular belief, debate is not an exercise in training would-be politicians and lawyers to convincingly say things they don't believe, although it has been used as such. It is a tool for encouraging open and enquiring minds to consider the possibility that their own preconceptions may be incorrect. Delivering speeches that make clear to the listener that you take these arguments seriously, rather than just going through the motions, is just as important as any other part of that process.

CONCLUSION

In everyday conversation, only about 20% of what we communicate comes from the words we use. The rest is expressed by tone, pitch, body language, attitude, and other factors—in short, style. In debate, the role of the words themselves is greatly expanded, but, with the best will in the world, some of these other elements are going to come into play. Even if they didn't, why make it difficult for people to follow what you're saying? Using pitch, volume, speed, and nonverbal language—just as you would in everyday conversation—will make your argument much easier to follow.

Beyond speaking in a way that is possible and practical to follow, how you address the other issues of style is up to you. Ultimately, your style should be the one with which you