

The Basic Tasks of an Adjudicator

The primary task of the adjudicator is to be objective. This is the golden rule and trumps experience, expertise, or even intelligence. From the perspective of the debater, the emphasis on objectivity means that you are unlikely to be judged by anyone who could be considered biased for or against you as a speaker. An adjudicator in a competition is, therefore, unlikely to be directly associated with a team, society, or school of which you are a member. Where this is impossible for logistical reasons, conflicts of interest are both minimized and made public to all participants.

Objectivity also applies to the debate topic. Although an adjudicator may have strong views on the subject, she must set them aside for the purposes of the debate and her assessment of the speakers or teams. If she has specialist knowledge on the subject, she will ignore it. She can, however, utilize all of the knowledge and experience she has as an intelligent and reasonably informed human being. Consequently, even if an adjudicator knows you have said something incorrect, she will be looking for the opposing team to point that out. If that doesn't happen, your error will rarely form part of her decision unless it is an error that would have been widely noticed by the general public. If she mentions it after the debate, it's probably just for reference to stop you from making the same mistake in the future.

In theory, the ideal adjudicator would be an odd combination: a well-rounded and intelligent person who had no views on any subject. She would have no religious, political, or professional affiliations and no strong opinions on any issue of contemporary dispute. There is one caveat, however: views that would rightly repulse the "average, reasonable, intelligent person" can also repulse the adjudicator.

After objectivity, the next intellectual task of the adjudicator is to be attentive. Critical thinking and active listening are key skills; the judge is trying to get an overall sense of the themes as they run through the debate and to determine how effectively each speaker addresses them. Adjudicators assess effectiveness in the context of the particular format being used and the speakers' positions and roles in the debate. At a basic level, they also consider issues such as timing to check that the speaker is staying within the rules of the competition. More important, they are also aware of why the format's rules exist and the way in which they support the overall objective of creating satisfying cases. You will be measured against this standard as well. As a result, debaters should be familiar with the rules and marking system the adjudicator will be using.

Finally, the critical role of the adjudicator is to act in lieu of an audience and ask, "Is this persuasive?" So, where a debater's failure to perform a particular task affects the development of her case or the debate more generally, the adjudicator will pick up on that fact. How