

- *Forcing a dead stop.* Using a very short question can catch a respondent off-guard. For example, if she has claimed that the economy will rebalance “at some point in the future,” try a simple word, “When?” This leaves no time for thought and can often lead the speaker to lose the thread of her argument while she works out what is being asked.

Offering Questions

Regardless of your specific goal, keep the following points in mind when asking a question.

- *Keep the question brief.* Questions should not turn into speeches; they are neither an opportunity to start in early on rebuttal nor do they provide an opening for filling in the blanks in your team’s case. Whether it takes place over 3 minutes or 10 seconds, the objective of hard interaction is to identify a flaw in the opposition’s case and then either highlight or exploit it.

Keeping your questions short offers a strategic benefit. Long rambling questions in multiple parts, covering several stages of logic, give the respondent time to think and the opportunity to pick up on the flab surrounding your question. They also give the impression that you are uncertain about what you’re really asking. And, in the case of a POI, if the question is too long, the respondent can legitimately ignore it.

- *Be polite.* Haranguing or shouting at the respondent is off-putting for listeners and leads them to sympathize with the respondent who, in turn, will seem justified in sticking to his guns. It’s also against the rules in some competitions.
- *Don’t pursue the point until the respondent concedes that he is wrong.* That’s unlikely to happen, and the adjudicator will have seen the point you’re making long before the respondent does. Think strategically. Your question may well prove as important, or more important, than the answer. Not only are you seeking that answer, you are also aiming to leave that question in the minds of your listeners. This won’t happen if you keep pushing for a concession.

Finally, don’t worry too much if the respondent obviously fails to answer a valid question. It simply suggests to the adjudicator that the speaker doesn’t have an answer—the goal of undermining the opposing case is still achieved.