

An Introduction to British Parliamentary Debating

Structure of Speeches

- Speeches are **seven minutes** in length
 - The first and last minute are **Protected Time** – no points of information can be made to you during them.
 - **Points of Information** should be offered during the five minutes of unprotected time.
 - Speeches should have **Internal Structure**. An example of ideal structure is
 - introduction
 - rebuttal of the previous speakers arguments
 - your first point
 - your second point
 - your third point
 - conclusion
- Try to separate your arguments into three main areas – such as social, political and economic.
- Remember to **Signpost** throughout your speech – i.e. say “this is my first point”, “now to move onto my second point”, “lastly, looking at my third point...” etc.

The Motion

Every round starts with a motion. A good motion is any moral imperative that has clear arguments in favour of it and against it.

For example:

- This House would cancel third-world debt.
- THW legalise prostitution.

The eight debaters in a BP round are divided into two sides. Thus four people support the motion (Proposition) and the other four oppose it (Opposition). In most competitions, the four debaters on either side are divided into two-person teams (giving a total of four teams in one debate).

Opening Proposition Team

▷ FIRST SPEAKER

1. Define the motion (see below).
2. Outline the case his team will put forward and explain which speaker will deal with which arguments.
3. Develop his own arguments, which should be separated into two or three main points.
4. Finish by summarising his/her main points

▷ SECOND SPEAKER

1. Re-cap the team line.

2. Rebut the response made by the first opposition speaker to his partner's speech.
3. Rebut the first opposition speaker's main arguments.
4. Develop his own arguments – separated into two or three main points.
5. Finish with a summary of the whole prop case.

Opening Opposition Team

FIRST SPEAKER

1. Respond to the definition if it is unfair or makes no link to the motion. You can re-define (offer an alternative interpretation of the motion), but this can be risky and should only be done when the definition is not debatable (usually better to complain a little and hope the adjudicator gives you credit – “well this is a silly definition but we’re going to debate it and beat you on it anyway” type approach).
2. Rebut the first prop speech.
3. Introduce the opp line - tell the judges how you will be opposing it.
4. Offer additional arguments (roughly 2) about why the policy is a bad idea, or develop a counter case (ie an alternative proposal). This decision is largely based on the circumstances of the debate, and only experience will provide insight.

SECOND SPEAKER

The second opposition speaker should very much follow this lead and continue with the same strategy as his partner.

1. Rebut the speech of the second proposition speaker.
2. Offer some more arguments to support your partners approach to the motion.
3. Summarise the case for your team, including your own and your partners arguments.

Closing Proposition Team

FIRST SPEAKER

The first speaker must stake his team's claim in the debate by doing one of the following:

1. Extend the debate into a new area (i.e. "this debate has so far focused on the developed world, and now our team will extend that to look at the important benefits for the developing world)
2. Introduce a couple of new arguments which make the case on his side more persuasive.
3. Give a thing called "deeper analysis". To be sure, some debaters who say they are giving "deeper analysis" are just at a loss to find a good extension - so, when you bring it, make sure your deeper analysis actually is deeper analysis.

The general idea for this speech is that you have to add something significant to the debate. The debate should break into new grounds compared to the first four speeches - else the judges will be bored!

What strategy you choose depends on the scenario. This is quite a complex part of debating to master, but it is very important to add something new to the debate or you will be penalised.

▷ SECOND SPEAKER

The last speech of a debate is known as a **Summary Speech**. In it you should step back and look at the debate as a whole and explain why on all the areas you have argued your side has won. You can:

1. Go through the debate chronologically (this is not very advanced and usually not very persuasive either)
2. Go through one side's case and then the other.
3. Go through the debate according to the main points of contention (this is the most persuasive and advanced way) explaining why on each of the main issues that have been debated have been won by your side.

Closing Opposition Team

▷ FIRST SPEAKER

This is very similar to the second prop role.

1. You **must** rebut the new analysis of the third proposition speaker.

2. You must also bring an **extension** to the debate – i.e. extend the debate into a new area or bring a couple of new arguments to the debate.

▷ **SECOND SPEAKER**

The last opposition speaker must devote their whole speech to a summing up and should not introduce new material. See the notes above on summation speeches.

Points of Information

Points of Information are a very important part of British Parliamentary Debating. They enable you to keep involved throughout the whole debate, and continue making your voice and arguments heard even when your five minutes are up.

They do not figure too heavily in most judging decisions, but in a close round where the teams are all similarly good at style and content could be the deciding factor.

- ▷ Points of information should be offered in **unprotected time** (i.e. in the time between the two time signals).
- ▷ They should be offered by **members of the opposite side only**.
- ▷ You offer a point of information by standing and indicating this, usually by saying "point of information" or similar. Some people will stand with one of their hands on their head, but this just looks silly. It is unfair, however, to 'headline' your point, by saying something like "on the UN Security Council veto" instead of "point of information": don't try to make your point before the speaker has accepted your point of information!

- ▷ You should aim to **offer one point of information every minute** during someone else's speech. This is just a rough guideline. If you offer too few it will look like you cannot argue against the point they are making, and if you offer too many it will look like you are trying to unsettle or harass the speaker.
- ▷ Speakers may accept or decline the point of information in any way they like; the simplest is by saying "yes please", or "no thank you".
- ▷ You should aim to **accept one or two points** of information during a five minute speech. In a seven minute speech, aim to accept at least two.

▷ Points of Information should be **quick and to the point** (no more than about ten seconds).

Dealing with Points of Information

Many new debaters find points of information one of the scariest bits of debating. This is usually because they vastly overestimate the intelligence of the speakers on the other side. Remember confidence does not equal intelligence, it only gives that impression and is designed to do so.

There are a number of ways of dealing with Points of Information.

1. **Dismiss them briefly** and then get on with your speech (if it was a stupid point).
2. **Answer them more fully and merge your answer into what you were going to say next.** This can be seen as more sophisticated, as it allows you to deal with the point in much more depth.
3. Say that you are **planning to deal with that point later on in your speech** and carry on where you were. If you do this, you absolutely **MUST** make it utterly explicit when you refute the point later on. You must not use this as a ducking tactic since adjudicators will notice. One tactic is to explain why you'll be replying later, such as, "Well, there's a macro- and a micro- economic answer to that point, which I'll explain in more detail in my point on X"

Case Building

One of the most difficult skills in debating is preparing cases (i.e. being First Proposition). Many teams find it difficult to come up with a good case statement and supporting arguments in the 15 minutes that most tournaments allot for preparation time. The key to success is to recognise your time constraints and live within them. Every other team in the tournament will have similar restrictions placed on them when they are in opening proposition. Accept it and move on.

There are a number of ways to prepare and practise for the difficult task of case building in a restricted time period, and we have an information sheet on this that you can get by contacting the convenor of the Competition.

Sometimes, the motion won't be very helpful in locating a case. For example:

- THW use the force.
- TH believes fish swim faster in cold water.

These are known as **Open Motions**, and you will not encounter them at the Amsterdam Open, but may in others.

When this happens, you can turn the resolution into a debate on anything you want. Some teams find it useful to have a few prepared cases to use in these situations, and spend the fifteen minutes working out how to link the motion to their prepared case! This is only ever ok in a truly open motion. If you try to link a motion that is obviously asking you to deal with a specific problem to a case you have in your bag you will be penalised. This is known as a **Squirrel**.

Usually however the subject for debate is obvious. For example:

- This House would legalise euthanasia.
- THW lift the sanctions on Iraq.

These are known as **Closed Motions**. Here, you know exactly what you will be arguing, and **will be penalised for any attempts to squirrel**.

You should identify your contention/case statement (even if it's just a rewording of the resolution) in one sentence. For Example:

- "The proposition will argue that doctors in the UK should be allowed to administer lethal drugs to terminally ill patients."
- "We believe that the US and its allies should lift all economic sanctions against Iraq now."

Judges like succinct (one-sentence) case statements. A short case statement will help your own thought processes.

It is not ok to run a case with no opposition to it at all. If your case is

- tautological (true by definition: the Sun rises in the morning),
- truistic (true by commonly accepted principles: Hitler is bad), or
- tight (there is just no opposition to the idea: We should adopt an opt out organ donation system in the UK)

you will be penalised, and will probably lose the debate by default.

Having now identified the case statement, all you need to do is answer the following questions:

1. “How would we implement this resolution?” (model)
2. “Why should we implement this model?” (arguments)

The Model

The proposition’s model/plan should be introduced in the **first minute of the first speaker’s speech**. In building the model, you want to work out how your proposition will be implemented. Judges hate first proposition teams that take forever to get to the point.

Often, motions do not demand an answer to the question “how”? The resulting debates are called “philosophical” debates and can be quite enjoyable.

- THB that the Roman Catholic Church should ordain female priests.
- This House would not use economic sanctions as a tool of diplomacy (this can be debated broadly or first prop could identify a specific country and suggested sanctions should be lifted; the former case does not require a model, the later does).

In case the motion *does* demand an answer to the question “how”, it is up to you to define and explain exactly how your model will be implemented. Quite generally you will get quite far in defining your model if you take care to answer the following questions:

- *Who* is going to do something? “Who” is usually a governing body, like for example ‘the state’, the United Nations’, or in some cases, even ‘The Catholic Church’.
- *What* is that actor going to do? Usually it suffices to define a general direction of the action you want your governing body to take. For example: in a debate where you propose to make alcohol illegal, you just need to say: “we want the government to prohibit the possession, consumption and distribution of alcohol”. You **don’t** need to specify how many years of prison sentence you would like a possessor, consumer of distributor of alcohol to get, or if you’re considering fines, how high the fine should be. Just give us the general idea.
- *Under what conditions* is the actor going to do what it is going to? This doesn’t always apply, but is useful to think of anyhow – it might be that there is an important condition you would want to add to make the case better. For example, in a case where the motion is “THW prohibit abortion”, you would like to have a debate over whether abortion is morally a good choice and whether the state should allow women to have that choice. In that case it might be smart to state as part of your model: “Unless, ofcourse, for obvious medical reasons”. This makes sure your opponents cannot use that easy argument, and makes sure your debate focuses more on the relevant situations you *want* to debate about.

What to argue?

This is the part what debating is mostly about: constructing, crafting and deconstructing arguments. Generally speaking, there are three types of arguments:

1. Constructive
2. Offensive
3. Defensive.

The **constructive** arguments, for proposition, are basically answers to the question: “Why should we implement the model that the proposition just defined?”. You basically try to explain why the world will be a better place if we adopt your model.

Obviously, opposition is not going to argue that! Still, opposition has constructive arguments, too: these are the arguments that answer the question “why should we *not* implement the model that proposition just gave?”. In opposition, you basically try to explain why the world will be a worse place if we adopt proposition’s model.

The **offensive** arguments engage directly with those constructive arguments. Offensive arguments are answers to these two questions: “what is factually or logically wrong with the arguments the other side just gave?” and “why are the arguments the other side just gave irrelevant to the case at hand?”. These kinds of arguments are used to pick apart the arguments on the other side. By devaluing these arguments, you’re making the other side’s case weaker – but do keep in mind: *you’re not making your own case stronger!* If you succeed, your case may turn out to be stronger relative to the other sides’ case. But it might still be a weak case, and will still get you low points!

The **defensive** arguments are reactions to the attacks delivered in the offensive arguments. So, when the other side has attacked your partner’s arguments by claiming they were wrong or irrelevant, it is up to you to argue again that they are right or relevant all over again. How you do this is mostly a matter of experience and strategy.

Obviously, defensive arguments only come into play *after your partner’s arguments have been attacked!* Delivering defensive arguments in the first speech of opening proposition is called “prebuttal”. It usually comes in the form: “our opponents will probably say that...to this we say that...”. This is rather silly to do: either your opponents haven’t thought of this argument yet, and in doing this, you’re helping them, or they have thought of the argument already, but will be thankful you’ve already identified this as a very valid and important counterargument. So: defensive arguments are usually done after the first two speeches.

In British Parliamentary Debate both defensive and offensive arguments are usually grouped together and called “rebuttal”. Remember that there is a difference between making someone else’s case weaker via rebuttal and making your own case stronger via constructive. Whether you as a second speaker of either first proposition or first opposition will have to deliver more constructive than rebuttal or vice versa, is a strategic decision which is up to you. Wise debaters remember, however, that there is also a second proposition and opposition team, whose main job is to “extend” the debate – that means they will be giving more constructive arguments. To stay ahead of their game, many second speakers from the first half also try to deliver as much as constructive matter as possible.

How to argue?

Now you know what to argue about – but *how* do you argue? What does an argument look like?

Basically, an argument is a series of sentences you say coupled by words like “because” and “therefore”. The more sentences you couple in this way, the more *developed* your argument is. This means you’re constantly answering the question “why?” . For example: suppose the motion is: “THW allow the death penalty”. One of the arguments could be that it is an effective means to deter future criminals. You can give this argument more or less fully developed:

Less fully developed

- death penalty will deter criminals
- because criminals don’t want to die

More fully developed

- death penalty will deter criminals
- because criminals weigh the costs and benefits of doing a crime
- and whereas right now, the maximum cost of a serious crime is lifelong imprisonment
- whereas in our model the maximum cost would then be ‘death’
- and we can reasonably expect that criminals find ‘dying’ a higher cost than ‘lifelong imprisonment’
- because people in general value their life most highly
- therefore the death penalty will deter criminals.

As you can see, there’s a lot more possible “ why?’s” answered in the second, more fully developed argument. That’s why judges like fully developed arguments more: they truly hammer home the point you’re making. But it would also be great if you can get somewhat more explicit and concrete than this. It would be great if you had an example!

That's why most debaters use the so-called 'SEXI'-model to help them develop their model. SEXI stands for 'State, Explain, Illustrate', and it sums up the basic stuff you need to do with an argument. **State** means that you state the central claim. It is the shortest description of the reason why we would or would not implement the model. In this example: "Death penalty will deter criminals". **Explain** means that you answer all kinds of 'Why's' that people can ask. **Illustrate** means that you deliver either a clear example of your reasoning: a real-world case in which your argument has proven true. In this case you would need to deliver an example where instating death penalty has resulted in lower crime rates. Another way of illustrating is using an analogy – you might use the analogy that the harder you punish kids for stealing mom's cookies, the less likely they are to actually attempt to steal those cookies. Make sure, however, when you're introducing an analogy, that the analogy stands and makes sense in relation to the motion.