

Debating in an International Setting*

Debating in an international setting is a powerful tool for change. It helps us recognize and appreciate cultural differences, broaden our horizons, expand our knowledge of the world, and force us to reexamine deeply held beliefs. Used responsibly, it can transform individuals, cultures, and societies. But embracing difference can create serious challenges for debaters as well. Not only do different cultures have different traditions and languages, they may also have different social norms, expectations, or even ways of thinking. As debaters, being aware of and appreciating cultural difference is not enough; you must understand the role culture plays in our interactions. Obviously, the study of cultural diversity is very broad and we cannot hope to be comprehensive here, but in this chapter we will highlight some key elements you need to understand to debate successfully in an international setting.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

In the broad sense, a culture is defined as a group of people who share codes, systems of words, conduct, and memory. These unique codes keep cultures distinct. Expressed through the practice of language, religion, or different customs, the maintenance of the cultural codes is vital to the survival of a culture. On a personal level, the cultural codes shape the way humans perceive and make meaning of the world around us.

You can find many examples of how different cultural codes influence your understanding of the world. For example, the word *independence* can have different meanings in different cultures. For representatives of former Soviet bloc countries, it might be associated with the upheavals of the early 1990s, while for Americans, it is associated with the events of 1776. Similarly, a person who has experienced sexual discrimination might define the word *conflict* differently than one who has lived through a civil war. Even when people of different cultures speak a shared language (for example, when they debate in English) and can understand the direct meaning of the words used, the indirect cultural meaning of the same words often differs.

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